

# Ripples of Hope

Fall 2010

UNESCO  
STUDENT  
AMBASSADORS  
FOR HUMAN  
RIGHTS

Conference speakers and staff, left to right, front to back: Ms. Maytte Restrepo-Ruiz, Gov. Madeleine May Kunin, Dr. Jeanne D'Arc Mujawamariya, Ms. Teresa C. Younger, Ms. Angie Le Mar, Yomi Abiola, Dr. Amii Omara-Otunnu, Dr. Lucrecia Ramirez Restrepo, and Dr. Deepti Priya Mehrotra



## A Successful Semester

This semester's edition of Ripples of Hope catalogues a very successful fall for the UNESCO SAHR! We started off with a wonderful bonding experience at Holiday Hill on the ropes course, where I almost fell off several times!

We got to work on projects such as

organizing a benefit concert for an school and house for the destitute in Chennai and is where a group of SAHR students are on their way to work on education workshops with children. We also had every meeting filled with fruitful discussion and learning of important issues.

We also had the pleasure of receiving a representative of the

NGO Roots of Development at a meeting and learning about the amazing work that they do in Haiti.

Finally, a group of students helped model and human rights activist Yomi Abiola in her quest to bring human rights and her story to schools around the nation, starting in Connecticut.

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UNESCO Chair and Institute of Comparative Human Rights



Fall 2010

Through the agreement with UNESCO, the Chair in Comparative Human Rights is mandated to promote an integrated system of research, education, training, information, and documentation in the field of human right, facilitate collaboration between high-level internationally recognized researchers and teaching staff of the University and other institutions in the United States and other countries, particularly South Africa; and disseminate the results of research in the field of human rights.

## The Team!

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## Upcoming and Past Events/Projects

### In the Key of Justice

On November 17th we hosted a benefit entertainment event for Udavam Karangal. UNESCO SAHR raised \$61! This is quite good considering that many college students are quite poor. The night was a great success!

### Eleventh Annual UNESCO Chair Conference on Women's Leadership and Human Rights

Every October the UNESCO Chair hosts a human rights conference focused on a particular topic. Last year's conference was on health and human rights and this year's conference was on women's leadership in human rights. Speakers included keynote speaker former Governor of Vermont Madelein May Kunin, Ms. Angie Le Mar, a British comedienne, radio and tv personality, and prolific producer, among many others.

The morning session involved speakers addressing many high school students from throughout the state. This session is one of the most interesting and exciting as high school students get excited and learn from giants in the human rights field.

The afternoon session was more academic but just as interesting. By then the high school students are

having lunch and participating in facilitated discussions on what they learned about in the morning session.

By the end of the day, all have been enriched by the engaging panel discussions and left looking forward to next year's conference!

### World Aids Day

On December 1st, the University of Connecticut was buzzing with activity raising AIDS awareness.

### Udavam Karangal

*"In the outskirts of Chennai, India lies a grammar school of seventeen hundred orphaned and impoverished children. The institution which holds proprietorship over this school is Udavum Karangal, a gated community for the poor which provides healthcare, housing, and education for its community. Since its establishment in 1983, only one or two students, from each graduating class of sixty, continue on to college or vocational school each year..."* check out the full story in this issue!

## In Focus

### Workshops with Yomi Abiola

This semester, Yomia Abiola and the UNESCO SAHR visited high schools and inspired students to make a difference and promote human rights through Yomi's story.

### Who is Yomi?

Yomi is a human rights activist born in Nigeria and the daughter of the first Nigerian president elected in a free and fair election. She is passionate about raising awareness of people's human rights and what we can each do to make a difference.

### List of Schools we went to

Avon High School, Conard High School, Stamford High School, Newark High School and Norwich Free Academy

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Climbing to Success	Solidarity	Fun	Learning
	<p>UNESCO SAHR Orientation had the group onto a good start.</p> <p>By Kerry McCole</p>	<p><b>12</b> Number of UNESCO SAHR that attended</p> <p><b>2</b> Hours we were out on the ropes course.</p> <p><b>10,000</b> Total number of calories we probably ate at Angelinos after the ropes course.</p>	<p><b>1,000</b> Average number of times a UNESCO SAHR smiled over the two day orientation period.</p> <p><b>80</b> Percentage of new people who come back for more after their first UNESCO SAHR meeting!</p>

While some students were anxious that the summer was coming to a close, the UNESCO Student Ambassadors for Human Rights (SAHR) were thrilled because the summer's close meant that another year of human rights work was about to commence. For the third year in a row, the student ambassadors moved onto campus earlier than other students at UConn to begin our two-day orientation. The goals of our orientation every year are three fold; to brainstorm human rights projects, to immerse ourselves in the history of UNESCO and human rights in the UN, and the importance of being a Student Ambassador, and finally to come together as a group and hone our team work skills that help us achieve the objectives we set out for ourselves each year.

To achieve our first goal, we spent an entire afternoon gathered around a table discussing which projects we'd like to continue, create, and drop. By the end of the day, however, our mission was clear, and we outlined a few projects that we wanted to both continue and start from scratch.

Secondly, as a group, we reviewed the articles in the Universal Declaration for Human Rights by comparing them with the US Bill of Rights. We also listened to Dr. Amii Omara-Otunnu, the UNESCO Chair for comparative human rights in the United States, lead a discussion about human rights that immediately rekindled the human rights flame in all of our hearts. Since we must know where we came from to know where we're going, understanding the history of UNESCO is vital to our success as student ambassadors



Student Ambassador Surav climbing the pirate ship! This proved to be one of the harder parts of the ropes course, especially when the facilitators swung it back and forth as if we were in a storm!

## Team Work

### 5 ways to keep it together

#### 1. Smile!

A smile can go a long way. It also serves to make meeting new people less awkward, or if it's awkward at least it'll be funny. Who doesn't like to laugh?

#### 2. Recognize interdependence

A fancy way to say that we're all in this together! Help others, regardless of how much recognition you might get for the eventual outcome.

#### 3. Meet outside of meeting times

Assuming that you all like each other enough to try, meeting outside of regular meeting hours promotes bonding and friendship. Who doesn't like a nice coffee or hot chocolate and good company?

#### 4. Listen

Be sure to listen to all the different points of view that you can. Many times this leads to better outcomes.

#### 5. Purpose

Know why you want to be here at UNESCO SAHR. Having a general sense of purpose makes it easier to go after ambitious projects. We are all here to help each other, including finding your purpose to be here.



The Student ambassadors on the second day of Orientation at the Mansfield HOliday Hill ropes course

Lastly, we spent the second day of our orientation at Holiday Hill, a camp ground close to UConn, where we all stepped out of our comfort zone to do some team building on a high ropes course. Some were more fearful of heights than others, but every single person was up in the air at some point, and it would not have been possible to do so without all of us encouraging each other from the ground below. We all challenged ourselves both mentally and physically to prepare ourselves for a school year that would do the same. The day culminated with a trust fall where, while harnessed, we jumped from a platform trusting that those below would help us land safely. We certainly left Holiday Hill feeling cohesive, as we shared an Italian style lunch afterward, the entire time recounting our bravery at the ropes course. If we maintain this cohesiveness all year, there is no limit to what we can achieve in the name of human rights.

Sometimes we become overwhelmed with our own agendas, but with such a strong start to the year, it will be that much easier to carry out our initial goals we agreed upon during orientation, and end our year being able to look back on all the success we achieved.

## First Thoughts on UNESCO SAHR

By Syeda Haider

When I first walked into the UNESCO meeting room in Wilbur Cross, I wasn't sure exactly what to expect. Just the title "Student Ambassadors for Human Rights" was a bit too impressive for me and I wasn't sure how I could fit myself into an organization such as this. Waiting for me was a group of smart and talented individuals who were so friendly that I was almost bewildered. These people are doing remarkable activities, ranging from teaching the UConn community about poverty in various parts of the world to organizing conferences on human rights.

There were indeed a few times that I felt out of place. I wasn't traveling all over the world and helping eradicate destitution. I

wasn't double-majoring and minoring in multiple interdisciplinary fields. I was just a freshman. But luckily for me, everyone was so friendly that I felt like I belonged, even in an institution as prestigious as this. As long as I continued to show enthusiasm, I continued to be warmly welcomed by these people.

The conference this week was an eye-opener. I had no idea that Rwanda was this far ahead in closing the gender gap. Neither did I know that a small city in Colombia was making great strides in creating equal opportunities for women. It is individuals and events like these that make me proud to be a part of the UNESCO Student Ambassadors' program. I look forward to working as an ambassador and learning more about how I can contribute to the human rights dialogue.

## Roots of Development An example of learning and acting

By Brittany Kerr

While it took the earthquake to get the world to focus on the problems of Haiti, Roots of Development has been working to aid Haiti since 2006. This organization is unlike any other because it provides funds to Haitian communities but allows the communities to manage their own development. Chad Bissonnette, Roots of Development's Co-Founder and Executive Director, began this organization when he traveled to Gran Sous Haiti in 2005. He has been working with this community ever since in efforts to ensure further growth and progress. If you are looking for ways to get involved, Roots of Development is looking for volunteers to raise funds for their own communities. For more information on Roots of Development visit [www.rootsofdevelopment.org](http://www.rootsofdevelopment.org).

## The Gaza Flotilla Incident and Human Rights

The interception of a flotilla to Gaza by the Israeli navy sparked controversy and raised more questions as to the future of peace in the middle east.

By Jennifer Chevinsky

Top Photo: Gaza flotilla clash demonstration in Belfast. Photo by Wikilaurent. Wikimedia Commons

Bottom Photo: Tel Aviv University students support Israel against the Gaza Flotilla. Photo by Lilach Daniel. Wikimedia Commons



Human rights activism is immensely more complex than one might presume. For the average young activist who just wants to 'do good,' this becomes an immediate realization. There are international agreements, governmental impositions, and laws of the land that must be reckoned with. The Gaza Flotilla that was sent from Turkey in May of 2010 brings up particularly interesting issues in this respect. If the Gaza Flotilla was acting as a body of

humanitarian aid, as it has been widely claimed, were its actions justified? How ought humanitarian agencies conduct themselves?

Although the facts have not been completely established, a basic report might recount that six ships, the Gaza Freedom Flotilla, were sent from Turkey proclaiming to be delivering aid. Israel asked that the ships pass through a specific checkpoint so that the goods could be delivered to Gaza by land, instead. The ships refused, leading to a clash between the Israeli Army and the people on board one of the ships, MV Mavi Marmara. Nine activists were killed and dozens on both sides were injured.

Controversy exists as to whether the Gaza flotilla was truly humanitarian, with intentions of delivering necessary goods to Gazan civilians. According to the Washington Times, sources have said that "Many of the medicines are expired... In addition, much of the equipment is in poor condition." There were also claims of weaponry on board the flotilla. They continued to say that, "this once again strengthens the evaluation that the intentions of the flotilla organizers were not humanitarian in the first place." Although it may or may not be the case, let us assume that the flotilla was, indeed, fueled by humanitarian motives.

The humanitarian's primary concern ought to be getting the resources to the people. Consider if the ships were sunk or turned around; this result would be devastating in light of the good that these resources, assuming they have value, could do. Fortunately "it (the goods) is being taken to the Kerem Shalom crossing, and will be distributed in Gaza by human rights organizations." While having goods in one's possession, it seems irresponsible to risk that they may never make it to the destination; the flotilla succeeded in being a media stunt, but in acting in a humanitarian fashion, it isn't so clear.

Red Cross, Amnesty International, and other widely known groups have been complying with the Israeli Government in order to deliver aid. They recognize, even if they do not agree, Israel's concern of weapons being sent into Palestinian territories, fearing that Hamas might become stronger and plan further attacks. Israeli Foreign Ministry Spokesman Yigal Palmor stated that, "In a typical week 15,000 tons of supplies enter Gaza: truckloads of meat, poultry, fish, dairy products, fruits, vegetables ... arrive in Gaza on a daily basis." This is not to say that there are enough resources reaching Gaza, but rather to establish that there are working channels for such aid.

Whether one agrees with a country's political handlings, the primary concern while managing important

resources should be ensuring to the best of one's capabilities that the goods reach the people. Activists are generally better off working within governmentally established channels than attempting to forge their own paths, especially when other internationally recognized humanitarian agencies acknowledge these channels. This misguided event continues to have detrimental effects on the peace process, creating tension between two countries, Israel and Turkey, which have long been allies. One must concede that perhaps there were better ways to attempt this proclaimed humanitarian aid project.

<http://www.israelnationalnews.com/News/news.aspx/137816>

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/blog/watercooler/2010/jun/1/Gaza-Freedom-Flotilla-aid-included-expired/>

<http://www.businessweek.com/news/2010-06-01/turkey-alliance-with-israel-may-rupture-on-gaza-raid-update3-.html>

Hey!

Any comments on any articles please send to

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From Connecticut to Chennai- Promoting Education at the Heart of Need

By: Anusuya Bharadwaj

In the outskirts of Chennai, India lies a grammar school of seventeen hundred orphaned and impoverished children. The institution which holds proprietorship over this school is Udavum Karangal, a gated community for the poor which provides healthcare, housing, and education for its community. Since its establishment in 1983, only one or two students, from each graduating class of sixty, continue on to college or vocational school each year.

As a group of four student ambassadors for human rights, we noted this shocking statistic, and decided to be a catalyst for change. Since December 2009, we have been developing an inspirational workshop to encourage high schools students of Udavum Karangal to stay committed to their education, and pursue higher forms of schooling. Our ultimate goal is to encourage students to think of their future aspirations, and consider how

higher education can be used as a tool to help them achieve further success. We will be specifically executing brief seminars promoting soft skill development (i.e. teamwork, presentation skills), financial basics, and cultural tolerance. Currently the team is working on fundraising money for school supplies requested by the organization, and determining modes of long term sustainability for this project.

An equally important aspect of this endeavor is exposing American bred students to hope, resilience, and ecstasy in the depths of poverty of southern India. This project will serve as a cultural and educational experience for both the students of Udavum Karngal and the student ambassadors on board to Chennai.

For more information, please e-mail the UNESCO Chair at [unescochair@uconn.edu](mailto:unescochair@uconn.edu)

## The Right to Education in the United States

*The children who don't have equal access and the amazing things being done about it*

By Erin Arbelaez

Education in the United States is at its best and worst point that it has been in decades. On the one hand our country is facing an educational crisis: for the first time in American history it's predicted that the current generation of Americans will be less literate than the previous generation and huge numbers of children are performing far below grade level. On the other hand, there are amazing innovations occurring across the country to try to deal with these enormous problems. Academic achievement is heavily divided along racial and economic lines. Every year thousands of low-income minority children perform shockingly below the national averages on standardized exams and this achievement gap increases as the

children get older. By the time children in low-income communities reach the fourth grade they are already two to three grades behind their higher-income peers. Only half of students in low-income communities will graduate high school by the time they're eighteen. Shockingly, even the students who do graduate will perform at an eighth-grade level- a full four years behind their higher-income peers<sup>21</sup>. Only one in ten students who grow up in poverty will graduate from college<sup>31</sup>.

I hope most people will agree that neither race nor the amount of money one's parents has determines a child's ability to learn. I like to think we have put the Bell Curve days firmly behind us. With the right support, dedication, and high expectations, time after time studies have proven that students who come from some of the most difficult circumstances can be extremely successful.

According to an economic study performed by Dr. Steven

Lanza, an economics professor at the University of Connecticut, the variables that most determine academic success are factors outside of the control of the schools<sup>2</sup>. Many schools have used information like this to in some ways shrug their shoulders- if so much is outside of their control, what can they be expected to do? In many ways this view is understandable. Schools that are made up of low-income students often have to navigate so many issues that schools for wealthier children do not. Children in low-income communities often come to school hungry, some do not speak English as their first language, they usually get less help on homework, and the list goes on. To top it all off, these schools who need the most resources possible and the absolute best teachers to try to make up for the disadvantages their students face and the advantages that wealthier students inherit, usually have the worst resources and don't necessarily have the best teachers. I want to



The Hartford, CT Skyline. Source: Wikimedia Commons

really stress the point that I know there are amazing public school teachers, amazing teachers that are working in inner city schools. I don't want to diminish their inspiring work. But, since teaching in inner city schools is significantly more challenging, turnover rates are usually very high and there are the good number of tenured teachers who simply don't have control of their classes or don't seem to care about the success and development of their students (as there are in all schools). I'm involved in a University of Connecticut program called Husky Sport that runs different activities focused on literacy, nutrition, and physical activity in the North End of Hartford, the capital city of CT that's about forty minutes away from our university campus. Hartford is one of the poorest cities in the state, one of the poorest cities in the entire country in fact. At the elementary school where Husky Sport is most concentrated over ninety-five percent of the students are eligible for free/reduced-price meals and ninety-eight percent of the students are racial minorities. It's a K-8<sup>th</sup> grade school, and each year the children from the third grade onward take the CMT exam that examines skill-levels in reading, writing, and math. Out of the six grades (third grade through eighth grade) that take the exam, in 2008 the highest scores compared to the state averages, was the fifth grade math scores. Their scores were equal or better than 9% of schools in the state.

All of the scores are low compared to state averages, 8.8% of the seventh graders met the state goal in reading compared to 71.1% of children statewide that met the state goal<sup>3</sup>. Despite these low scores I've seen teachers in this school who are amazing, teachers I wish I'd been lucky enough to have! I've also seen teachers who just sit in the corner as the kids go wild because they don't have any control over the students. One teacher even remarked to another Husky Sport volunteer something to the effect of 'so now you know what it's like to work with the Special Olympics' in reference to her students. Many of the teachers have extremely low expectations of the children and the kids absorb that attitude and internalize it.

While this kind of experience is common in schools through out the country, there are new types of schools emerging. Some people are trying to change the cycle of failing public schools by forming charter schools. A charter school is a school that is public but is allowed to run independently from the traditional public school system and adapt to the community's needs. In the 1990's state legislatures started passing charter legislation and currently forty states in the United States allow charter schools to be formed. Since then, almost 3,000 schools have been opened<sup>4</sup>. Some of the most famous models are the Harlem Success Academies, the Harlem Children

Zone schools, and the KIPP Charter Schools. The most successful charter schools' students perform above the state average on standardized exams. Common ways charter schools try to overcome external challenges and disadvantages their students face include longer school days, shorter summer vacations, promoting a culture of expected success, and most controversially – no tenure for teachers. One of the main things the most famous charter founders argue for is eliminating tenure for public school teachers. They believe that tenure doesn't allow for any accountability because even if a teacher consistently isn't achieving results with their students, tenure makes it extremely difficult to fire them. Many teachers unions have vehemently come out against charter schools in part for this reason. The issue is made even more complicated because while many education reformers agree that tenure for teachers needs to be absolved, getting elected to most state-level positions in the U.S. is almost impossible without the support of teachers unions. Therefore many politicians are extremely reluctant to come out against tenure for teachers. In the recent midterm elections many officials who were fighting for real changes in education lose their positions. One of the most notable was D.C. Chancellor of Schools, Michelle Rhee. Rhee caused enormous controversy by firing hundreds of teachers and taking hard stances that were often viewed as

unwillingness to compromise. With the latest election cycle she lost significant support and resigned from her position. An article by the New York Times covering Rhee's resignation pointed to similar losses across the country of politicians and officials who also attempted to make drastic education reforms.

It is very difficult to know what the policy solution is, there are amazingly successful charter schools being created and charter schools that are failing and being shut down. There are amazing public school teachers and frighteningly detached ones as well. Hopefully the discussion that education innovators have stirred will help continue the reform process, the future of the United States depends upon that continuation. One thing that is absolutely clear is that our children, our society as a whole, simply can't continue to allow politicians to not take a stand on education. Geoffrey Canada, the founder and CEO of the Harlem Children's Zone, stated in the documentary "The Lottery", "If every one of us wrote to the leadership and said look, I demand that you take a stand on education, we would make this a better country for all of our children." As a reader of this article, I challenge you to do what Canada advocates, write to your state representatives, your Congress people, your president- no matter what you feel is the solution, tell our country's leadership that we will no longer accept the failure of our education system and that change needs to happen.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.teachforamerica.org/what-we-do/the-challenge/>

<sup>2</sup> The Connecticut Economy, Spring 1997. "Do Schools Fail the Mastery Test?" [http://cteconomy.uconn.edu/TCE\\_Issues/Spring\\_1997.pdf](http://cteconomy.uconn.edu/TCE_Issues/Spring_1997.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> CT Department of Education  
School Profile: Clark Elementary  
School

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs\\_docs/o/movement.htm](http://www.uscharterschools.org/pub/uscs_docs/o/movement.htm)

## So you think you're a global citizen?

Let Nikki make you think twice about what it really means to be a global citizen. It's a lot more than knowing where countries fall on the map.

By Nikki Rubin

English: World map -  
Produced in Amsterdam  
First edition : 1689.



The term global citizen has recently become quite trendy; every celebrity who has travelled to the developing world claim to be one and job descriptions now list this quality as a requirement. Society and the media would have us believe that being a global citizen is an easy quality to develop and confuses it with being a volunteer. However, being a global citizen is about more than reading the New York Times and being familiar with the politics of small forgotten countries or donating money every month to your favorite NGO. While both of these actions can be beneficial, I believe that being a global citizen is more about what is in your heart than what is in your mind or wallet. Being a global citizen is about solidarity.

When confronted with volunteers who came to "help" her people, Lila Watson, an aboriginal woman from Australia, eloquently points out the difference between being a volunteer and being a global citizen. She said, "If you have come to help me, you can go home again. But if you see my struggles as part of your own survival then perhaps we can work together."

In the first part of her quote she describes what is meant to "help," to be a volunteer. While volunteering can be a positive action, volunteering is often based on the assumption that the volunteer "knows" exactly how to "help" the community. This assumption is based on a paternalistic mentality and encourages pity, it assumes that those in position of privilege know best and know how to fix the social ills of the world. In its most perverted form volunteering is just a gentler form of colonialism. The communities that these volunteers venture into to "help" often come to detest these individuals not because of the work they do but because of the philosophy behind their actions. Volunteering thus becomes viewed as a surface action, an act initiated by what we have read in newspapers and how we have interpreted it, and funded by the money in our wallets.

The second part of Lila Watson's quote beautifully explains what it means to be a global citizen. Being a global citizen means that one feels connected to people around the world for no other reason than our shared humanity. When a global citizen approaches a community in need, she or he approaches with a completely open mind. A global citizen asks those in the community what their concerns are and how they would like to address these problems. He or she then works side by side with the community for change, both

motivated by a sense of solidarity. A global citizen opens his or her heart.

Becoming a global citizen is not easy and it requires an individual to be completely honest with himself or herself. I began this journey as a freshman traveling to Pine Ridge Reservation, a Native American Reservation in South Dakota, with Community Outreach and learning what it meant to work in solidarity with a community. In my sophomore year I led this same trip and faced the challenge of helping my participants to begin the transition from volunteers to global citizens. Working with the people of

the Pine Ridge Reservation I learned that their greatest concern was that the rest of the United States had forgotten that they had existed—that they were alone in their struggle. What the people of the Pine Ridge Reservation need above all else is solidarity; they need global citizens.

## Think. Learn. Act.

Hopefully this newsletter has gotten you thinking of different ways to spread the words of human rights, in whatever you do! Maybe hold a fundraiser for Udavam Karangal or contact the UNESCO Chair to learn more about how you can get involved

with our projects here on and off campus.