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**The Arts**

**Creating COMMUNITIES OF CONSCIENCE BY MARLI GUZZETTA**



**Karen Tse on a visit with Cambodian prisoners in Kandal Prison. Tse will speak at the Unitarian Church (11 Orange Street) on July 9 at 7 p.m. The event is free.**

There are few forces in the world more powerful than a person who has found her calling, and Karen Tse found two: law and religion.

In 1986, knowing she wanted to improve legal conditions for defendants in Asiatic countries, Tse applied to both UCLA's Law School and Harvard's Divinity School. She was accepted to both.

"I'm a big fan of Martin Luther King, Jr. who advocated a tough mind and tender heart," said Tse, 41, founder and CEO of the International Bridges to Justice (IBJ).

"I knew I had a tender heart, but the tough mind I wanted to work on," said Tse, who comes to Nantucket this week.

"Though I was more drawn to divinity school, I went to law school because I wanted to create more structural change."

After college, Tse traveled to Cambodia to volunteer in refugee camps - "I made friends who were refugees who were falsely imprisoned," she said.

During that time, Tse saw a need in Cambodia for criminal law reform. So she returned to the States to work as a public defender in San Francisco from 1994 to 1997 before returning to Cambodia, where there were fewer than 10 lawyers at the time. She trained the first core group of public defenders in the country - 25 in all, which have become "hundreds" today, she said - then Tse returned to the United States in 2000.

"I decided to go to divinity school, because I felt I had finally made the contribution I wanted to make," Tse said. At Harvard Divinity School, however, she couldn't keep herself from thinking about "the gap in the system" of global criminal justice. So, while Tse worked towards her ordination as a Buddhist minister in the Unitarian Universalist Church, she also wrote the plan for what would become IBJ - an organization that works to mitigate torture and criminal rights abuses by advocating for the "good laws" already on the books in other countries and by training and financing public defenders in countries with legal systems compromised by injustice.

"In some countries, it's the norm that people are picked up by the police and tortured into giving a confession," Tse said. "In some places, the police even brag and say, 'We solved 6000 cases in two days.' And you know they did that by torturing people for confessions."

These kinds of incidents of abuse happen in more countries than can be counted on two hands, because "torture is still the cheapest form of investigation," Tse said.

"But it's not just the maid who gets tortured because the jewels have gone missing, it's also the sister of the maid, because life is dispensable, and the sister may know something about who the maid's associating with," Tse explained. "It's

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not only the accused, but whole families and communities, whole networks that can be influenced or affected when there's really no rule of law. In these places, we're working towards making sure there's a defender adequately trained to make sure every man, woman and child has effective counsel and due process."

Tse said her ordination within the Unitarian church has made her work spirituality-based in a way that her clients can sense, but she keeps the words "religion" and "values" at arm's length.

"It's hard to say 'values-based' nowadays, because everything gets mixed up with George W. Bush, but we're spiritually motivated in terms of recognizing the inherent worth of every human being and being able to take leaps of faith knowing this is what we're called to do."

Tse said she has experienced little derision for being an American overseas, first of all, "because I don't know that people's first impression of me is that I'm an American," she said.

"It's all in the way that you approach it. Our approach is not in any lecturing form. It's about working together and finding the strengths in systems. ... We're not about imposing any of our laws and standards. We take the best of Cambodian laws, for example, and help them implement those pieces of it."

The IBJ is expanding rapidly thanks to requests from other countries - from private citizens and government entities - according to Tse, who said the organization works with the permission of the government in most places, educating citizens and government workers through camps, conferences and round-table discussions.

The personal implications of Tse's work aren't left in the conference room, however. When asked about times she has been endangered by her work, Tse declined to answer. "Why don't we just leave that out?" she asked.

She was much more open about her feelings of gratification: "I feel rewarded on a very regular basis," she said. "When you're in the country and working with the people, you feel the immediate impact of what you're doing. When you see a woman who has been imprisoned because her husband has committed a crime, and she gets released, you feel great about that."

Lately, however, Tse has spent more time in front of a computer screen, trying to satisfy the many requests for training assistance she receives from people all over the world - like the Indian swami who called Tse saying "my country has one of the larger instances of custodian deaths, and so many people have served double what their sentences would have been had they gone to court," Tse recalled.

"The laws are on the books but are not implemented, and we can change or shift things, but it's about work ... it's easy to protest, but hard to get down to the nuts and bolts to make sure every letter of the law becomes a reality," she said. "There are governments and citizens who will work with us, but we have to stand up to that challenge."

A young lawyer from Zimbabwe kept encouraging Tse to bring IBJ's services to Africa.

"He kept saying, 'Karen, you must come, you must come. We have decent laws but they're not being implemented. The country is in such turmoil and we need to build a strong defense core,'" remembered Tse, who first balked at the logistical difficulty of working in Africa. (Simply, she couldn't get there.)

"But Martin Luther King says, 'The time is always right for justice.' People all over the world are saying 'help us' ... and we have to respond to that call."

So, Tse's next plan is to create a training system that can be implemented in any country where there is a demand for equitable defense counsel - even if that is a daunting task.

In order to expand the IBJ's reach, Tse is looking to create "Communities of Conscience" to support 108 legal fellows around the world. She's hoping Nantucket may be one of them - one of the communities willing to open their homes during Americabased training sessions, or even donate extra frequent flyer miles towards travel costs, and also possibly offer financial assistance toward their training, she said.

"With that startup money, we would bring [lawyers from all over the world] to Geneva, help them be a part of this fellows community now that we have templated manuals ... and we would specialize it to their own countries as they begin this process."

According to Tse, no other organization in the world does what the IBJ does - "implementing criminal justice laws."

"At first, I as like, 'Wow, this is too much,'" Tse said about expanding IBJ's focus from Cambodia, Vietnam, China and the like to other countries. "But then I realized we can figure this out and we have an obligation and duty to support these warriors throughout the world who want to support this change. We want to reach out to all corners of the world, but we need all corners of the world need to reach out to us."

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