Reconstructing Society After Genocide

Boston College Law School

Follow this and additional works at: http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/law_school_publications

Part of the Legal Education Commons

Digital Commons Citation
http://lawdigitalcommons.bc.edu/law_school_publications/635

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Law School Archive at Digital Commons @ Boston College Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Law School Publications by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Boston College Law School. For more information, please contact nick.szydlowski@bc.edu.
Reconstructing Society After Genocide

OLIVIA MAGDALENA SANTIAGO CETO

9/26/05-- The first human rights law event of the fall semester, co-sponsored by the newly established Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College, and the Law School’s Owen M. Kupferschmid Holocaust/Human Rights Project, will take place on the BC Law campus on September 29, in the East Wing Building room 120, beginning at 5:30 pm. This event is part of a series looking at multi-disciplinary methods of healing societies in the wake of war and genocide.

The first guest speaker for the Boston College Center for Human Rights and International Justice, Olivia Magdalena Santiago Ceto, is from Santa Maria Nebaj in the conflict-torn Ixil region of the state of “El Quiché” in northern Guatemala. Her Mayan ancestors have inhabited Central America for thousands of years. Ms. Santiago Ceto is the first indigenous woman within the Ixil population to obtain a university degree (Universidad Rafael Landivar, Quetzaltenango, Guatemala), which she earned in the political and social sciences with a specialization in development management. In the devastating wake of the armed conflict between the Guatemalan government and guerrilla forces in the 1970’s and 1980’s, she and other youth leaders founded a non-profit organization in Nebaj that works to lower the suicide rate of the region while reconstructing the social fabric of a society in which genocide tore apart a culture of close relationships between neighbors, social groups and families.

“[Olivia Santiago Ceto] will describe her personal experiences and, following her talk, we will begin what I hope will be a focused, year-long conversation exploring these subjects in a variety of contexts,” said Professor Dan Kanstroom, Director of Human Rights Programs at BC Law.

The student primarily responsible for bringing Olivia to campus is Ben Weiner, a first-year student at the Law School. During the 2003 elections in Guatemala, Weiner worked with the Carter Center investigating human rights abuses that resulted in 250,000 civilians being killed. Olivia Magdalena Santiago Ceto was working with Mirador Electoral, a grassroots electoral observation initiative in Guatemala that included thousands of Guatemalan observers spread out throughout the country. Weiner met her in her hometown of Santa Maria Nebaj.

"I learned that she and other youth started an NGO there with USAID and EU funding when she was only 17,” Weiner says. "Their NGO is working toward reconstructing a society torn apart by genocide."

After enrolling at BC Law, Weiner mentioned the idea of bringing Santiago Ceto to campus in conversations with Kanstroom and Dean Lykes (School of Ed/Psychology). The Holocaust Human Rights Project also agreed to be a primary sponsor and help organize the event.

"Professor Kanstroom and Dean Lykes wrote letters of support for Ms. Santiago Ceto to the US Embassy in Guatemala,” Weiner says. "Ms. Santiago Ceto also obtained legal documents in Guatemala to prove her status there and help smooth the visa application process. Further, we obtained the support of many student groups to show the embassy the legitimacy of our event.”

President of HHRP Alison Eggers helped organize the event and has been enthusiastic about the
topic and making the event a reality, Weiner says. The main sponsors are the Holocaust Human Rights Project, the new Center for Human Rights and International Justice at Boston College, the Lynch School of Education, and the Latin American Studies Department at Boston College, which is directed by Elizabeth King.

Ms. Santiago Ceto’s speech is titled Reconstructing Society After Genocide: The Experience Of A Mayan Activist In Guatemala.

Guatemala and the Internal Armed Conflict

Until the signing of the Peace Accords in December, 1996, Guatemala was involved in an internal armed conflict that lasted for more than 36 years. This conflict is considered the longest civil war in the history of Central America. The war left 150,000 dead, 47,000 disappeared, over one million internally displaced and well over 200,000 refugees and 300,000 orphans. A United Nations Report attributed 93% of all human rights violations during that time to State agents; either the armed forces or paramilitary forces under military command. Insurgency groups were deemed responsible for only 4% of violations. The perpetrators of genocide have yet to be brought to justice in a culture of impunity and a dysfunctional legal system.

The root causes of the war were deep racial oppression and severe economic disparity. Currently, of Guatemala’s 42,042 square miles, nearly 30,000 are owned by 2% of the population. While Guatemala suffers the second worst poverty level in Latin American, with 60% of the population living below poverty line (in some areas as much as 98%), it also has over 4,000 millionaires. 83% of all violations during the war were against indigenous peoples and even today, women in their traditional Mayan clothing are denied entrance to some exclusive restaurants.

Throughout the civil war and in the post-conflict era, nearly all sectors of the population have been in some way negatively affected by violence. One of the most profoundly affected populations during the war was Guatemalan women. In addition to the violence they suffered first hand, they were the ones left to pick up the broken pieces of their communities, families and households, often widowed and alone.

For more information on the event, please contact Ben Weiner at weinerbe@bc.edu.