Internships Promote Commitment to Justice

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For his summer internship, D. Christopher Decker '98 worked in an Istanbul law office that also runs the torture-rehabilitation clinic next door.

"It was a full-service organization," he quips. The third-year student pauses, then adds quickly, "There's a certain dark humor that goes with the job."

Decke is anything but flip about his experience as one of 11 students who went abroad this year under UB Law's new International Human Rights Internship Program. Shortly before he boarded his plane for home in mid-August, one of the lawyers he worked with was sentenced to 23 years in prison. "I'm glad I'm back," he says. "But it's depressing, too. I left a lot of people I care about who are in danger every day because of what they do."

As most UB Law students were preparing for the start of fall classes, Decker and the other human rights interns were just beginning to readjust and reflect after as much as 2 1/2 months in places like Bulawayo, Zimbabwe, Cairo, Egypt, and Geneva, Switzerland. Soon they would be back in the library, pondering such issues as the tension between Western norms and local values in Third World non-governmental organizations. But first they had to come to terms with what they had experienced.

"I saw a lot of intense things," recalls Leila K. Hilal '98, who spent seven weeks in Gaza, including one day when she found herself in the middle of a confrontation between stone-throwing youths and armed settlers. "I saw people shot that day," she says quietly.

The Human Rights Internship Program, which is part of the UB Law Human Rights Center, is one of only a handful of similar programs offered by U.S. law schools. Center Director and Associate Professor Makau Mutua organized the placements, in many cases through people he knows personally from his own extensive work in international human rights and contacts he made while at Harvard Law.
"I hope to make these organizations aware that there is a Human Rights Center here at Buffalo which can be a feeder for interns," says Mutua. "And also to create a cadre of students exposed to this. ... All the people who work in this field from the Western world are from either Harvard or Columbia Law School. We want to form our own Buffalo mafia for human rights."

While the internship program formally began during the summer, the first student to go abroad left in Dec. 1996. That was Wendy Moore '97, who worked for about six weeks in Kathmandu, Nepal, before graduating in May. She is now doing part-time legal work as she prepares for further study in human rights, a realm she hadn't really considered when she first entered law school.

"Then I took a class with Professor Mutua, and it was so interesting," she recalls. "I wanted to find out how I could do more in the area, and he told me you had to have overseas experience to do it."

Mutua would know. Since fleeing political persecution in his native Kenya in the early 1980s, he spent three years as director of the Africa Project of the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, in New York City, and several more years as associate director of the Human Rights Program at Harvard, where he earned his LLM and SJD degree. Mutua, who joined the UB Law faculty in 1996, made a number of important friends along the way, such as Abdullah Mohamed Omar, the South African justice minister who made a special trip to the Law School last April at the professor's invitation.

"There are very few jobs in international law and human rights," Mutua notes. "Only those people with prior initiation in the field get looked at by employers. That is why these experiences are particularly valuable for students interested in this field."

Moore's initiation came via some fortuitous circumstances. She told Mutua that her husband, a Buddhist, was already planning a trip to Nepal. Mutua, it turned out, knew some key people at a major organization there, the Institute for Human Rights, Environment and Development (INHURED). On Dec. 28, Moore stepped off a plane in Kathmandu.

One of INHURED's top issues is hydropower development, and Moore was assigned to gather information. At one point she made a trip to a dam project, posing as an American student studying hydropower.

"There's a lot of corruption and things are in an uproar," she says. "A lot of developed countries like the United States and Germany are going in to develop big hydropower projects. They are really bigger than what Nepal needs right now."

She also accompanied four members of the organization on a cross-country trek to meet with villagers during a religious festival near the Indian border. The trip took about a dozen days, and it was unlike anything she'd ever done. "We took horses and buggies," Moore
recounts. "We walked a lot. We took bicycle rickshaws. We were carrying bags on our backs in the pouring rain. But I loved the people."

Back in Kathmandu, when she wasn't working on hydropower or proofing legal documents for INHURED, she dined with people from the various non-governmental organizations working in the country. Sometimes their discussions focused on the small nation's effort to implement its recently adopted constitution, which blends a traditional monarchy with elements of Western democracy.

"It is like what it must have been right after the Revolution," Moore says. "I really would like to do more work overseas. I hardly know how to describe it, but you really can make a difference. You can see the effect of what you're doing. It's so hard, here, to make a change. But there, everything is in such a state of flux."

Mutua says INHURED was equally pleased with the experience. "They wrote me back and said they would take our students any time," he says. "Now they know the quality of our students."

Word also got around UB Law. More and more students wanted to know about the international law and human rights program. "The interest was so enormous that it was difficult for one person to handle the number of students who wanted to talk and to take classes," Mutua says. Work started on the new Buffalo Human Rights Law Review, which will be one of only four similar reviews nationally when it publishes its first issue this spring. And Mutua threw himself into developing a full internship program as part of the strengthened international law and human rights curriculum.

"I just called people up and told them we were creating a program here," he adds. "I was quite surprised by the number of people we were able to place, because we were just starting. But it jelled."

As the spring semester ended, the 10 summer interns headed for the airport. The Law School was able to provide some financial support, as was the Buffalo Public Interest Law Program, but the students had to foot much of the $2,500 to $3,500 travel and lodging tab themselves. Some got more than they bargained for. Lourdes M. Ventura '98 was nearly turned back by a South African immigration official who said her papers weren't in order. Tome Tanevski's '98 connecting flight to Albania was on a plane so rickety he didn't expect to make it. The students had to learn about dickering with local merchants and finding space on minibuses crowded with as many chickens as people.

Hilal experienced daily life in Gaza, where she spent half her internship with the Center for Economic and Social Rights. "There is no sewer system. You have to drive to get water," she recalls. "It's like a prison, like a pressure cooker."

Ventura, during her stint with the Legal Resources Centre in Cape Town, visited the townships and camps. "I grew up on welfare and I thought I was poor, but it's totally different," she says. "We at least had a phone, but they didn't even have a floor. I came back a different person."

Decker learned to recognize Istanbul's "Saturday Mothers" and "Robo Cops." The former were relatives of those who have disappeared. They gathered every Saturday to make short speeches, clutching pictures of their missing loved ones. The latter were the police sheathed head to foot in black body armor and visors. They dissuaded the speakers from remaining at the protest too long.

"Turkey is technically democratic, but it's very hard to get information in or out of the country," says Decker, who worked with Turkey's Human Rights Association in establishing relationships with overseas groups. "When it takes a fax two days to get somewhere, you know something is funny. The police are very brutal. They don't think twice about beating someone in the street in front of you."

One of the Human Rights Association's founding members was assassinated in 1994. "While I was there the government was closing down a number of their offices," Decker says. "No reason was given. They were just closing them down."

The organization had started as a research group, but it subsequently branched out into providing legal aid as well as medical and psychological services for torture victims—hence the rehabilitation clinic next to the legal office where Decker worked. "Some people need therapy because of joints that have been broken," he says. "There were methods of torture I hadn't even heard of." Many patients came from the southeast, where Decker says the military has used torture and forced relocation against villagers who refuse to take up arms against Kurdish rebels.

Like many of the interns, Decker found himself grappling with a dose of culture shock when he returned. "It's a country with many contradictions," he says. "You take the metro train, and the last stop is in front of the new mosque, which is over 400 years old."

He also remains concerned for the lawyers with whom he worked. "You always worry about your own family, that they don't get into a car accident," he adds. "But over there, it isn't fate. Someone may decide to pick them up in the middle of the night."

In early fall, once the interns were all back, they reassembled for Mutua's seminar, Problems of International Human Rights Practice. The seminar is open only to interns and is a required part of the internship, integrating the foreign experience into the educational curriculum. Interns must submit a jour-
Mutua opened the first session by jokingly asking if anyone had lost their baggage along the way. "We all lost baggage one way or another," responded Jay S. Osviovitch '98, who spent nearly three months at the Center for Basic Research in Kampala, Uganda.

Hilal’s supervisor at the International Commission of Jurists in Geneva, where she spent the other half of her internship, assigned her to draft a document on female circumcision. The supervisor wanted a blanket condemnation, but Hilal wasn’t personally quite so sure. She had had mixed feelings about the issue since taking Professor Mutua’s course and organizing a forum on the issue last year.

"We are encouraged to think critically about human rights," she says. "Not just to do advocacy, but to think about the context, about cultural factors." She wrote the document, and the supervisor made the changes he wanted. "I felt more alienated than that they were doing something wrong," she adds.

Some of the students found race and ethnicity playing important roles in their experience, although not in ways they necessarily expected. Mayada G. Osman '99, whose family is from Egypt, dressed traditionally and prayed five times a day while at the Egyptian Organization for Human Rights, in Cairo. Many of her co-workers did not. In fact, she soon noticed that half the women there seemed more American than she.

For Tanevski, the internship at the U.S. Embassy in Macedonia seemed a wonderful opportunity. His parents came from Macedonia, and he grew up with the culture. "Although I consider myself an American, at the same time I have always believed in holding on to my ethnic roots," he says. "But I realized after a couple weeks there that I’m not the same. It was an eye-opener. It was like a slap in the face. They live in entirely different socioeconomic circumstances there."

He was not particularly comfortable with the local expression of ethnicity, with Albanians and Macedonians living side by side but still remaining in com-
Julia Hall '96
decrees women's plight in Bosnia

Julia Hall '96 moved her audience to the verge of tears when she graphically depicted the desperate plight of women that she witnessed during a three-week mission to Bosnia. Now counsel to the Helsinki division of the Human Rights Watch, a leading U.S.-based human rights organization, Hall was warmly reunited with friends and faculty in the Faculty Lounge in O'Brien Hall last November 18. Speaking of her encounters, she says, "We've been in Egypt and Thailand and various parts of the world and I've never experienced as devastating a landscape — geographically and artistically, psychologically and emotionally — as I experienced while I was in Bosnia."

Hall is not a stranger to international travel and research. A 1985 graduate of Fordham University, she attended the American University in Cairo, Egypt, as a Fulbright/ITT fellow, where she studied Mideastern Studies and Arabic. She has since traveled to Bangkok, Thailand, to work at the Thailand Ecumenical Coalition of Third World Tourism, and has attended Australia National University on a Rotary scholarship.

Amid her travels, Hall has made briefs stops back home, in Buffalo. In 1993, she earned a master's in sociology from the University at Buffalo, and subsequently attended UB Law as a Gilbert Moore fellow. The recipient of the Max Koren award as outstanding law student, Hall secured her human rights position after graduation. Earlier this year, she traveled to Northern Ireland, which resulted in her newly published report, "To Serve Without Favor: Policing, Human Rights, and Accountability in Northern Ireland."

In Bosnia, Hall and a team of her colleagues from the Human Rights Watch traveled to over 18 villages to interview Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Muslim women. "The striking feature of every single one of the over 100 interviews that we did," Hall says, "was the degree of depression, coupled with the post-war material deprivation that created a situation in which people were deprived of hope."

Initially, Hall and her colleagues were greeted with some resistance. "Women would come out of their homes and ask, 'Where were you during the war?'" she recalls. Over time, Hall and her team were able to win over the trust of the women, who then proved eager to talk.

While high-profile issues such as rape and sexual assault were obvious concerns, Hall and her colleagues immediately recognized a much broader range of issues distressing Bosnian women. "When we started to call women in Bosnia, the first thing they said was, 'Don't come here and talk about rape. We're tired of that. We have been exploited by the political parties, we have been exploited by the media, and we have been exploited by academics who come over and earn tenure off of our trauma.'"

In addition to a lack of witness protection for victims of rape and sexual assault, Hall's interviews revealed a skewed distribution of humanitarian aid, limited access to medical services, gender discrimination by micro-credit lending institutions, and a lack of employment and training programs for women. Although the nation now struggles to recover and rebuild, women are excluded from construction training, the largest area of employment during the post-conflict period.

"We will do anything," Hall says she was told by a Bosnian woman desperate to find employment. "We have walked up mountains in the dead of night to get military supplies that were dropped by airplane. I can carry back 50 pounds of canned goods, I can direct traffic, I can pour cement, I can carry a log."

During her visit, Hall was prohibited from traveling to the Republic of Serbia as the presence of war criminals at the point of entry raised serious security concerns.

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