4-1-1999

A Question of Rights: Kerry Kennedy Cuomo Advocates for Human Rights

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A member of America’s most prominent political family came to UB Law School to put a human face on a subject that has become her life’s work: the struggle for human rights worldwide.

Kerry Kennedy Cuomo — the daughter of Sen. Robert F. Kennedy who grew up to marry Andrew Cuomo, son of

A question of rights

Kerry Kennedy Cuomo advocates for human rights

New York Gov. Mario Cuomo — spoke in the first-floor O’Brian Hall auditorium to an audience enraptured by her tales of individuals who are resisting the powers of oppression in Kenya, India, South Africa and other nations. Her appearance was sponsored by the University’s active Human Rights Center.

“At a time of diminished idealism and growing cynicism about public service, Ms. Cuomo’s life history is a testament to the commitment to the basic values of human rights,” said UB Law Professor Makau Mutua, a friend of the speaker.

“Kerry’s life has been devoted exclusively to the vindication of equal justice, to the promotion and protection of basic rights, and to the preservation of the rule of law. When I first met Kerry about 10 years ago in New York City, I was struck by her humility, which she carries with her to this day. She is the one person I know who believes — with
The United Nations Declaration on Human Rights, issued just after World War II (and drafted by Eleanor Roosevelt), put forth five kinds of rights considered inviolable: the right to be free from violations of one's physical integrity; torture, execution and arbitrary disappearance; freedoms of expression, association and travel; the right to economic, cultural and social well-being; and the right to select leaders by free and fair elections.

"The United States, I believe, more than any other nation, has a responsibility to protect human rights, because we were founded by people who were persecuted for their religious and political beliefs," Kennedy Cuomo said.

"Not only is it right, it is smart. Supporting human rights worldwide shows the United States is serious about the rule of law in its international treaties; it promotes worldwide peace and stability, and it is an effective antidote to the mounting problem of international refugees."

One way for individuals to join the fight is to pressure our own government to behave responsibly, such as in its dealings with China—a place, she said, with an abysmal track record on human rights. One example: "They administer capital punishment by giving the condemned an injection which will stop their blood from coagulating. Then they shoot them through the back of the head. They quickly take out all the organs, preserve them, and then ship them to the United States and other countries and sell them at a profit. And then they charge the family for the cost of the bullet."

The challenge for those working to change the world for the better, she said, is to never forget the individuals whose lives are affected.

"Sometimes in the human rights field we tend to be very academic, and we don't really think about, 'What impact is this going to have on someone? Is someone going to be free as a result of my work?' That is always a question that we have to ask ourselves. Otherwise, we have great laws on paper, but has anything really changed?"

"In prison, she wrote pro-Tibetan songs and recorded them, signed her name to them and smuggled them out of prison. Once they got into the Tibetan community, they were a tremendous source of strength and hope for the people in Lhasa. Of course, they eventually made it into the Chinese army's hands. She was sentenced to an extra 12 years in jail, which is where she is today. Twelve years for a song."

And she told a long, compelling story from India, where a leading advocate for the abolition of child labor has emancipated 40,000 people, including 30,000 children, from forced labor in the past decade.

"There was a family who couldn't afford to pay rent and feed their children. They borrowed money from the owner of a local carpet factory. Not having collateral, they agreed to let their 6-year-old son work in the factory to help pay off the loan."

brothers made it, he was caught. They beat him, burned him with cigarette butts and branded him on three parts of his body so he would know to whom he belonged.

"In this business, sometimes you hear the words 'unspeakable torture' bandied about," said Kennedy Cuomo. "This was truly unspeakable torture. As a result, he lost his capacity to speak."

"When his younger brothers related what had happened, the family and townspeople brought in an activist, who organized a raid on the factory and emancipated 13 children. Fortunately, six months later, the boy regained his ability to talk."

It is stories like those, Kennedy Cuomo said, that put a human face on what the struggle is about. "These activists share a common purpose," she said. "They are seeking what is theirs as members of the human family, their fundamental human rights."

no reservations — that we have to be idealistic, that we have to advocate, and that we have to seek to protect those who are the least among us."

Kerry Kennedy Cuomo spoke in life stories, detailing the miseries and the struggles to overcome oppression of a handful of people whose lives illustrate the very real issues at stake. There was the young Tibetan woman, for example, who while walking down a street in Lhasa saw a protest gathering of monks, and joined them in shouting pro-Tibetan slogans. The Chinese army arrested them all and sentenced her to three years in prison.