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Making Rights Real: Tara Melish Will Direct the Buffalo Human Rights Center

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From very early on, my core commitment was to social justice work, a commitment that led me directly to human rights and, particularly, to a focus on economic, social and cultural rights. Ensuring that appropriate steps are being taken to guarantee that everyone has sustainable access to adequate food and water, health care and education, adequate housing and land for subsistence, those sorts of issues were always going to be my focus,” says Tara Melish.

Melish began to travel to war-torn Central America as a teenager with Witness for Peace, collecting stories from affected communities, accompanying refugees in repatriation efforts, and advocating for changes in U.S. policy toward the region. These experiences cemented a commitment to a community-based understanding of human rights that would guide Melish’s academic and professional work for the next two decades.

At Brown, where she graduated magna cum laude, Melish majored in comparative development, spending a semester studying sustainable development in Bolivia and another in Kenya, while traveling back to Guatemala during her summer to work as an international accompanier with a women’s group, CONAVIGUA. Through these experiences, Melish developed a strong interest in rights-based approaches to development and to inclusive, participatory planning processes. Back at Brown, these lessons became a central focus of her work at the World Hunger Program on the right to food.

Law school was not definitively in the cards, however, until Melish returned to Central America with a Fulbright after college. The yearlong fellowship was to work in a border integration initiative between Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador, using a rights-based approach to target food insecurity in several border communities.

“I was doing participation-based workshops and right trainings, working with communities to put together right-to-food projects that corresponded to local priorities, going with leaders to embassies and development offices to seek funding,” Melish says. “It quickly became clear, however, that invoking the right to food – invoking any right doesn’t get you very far if there is no accountability, if that right cannot be enforced. We would go to mayors’ offices, and they would promise us everything we asked for, and deliver on nothing. From that experience of hitting our heads against the wall, of confronting practical barriers at every step of the way. I realized that if I wanted to make a difference, I had to go to law school to learn how to make these rights genuinely enforceable.”

At Yale Law School, from which she graduated in 2000, Melish thus committed herself to studying economic, social and cultural rights, even writing a book on it. She was heavily involved in the human rights program – as editor in chief of the Yale Human Rights and Development Law Journal, book reviews editor of the Yale Journal of International Law, student director of the law school’s Human Rights Center and a three-year member of the Human Rights Clinic.

“Even so, she says, “my greatest understanding of human rights law, and the challenges it poses, came from my experiences working on the ground in different parts of the world. That is where you see how concepts learned in the classroom conform to peoples realities.” During her summers she worked with the Land Claims Court of South Africa, with human rights groups in Argentina, and with the Center for Justice and International Law, in Costa Rica.

After completing her work at Yale Law School, Melish clerked for a year on the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. “I wasn’t planning to go into teaching immediately,” she says. But a call came from a small law school in Miami, which was starting an LLM program in intercultural human rights. She agreed to teach an intensive course on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.
Rights, a job that turned into a two-year visiting appointment to teach constitutional and criminal law.

“It was an important experience in my life,” Melish says, “because it became clear to me just how much I loved to teach and to challenge students to think in new directions. I knew I would continue in academia, but I felt I needed more practical experience as a lawyer.” Melish thus moved to Washington, D.C., in 2003 to work as a staff attorney for CEJIL, a non-profit law firm that specializes in litigation before the Inter-American Commission and Court of Human Rights. While continuing as legal adviser to the organization, she subsequently took a position at the United Nations to work as associate social affairs officer in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and, then, as U.N. representative of Mental Disability Rights International in the drafting negotiations of the U.N. Convention on the Rights of Persons With Disabilities and its Optional Protocol.

She has interspersed this practical work with classroom teaching, serving as a visiting professor or lecturer at the law schools of Notre Dame, George Washington, Oxford, Åbo Akademi, Georgia, and Virginia, where she has taught human rights, international litigation, constitutional law and torts.

Melish thus brings a world of theory and practical experience to her new position as a UB Law faculty member and director of the Law School’s Human Rights Center.

As she succeeds Dean M.P. Makau W. Mutua as director of the Buffalo Human Rights Center, Melish knows she has big shoes to fill. She hopes nevertheless that she can provide the center with a strong foundation for growth and an open environment for students wishing to find meaningful ways to give expression to their human rights commitments. “I hope the center will be a real resource for students, to give them the support that they need to follow their own paths in the human rights field,” she says. “I want to be a person they feel comfortable coming to with their ideas, saying, ‘How can I do this?’”

Melish wants the center to also be a place of active institutional engagement with human rights initiatives around the world — through research, scholarly fora, monitoring initiatives and litigation. She underscores in this respect that “one of the great attractions of coming to Buffalo is having a dean who so fully and genuinely supports human rights, is so respected in the field, and who will be actively working to bring the full community together to strengthen the center’s profile and impact.”

Melish and her fiancé, Jeff Rinne, who works for the World Bank, are enthusiastic travelers, adventurers and runners. They recently completed their first marathon.