

Humanitarian Action Students Impact Human Rights in Iran

As the Humanitarian Action minor was being developed in recent years, Janie Leatherman, PhD, professor of politics and international studies, envisioned opportunities in foundational courses and students immersed in service learning and experiential learning — hands-on engagement with opportunities to connect theory and concepts learned in the classroom with the realities in the world.

Spring 2015, the Politics Department approved Leatherman's proposed curriculum for PO 129, the Politics of Humanitarian Action course which would expose students to countries with humanitarian issues and the core principles of impartiality and human needs. Director for the Center for Faith & Public Life, Melissa Quan, suggested that Leatherman and her students connect with the organization Scholars at Risk (SAR) as a community partner.

Scholars at Risk wanted Fairfield to work on policy research, requiring research, data management and teamwork – identified as central to the new humanitarian minor, which would be launched with the introductory course. During the summer of 2015, Scholars at Risk presented Fairfield with the case of Dr. **Mohammad Hossein Rafiee, a retired Iranian chemistry professor imprisoned in Tehran since June 16, 2015. According to verdict records, Rafiee, who had a history of social and peace activism, was arrested without warrant and sentenced to five years in prison for “spreading propaganda against the system by giving interviews to media who are against the state.”** Groups such as Scholars at Risk, the American Chemical Society and the Committee of Concerned Scientists raised their concerns about Professor Rafiee's welfare and the repercussions his circumstances might have on intellectual discourse in Iran.

Leatherman was inspired by the prospect of making a difference but the task ahead was daunting: “This was a case that was so fraught with layers and layers of complexities, decades of sanctions on Iran and the nuclear accord.” PO 129 students were divided into 4 teams. One researched human rights in Iran. Another group researched the foreign policy arm of the European Union. The third group looked at the State Department with respect to Iran and human rights in the context of the July 2015 nuclear accords and sanctions. And the fourth group focused on the U.N.

In addition to meetings with Scholars at Risk, Leatherman's PO 129 students went to New York City to meet with the UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights on Iran, and subsequently visited the United Nations. The students wrote a 50-page background report for SAR on Dr. Rafiee's case and avenues for advocacy in relation to several key stakeholders, including the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Their report included a timeline and details of the case, a timeline of major abuses of human rights in the country, and background on the political landscape in Iran.

Dr. Rafiee's case was mentioned in a more prominent way in the spring 2016 report of the rapporteur. In September, after spending 15 months in Evin Prison, Dr. Rafiee was released on medical furlough due to poor health and was allowed to recuperate at home, without guards.

“SAR is so grateful to Professor Leatherman and her students for their research and advocacy on this case,” said Clare Farne Robinson, Scholars at Risk Advocacy Director. “Their efforts were instrumental in moving Dr. Rafiee's case forward, and specifically led to inclusion of Professor Rafiee in a recent report by UN Special Rapporteur for Human Rights in Iran. But beyond that, and perhaps most important, they provided much-needed hope to his family.”

Leatherman and Scholars at Risk are in the process of discussing possible cases for next spring. “I think this kind of advocacy aspires to bear witness to human suffering and injustice and hold governments accountable to human rights and national and international bodies of law,” said Leatherman.

Scholars at Risk is an international network of higher education institutions and associations dedicated to protecting scholars and promoting academic freedom around the world. SAR also provides advisory services for visiting scholars and their hosts, campaigns for scholars who are imprisoned or silenced in their home countries, monitoring of attacks on higher education communities worldwide, and leadership in deploying new tools and strategies for promoting academic freedom and improving respect for university values everywhere.