

A Global Intern's Lessons Learnt

By Joel Lazar

The Castan Centre audience will be largely familiar with the basic ins-and-outs of international human rights stories, and with the kinds of work engaged in by the International Service for Human Rights (Geneva). For basic information and summaries, ISHR's website does the trick. But there is something I have come to realise about what underpins ISHR's work and, more broadly, organisations' work on systemic international human rights change. It cannot be understated and I only came to understand it through the following experiences.

In mid-May, I was walking past Plainpalais, a large public square in central Geneva known for its farmers' markets, craft stalls and cultural events. On this occasion I noticed a fight break out about fifty metres away.

An angry young man was yelling obscenities at a young woman. His body seemed to say: *I want to smash you because of the anger I feel.* They seemed to know each other. She was trying to keep her distance from him by walking carefully backward, around the circumference of a circular brick bench, her outstretched arms her only defence. He punched her once, hard and square in the face while she buried herself in her elbows, guarding herself in expectation of a second blow. Three men pulled him off her before he was able to strike again. I was relieved, and the fire that had erupted inside of me cooled rapidly. As I walked away I heard him complaining to the three men about something she had done. I did nothing except feel fire, then ice.

That was the first experience. Then I had another.

In my final week at ISHR in June, I was sitting beside a human rights defender while reporting on the daily events of the Human Rights Council. The defender was a woman from a Gulf State. She told me that she had built a website reporting, in Arabic for a primarily Arabic audience, on human rights issues in the Arab world. She reflected, in frustration, that it was very dangerous to publish negative material about her own Government (unnamed here for security reasons), thereby limiting her website's potential to effect change. She said ISHR was courageous for posting about Bahraini activists imprisoned for their legitimate human rights work.

She concluded: you are very courageous for doing this. I said: *Thank you. But I assure you, it's a lot easier for us.*

The fight and this conversation helped me understand what lies at the heart of human rights work: *courage.*

But what is courage? Is it a character trait; inherent, dormant, but ready? Is it born of experience, hardship, sustained exposure to risk? If I work in human rights, do I need it? And if I do, but I don't have it (or enough of it), does this affect the quality, authenticity or possibilities of my work?

During ISHR's month-long, annual Human Rights Defender Advocacy Programme (HRDAP) in June this year, I joined an intimate conversation between 15 human rights defenders from around the world, and Mainai Kai, UN Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association (himself a HRDAP alumnus). As defenders expressed their frustration at various UN human rights mechanisms not doing enough to support the defenders' respective causes, Kai said frankly: *human rights defenders are in the business of courage. If you're not willing to be courageous, perhaps be a banker.* This stuck with me. He certainly



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didn't mean to suggest that they weren't courageous, but simply wished to implore them to continue to be the most vociferous proponents of their cause, while the UN would do whatever it could to propagate their message, support their cause and respond to cases of reprisals.

The fight in Plainpalais taught me that, often, no number of submissions to the official bodies, reports or media releases can stop a human rights violation as it transpires. Only courage can. And courage is the unique and rare tool of a certain group of people who deserve the highest respect and admiration. I'm not sure I had it that day in Plainpalais. I wonder what that means. What would you have done?

The conversation at the HRC taught me that, in Australia, we are fortunate enough to not have our tongues and hands tied by circumstance. Our opportunities to be vocal about human rights issues are relatively protected (compared to many other countries, at least).

The experiences above and many others I had during my internship helped me realise that we need not all necessarily possess equal measures of courage, but that it is the duty of us all to push the personal boundaries of courage, whatever that may look like. Organisations like the Castan Centre and the ISHR demonstrate that whether it is the staff and volunteers who work with them, and the donors who support them, all protect the freedoms that demarcate our humanity in their own important way.

Finally, I also came to appreciate that ISHR does not act in a political or NGO silo. Foremost, it helps build and protect the spaces in which exceptionally courageous human rights defenders operate and risk lives so that others can be free. I am forever grateful to the Castan Centre for facilitating the experiences that underpinned this journey.