

Profile

Donna McKay: taking a long lens on human rights

Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) celebrated its 25th anniversary last year, and has recently appointed a new Executive Director, Donna McKay, to strengthen its reputation as an influential human rights organisation on the international stage. At the heart of PHR's activities lies a network of physicians and allied health professionals involved in forensic and scientific data gathering to document human rights violations; this evidence is used as an advocacy tool to influence policy makers in government, and to inform national and international legal processes.

McKay brings two decades of human rights experience to PHR, and sees herself as an activist born, not made: "My mother would have called me an activist as soon as I could talk. At middle school I was constantly sent to the Principal's office, not for speaking out for myself, but because a teacher was abusing their power, or a fellow pupil was bullying a peer. At that age I didn't have the words to articulate clearly what I was feeling, but the spirit of human rights was within my very being, part of my DNA." McKay's first experience as an overseas volunteer in Botswana after college graduation proved to be the turning point in her life. "Building pit latrines in the Kalahari Desert was a transformative moment for someone used to the suburbs of New Jersey. From then on, everything in my thinking and my life became global."

It was in the field of women's rights that McKay first entered the human rights arena in a professional role. Her work as Senior Program Officer and then as Vice President of External Affairs at the Planned Parenthood organisation took her to Africa and the development of adolescent HIV and pregnancy prevention programmes. Later, as Vice President for Development at the US Fund for UNICEF, she worked with Francois Gasse on the campaign to eliminate maternal and neonatal tetanus "to help raise awareness and resources to eliminate a disease that ought not to have existed".

Then came 9/11 and McKay's focus shifted. "I knew as soon as those planes hit the World Trade Center that we would enter a civil liberties crisis, that the US would become inward focused, and that the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa would suffer", she reflects. Soon afterwards, she was approached by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) to join them as Director of Development. Was this in itself an inward career move for an internationalist? "Actually, I think the work of the ACLU at that time had global impact. By helping to protect civil liberties in the US, I believed this would have an effect internationally. For some people it was clear civil rights were under threat, but for most Americans it took time for people to process the catastrophic events before they could take on broad civil rights issues, such as torture, extraordinary rendition, and indefinite detention. It took many advocacy groups collecting evidence to show the world what was really

happening in secret prisons and Guantanamo. Including, remarkably, the complicity and direct participation of physicians and psychologists in torture at Guantanamo and elsewhere." McKay points to the media blackout of human rights violations in the US immediately after 9/11 "as the end of investigative journalism in my country at that time". She notes how "Most people were too scared of losing their jobs to write or talk about what was really happening. NGOs have helped share the role of such investigations ever since. Organisations with clear legitimacy like PHR, like ACLU. It is impossible to knock down their documentation."

ACLU Executive Director Anthony Romero recalls McKay's contribution at that time: "Donna's global focus, ability to see the long-term goals of an organisation, and skill in mapping out and executing a plan of action helped the ACLU enormously during her tenure here. She helped take us to a qualitatively different level. We are stronger today than we were 10 years ago because of her vision and talent. PHR brings a much needed expertise to the human rights world. It has a singular role to play and with Donna at the helm, failure isn't an option."

As for PHR's future development, McKay believes that "its unique forensic and data collection skills should be brought to new geographical areas of human rights to support growing local and national human rights movements". She refers to work in Afghanistan, where PHR is helping to launch a local independent forensic team, and to efforts in Libya collecting evidence of crimes and guiding forensic identification of those killed. But, says McKay, gathering evidence from doctors in PHR's network is only half the work: "If you do not know how to use an advocacy network, if you are not able to communicate the findings and change people's hearts and minds, you cannot be fully effective. At PHR we want to increase our impact, but like all organisations, this is only possible with greater resources and visibility. If we put human rights in the consciousness of the wider public through media and other outreach, greater resources can follow."

Taking the long view is essential, McKay asserts. "Take the issue of rape as a weapon of war in DR Congo and many other countries. Discussing it often causes people's eyes to glaze over; the problem just seems too big. By starting small, by looking at the problem through a long lens, and by forming strategic partnerships with other key agencies, I believe we will succeed in bringing justice for survivors against this most appalling example of human rights abuse. But it will take time. This is when I think about the profound words of Martin Luther King: 'The ark of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice'. How eloquent, and how right."

Richard Lane



Physicians for Human Rights

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