

Human Rights Brief

Volume 16 | Issue 3

Article 14

2009

Alumni Profile

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Recommended Citation

Burke, Lynn . "Alumni Profile." Human Rights Brief 16, no. 3 (2009): 63-64.

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ALUMNI PROFILE

Photo courtesy of Theresa Harris



Theresa Harris

Theresa Harris, a 2007 graduate of the Washington College of Law (WCL), did not begin her career path with the intention of becoming an attorney. Having attained her Masters of Science in Planning from the University of Tennessee, Ms. Harris originally worked toward social justice by creating affordable housing and by designing environmentally sustainable projects.

Although she was not initially drawn to the legal profession, Ms. Harris has been a human rights activist and community organizer for many years. Since 1987, she has volunteered with Amnesty International USA in various roles including Area Coordinator for Tampa/St. Petersburg, Florida; National Resolutions Committee member (Chair in 2003); and Middle East Regional Action Network Specialist, a position in which she coordinated membership actions for Amnesty's campaigns for human rights in the Middle East. Ms. Harris currently serves on the Board of Directors for Amnesty International USA and will represent AIUSA at Amnesty's 2009 International Council Meeting in Turkey. In addition, as an outreach volunteer with Florida's Center for Survivors of Torture from 2002–2004, Ms. Harris recruited speakers on international human rights for the Center's devel-

opment programs and coordinated volunteer efforts to provide information about the Center to medical practitioners.

Driven by a desire to affect social change in her career more regularly than through urban planning, Ms. Harris decided to pursue a law degree. During her time at WCL, Ms. Harris served on the *Human Rights Brief* as the Managing Editor in her second year. She was also a member of the Center for Human Rights & Humanitarian Law Student Advisory Board, and was a Public Interest/Public Service Scholar. In the summer following her second year, Ms. Harris interned at the World Organization for Human Rights USA, where she was later hired as the International Justice Project Director. In November 2008, Harris became the Executive Director for the organization.

What differentiates Human Rights USA from other human rights groups is its focus on the United States' compliance with international human rights norms, using litigation as the primary tool for bringing public attention to these problems. Specifically, the organization focuses on the protection of habeas corpus, accountability for torture, protection against human trafficking, and refugee rights, among many other important issues.

Ms. Harris notes that Human Rights USA looks for cases that implicate an inherently transnational human rights issue and that also reveal a gap in U.S. law where further victim protection is needed. Throughout her tenure with Human Rights USA, Ms. Harris has worked on groundbreaking cases including the corporate accountability case against Yahoo and the criminal trial of Chuckie Taylor, the son of former Liberian president Charles Taylor.

While still a law student and studying for the Maryland Bar exam at the time of the Yahoo case, Ms. Harris provided litigation support by conducting research, working with witnesses, and assisting in the brief and motion writing process. Yahoo was prosecuted in the United States under the Alien Tort Claims Act and Torture Victim Protection Act after it revealed the identity of pro-human rights and pro-democracy internet users to the Chinese government. Yahoo's disclosure subsequently resulted in the arbitrary arrest, long-term detention, and torture of a number of Chinese activists. Yahoo claimed that it was forced to provide internet user's information to Chinese officials in order to comply with Chinese law, and that these communications were "privileged" actions not subject to challenge in U.S. courts. As Ms. Harris points out, however "there is a need for a human rights framework for Internet service providers' responsibilities, because their business has no borders and relies on freedom of expression." This underscores the need for U.S. corporations to be held accountable for their human rights violations committed abroad. Ultimately, Yahoo agreed to settle the lawsuit for a private amount. Ms. Harris has expressed a profound sense of accomplishment for the formal apology from Yahoo to her clients.

The case against Chuckie Taylor represented the first trial of a U.S. citizen for acts of torture abroad. At the age of 17, Chuckie went to live with his father in Liberia, where he created and commanded the nation's Anti-Terrorist Unit (ATU). The ATU served as Charles Taylor's personal security force until he was expelled from power in 2006. Although his exiled father was on trial in the Special Court for Sierra Leone for crimes against humanity, Chuckie attempted to re-enter the United States, at which point he was arrested and charged with multiple counts of torture and conspiracy to commit torture. These international crimes have been incorporated by reference into U.S. domestic law. In past cases where U.S. citizens had been charged with violations of the

Geneva Conventions abroad, however, the normal procedure was to extradite those charged with torture back to the country where the abuses were committed.

Human Rights USA filed multiple amicus briefs in response to Chuckie's contention that the federal statute implementing the Convention Against Torture was inapplicable because the U.S. Congress did not have the constitutional authority to criminalize acts committed abroad. Ms. Harris worked with a witness in the case and on the drafting of the briefs. On January 9, 2008, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Florida sentenced Chuckie Taylor to 97 years in federal prison. Calling Taylor's crimes "sadistic, cruel, atrocious acts," Judge Cecilia M. Altonaga handed down the first sentence in American history under a federal anti-torture statute. Ms. Harris believes that the Taylor case "was an essential step forward towards domestic enforcement of international human rights agreements, including the understanding that every nation has the jurisdiction and the responsibility to investigate, and where warranted arrest and prosecute, torturers who are within that country's borders, no matter where the crime occurred." Ms. Harris is currently the co-counsel in the victim's class action suit against Chuckie Taylor.

As the Executive Director for Human Rights USA, Ms. Harris continues to push the organization's development and sustainability through marketing, fundraising, and overseeing the organization's projects. She also remains busy with various speaking commitments. This year she participated as a panelist for the Inter-American Law Review Symposium at the University of Miami and at a conference hosted by the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) through its Science and Human Rights Program.

By transitioning from urban planning to a life dedicated to the work of advancing human rights, Ms. Harris knew that she was trading "something good, for something great." She has found a way to earn a living doing what she loves, and she attributes the unique set of opportunities she has been afforded to her time at WCL. The *Human Rights Brief* congratulates Ms. Harris on her contributions to the promotion and advancement of human rights and we look forward to seeing her successes in the future. **HRB**

Lynn Burke, a J.D. Candidate at the Washington College of Law, writes the Alumni Profile for the Human Rights Brief.