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## A New Framework for Change

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# A New Framework for Change

A new center helps guide students as they grapple with the complex issues of human rights and social justice.

Story by **KIM HILL & TIM OBERMILLER**

Photos by **MARC FEATHERLY**

“What do human rights mean to you?”

It was a question posed on social media and poster boards for IWU students to ponder as the University’s new Center for Human Rights and Social Justice (CHRSJ) officially opened in February.

“Equal access to education,” was one student’s response. Others wrote: “Peace and justice.” “Freedom to read what I choose.” “The right to control what is done to my body.” “Marriage equality.” “The ability to express one’s religious, ethnic, political or social ideas.”



**The inaugural of IWU’s Center for Human Rights and Social Justice featured Martha Nussbaum as speaker. She is a renowned scholar of law, philosophy, gender and social justice at the University of Chicago.**

CHRSJ inspires students to think deeply about such questions by supporting opportunities to explore issues that relate to human rights and social justice within a rigorous academic framework.

Educational Studies Professor Irving Epstein serves as CHRSJ director. He and other faculty, students, staff and alumni who helped plan the new center see its role as essential to the liberal arts experience at Illinois Wesleyan.

“You can’t talk about liberal arts without knowing what it means to be a human,” says Epstein. “Rights and responsibilities we have to one another raise basic questions we ask ourselves all the time.”

President Richard F. Wilson recalls his first meeting with Epstein to discuss creation of the CHRSJ. “I found myself intrigued with the idea of pulling together scattered initiatives related to human rights and social justice,” says Wilson. “But I also recognized that considerable effort would be required to make this happen.”



**Professor Irving Epstein (above) leads the University's new Center for Human Rights and Social Justice. He sees the center as a vital part of students' liberal arts experience.**

At a Feb. 21 ceremony inaugurating the CHRSJ, Wilson noted that the center “takes advantage of our strengths as a liberal arts college, drawing on cross-disciplinary knowledge and experiences in our search for solutions to inherently complex issues.” Its focus “is also a visible manifestation of a theme in our mission statement and articulated clearly as an important value in our current strategic plan.”

The CHRSJ is now part of IWU's new Center for Engaged Citizenship, which includes the University's Action Research Center and the Student Volunteer and Resource Center. Helping Epstein lead the CHRSJ are two associate directors: Associate Anthropology Professor Rebecca Gearhart and William Munro, who is the Betty Ritchie-Birrer '47 and Ivan Birrer, Ph.D. Endowed Professor. All three directors have widely published scholarship and teach courses in academic areas associated with human rights and social justice.

## **An academic focus**

With its sharp academic focus, the CHRSJ is distinct from more volunteer-oriented human rights and social justice programs offered by other colleges and universities.

“What we say to students is: Your coursework really matters, and we will tie the serious engagement of these issues with all sorts of opportunities that extend beyond the classroom,” Epstein explains. Those opportunities include the ongoing Peace Fellows Program, the Scholars at Risk Advocacy Seminar and course clusters related to social justice issues.

This academic year's course-cluster theme, “Unraveling Inequality,” has created connections between students in a variety of disciplines — including sociology, education, anthropology, Spanish, psychology and nursing. Workshops held each semester also give students a chance to discuss and compare how their individual coursework approached the theme of inequality.

Another CHRSJ activity is the annual Under-graduate Research Workshop, conceived by Munro and started in 2013 with a grant from the U.S. Institute of Peace. The event brings together students from liberal arts colleges across the country who are pursuing human rights-related research.

Adding to the list of activities that the Center for Human Rights and Social Justice supports is a new internship program that places students at non-governmental organizations (NGOs) around the country.

Epstein has received comments from faculty at other schools “who are impressed about the range of activities that is going on here.” He credits the entire Illinois Wesleyan community — including past and current students — for making human rights and social justice so essential to the University and its liberal arts mission.

One example of those efforts is IWU’s Peace Fellows Program, established by John Stutzman ’54 and his wife Emma. A retired urologist, Stutzman said his volunteer work in Haiti and other war-torn nations inspired him to create a “program that promotes peace, justice and reconciliation. And we knew Illinois Wesleyan would be a good platform for such a program.”

A faculty panel guides students selected as Peace Fellows through coursework, independent study and an internship related to their areas of interest. Since its founding in 2007, the program has developed a positive reputation both on campus and among NGOs nationwide where Peace Fellows have studied and interned. Students in the program have explored a range of topics, such as interaction between poverty and social exclusion in the U.S., and healthcare disparities in the developing world.

Former Peace Fellow Megan Thompson ’12 helped launch another notable program that now flies under the CHRSJ banner. The University’s Scholars at Risk Advocacy Seminar is the first non-credit undergraduate seminar of its kind in the country. Its goal is to assist Scholars at Risk (SAR), an international network of colleges and universities that promotes academic freedom and defends the human rights of scholars worldwide. Illinois Wesleyan is a founding SAR member, and Epstein is one of the group’s longest-serving board members.

## How change happens

It was Epstein who suggested Thompson consider organizing a new student advocacy seminar to assist SAR’s legal efforts, with William Munro guiding the group since its inception. The first case involved Chen Guangcheng, who was imprisoned after revealing forced abortions and sterilizations in China as a result of its One Child Policy. Over a semester, Thompson and fellow seminar students Kelsey “Rae” Brattin, Jeremy Duffee, Catherine Geehan and Liz Liubicich (all Class of 2014) conducted research to strengthen Guangcheng’s legal case. When finished, they were surprised when asked to present their dossier before the human rights committee of the Chicago Bar Association as it deliberated how to help Guangcheng.



**In addition to her on-campus advocacy work, Peace Fellow Megan Thompson ’12 served as an international human rights legal intern in Tanzania, assisting preparation of case applications to the African Court on Human and Peoples’ Rights.(Photo provided by Megan Thompson)**

“We were pretty terrified,” recalls Thompson, who says even she had her doubts about how much impact a small group of undergraduates could have on a human rights case that had international implications. “But we

were also overwhelmed at how receptive they were to our arguments. We found out later they thought we were law students.”

Fate would have it that Chen would escape house arrest the day after the IWU students’ presentation. He was later granted travel to the United States and is now associated with a conservative think tank in New Jersey.

Looking back, Thompson regards her efforts to launch the group as “one of my greatest accomplishments at IWU because it was successful without me. This was the first time I had been a catalyst of something that was going to grow and expand beyond what I had initiated.”



**Students portrayed Nairobi street children during a Course Cluster Open House, “Inequality Portrayed,” held in front of The Ames Library. (Photo provided by Rebecca Gearhart)**

Since Thompson’s graduation, SAR seminar students have researched three more cases. The most recent involves Omid Kokabee, an Iranian physics graduate student at the University of Texas who was arrested in Iran while visiting his family in 2011.

Catherine Geehan ’14, who worked with Thompson in the first advocacy seminar, became familiar with Kokabee’s case during her two-month internship at the SAR headquarters in New York that was supported by the CHRJSJ.

Geehan’s internship tasks included serving as a point of contact for two Syrian scholars seeking refuge from their country’s civil war. Geehan found the work emotionally wrenching at times; she recalls photos that one of the scholars sent her depicting the heavy bombardment that his city and university had endured.

“It was gut-wrenching to see those photos,” says Geehan, adding that she has “no way of knowing what happened to him for confidentiality reasons.”

“Even though it’s intimidating to have even a piece of someone else’s future in your hands, it’s also a great opportunity to help someone else,” says Geehan. Whether or not she continues such work as a career, she says her IWU experiences have affirmed that working on behalf of human rights and social justice “is not something I can allow to leave my life. Once you have a taste of it, it’s really hard to go back to doing nothing.”

Geehan is not alone. Epstein notes that, in recent years, “more and more students leave here wanting to make a difference.”

“When we talk about issues of sex trafficking, child soldiering, organ harvesting, what poverty really means or environmental justice as a human right, there is real resonance among the students,” says Epstein, who has taught an introductory course on international human rights for more than a decade.

Though not all IWU students will maintain an active interest in human rights and social justice issues after graduation, Epstein believes the odds are greater that they will because of coursework and other programs that CHRSJ now supports.

Sometimes that influence can even be life-changing. Looking back on her work with the Scholars at Risk Advocacy Seminar, Megan Thompson says, “This was the first time I was able to step back and say ‘This is what meaningful advocacy looks like.’ That’s something I could take with me into my work after IWU.”

That work has included a two-year appointment with AmeriCorps VISTA in Chicago. This fall Thompson will attend the University of Chicago to pursue a master’s degree in social work, specializing in violence prevention and community organization and development.

Thompson recognizes that many people feel overwhelmed by injustices that occur every day around the globe and in their own communities. As for herself, she says, “I am not idealistic enough to believe I can change the world on my own. But I do know that power and privilege can be tools of indifference, marginalization and violence, or they can be instruments of social change and the demand for justice.

“IWU students, and other educated young people, are privileged, even if they are not necessarily powerful. Take that privilege and place it on the side of justice,” Thompson urges. “If the small efforts of one person combine with another person — that is how change happens. That is how you become powerful.”

**Read About alumni involved in social-justice careers in [a related story](#).**

**To visit the Center for Human Rights and Social Justice website, [click here](#).**



**Students in IWU’s Scholars at Risk (SAR) Advocacy Seminar hold a conference call with leaders at SAR’s New York headquarters. Launched in 2012, it is the first non-credit undergraduate seminar of its kind in the country.**