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# Students Appeal on Behalf of Chinese Activist

May 14, 2012

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – On Wednesday, April 25, a group of Illinois Wesleyan students made an appeal to the Human Rights Committee of the Chicago Bar Association (CBA) on behalf of Chen Guangcheng.

Chen is a blind Chinese activist who was imprisoned for four years after revealing forced abortions and sterilizations in China due to the nation's One Child Policy. After he escaped house arrest on April 26, Chen's case gained international attention. However, the students who spoke on his behalf have worked all semester for his safety.

The students began their efforts in January of this year. Chen's case was selected by the group in collaboration with Scholars at Risk (SAR), a U.S.-based international network that supports and defends the academic freedom and human rights of scholars around the world. What started as part of an initiative for the IWU Peace Fellows program, spearheaded by Megan Thompson, Class of 2012, quickly emerged as the first non-credit undergraduate seminar of its kind in the United States. Also involved in the project were Kelsey "Rae" Brattin, Jeremy Duffee, Cathy Geehan, and Liz Liubicich, all Class of 2014.

Before approaching officials for support, the students compiled a comprehensive research document on the issue, including background information, a timeline of events, international legal instruments and Chinese legal instruments that were being violated as a result of the actions taken against Chen and his family. The group then asked for support and verification from organizations and individuals such as the Dui Hua Foundation, Human Rights in China and New Jersey representative Chris Smith [R-NJ4].

On the recommendation of Clare Robinson, senior program officer at SAR, the students submitted their document to the CBA, who subsequently accepted their request to formally present the case to the Human Rights Committee. Brattin was aware that their presentation was a slight departure from the committee's regular business, explaining that in the past, they have generally dealt with human rights issues in Chicago and Illinois. "However, we felt our case for Chen and his current condition needed immediate attention from anyone willing to listen," she said.

Thompson shared this sentiment, noting that starting in Chicago would be an ideal course of action. "As an international case of this magnitude would be incredibly impossible to take on single-handedly at the global level, we knew we had to begin with local, grassroots initiatives and collaboration," said Thompson. "The Chicago Bar Association would be a key resource for our networking with Illinois Senators and Representatives."

After the students presented their case to the committee, the CBA quickly motioned to pass the case on to the Board of Directors. The students had plans to obtain a letter of support with the CBA's legal expertise as endorsement, as well as partake in a conference call with the Asia Director of Human Rights Watch to discuss the situation. However, on Thursday, April 4, news sources reported that a tentative negotiation was being made between the United States and China, allowing Chen to pursue an academic fellowship in the United States at New York University.

Although pleased with the news, Duffee, who initiated contact with the CBA, is approaching the situation with a rational mind. "There is no written agreement yet that specifies that the two countries have agreed to an expedited visa process for Chen and his family, just statements from government officials, as Chen's U.S. lawyer has publicly stated," said the international studies and economics double major. "I am cautiously optimistic that the situation will be resolved, but we will continue to monitor new developments."

As the case progresses and further details of the negotiations are reported, the students continue their advocacy work for the Chinese activist. However, Thompson notes, this is only the beginning. "Future SAR advocacy groups will focus on other cases from around the world," said Thompson, who explained that Scholars at Risk has a list of scholars imprisoned and persecuted. "The battle does not end with Chen."

Thompson, who graduated with a bachelor of arts degree in international studies this year, plans to continue her advocacy work. She was recently hired as an AmeriCorps VISTA Tenant Advocate by the Lawyers' Committee for Better Housing in Chicago. Her responsibilities will include educating low-income communities about their rights in terms of evictions and foreclosures, finding attorneys for low-income communities and doing policy research and reports on foreclosures in the Chicago area. After the one year position ends, she hopes to get a master's degree in social work or a law degree.

Many of the other students will spend part or all of their junior year abroad. Duffee will study at Pembroke College in Oxford, England, Geehan will travel to Morocco and Brattin will be in London in the fall of 2012 and Cape Town, South Africa in the spring of 2013. Liubicich will remain on campus in the fall and plans to take on another SAR advocacy project for the 2012-2013 academic year.

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