

2020

GCHR 2020 - A Year Not to Be Forgotten

Leonard and Shirley Goldstein Center for Human Rights - University of Nebraska at Omaha

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GCHR 2020 – A Year Not to Be Forgotten

If there was ever a year to be dispatched early and forgotten, 2020 may be the one. Almost unimaginable twelve months ago, the novel coronavirus pandemic has transformed our lives. This “Year in Review” that I write to you as Executive Director of the Leonard and Shirley Goldstein Center for Human Rights, is soaked in human tragedy. Almost two million people are confirmed dead across the globe from Covid-19. In the United States we are approaching 350,000 deaths. As Wall Street soars, suffering disproportionately affects the most vulnerable amongst us – the elderly and the poor. Human Rights issues abound. Those out of sight, the incarcerated and detained, are infected en masse. Many suffer without any affordable or safe access to healthcare. Our heroes – doctors, nurses, teachers, and parents – continue to work through exhaustion on the frontlines. All of these labors of love notwithstanding, the wretched response to Covid-19 by the Federal as well as some State and local governments has been exacerbated by unprecedented political turmoil throughout the United States. We have seen our neighbors lose their jobs and join long lines at local food banks. They have lost their grandparents, parents, and in some cases children. We have heard voices in the streets, seeking out justice for George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. At the same time, white nationalists have brought weapons to Statehouses. Going into the New Year 2021, a President of the United States is refusing to acknowledge defeat in the November elections or to cooperate with the incoming President-Elect in an orderly transfer of power. Millions of employed, underemployed, and unemployed Americans citizens will be going into the New Year with ballooning debt, a lack of access to healthcare and sustenance, as well as the threat of evictions hanging over their heads. So much of what has occurred will never be forgotten. Investigation into the causes of the situations that we find ourselves in certainly shouldn't be forestalled and we must plan for future exigencies.

Please excuse me for beginning this 2020 review with some of the difficulties the Goldstein Center has faced during the last several months of this pandemic. Like our colleagues throughout the University of Nebraska at Omaha and academic institutions across the world, the pandemic forced us to adapt. Many classes were hastily transformed on the fly into distance learning offerings. Longtime research was postponed. “In person” events on the UNO campuses were cancelled. Now is time for a shout out to our affiliated faculty – numbering 48, including most recent additions John Price and Pedro Cantisano – who have struggled yet persevered through career and personal challenges brought about by Covid-19.

The Goldstein Center itself engineered a quick pivot to online programming. In addition to Zoom becoming our Executive and Sub-Committee boardrooms, with the help of people like Courtni Kopietz (the new Communications Specialist in the College of Arts and Science) and Gary Repair (UNO TV) we took our events online – not only reproducing work regularly done in person but creating new digital content related to human rights studies. Online participation from interviewees and viewers from across the world, in several prominent cases, outdid equivalent in person events from pre-Covid times. None of this move online could have been accomplished without the work of Angela Brown, the Goldstein Center Project and Design Manager, who is also a major original content contributor.

In this time of Covid-19, many things that we have done in the past now continue online and are accessed through our UNO Goldstein Center website and social media. The former has become a repository of and door to our collective work. For example, the Human Rights Forum sponsored by the Goldstein Center and organized by Laura Alexander (the Goldstein Family Community Chair in Human Rights) went from in person to online. Two of these Human Rights Forums were also *Charlas*, put together with the UNO Office for Latino and Latin American Studies. These included:

- 1.) Human Rights Forum and *Charla*: "Protest and Change in Venezuela and Beyond: Current Human Rights Issues in Latin America."
- 2.) Human Rights Forum: "The 19th Amendment"
- 3.) Human Rights Forum and *Charla*: "Pandemic and Human Rights in Latin America"
* held during Human Rights Week

With Paul Williams, the chair of UNO Religious Studies and Assistant Director of the Goldstein Center, Laura Alexander also took the lead organizing the 2020 Goldstein Lecture on Human Rights that once again coincided with Human Rights Week at UNO. The Goldstein Lecture featured Najeeba Syeed and her provocative talk titled: "Angelic Troublemakers and Immigration: How Faith Leaders Use Ritual as a Human Rights Tool." This online event, in addition to drawing a large crowd full of local Goldstein Lecture veterans, included viewers from across North America, Central America, Europe, and Asia. Human Rights Week, sponsored by the Goldstein Family Community Chair, featured three online Watch Parties with UNO students to view just released learning modules on human rights. These were developed by faculty experts on: 1.) Religion and Human Rights (Laura Alexander); 2.) Social Media and Human Rights (Magie Hall); 3. Careers in Human Rights (Brett Kyle). In addition to the aforementioned Human Rights Forum and Charla which closed out Human Rights Week, the festivities were kicked off with an important panel discussion on "Pandemic, Ecology, and Public Health" that was organized and hosted by UNO students from the student organization "United Nations Association." Once again, all of this programming is available for viewing after their original streaming on the UNO Goldstein Center for Human Rights website.

In addition to these scheduled in-person events that were moved online, the Goldstein Center ramped up the production of digital content related to human rights studies. We continue to sponsor the annual publication of the e-journal *ID: International Dialogue* that will soon be available on Digital Commons – the Institutional Repository of the University of Nebraska at Omaha. We also sponsor *Siyasa*, an online Forum with a focus on human rights in the Middle East. Angela Brown has also added, in addition to a Human Rights Research Guide produced with the Criss Library, a new Human Rights Resource List tab that allows one to search for information related to a variety of topics like Anti-Racism, Criminal Justice Reform, Digital Human Rights, and the Human Rights of Migrants. Most recently, the Goldstein Center in partnership with UNO TV has produced a seven episode series titled "Human Rights in the Time of Covid-19" that has just begun to air on the TKN Network and will be available in different versions through the UNO Goldstein Center website.

In this annual review of Goldstein Center accomplishments, we highlight the work of our three sub-committees evaluating proposed projects for funding in the areas of Curriculum, Research, and Community Engagement. Several of the projects supported are multi-year by design. It is wonderful when these major projects come to fruition – for example, in the recent development and present roll out of a Digital Human Rights App funded in 2019. In 2020, the following proposals were funded:

Research Sub-Committee (chair, Brett Kyle)

Laura Alexander, "Religion, Migration, and Human Rights in the USA and Australia"

Lisette Aliaga-Linares and Cristián Doña-Reveco, "The Community Effects of Immigration Enforcement in the Midwest"

Danielle Battisti, "Privileges of Illegality? Unauthorized Italian Immigration in the Twentieth Century"

Community Engagement Sub-Committee (chairs, Alecia Anderson and Martina Saltamacchia)

Laura Alexander, "Interreligious Advocacy for the Human and Civil Rights of Religious Minorities"

Ramazan Kiliç, "Bridging Academy to the Public: Spreading Academic Knowledge on Human Rights Issues in the Middle East and Beyond"

Curriculum Sub-Committee (chair, Rory Conces)

Connie Schaffer, "Human Rights in P-12 Education"

We are of course looking forward to a full return to campus in person – especially to our new Goldstein Center physical location at the University of Nebraska at Omaha in Arts and Sciences Hall 206. In addition to an office, there is a larger activity room where we are hoping to meet and work with each other and students. To have space but to be unable to fully use it is the dilemma now. In other major developments, the Goldstein Center has joined the Scholars at Risk Network and we are looking forward to being a host institution soon. The Goldstein Center is also rolling out a new internship program through which students performing unpaid internships in human rights-related areas can apply for scholarships to support their practical work in human rights and its connection to their academic work. We are also actively seeking out local, national, and international internship opportunities for our students.

In the near future, the Goldstein Center will continue to produce programming and content on human rights that is accessible online. We will continue to co-sponsor academic meetings like the European Studies Conference and to help UNO partners bring to our community, whether online or in person, dynamic individuals like Ashlei Spivey and Simran Jeet Singh. Most importantly, we will return to our students doing whatever it takes to make their learning experiences first in class. Speaking of them, the Goldstein Center co-sponsored and promoted a Human Rights Essay Contest organized by the Goldstein Family Chair in Human Rights, Laura Alexander. Winners of the 2020 contest were:

Graduate winner – Megan Kuhn

Undergraduate winner – Ryan Melcher

High School winners – Jackson Long, Massimiliano Saitta, Jackie Iraheta-Baires, Alexandra Schmidt

I am going to close by thanking each member of the very active Goldstein Center's Executive Committee 2020 – Paul Williams (Asst. Director), Brett Kyle, Alecia Anderson, Martina Saltamacchia, Rory Conces, Lana Obradovic, Brady DeSanti, Troy Romero, Mark Celinscak, and Laura Alexander. I raise a glass to a 2021 that we can celebrate. Together.

Wishing you and your loved ones a safe, healthy, and productive New Year.

Curtis

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