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# Notes From the Field: After All, Where Do Human Rights Begin? The Case of Two Small Cities in North Carolina

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*Notes From the Field*  
**After All, Where Do Human Rights Begin?**  
**The Case of Two Small Cities in North Carolina**

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**Abstract**

Judith Blau and Manuel Rafael Gallegos Lerma teach Soc 273 together at the University of North Carolina (UNC). This course is devoted to human rights. From the very beginning, Judith and Rafael worked to establish the Human Rights Center of Chapel Hill and Carrboro (HRC). Since Fall of 2010 the students in the class have been integrated into the activities of the HRC, through service-learning. This is a note from the field on their experiences with the HRC.

**Keywords**

Human Rights Cities, Human Rights

The HRC moved into Abbey Court (AC), Carrboro, North Carolina in February 2009 shortly after obtaining its 501.C.3 certification. Why was the HRC created? To give students at UNC the opportunity to immerse themselves in the practical implications of a human rights philosophy and to work alongside people who experience deep poverty and horrific discrimination. We also wanted to engage college students in human rights projects in the larger community. Why AC? The housing complex, which is comprised of nearly 400 units, has historically been home to Latino migrants and day laborers, working-class African Americans, and Burmese refugees. Most residents are Latinos, primarily from Mexico, but also Guatemala and El Salvador.

Our first visit to AC was in Fall 2008, and it was innocent enough. Along with a few students, we arrived at the housing complex to hand out fliers on behalf of El Centro Latino (a non-profit that has since closed). To our surprise, police officers and sheriff agents came whizzing into the complex, guns in their belts and car lights flashing. According to the law enforcement agents, management officials had called the police department to issue a trespassing order against us, citing anti-loitering regulations. More importantly, the threatening and

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oppressive behavior displayed by law enforcement agents and office management confirmed residents' anecdotes of discrimination and harassment. Our suspicions regarding abuses by local management and the lack of support by town officials solidified.

'Of course!,' we thought, 'This is the perfect community for the HRC.'

Immediately after leaving the premises, we called the mayor. The following day, we met with the chief-of-police. (It is highly advantageous to be situated in a small town where it is possible to have access to town officials, even when one cannot persuade them to adopt reasonable policies and practices.)

Fast forward to 2011. The HRC is thriving, and we have built coalitions with faculty at the UNC Law School, Duke University's Center for Human Rights, the North Carolina Justice Center, the Social Coalition for Social Justice, and more recently, with El Centro Hispano, a new non-profit in the area. Moreover, the mayors of both Chapel Hill and Carrboro have endorsed the creation of a Task Force to assist immigrant workers, and have opposed the full implementation of the controversial 'Secure Communities Program,' which is rapidly growing in our state and around the country. We are also engaged in new collaborations with Rogers Road Community Center, located in an historically black neighborhood whose residents have contended with deep racism since 1865 when emancipated slaves fled Chapel Hill to farm in this community.

### **Evolution of the HRC**

To put this in a larger context, readers should know that the U.S. traditionally does not ratify human rights treaties. (Somalia does better than that, and it does not have a functional government.) Because the U.S. has marginalized itself from the world's human rights community, Americans do not have a language and perspective to talk about human rights or think in terms of human rights. It is the case that relatively new national U.S. organizations—the U.S. Human Rights Network and the National Economic and Social Rights Initiative—are beginning to change the paradigm, from one of liberalism to human rights. Still, human rights principles do not infuse government, institutions, the media, and public life. The course we co-teach at UNC is designed to introduce undergraduates to the interna-

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tional framework of human rights, with the hope that the students will see the implications for the U.S.

During our first months, we explored the possibilities of empowering immigrant workers during the economic downturn. However, lack of financial and human resources, and the complexity of working hand-in-hand with a group of highly marginalized individuals made us rethink the initial role of the HRC. It became clear we needed to reprioritize our efforts. However, it did not take long. During the summer of 2009, the first glimpses of what the HRC could accomplish emerged after a meeting with an enthusiastic educator from Mary Scroggs Elementary School who, through a summer reading program, had already developed significant ties in the community. We invited her and the children to the HRC. During early fall of 2009, conversations extended to include the school principal. In no time, through a collaborative effort that included public school personnel and UNC students, our students became tutors for about forty children who daily attended the program. As a result, the after-school program also became a magnet for parents and residents, who then began to enroll in the emerging programs offered at the HRC in collaboration with UNC students and community members. These programs include ESL, food distribution, know your rights presentations, health fairs, and cooking and computer classes.

During this early expansion period, Shaddi Hassenin, a UNC student majoring in computer sciences and founder/chair of Techs Without Borders (TWB, a UNC student organization), in collaboration with the HRC, obtained a grant to provide the community with free wireless access to the Internet. Through this collaboration, a grant of \$8,000 was awarded to TWB, and AC became wireless. Building on this success, the HRC partnered with the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Public Schools System and jointly obtained over fifty free computers from the Kramden Institute, which were distributed to families with school-age children. Moreover, the HRC also established a computer lab that includes over twenty computers for residents.

One of our most successful programs is Linking Immigrants to New Communities (LINC), which is carried out by a student group from UNC. They meet three times a week, with sessions devoted to grammar, speaking, and role-playing centered on their experiences adjusting to the U.S. As a result, LINC has become an extremely

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**Figure 1. Service-Learning Projects for SOC273 Students (Spring 2011)**

The goal is to provide a seamless connection between the theory and practice of human rights. Students will choose projects that are related solely to the mission and activities of the HRC. This helps to create a class culture where we share a common language and perspective. Note that some projects are not sufficient in and of themselves and students need to find an additional project to fulfill the 30-hour requirement. Projects that need to be supplemented with additional opportunities are indicated with an asterisk.

- NC CALDO. Mostly a network, and meets once a month. (1 student)\*
- LINC (ESL) <http://linking-immigrants-to-new-communities.webs.com/> Tues, Wed and Thurs. 7-8:15' (4 students)
- El Centro Hispano. Liaison and facilitator (1 student)
- El Centro Hispano and HRC. Survey of Abbey Court residents (one afternoon; 5 students) \*
- After-school program, M-Th 3-5 (35 students, 2 days a week minimum).
- Soccer, Th. Eve. 5-6, changes to 6-7 when daylight hours are longer. Partnership with Play Street Soccer (<http://playstreetsoccer.org/>), Rogers Road Community Center (<http://rogersroad.wordpress.com/>) and Carrboro Parks and Recreation (3 students)
- Food distribution and FoodShare, Every Saturday. 11:45 at the Farmers' Market to take the food to Abbey Court until approximately 1pm (3 students).
- Fair Trade educational campaign (2 students)
- Saludamos. Cooking classes and Yoga. Once a week, Wed 5-7. (1 student) \*
- TABLE. Friday afternoon, 2:15-3:45 pm. Meet at TABLE (Carrboro) and bring back food to E-8 for children (2 students). \*
- Community Empowerment Fund. Microloans. Once a week (1 student). \*
- Orange County Partnership for Young Children. Gardening for Abbey Court refugee families (1 student) \*
- Abbey Court Newspaper. (2-3 students).
- Online information and learning network. (1 student; Spanish language necessary),
- Girl Scouts. Every other Friday, beginning Jan 21, 3-4pm (2 students). \*
- "Compu," E-4 Abbey Court, afternoons, 6-7pm (1 student who knows Spanish)
- Techs without Borders. Community network & maintain E-8 computers (1-2 students).
- Rogers Road liaison. (3 students) \*
- Literature review on workers' centers and criminalizing wage theft, e.g., <http://www.ndlon.org/>
- Literature review on anti-loitering ordinance, e.g., Chicago. Judith Blau\*
- Know Your Rights Workshops (1 student). \*
- Thingyan Festival Students to find Thai and Burmese music to play and broadcast, water games and kites (2 students). \*
- Metamouse. Early in the semester students introduce the after-school kids to Metamouse, and check in occasionally to see how it is being used (2 students). \*
- Convention on the Rights of the Child. Presentation in after-school program \*

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**Figure 1. Service-Learning Projects for SOC273 Students (cont.)**

- Health Fairs (1 student)
- Make new brochure for the HRC.
- Emerging soccer programs for kids and adults: Abbey Court
- Liaison with the two towns and media
- Checking all computers in E-4 and E-8 once a week, Techs without Borders, 2 students.
- Community Clean-Up Campaign (all students; once a month)

popular program among AC residents, and works with forty students each week, occupying both apartments –E-4 and E-8. In a similar fashion, other student group organizations have developed collaborative partnerships with the HRC, which currently consist of more than ten programs ranging from technology and English literacy to food distribution. Looking at this array of programs from our students' perspective, Figure 1 includes the service-learning opportunities for students in the two Spring 2011 classes who need to coordinate their activities across classes.

However, we have not abandoned our early aspirations of working with the day laborers to support them in promoting their dignity and welfare. One form this takes is that Rafael works with individual day laborers to recover lost wages when they are cheated of earnings (a process known as 'wage theft'). We have also introduced a resolution at Carrboro Town Hall. However, in the State of North Carolina, municipalities are not allowed to enact laws. Nonetheless, we continue to work with local attorneys to make this happen. Another form of help is provided by David Iberkleid, who has not only created web resources to assist community residents, but has also developed a text-messaging network to distribute information to residents. We are now working with a coalition that includes not only lawyers from the UNC Law School, but also NGOs such as El Centro Hispano and Justice United (a faith-based group).

**Evolution of the Class and Service-Learning Since Fall 2009**

The course, the HRC, and the AC community are organically interconnected. Because of these connections, students can directly observe the consequences of food insecurity and discrimination, along with the lack of human dignity, freedom, educational opportunities, labor rights. These can be abstractions in university courses on human

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rights, but we have designed the course in such a way that students see first hand the social and economic forces that impinge on the residents of Abbey Court. Our goal is to introduce students to the deep deprivations faced by residents who live in Abbey Court, and encourage them to find ways to collaboratively overcome them. Students learn firsthand the importance of human rights by understanding what it means to be human, not simply individuals. They learn from AC residents, who are decent human beings, good parents, and hard workers. In many instances, these realities inspire students to launch ambitious projects, such as food collections, implementing new learning programs for adults, and social programs for both, children and adults living at AC. At the same time, the emerging ties also inspire immigrant families and workers to develop their own ambitious projects, such as managing the computer lab and teaching computer classes.

### **Goals of the Course**

The objective is to teach the origins, evolution and meaning of human rights. But more importantly, we seek to clarify the philosophy and practice of human rights, with an emphasis on economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. We also study constitutions, human rights treaties, and declarations.

Because of the popularity of this course among undergraduate students, the course has been confined to fixed-seats and large enrollments, which are difficult when attempting to have group discussions; however, not impossible. During some classes, students are asked to break up into groups based on their service-learning projects. Sometimes students divide into topical groups, and they are asked to analyze a controversial human rights topic and to present multiple views (such as the right to migrate). Students are also asked to stand in the front of the room to debate a topic, while in other instances additional students are asked to join the debate, or we divide the classroom in half for the purpose of debate. The point is that students are constantly encouraged to contribute to share their thoughts and experiences. TAs also lead service-learning reflections. Since most courses are large and meet once a week for three hours, we have found that the best approach is to keep the class lively, moving from one format to another, and to allow students to feel comfortable

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expressing any viewpoints they are willing to share. Pop quizzes are customary at the beginning of class, and the first person with the correct answer receives a Fair Trade chocolate bar (the significance of which is noted below). The questions need to be somewhat obscure (after all, there are sometimes about 100 in each class, and we distribute only one bar of chocolate, with no credit), and they are always germane to the class and about international affairs (such as, 'Who did Aung San Suu Kyi meet with yesterday?' Answer: Senior UN Envoy). Because human rights are universal, it is important we encourage students to keep up and reflect on events worldwide. After all, we live in a global village.

### **Community Impact**

In the last two years, students from different courses drafted and presented resolutions to both Carrboro's Board of Alderman and Chapel Hill's Town Council, asking them to adopt the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and to endorse Fair Trade. Each time this has been successful. As a result of students' hard work and determination, four resolutions have been approved in both towns. To reiterate, while each semester is somewhat different, depending on HRC programs, students are required to fulfill service-learning objectives at the HRC.

The HRC also sponsors two festivals in the course of the year for local residents: Las Posadas, a Mexican pageant held before Christmas; and Thingyan, or the Burmese Water Festival, held in the late Spring. Students are asked to plan these celebrations alongside community members to ensure a true community event. The events are generally scheduled for late in the semester. The goal is to celebrate the partnership between the HRC, UNC students, and residents. Students are not asked to contribute much time; however, they are highly encouraged to attend and enjoy themselves.

Future projects include developing local solidarity with peoples whose lives have been touched by prolonged disasters. For instance, the HRC has begun to work with a rural historically African American community (Rogers Road Coalition) located near both towns' recycling centers and waste dumps. Residents of this area have been long suffering from cancer and other severe illnesses. The lack of filtration systems has allowed pollution to permeate local wells,

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## Figure 2. Judith's Observations

*On a sunny fall day I was arriving, by car, at AC just as the school bus from Scroggs Elementary School was arriving. Three girls leaped from the bus and dashed to the HRC. We arrived at the HRC at about the same time. They flew through the front door. "We want to do our homework! Where are the college students? Let's turn the computers on!"*

*A few weeks later, two residents, one a Burmese refugee and the other an African American, decided they would co-chair a neighborhood clean-up campaign. The HRC got them bright orange hats, trash-nabbers, gloves, and big black garbage bags. They were on their way, recruiting other residents to join them.*

*I walked into E-8 one afternoon. Rafael Gallegos was there with two day-laborers, Jose and Socrates (not their real names). Jose was on one computer—with headphones and a camera—talking on Skype to a relative in Mexico. The other was on another computer, entering some kind of "data" from a sheaf of notes. I asked him what he was entering, and he replied, he was entering his new poems into his blog. I discovered that his poetry is remarkably good. I asked for his permission to publish one, and he agreed. It will be published in Spanish and English, using his nom de plume, Socrates.*

*At our annual Burmese water festival—after checking with the Orange Water and Sewer Authority—we brought outside hoses and big tubs of water. The little kids gleefully doused their tutors, screaming with delight and joy. The tutors retaliated, but they were no match for the little kids. The tutors surrendered en masse. Then, they all climbed up on the top of a knoll to fly kites together.*

*At our annual Las Posadas festival, a resident made tamales for 300 people, a mother agreed to find a little Joseph and Mary for the procession, and two neighbors agreed to be the musicians. This year, we had two horses, and the children could ride as often as they liked.*

*I often joke that futbol or soccer is a gene shared by the AC kids because all the little kids—Latinos, Burmese, and African American—are addicted to and adept at the sport. I enjoy watching their collaboration on the pitch as much as I admire their focused competition. A coach from local leagues, John Mulholland, has recognized the distinctive talents of children from very poor communities, and is starting a new league, beginning in AC. He calls it "Street Soccer."*

*The HRC is well-linked with university computer groups, and one of them—Techs without Borders—secured a grant to create a WiFi network throughout AC. Supported by our efforts, they worked with the public schools to get free computers for families with children. Another organization, called "Why Equals," is constructing a network through which residents can access services and jobs.*

*Rafael and I devote a lot of time to mobilizing support for the male day laborers, but every time I stop by when a (mostly female) LINC class is in session, I think that women are untapped resources in the campaign for workers' rights. Let me explain. Our computer classes are predominately male. The men are looking (mostly unsuccessfully) for*

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**Figure 2. Judith's Observations (cont.)**

*jobs, while our ESL (LINC) classes cater mostly women, interested in learning how to navigate schools, health care, social services. The gendered division of responsibilities in AC is noteworthy. Yet, I would add that Latino and other fathers dote over their children, push strollers, and play games outdoors with their kids.*

*Among the highlights in the fall were our excursions to Lowe's. Usually two day laborers, Rafael, and I would set out on what usually turned into at least a four-hour shopping spree. We had to extensively remodel E-4, the second apartment we acquired, and two of our neighbors took on the job. They knew exactly what they wanted, but sometimes Lowe's didn't supply the exact gizmo and they needed to put their heads together to decide what gizmo to buy. I experienced similar excursions when I was a youngster—my father was an engineer—but never have I experienced the sheer joy and pride that our companions expressed at Lowe's on these trips.*

*Also in the fall, Rafael discovered that a day laborer was very computer savvy. Slowly, he acquired students and started giving classes in E-4. One day, while I was there, Patrick, from UNC and co-chair of Techs without Borders walked in. Adolpho (not his real name) told Patrick he had installed Ubuntu (an open-source operating system) on two of the computers to save space and prevent viruses. Patrick grinned from ear to ear. I ordered a big red sign for the door, "Ado's Compu."*

contaminating people's drinking water and filling their septic tanks with drudge. Delegations have traveled to Washington, DC, and have filed complaints in courts, which they mostly won. In some respects, Rogers Road residents have been compensated. Moreover, the Town of Chapel Hill is now providing community public services to the Rogers' Road Community that were denied in the past.

Our hope is to learn from the mobilizing experiences of the Rogers Road Coalition, and to develop stronger ties between the residents of AC and the Rogers Road community. We believe that inter-cultural experiences are important for the AC and Rogers Road kids and adults, as we begin to tackle issues of racial discrimination. Another project planned for the future is working with local farmers to measure biodiversity in different areas, and to make the links between biodiversity and cultural diversity.

Please glance at Figure 2. Both of us jotted down some of our memorable moments to give readers a sense of everyday life at the HRC. There is nothing of staggering importance here, but our observations reflect the myriad ways we experience the community.

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### **Conclusion**

On Wednesday, December 29, 2010 it was announced that Senator Manuel Villar had introduced SB Bill 2585. The legislature would require all schools in the nation to teach human rights, including social, economic, cultural rights, and the universal right to human dignity. Unfortunately, this piece of legislation was not introduced into the U.S. Senate. Instead, it was presented in the Philippines' Senate. Americans and the U.S. media point to human rights violations in Burma, the Sudan, and North Korea, yet there seems to be a complete disconnect with human rights violations in the U.S. In accordance with growing academic interest in the US to engage in human rights' research, the HRC, UNC students, and local activists will go to bat for those whose rights continue to be violated. As Eleanor Roosevelt once said, addressing the United Nations on March 27, 1958.

'Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home—so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world. Yet they are the world of the individual person; the neighborhood he lives in; the school or college he attends; the factory, farm, or office where he works. Such are the places where every man, woman, and child seeks equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination.'

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### **Endnotes**

**Judith Blau** teaches at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and is former president of the U.S. Chapter of Sociologists without Borders. She has just completed her year as chair of the Human Rights Section of the American Sociological Association, and is Acting President of the Thematic Group on Human Rights and Global Justice. She is director of the Human Rights Center of Chapel Hill and Carrboro

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**Manuel Rafael Gallegos Lerma Manuel** is currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is particularly interested in the topics of immigration, inequality, labor markets, human rights, and the study of the American South. Since February 2009, he has been working with the recently chartered Chapel Hill & Carrboro Human Rights Center, a nonprofit organization dedicated to promote inter-cultural understanding and the protection of the fundamental rights of local residents. As the associate director, he has been collaborating with local activists and government authorities to better serve and protect the rights of vulnerable populations in the Chapel Hill and Carrboro area. His immediate goal is to not only contribute to social literature, but also to actively participate in local communities to accomplish social and economic justice and to improve race relations between newcomers and established residents in the American south.

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