



Innovations in Public Service: Profiles of Success

He Wants Freedom Now: Jared Genser, MPP 1998

By Lory Hough
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The word 'freedom' has always been a big part of Jared Genser's vocabulary. As a four-year-old, he freed grasshoppers trapped in his parent's garage. Today, as founder of the all-volunteer nonprofit Freedom Now he works to free prisoners of conscience around the world.

Freedom is why he helped bring Chinese dissident Wei Jingsheng to the Kennedy School.

It is also why he took on the case of Yang Jianli, a Tiananmen Square activist who received his PhD from the Kennedy School in 2001. The Chinese government has been holding Jianli since April 2002 for illegally entering the country. His family has not heard from him. They don't even know where he is.



Genser met Jianli in 1997 when they were organizing a 5,000-person protest of Chinese President Jiang Zemin's visit to Harvard. Jianli's work pushing for democracy in China impressed Genser. So when he heard a few years later that Jianli was being held incommunicado by the Chinese government, he tracked down his wife, a researcher at Harvard Medical School, and offered the pro-bono support of Freedom Now.

"I didn't know who he was so I didn't call him back right away," says Christina Fu, Jianli's wife. "But he was persistent. Eventually we talked. I could see that he cared about my husband. He has a good heart. Now I feel lucky to work with him."

Today Genser spends his nights and weekends strategizing to free Jianli. (During the day, he works full-time as an associate in the federal affairs and legislative group at a Washington, DC law firm.) He's met with government officials and reporters to push Jianli's case. Dozens of Harvard faculty members have signed his petitions. The pile of letters on his desk written by nearly 50 U.S. Congress members on Jianli's behalf is at least half an inch thick. In December, he filed a petition to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights.

He admits it's a difficult case. "This is China we're up against. The Chinese government doesn't have foreign aid coming to it," he says. "At the end of the day, it's politics."

Difficult or not, Genser is certain that Jianli will be released. ("If is not in my vocabulary," he says.) Freedom Now's track record certainly backs him up. Their first two campaigns, one to free a British activist held in Burma, the second to free a man sentenced to death under Pakistan's blasphemy laws, ended with releases.

When asked to explain their success, Genser says that unlike larger organizations like Amnesty and Human Rights Watch, they take on only one or two new cases at a time, allowing them to stay sharply focused.

Of course, there are always the other factors, he says, laughing.

"Luck. And lots of persistence."

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For more information on Freedom Now, visit www.freedom-now.org/

Genser is also reaching out to Kennedy School students to work on a Public Policy Exercise (PAE) that will help Freedom Now grow.

Photo by Martha Stewart