



Freedom Now Executive Delivers Keynote at CBU Conference

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An audience sat transfixed as Maran Turner, Executive Director of Freedom Now, spoke about the NGO and how she became involved with the organization.

Maran addressed students, staff, and other community members as part of the Centre for International Studies annual Human Security Forum, a participatory forum; this year aimed at rethinking crime and punishment.

Although Maran usually takes a behind the scenes role in her work, she was a natural in front of a crowd. The young human rights lawyer shared many personal stories while exhibiting extensive international knowledge.

Maran started her path as a student at the University of Texas. She confided that as a student, she didn't get involved with the many organizations and groups that worked to alleviate global issues. It wasn't until she decided to travel on her own that she recognized there was a world outside her town. The moment came after a spontaneous trip to Peru where Maran encountered the shantytowns outside of the capital, Lima. These images, Maran claims, will be forever emblazoned on her mind.

After more travel, Maran completed her undergraduate degree and pursued a career in law. Wanting to make a difference in the world, she initially worked as a corporate lawyer, about which she shared a laugh with the crowd. Becoming a corporate lawyer was more about paying off student debt than anything else. Nonetheless, the opportunity led her to meet a variety of lawyers, changing her field to Human Rights law, and coming into contact with Jared Genser, the founder of Freedom Now.

Maran's passion for her work took her around the world, where she was a lawyer for the Southern African Litigation Council, and as a representative for former Czech Republic President Václav Havel and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Desmond Tutu.

It was after these experiences that Maran became Executive Director of Freedom Now, where she has worked for the past three years.

Freedom Now is a US based non-profit, non-governmental, non-partisan organization that works to liberate individual prisoners of conscience.

Freedom Now describes prisoners of conscience as "persons detained for their political, religious, or other beliefs or because of their ethnic origin, sex, sexual orientation, color,

language, national or social origin, economic status, birth or other status—who have not used or advocated violence.” Prisoners of conscience include people using their voice, including journalists, politicians, editors, lawyers, musicians and more.

The organization works with the family members of the prisoner, advocating on their behalf to international organizations such as the United Nations, by creating a dialogue between the governing bodies involved, and by focusing on getting media aware of the cases.

Maran notes that each individual case requires unique and creative strategies for freeing the prisoner. Law students and lawyers work pro-bono on the cases, always developing close personal relations with the prisoner and their families.

Ideally, prisoners are freed and their voices restored. In March 2011 alone, two prisoners have been released in Cuba, and Syria. Nonetheless, Maran explains, there are many more cases that continue, often keeping these individuals detained where torture or poor living conditions are almost always present.

Some current prisoners Freedom Now represents include 2010 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Liu Xiaobo, and famous Cameroonian musician Lapiro de Mbanga.

Presently, there are no American or Canadian cases being brought forward to their organization.

Maran describes Freedom Now’s impact quite modestly when in fact it is making huge inroads in human rights. While the organization doesn’t have a great deal of resources, they fundraise for prisoners and put pressure on governments and corporations to obey international human rights worldwide.

When asked if governments care about these situations, Maran’s answer varies. Higher-up government officials can be detached from the issue, and deflect everything Freedom Now does. Yet, some officials really do care, sharing information and offering their support.

The future of Freedom Now looks hopeful, especially with individuals like Maran Turner involved. Maran describes the current human rights situation, mentioning that the situation is getting worse, with more political prisoners currently than in recent years.

Maran works day in and day out to improve the global situation and to try and save lives and give voices back to the prisoners whom always continue to use them in betterment of the regional, and international situation.

Maran is impressed by the conference put on by the Centre for International Studies’, and its initiatives. She finishes by saying that more cooperation and awareness is needed amongst individuals and organizations looking to effect change. Sometimes egos and money can get in the way of cooperation, but getting involved and working together ultimately creates a stronger voice for those who cannot use their own.

For more information about Freedom Now, visit: <http://www.freedom-now.org/about/mission/>.