



# ONE ROOF

*Rain does not fall on one roof alone.*  
Cameroonian Proverb



Winter 2012

Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma

Vol. 13, No. 1

*The mission of ASTT is to alleviate the suffering of those who have experienced the trauma of torture, to educate the local, national, and world community about the needs of torture survivors, and to advocate on their behalf. ASTT was founded in 1994.*

## ASTT Clinical Director Mary Cogar Honored for Her Outstanding Commitment to Human Rights

On December 8, 2011, the United Nations Association of the National Capital Area (UNA-NCA) commemorated the 63rd anniversary of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights with its annual Human Rights Luncheon in the Caucus Room of the Cannon House. In addition to the main awardees, five members of the DC community were recognized with Community Human Rights Awards. Mary C. Cogar, Clinical Director of Advocates for Survivors of Torture and Trauma (ASTT) was honored for her outstanding commitment to human rights at the 2011 event.

Dr. Cogar, a licensed psychologist joined ASTT in 1999 to assist individuals who have suffered torture at the hands of their governments. Dr. Cogar provides compassionate and culturally sensitive psychological assessment



and treatment to torture survivors. As Clinical Director, she leads the clinical staff of ASTT and supervises numerous doctoral psychology students. Dr. Cogar makes a profound impact on the lives of others. Survivors speak of her with gratitude and warmth; psychologists

trained at ASTT reflect years later of her impact on their profession and lives; staff appreciate her dedication and motivation; and judges and lawyers speak with respect of her expert testimony.

Dr. Cogar was joined at the awards luncheon on December 8, 2011 by members of her family and ASTT Executive Director Dr. Karen Hanscom. Unaware that she had been nominated, she was “*completely surprised, stunned actually.*” In her acceptance speech she thanked Dr. Hanscom, the ASTT staff, and the clients for teaching her about human rights and helping her to value the freedom we all have here. Dr. Cogar says “*I feel honored to get the award but I definitely could not do what I do without all of you on the staff doing the absolutely superb work that you do.*” Thank you, Mary, for all that you do!

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# Groups at ASTT

ASTT provides psychotherapy, social and educational groups that complement and enhance the individual therapy and case management that survivors receive. The group sessions reinforce strengths based principles and encourage social skills and interaction. The ASTT strengths approach is based on the understanding that every individual has deep internal resources and the inherent capacity to transform his or her life. Groups offer a healing atmosphere for people to decrease their isolation and increase strategies to manage their psychological symptoms and constructively work on problem solving. In the group designed for women, group participants are able to share their painful traumatic experiences and help each other in adjusting to their new lives.

Alice (not her real name, all client names are changed for their protection) shared during a case management session that she missed the support of other women, that there is no one who can really

understand her other than women who have experienced something similar, women from her home country or from similar cultures. Not interested in traditional group therapy offered by ASTT, she worked with her case manager to promote a sewing and craft group. Meeting weekly with up to five attendees, the women are often so engaged in their projects and conversations that no one wants to stop after two hours. The group has become a space for women to gather to learn how to knit, needlepoint, or gather inspiration to start or finish creative projects. The group also provides an opportunity to share language and culture and has grown to incorporate ASTT staff and volunteers.

Another group focuses on learning English; survivors work on conversation and writing skills. The volunteer teacher, Jette Skadhauge, encourages her students to express themselves - to write, to use the computer, and to explore their communities. Jette is passionate about her students and their potential. Socialization groups help survivors practice using public transportation

and learning about the community. A client, Miriam, takes a complex and long route from work to home in order to avoid walking on the same street as a police station. During a recent group outing that included a walk past the White House; police had converged for a Presidential motorcade. Despite police presence, Miriam was able to negotiate the walk with the support of fellow survivors, staff and volunteers that made up the group. A visit to the National Museum of the American Indian allowed survivors from Togo and Ethiopia to explore the similarities and differences between their lives and experiences and those portrayed in the museum. Memories of mothers weaving baskets and drumming as a child were eagerly shared.

The process of healing is undertaken in a spirit of partnership; each of the ASTT groups enables and fosters positive relationships between all participants. ASTT staff has a significant role in re-affirming the strengths of each client and facilitating meaningful connections and community building.

## The Garden in Winter

Now that winter has come, the Healing Garden is in a state of repose. The perennials have settled in for the chilly weather to come, storing their energy in deep roots; the last blooms are fading from the pansies. Still, there is no lack of activity, or of color. Sparrows flock to the bird-feeder, and the occasional crimson cardinal makes an appearance as well. Scarlet nandina berries catch the eye, and the passion-flower and parsley, defying the elements, are still bright green. Confused by the early winter's warmth, some of the many bulbs planted by garden volunteers a few months ago sent up tentative shoots. Last week's frost made them reconsider, though, and tuck themselves back into the ground until spring.



## I Know

I know half a loaf is better  
than nothing

But

Sometimes a whole loaf would  
be nice

I know peace is better than war

But

Why then is there war all over  
the world?

I know things will not always  
look rosy

But

It would be good if they did

I know life is a journey

But

It can be tiring, to travel all the time

I know that hope like a blazing  
candle can be

Put out in a moment

But

I also know that hope, like  
candle light

Can lead through dark moments

I know things can fall apart

But

They can also come together

I know we shall overcome  
some day

But

It will take a lot of work...

*Original poem by client  
"Tim from the Congo"*

## I Am a Cook

By Jette Skadhauge, Volunteer ESL Teacher

The young student sits in the class with three other students and tells about her work in a restaurant. Her eyes are tired because of her late working hours, but she searches with great motivation for the right words and some grammatical structure in order to describe the busy kitchen, the boss and the night, where she alone cooked for all the costumers in the restaurant. "So you are a cook?" I ask her. "No.....ehh.....yes!.....I am a cook!" she answers with a big smile.

Her fellow student, a middle aged man, takes his turn and with a lot of help, some drawing, gesturing and guessing, we learn about his very hard and low paid work four hours a week in a storehouse. We practice the proper use of to be in present, singular – a grammatical structure he understands for the first time, I think. When asked to fill in an exercise on which days he can work, he does not put a mark on Sunday. He looks up and says slowly "Because.... I am an Orthodox". This is the first sentence I have heard from him with the correct use of I am, and at the same time a powerful statement about his dignity and identity. He accepts hard physical work, at low pay – but not on Sundays! Now he can say why in English.

To be able to use "who or what I am" in a correct sentence and with the right words is an accomplishment for all the students in the beginners English class at ASTT.

Students who have survived torture and have PTSD need to heal and settle in their new country - a process which for most also includes language acquisition. They must understand, talk, read and write English in order to manage daily life for themselves and their families, to make new friends and become citizens who have rights and obligations.

Experience of trauma and/or torture might negatively affect one's learning ability because of the damage that happened to the brain under such extreme experiences and because of the symptoms of PTSD. Therefore many students do not progress as much and in the same speed as other students. There can be several challenges to learning such as difficulties with remembering, with staying focused and with concentrating for any longer period of time. Stress, lack of sleep and low self confidence are some among many possible challenges for most students.

The English class at ASTT is a relatively small group of four to six students – an optimal size to meet the individual language needs and to facilitate exchange between students. A classroom conceived of as "a safe place" with room for personal and sometimes emotional exchanges constitutes a valuable place for students to listen to and learn from each other.

The subjects and the resources used must be of immediate relevance for the students to keep their attention and focus. Therefore we often produce our own texts like a letter to a relative back home,, a daily log with feelings and experiences, exercises to understand a driver's license manual, or a story of how Thanksgiving is celebrated. The task for the teacher is to find a balance between a lesson and the input and immediate needs from individual students.

All students have shown a keen interest in achieving a basic level of computer skills. Operating a mouse is a challenge and a much desired skill for them to have. "Me...computer today?" asks a young woman at the beginning of the class. With the help of her friends, she explains that she has been offered a job that she very much wanted to have, but since she could not meet the requirement of having basic computer skills, she did not get the job. She now comes one hour early every week to be sure to get time at the computer which is available for clients to use. All students now have a folder in the pc with their texts and exercises and have a big happy smile on their faces when a new maneuver with the mouse is learned!

As the students learn, they teach us - volunteers and staff - about strength, survival and self-reliance.

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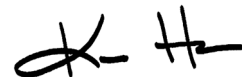
## Message from the Executive Director



Recently a staff psychotherapist came into my office asking to speak with me. She had just received a special phone call from one of her clients who was at the airport. The client couldn't wait to notify the clinician that she had just, at that moment, received her children into her open arms. Following torture by her government, escape to the United States, a long wait to gain political asylum, and hard work to pay for plane tickets from her country, she now actually held her children close to her heart. As tears came to the eyes of the therapist, they also came into my eyes. I was witness to the essence of the work of the ASTT staff.

An event such as this reflects the compassion and expertise of ASTT staff who establish safety and care for individuals who have lost these important elements in their lives through torture. This "heart work" involves both clinical skill and the ability to step into the lives of survivors and watching them begin to trust complete strangers in a world that has been horrific for them.

Emotionally touching survivors and being touched by them is truly an honor. As part of our ASTT community, please share this honor with us.



Karen Hanscom, PhD.  
Executive Director