



Freedom Fighter

From the United Nations to Congress to war-torn Sudan, Tina Ramirez is fighting against religious persecution.

Tina Ramirez '99, MA '01 has become one of the most effective behind-the-scenes advocates for religious freedom in Washington, D.C. Ramirez is the only Congressional Fellow on International Religious Freedom, and her efforts have prompted the U.S. to take a more muscular approach to safeguarding religious freedoms for people of all faiths internationally.

"She is gifted beyond my ability to articulate," says Congressman Trent Franks (Ariz.), whom Ramirez advises on foreign policy issues. "She does a fantastic job for us because she understands that religious freedom is the cornerstone of all other freedoms."

In addition to meeting with ambassadors and members of persecuted groups, Ramirez travels widely to monitor human rights issues on the ground in places like Sudan, Egypt and Algeria. But her signature accomplishment has been to craft language, passed into law last year, which set aside \$4 million for groups which promote religious freedom throughout the world.

"I had done all this research documenting how for the last ten years the U.S. government had done little to promote religious freedom abroad despite a congressional mandate to do so in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998," Ramirez says.

She used that research to compel members of Congress to add language to the federal budget calling for a specified amount to be spent on human rights funds for groups which promote religious freedom in countries like India, Nigeria and Egypt. Ramirez is in regular communication with the State Department to make sure the money is spent well.

"Human rights and religious freedom are important because people are made in the image of Christ. They have dignity, and we need to stand up and protect them," Ramirez says. "God had put a passion in my heart for it."

Ramirez works out of Rep. Franks' office in the Longworth building next to the Capitol, where on a recent morning she met with a delegation from Egypt after conferring with another Congressman in the hallway. Her journey into the field of religious freedom began after high school with a concern for the persecuted church. When she arrived at VU she delved into the study of world religions, and

was particularly influenced by professor Nancy Heidebrecht both in classes and on a trip to Israel.

"I loved Vanguard so much," Ramirez says. "I loved my time in Israel with Nancy Heidebrecht and studying Christian ethics and human rights under Sheri Benvenuti. I loved how my professors had been missionaries or had history in the countries we were learning about. I liked studying Pentecostalism with Lewis Wilson. Dennis McNutt taught me critical thinking in a way that I hadn't honed before, by looking at big-picture issues in a country or region. I loved Jerry Camery-Hoggatt for his storytelling. I loved everything about the school."

After graduating with her bachelor's degree Tina attended the International Institute for Human Rights in Strasbourg, France, in a joint program with Trinity Law School. There she realized that religious freedom and human dignity could be promoted using the levers of human rights law.

"The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights says everyone has the right to religious freedom, including the right to practice and teach their beliefs in public and private, and to choose or change your religion," she says. "Religious freedom is not just for Christians, it's for everybody. It is something that cannot be taken away by governments. It's universal, inherent and foundational to human life to have the freedom to seek and serve the creator."

Ramirez returned to California and taught junior high and high school for a few years, developing human rights curricula and earning a master's degree in education from VU. She earned a second master's degree in international human rights at the University of Essex, the premier human rights university in the world. Then the door opened to serve on the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, which monitors the status of freedom of thought, conscience and religion abroad. During her two years there she helped the commission follow religious freedom conditions in many countries and regions and recommend policy for the U.S. government.

In 2007 Ramirez became a Congressional Fellow which she sees as "a fulfillment of the calling God put on my life."

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“I can’t imagine a better position than being able to travel and to meet the persecuted church and to help them and others by changing policy,” she says.

Ramirez spoke at the United Nations in Geneva last year. She runs the congressional Task Force on International Religious Freedom that Rep. Franks founded. The Task Force works to ensure that the right to freedom of religion for people of all faiths around the world is a priority in U.S. foreign policy. And she coordinates congressional trips to different countries to observe religious freedom conditions.

She also drafts many letters to foreign leaders on behalf of members of Congress, trying to get religious dissidents released from prison or laws that discriminate against religious freedom rights changed. In December she fulfilled a dream of spending time in Sudan, a country she had first studied in Dennis McNutt’s African history class.

“My purpose was to see how the Comprehensive Peace Agreement has been implemented and find what areas we can help,” she says. “I met with government officials in the south, then traveled with Samaritan’s Purse, one of the only organizations that worked there during the civil war. I’ve never seen a country so desolate. It was like going to the moon. They have no infrastructure whatsoever. I stayed in a tent or a small hut the whole time. Most of the trips I go on are not luxurious.”

As a result of her findings, Rep. Franks called on the U.S. to beef up its assistance to Sudan and has made a number of specific recommendations to fortify the peace agreement.

“We are just grateful beyond words to have her in our office,” says Franks. “The work she does every day makes it worth it to continue to deal with some of these challenges.”

Back at home Ramirez has been instrumental

in networking Christians in Washington who work on religious freedom issues. She and a friend hold quarterly meetings in homes to fellowship, pray and share needs as they pursue common goals.

“It’s not often you have people from non-governmental organizations come together with people from the congressional world or the State Department,” Ramirez says. “We get together at one of our houses, have a meal together and pray for the issues we’re working on. A lot of collaboration and support come out of it.”

Ramirez sees herself fighting for religious freedom and human dignity for the rest of her career.

“I know I’m doing what God called me to do,” she says. “I love standing up for people and their value as human beings.”

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