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# STEPPING FORWARD

## Beating the Odds: Robert's Inspiring Journey



Robert Ndifor Tamukong

A promising new career awaits Robert Ndifor Tamukong, a 36-year-old from the African country of Cameroon. He has begun a doctoral program to be a pharmacist. Considering his past trials, this is no small feat. Even now, his attention drifts to scars on his body that remind him of a different, and difficult, time in his native country.

Robert was raised in Bamenda, an English-speaking province in western Cameroon. In the 1970s, separate factions in Cameroon united to form a single republic and autocratic rule ensued. In 1982, Paul Biya, the prime minister, became president, introducing severe human rights violations.

While studying linguistics at Cameroon's university, Robert joined the opposition party and founded a student movement group, the Cameroon Youth Association of Graduates (CYAG), to protect graduates' interests.

In 1993, Biya's regime labeled CYAG a threat to state institutions. "This is when my struggles began," noted Robert. He spent the next seven years working for his cause, organizing non-violent demonstrations to promote awareness of issues affecting graduates.

Robert was imprisoned without charges in August 2000 after being interviewed on national public radio. Sharing a cell with 19 inmates, he suffered intensive interrogation and torture. Thanks to his supporters' efforts, he was released after two weeks - but he was ordered not to speak about his prison experiences.

In January 2001, the government decreed that those with bachelor's degrees could not pursue further professional schooling - limiting opportunities for a majority of Cameroon's graduates. "As a representative of the graduates, I had to

respond," he said. CYAG organized a protest march. Robert was arrested and taken to a prison notorious for torture and execution.

"They threatened to kill me," recalled Robert. "They beat me on the soles of my feet, they stripped me naked, they tied me in chains. I slept on a cold cement floor in a pool of cold water."

Freedom came unexpectedly. After 23 days in prison, Robert escaped after fellow inmates broke through a cell window. He hid in the city outskirts for two weeks until a friend took him to the American embassy. That same day he was on a plane to Minnesota.

### New Beginnings

Penniless in Minnesota, Robert befriended an African man who gave him bus fare to Los Angeles, where an attorney introduced him to PTV. Recalling his first counseling sessions, Robert said, "It was difficult to express exactly what had happened to me. Each time I tried to talk to [PTV therapist] Ken Louria, I burst out in tears. He helped me overcome my emotions." PTV staff also helped prepare an INS asylum report, assisted with attorney fees, and provided counseling and other services.

Three months after arriving in the United States, Robert was granted political asylum. After working as a substitute teacher, he decided to pursue a pharmaceutical career. Former PTV case manager Noemi Rossler and executive director Michael Nutkiewicz wrote letters of recommendation, which Robert credits for his acceptance into the University of Minnesota's School of Pharmacy.

Now in Minneapolis, Robert attributes PTV with strides he has made along his difficult journey. And he is spreading the word. "At that time, I was the first Cameroonian to be with PTV. Since then, I have referred others from Cameroon, who have been very satisfied with PTV," he said. "As for me, I am very thankful for all that PTV has done for me."

"Each time I tried to talk to Ken Louria, I burst out in tears."

THE PTV MISSION:  
 To alleviate the suffering and health consequences of torture through medical, psychological, and case management services to torture survivors.

For the survivors, torture is a past that will not go away. But at least the survivor is no longer in the wilderness.



## Article 2 UN Convention Against Torture

"No exceptional circumstances whatsoever, whether a state of war or a threat of war, internal political instability or any other public emergency, may be invoked as a justification of torture."

"No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment."

## Article 5 Universal Declaration of Human Rights



PTV Board President, Diana Aiello

## Steering PTV: Board President Diana Aiello

In Argentina, PTV Board President Diana Aiello lived in a climate of fear. Diana provided psychotherapy to family members of the "disappeared" during the reign of a brutal military regime. Recalling those years, Diana said, "There was a feeling of helplessness. We were always under stress; we didn't trust anyone." Although she survived those years without personal injury, her encounters with oppression give her special insight into the struggles faced by PTV's diverse service population.

In 1955 a military coup in Argentina against the government of Juan Peron sparked decades of military rule, and initiated a period of economic decline, guerilla warfare and inhumane acts against opponents of the government and innocent people alike. The most innocent gathering could be viewed as political activity, and result in arrest or worse.

In 1976, a military junta had seized power, unleashing the infamous "Dirty War." Tens of thousands of Argentinians were "disappeared" by government death squads. Diana heard horrible stories through colleagues, friends and

patients, some of them children who had lost their parents. "Shootings, bombings, housebreakings, check points for public or private transportation, and the constant presence of the death squads were part of our every day life," recalls Diana. While a student at the University of Buenos Aires, Diana feared even meeting friends to study. "The military was always watching what you were doing," she recalled.

Diana married and moved to the U.S in 1981 where she completed a Masters in Educational Psychology and received her Marriage, Family and Child license. PTV's co-founder, Ana Deutsch, also from Argentina, introduced Diana to the organization's work. She also received training from PTV co-founder Dr. Jose Quiroga.

From 1992 -1998, Diana volunteered as a therapist at PTV. Her past allowed Diana to not only understand her clients' emotional states but also her own. "Helping them was a healing experience for me. It gave me a sense of empowerment, which I didn't have when I was in my country," she said.

Diana currently serves as the East Valley Divisional Director at Pacific Clinics, overseeing El Camino Mental Health Clinic in the city of Santa Fe Springs. She spent 12 years at the Amanecer Mental Health Clinic as a

therapist and an administrator working with Central American refugees.

In 2000, PTV received a four-year grant from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement and began its transition from a volunteer program to an organization with enhanced capacity to provide services. The PTV staff asked Diana to become president of the board of directors - a position she has held since 2000. Diana is proud of PTV's accomplishments. "PTV is the oldest torture treatment program in the United States and a leader in the field. It understands the needs of torture survivors," she said. In addition to working with torture survivors, PTV provides services to trafficking victims and unaccompanied minors in

## PTV understands the needs of torture survivors

immigration detention in Greater Los Angeles. As she looks into the future, Diana hopes that "we continue this leadership role and expand what we're doing through outreach, education, research, and even more provision of services to those suffering the medical and psychological effects of trauma so that survivors feel less burdened and more able to work and live in our community." Diana envisions PTV becoming an advocate in the fight for the eradication of torture around the world.

## Message from the Executive Director

"Torture makes all the difference. To be arrested knowing you will be tortured is to know absolute helplessness before absolute power," writes Kate Millet in her brilliant book *The Politics of Cruelty*. Our task and challenge at PTV is to alleviate the suffering and the health consequences of torture. The survivor's goal is our goal: to regain the optimism and sense of control over one's destiny. Like everyone else, survivors want to be creative and contributing members of society. We need your help to make these simple dreams possible.

## PTV Hosts International Guests

This year PTV hosted many distinguished international guests. In February a group of 18 human rights specialists and foreign reporters spoke with PTV board member and USC law professor Niels Frenzen, Medical Director Jose Quiroga, and Executive Director Michael Nutkiewicz about PTV's work with torture victims and asylum seekers. Brought by the International Visitors Council of Los Angeles on behalf of the U.S. Department of State, the guests came from 16 countries and represented governments, NGOs, and the press.

In July the entire PTV staff met with Father Roberto Layson from the parish of Pikit in Central Mindanao, the Philippines. Father Layson spoke movingly about his work in an area gravely affected by the conflict between the Filipino military and the Moro Islamic Liberation front. Father Layson works to establish "spaces for peace" - weapon-free zones and has implemented social service programs that assist the poor and displaced families around Pikit.

On a troubling note, the Cairo-based torture treatment clinic of Dr. Aida Seif Dawla, who visited PTV last November, was raided on July 11 by agents of the Egyptian Ministry of Health. Documents and files, including patient records, were confiscated. PTV, along with Human Rights Watch (L.A.) and the Muslim Public Affairs Counsel issued a statement of concern that the raid may be part of a larger attempt by the Egyptian government to intimidate human rights defenders. Speaking on behalf of the PTV staff, PTV executive director Michael Nutkiewicz noted: "We were moved by her determination to help torture survivors under conditions and challenges that are much harder than those faced by torture treatment centers in the United States, and we want to express our solidarity to both her and the staff of the EL-Nadim Clinic."



L to R: Arturo Requesens Galnares, Christian Action for the Abolition of Torture (Mexico), PTV executive director Michael Nutkiewicz, Juan Bernardo Rosado Duque, School of National Labor Unions (Columbia)



Dr. Aida Seif El Dawla, co-founder of the El Nadim Center for the Psychological Rehabilitation of Victims of Torture in Cairo speaks to PTV staff.

### PROGRAM FOR TORTURE VICTIMS

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#### STAFF

|  |
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| Michael Nutkiewicz, Ph.D.                          |
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## PTV Seeking Board Members

Are we talking about you?

The reason we're talking about you is that the PTV Board of Directors is in the process of finding people who are interested in serving on the board - and that might be YOU!

The major roles of the PTV Board are to formulate policies, serve on one of the various committees that carry out Board functions, and help ensure that PTV has sufficient charitable support to carry out all the approved goals and objectives.

If you believe in the ideals of the Program for Torture Victims and would like to learn more, call Michael Nutkiewicz, Executive Director, (213) 747-4944 ext 253!

## Father Layson works to establish "spaces for peace" - weapon-free zones...