

***United Nations Association-Greater Philadelphia Chapter
Bread and Roses Grant Report
January 2017***

On December 8, 2016 the United Nations Association-Greater Philadelphia Chapter (UNA-GP) held a special program on “The Right to Education”. The event was organized as UNA-GP’s annual program promoting and honoring the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) approved by the United Nations on December 10, 1948. It includes 30 rights shared by all humanity. In recent years programs have been held on issues such as the rights of refugees and the need for a free press/media.

The universal right to education, the first of its kind in world history, appears as Article 26 of the UDHR. It states that education shall be free and compulsory at the elementary and fundamental stages and that technical, professional as well as higher education shall be equally accessible to all persons. Article 26 says that parents should have the right to choose their children’s education and further states that education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality while strengthening respect for all human rights.

Grant Purposes

The major purposes of the grant from Bread and Roses were to assist UNA-GP in: (1) educating adults about educational inequality globally and locally; (2) offering ideas and opportunities for adults to take action to reduce educational inequality. The program for the event is attached.

Grant Outcomes

The December 8 program was held from 5:30 to 8pm at the Ethical Society of Philadelphia, 1906 Rittenhouse Square. Over 60 adults were in attendance. Following an introductory video overview of human rights and the UDHR, a toast was offered to the work of Eleanor Roosevelt. She championed the UDHR and led the effort at the UN for its approval.

The major portion of the evening was devoted to a panel discussion on

education and interaction by those in attendance on ways to expand and protect the right to education. The panelists were:

- Andrea Townrow, Executive Director of Women’s Campaign International (WCI)
- Sheila Armstrong and David Mosenkis, co-chairs of the Education Task Force of POWER (Philadelphians Organized to Witness, Empower and Rebuild)
- Helen Gym, Philadelphia City Councilwomen at-large

Ms. Townrow provided a compelling overview of her group’s work educating women for leadership roles in Liberia, Afghanistan and Timor Leste. In addition she spoke of WCI’s special initiative with underserved high school girls in Philadelphia called “GALS” (Global Advocacy and Leadership Series). GALS works on issues of social justice and self-esteem with these young women.

Ms. Armstrong, a parent of public school students, and Mr. Mosenkis, spoke about the struggle to achieve an adequate, state-wide funding formula for public schools in Pennsylvania. This included information on a school funding lawsuit currently being considered by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. The suit claims that the great funding disparities between wealthier and poorer districts violates the state constitution. Ms. Armstrong is among 7 parents in the state, along with 6 school districts, who are petitioners in the lawsuit.

Ms. Armstrong provided a passionate description of her family’s struggles for good education in the Philadelphia School System. Mr. Mosenkis, provided a learned, as well as passionate, description of statewide/local data linking inadequate funding with factors such as poverty prevalence and racial composition of districts.

City Councilwoman Helen Gym spoke about citizen organizing for justice and equity and the great need for community engagement. As a strong proponent of public education, and the parent of 3 children who attend or graduated from Philadelphia public schools, she spoke eloquently about the challenges faced by Philadelphia schools. Some of the areas she covered were: inadequate nursing, counseling and other support staff, stagnant salaries for teachers, poor funding, governance issues around the state-controlled Philadelphia School Reform Commission and other concerns.

Ms. Gym also emphasized the importance of the community creating a progressive context within which City Council governs. The important passage of a tax on certain beverages in the Philadelphia in 2016, devoted to pre-K and community schools as well as libraries and playgrounds was cited as a good example of how council and the mayor can act to assist education when enough community forces are engaged.

All speakers urged the audience to get personally involved to a level beyond just signing on-line petitions. The future of education in light of the Trump Administration taking office was a concern of many. Ms. Gym spoke of the need to: take to the streets to protest, stand in solidarity with groups like POWER, educate friends, family and community members and to lobby elected officials for fair funding. Discussion with the audience also involved support of the Black Lives Matter Movement, the need for support of the UN in the current climate and opportunities to get involved with groups like POWER, WCI and others.

Going forward, UNA-GP will continue promoting improvements in the realm of education and other key elements of human rights. This will occur through educational programs with youth such as The Model UN, engagement of college students from Penn, Drexel and other institutions and outreach to adults by board members and other UNA-GP members.

More information about our organization and partner organizations can be found below:

UNA-GP <http://una-gp.org/>

POWER <http://powerinterfaith.org/>

Women's Campaign International
<http://www.womenscampaigninternational.org/>

More information on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights can be found at:

Universal Declaration of Human Rights: <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>

UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights: www.ohchr.org & www.standup4humanrights.org