

**CHAMPIONING HUMAN RIGHTS IN SOUTHERN OHIO  
BY DONALD HARDY  
COLUMBUS, OHIO, CORRESPONDENT**

SGI-USA members of the Southern Ohio Area and their guests gathered at the Columbus Community Center on Oct. 15 for an event titled "Open House to Champion Human Rights."

Warm temperatures and sunshine welcomed the attendees to the community center. In one room, visitors could see an exhibit of SGI-USA's accomplishments in the Victory Over Violence project. The exhibit, created by local youth, also included a documentary of the Hiroshima bombing.

After opening entertainment from the Culture Department and youth, a panel of five speakers began the day's human rights discussion. The panel included Judi Carter, a local SGI-USA member, Gene Harris of the Columbus public schools, Rev. William Barndt of Pastors for Peace, Winifred Wurst of Amnesty International and Paul Matherny of the Stonewall Union.

Each panelist brought his or her own special perspective to the open house, but how much they all had in common became readily apparent. Judi Carter spoke of the local SGI-USA human rights efforts and presented an SGI perspective. She spoke of introducing Buddhist ideas into her local community, specifically Victory Over Violence in the Cincinnati area, noting that it is important that every person contribute to efforts for human rights in whatever way that he or she can.

"It is important to recognize the fortune in one's own life," she said, "and make the effort to extend that fortune to others."

Gene Harris spoke of Project Grad, a new program in the Columbus public schools that targets those students who previously had fallen through the cracks. Mr. Harris spoke of reaching those students who have been ignored and succeeding at educating them. This success required family involvement and raising the expectation of students who believed that college and graduation were things other people did. He noted that we want only the best education for our own children; it should be only natural to want the same for all children.

Ms. Wurst focused on human rights violations at an individual level, echoing that one person can make a difference. She spoke of the power of the individual to influence human rights issues around the world by drawing attention to abuses that would otherwise continue in secret. People are still imprisoned and tortured, she reported, for peacefully expressing their religious and political beliefs. Something as simple as a toast for freedom can still lead to jail. "Ending violence isn't simply passing laws," she stated, "but rather changing the way people think and act."

Mr. Matherny spoke of educating the public about tolerance for the gay community. One comment from his remarks can immediately be seen as relating to prejudice in general. He stated that prejudice is often based on ignorance of the person or group that is the target. Specifically, disliking a group whom you have never associated with. This intolerance manifests itself in racial prejudice and religious intolerance as well as the specific example of discrimination against gays.

Rev. Barndt spoke of humanitarian efforts to provide medical equipment to strife-ridden regions of the world, such as the sending of medical supplies to Central America where the need is so very great. A dentist's throw-outs filled a clinic in a needy country. He spoke

of those neglected and caught in the midst of war and political gamesmanship, those who severely need what we take for granted. He also spoke of those in need in central Ohio—not all of the needy are in some far-off country, he said, stressing that we on this planet are all one people.

Although the panelists came from diverse backgrounds and had different perspectives on human rights, it was clear by the end of the day's events that the battle for human rights is far from over and that everyone has a role to play in the struggle.