

### **Stan and Vickie Casanova Willis-University of Pittsburgh Visit March 22-24**

This visit enabled us to continue conversations begun with our November 2016 Housing Summit about the social structures that reproduce racial exclusion and violence and how these structures are influenced by global forces. Research on affordable housing documents connections between policing policies and patterns of urban displacement, and we were fortunate to have the opportunity to learn about the work being done by Stan and Vickie Casanova Willis in Chicago to resist police discrimination and violence. Moreover, this program allowed us to consider global dimensions of police discrimination and popular resistance. Stan Willis discussed his use of international human rights treaties to successfully challenge police abuse and impunity in Chicago. More broadly, the public lecture and meetings with Pitt faculty and community activists enabled further reflection on the utility of human rights frameworks for advancing social justice.

During their visit, the Willises met with several faculty members from Pitt's School of Law and the Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences, the Director and a Commissioner from the City of Pittsburgh's Commission on Human Relations, and leaders from the following community organizations: Alliance for Police Accountability, Casa San Jose, United Steelworkers, Labor Council for Latin American Advancement, Northside Coalition for Fair Housing, Homes for All, Pittsburgh for CEDAW Coalition, Hill District Consensus Group, Pittsburgh Food Policy Council, and Pittsburgh's Human Rights City Alliance. In addition, they spoke to a group of seniors at Milliones University Prep.

The Willises were able to share with us some of their experience doing human rights law and activism in Chicago and with the US Human Rights Network. Stan has presented evidence on police torture before the Organization of American States' Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the UN Committee to Eliminate Racial Discrimination in Geneva. In 2015 he filed a Stakeholders' Report with the UN Periodic Review of the United States, challenging the closure of predominantly Black schools and the privatization of public education. Vickie has been active in national work to draw attention to the UN's International Decade on People of African Descent, and she serves on the Steering Committee for the National Human Rights Cities Alliance. Discussions with Pittsburgh organizers and educators helped generate some ideas about effective strategies for human rights organizing, and the Willises plan to draw from some of the work we've been doing in Pittsburgh to advance a Human Rights City initiative in Chicago.

A few themes that emerged from the several different group conversations we convened during their 2 ½ day visit include:

- Human rights frameworks can be a powerful resource for local justice activism, but few people in the United States have much exposure to this way of thinking. For many, it is novel to think about applying human rights standards to conditions *within* the United States.
- Education about human rights and the international mechanisms for advancing human rights is sorely needed in both the academy (including law schools) and in the wider public arena. Human rights cities can help advance this need.

- Broader efforts at human rights education can help counter systematic discrimination and address the gaps caused by limited mandates and funding for local human rights enforcement bodies.
- Human Rights Cities invite and encourage the use of *political and legal imagination* to engage residents in constructive thinking and dialogue about alternative ways of speaking, acting, and organizing local governments and other institutions (such as schools, hospitals, churches) in order to better realize human rights and dignity for all.
- Human Rights Cities have demonstrated a pattern of encouraging and supporting intersectional work by providing spaces that encourage discussions across different activist groups/sectors/issue-silos and other social divisions. Nonprofit organizations often see themselves in competition for limited funding and volunteers, and they don't typically find many sustained opportunities for cooperation.
- Although intersectional work is seen as important and necessary, sustaining it is difficult and requires dedicated time and resources. Such support is not often available in existing organizations and via mainstream funding agencies. In Pittsburgh, our efforts rely on a handful of volunteers dedicated to bringing diverse voices together around the human rights city project.
- Universities can provide essential resources to support human rights cities by supporting human rights education, providing spaces for community meetings, and by providing financial and other resources to encourage communication across the class, race, issue, gender, and other divides that are reproduced in our society.
- Overcoming the polarization and social exclusion that plagues our communities requires that conscious efforts be made to enable communication across differences and make visible the impacts on people and communities of policies such as mass incarceration, discrimination in all its forms, and anti-immigration policies. By *helping make visible the experiences* of those most impacted by human rights abuses, human rights initiatives counter the dehumanization of marginalized groups in public and political discourse. By *truth-telling about the history of Western society* and the lasting impacts of colonialism, slavery, and genocide against indigenous populations, human rights projects can help transform popular understandings and aid the reconciliation and healing that is essential for achieving community cohesion and universal human rights and dignity.
- Cross-city communication among activists is a productive exercise for deepening understandings of how global and national policies impact cities and communities and for strengthening national and global work for human rights.