

SSSP - Social Action Award 2006 Report

Chair: Susan Will (CUNY, John Jay College)

Committee Members: Marjorie DeVault, Chair-elect (Syracuse University), Baijayanta Mukhopadhyay (McGill University), Nicole Raeburn (University of San Francisco), Eric Rofes (Humboldt State University), Beth Roy (University of California, Berkeley), Terry Shaw (University of California, Berkeley). All six committee members participated in the process and voted. The committee chair acted as a facilitator and did not vote.

After careful consideration of the six (6) organizations in the greater Montreal area that were nominated, the committee chose **Action Réfugiés Montréal (ARM)** to receive the Social Action Award for 2006. Action Réfugiés Montréal (ARM) was founded in 1994, to respond to the needs of refugees who seek the protection of Canada. ARM's small staff and cadre of volunteers (a group of about thirty in both its Matching and Detention Programs) focus their attention on vulnerable individuals, namely: women and children and individuals held in a local immigration detention centre. ARM has three principal programs:

1. The Matching Program pairs newly arrived female refugee claimants with women volunteers from the community, in order to provide a supportive community for refugee women that break down isolation and create a sense of belonging and to create volunteer advocates who can challenge the myths and prejudices against refugees that are increasingly prevalent in Canada. Often volunteers attend their "twin's" refugee determination hearing, where they can witness first hand the barriers refugees face. ARM provides training sessions on the legal system as well as cross-cultural communication workshops.
2. The Detention Program conducts weekly visits to detainees who are held in the Immigration Prevention Centre just outside of Montreal with the goal of safeguarding detainees' rights and providing detainees human contact and support. It monitors the reasons for detention, the numbers of people held and the conditions of detention. The organization also provides information sessions on the refugee claim process, accompanies detainees to their detention review hearings, assist in finding lawyers and help detainees obtain their identity documents. Law and social work students expand the organization's ability to meet the goals of this program.
3. The Private Sponsorship of refugees from overseas is a resettlement program over and above the government program whereby it can name people for an interview who would not likely be referred by UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Private sponsorship allows former refugees living in Montreal, to re-unite with family members left behind, who are living the refugee experience overseas. Action Réfugiés Montréal expects to resettle over 40 people before the end of the year.

In addition to the abovementioned three programs, Action Réfugiés Montréal works in partnership with other organizations to advocate on policy issues, and works to combat negative stereotypes held towards refugees.

To paraphrase comments made by a committee member: In these xenophobic times, ARM does terrific work for some of the most marginalized groups in Montreal, particularly women

refugees. They use very innovative strategies, such as assigning volunteer "twins" to provide solidarity and face-to-face support through the terrifying immigration process. Another committee member lauded ARM for their: "Solid, quiet work on monitoring detention conditions in Montreal."

Other Nominees

Montreal has many good, socially active organizations doing excellent work. Through the efforts of one non-committee member's contact with a faculty member in Canada, my request that Michele Koontz send a call for nominations via email on March 21, 2006, and efforts by committee members (in particular, our Canadian member) the committee received a total of seven nominations for the 2006 Social Action Award (two of the nominations were for the same organization). The nominated organizations/agencies, listed in alphabetical order, are Action Autonomie (AA), Action Réfugiés Montréal (ARM), Archives Gaies du Québec (AGQ), Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC), The People's Commission on Security Immigration Measures (Solidarity Across Borders Montreal, PCS) and South Asian Women's Community Centre (SAWCC).

Recognition of other organizations

The committee concurred with last year's Social Action Committee chair, Talmadge Wright's suggestion that SSSP provide some sort of recognition for the nominees that did not win the Social Action Award. As one committee member pointed out, all the organizations need support, including the moral support that recognition by SSSP would provide. After consultation with Tom Hood and Michele Koontz, the committee decided the best way to do this would be to send each a letter on SSSP letterhead, sign by Claire Renzetti, as President, commending them on their work. The runner up organizations (2nd place-- Immigrant Workers Centre and 3rd place— Action Autonomie) would be recognized in two additional ways: they would be identified during the award presentation talk that precedes the presentation to the winning organization and in a press release provided to the local arrangements chair.

Suggestions

1. The nomination process seemed to have improved (Last year the committee received only 4 nominations, this year it received 7 nominations) despite the fact that the most members were unfamiliar with social action agencies in Montreal.

To maximize involvement of SSSP's membership in the nomination process, I suggest that the deadline of April 15th be retained or possibly changed to April 1st and that a call for nominations be sent to the entire membership via email two to three weeks prior to the deadline date. I received the first two nominations three days after an email was sent to the membership and received two more by April 15th. Because the 15th coincided with tax day and spring break (Easter and Passover), after conferring with Michele Koontz, I asked committee members if they received any nominations and asked them, particularly our Canadian member, to ask colleagues for nominations.

I believe it is important to schedule committee deliberations at a time when classes are still in session because it is easier to contact everyone that way.

2. The on-line nomination form is helpful, but the chair needs to make sure it is operational. On March 18, 2006, I received an error message when I went to the website. Within 12 hours of notifying Michele Koontz of the problem, it was fixed (this was on a weekend too).
3. The voting process. Last year, Talmadge Wright made an innovative suggestion of opening-up the voting process for the Social Action Award to the entire SSSP membership. When nominations arrive, the committee, working with SSSP could post those selected as nominees on SSSP's Web site, and have SSSP members vote on the WEB for the organization of their choice. The ballot could be linked to the on-line registration for the annual meetings. This would both encourage SSSP members to visit the SSSP Web site, plus allow us to display the actual rankings that members give to the various groups. Talmadge Wright suggested that SSSP could even set up a blog or Web site for members comments about the groups. This may not be feasible, but it is worth considering.
4. Defining the criteria to be used in evaluating which organization should receive the Social Action Award. Committee members struggle with whether they should prioritize organization that focus on social action/ social change or should organizations that provide direct service be placed on equal footing.
5. Committee meeting at the Annual Meeting. It would be helpful for the chair and chair-elect to meet at the annual meeting. It makes more sense to have the incoming committee meet instead of the outgoing committee (After all, by the Annual Meeting the committee's work is done and its report has been filed.) If the incoming committee could meet, they could solidify their timeline, clarify the nomination process, and agree upon the criteria that they will use to judge nominees. Perhaps both committees should be invited to meet.

Thank you for allowing me to serve as chair of this committee.

Susan Will, Chair
2006 Social Action Award