

WELCOME!

I want to thank Tierra Morena – Cesar Guarcax, Daniel Castelblanco, Xavier Buré and José Vega for their beautiful music, and for donating their time and talent – once again – to GHRC. I'd also like to thank Weygandt Wine in Cleveland Park and the Chapina Bakery for the donations of wine and food for tonight's event.

It's a pleasure to see you all here to honor this year's recipient of the Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defender Award. Many of you were here last year for the inaugural award, which we presented to the Communities in resistance in San Jose/San Pedro as part of our 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration.

Before I present this year's award, I want to say just a few words about GHRC for those who don't know us.

GHRC is a grassroots, solidarity organization that, for over three decades, has strived to promote human rights in Guatemala and to contribute to positive, systemic change. We provide analysis, public education, advocacy and direct support for human rights defenders. Over the years, we have worked to denounce torture, forced disappearances, massacres, and US involvement in these atrocities; monitor the implementation of the Peace Accords; and address patterns of abuses such as violence against women and attacks against activists and community leaders.

In the last few years the need for solidarity and support in Guatemala has grown, and due to tremendous support from our donors and community of supporters, we've been able to grow to help meet this need. GHRC is currently the only human rights organization with offices and staff in both Guatemala and Washington, DC.

I'd like to recognize our two Guatemala staff people, Rob Mercatante and Dania Rodríguez. Their presence has helped us increase our impact in Guatemala and respond more quickly – and more effectively – to violations that occur. We wish Rob and Dania could be here with us in person!

Here in DC, you all probably know Kathryn Johnson, who has been integral to our ever-growing presence in the U.S., and among many other things, has been responsible for all the emails you've been receiving if you're on our listserv!

And, our office has just expanded! It's a great pleasure to introduce the newest member of our team, who will be doing our communications work, Lindsay Bidga. You'll see her behind the camera tonight. In her first few weeks on the job, we've been involved in the Inter-American Commission hearings, had visits from multiple Guatemala delegations, were doing follow up on the genocide case, getting ready for our upcoming speaking tour, and preparing for this reception...not exactly a light load to start off with, but she's done an amazing job.

I'd also like to recognize the members of our Board of Directors who are here tonight. Could you raise your hands? Our amazing interns are here: Nellie, Marie and Josh. I also really want to thank our volunteers, who make our events possible!

Last, but definitely not least, I want to recognize our founder, Sr. Alice Zachmann. Sr. Alice was with GHRC for its first 20 years, and it is her fearless work, spirit, commitment to Guatemalan victims, and tireless efforts to hold the US accountable and bring about systemic change, that makes GHRC what it is today.

Alice was unable to be with us tonight, but I spoke with her today, and she sends her greetings. I'd like to read a brief note she sent:

Dear Friends,

It is with deep regret that I am unable to attend the Human Rights Award event tonight named in my honor.

I congratulate the Guatemalan Human Rights Defenders PROTECTION Unit for your courageous on-going struggle to defend the rights of your people. I admire your non-violent efforts for peace and the human rights you deserve.

My congratulations, also, go to the staff, board members and all who support GHRC. I applaud from a distance the outstanding work you are doing on behalf of the Guatemalan people.

My thoughts and prayers are with you as you continue to challenge the governments of Guatemala and the United States to seek non-violence as a goal and that justice is a right for everyone in Guatemala.

I will be with you in spirit tonight.

With warm regards,  
Sister Alice Zachmann, SSND

The Alice Zachmann Human Rights Defender Award recognizes an individual, organization or community who has demonstrated a commitment to the defense of human rights through non-violent methods, and for which he/she has been exposed to threats, violence or other attacks. The award serves as a means to bring international attention to the defender and represents a commitment by GHRC to provide ongoing support.

This year, it is an immense pleasure to recognize a long-time GHRC partner, the Guatemalan Human Rights Defender Protection Unit - UDEFEGUA, for its exemplary

work to investigate, document and denounce abuses, and accompany defenders throughout the process.

UDEFEGUA is unique in Guatemala – and perhaps the world – and its team of about 25 employees has responded to thousands of threats and attacks against human rights defenders over the last decade.

The UDEFEGUA verification team, for example, travels constantly, often leaving for remote communities on a moment's notice – working in areas experiencing active conflict, and with little guarantee of their personal security.

Other team members then provide longer-term follow-up services for the victims and their families, psycho-social counseling, and legal support.

UDEFEGUA also works to strengthen human rights institutions, and facilitates security workshops for organizations across Guatemala, as well as trainings for human rights activists. They publish monthly analysis and yearly reports, as well as thematic investigations on subjects such as criminalization, the psychosocial cost of human rights work, and the impacts on children of human rights defenders. The data collected by the organization is used by national and international organizations seeking to understand the human rights situation in Guatemala.

The UDEFEGUA team carries out this work amidst an extremely difficult, and often hostile, environment.

Most of you are familiar with the statistics on Guatemala's high rates of violence, femicide, and impunity, which can reach 98%. Corruption, organized crime, human trafficking, remilitarization, parallel power structures within government, and the incursion of unwanted large-scale development projects, cause further conflict and insecurity. The campaigns for justice for crimes of the past have been met with yet another wave of repression.

In this context, the role of human rights defenders who defend social, cultural and political rights – community leaders, women's rights activists, journalists, environmental defenders, and justice advocates -- is paramount. And UDEFEGUA's staff, by protecting individuals and communities at risk, themselves become human rights defenders.

UDEFEGUA focuses on documenting and responding to individual defenders at risk, but they play another important role in the defense of human rights: their political work denouncing abuses and participating in advocacy campaigns urging the implementation of policies that guarantee transparency, rule of law, and access to justice, and the respect of human rights.

Through its support for defenders of truth and justice, reparations and historic memory, UDEFEGUA helps move forward Guatemala's transitional justice process.

Through support for indigenous land rights activists, UDEFEGUA contributes to peaceful resolution of conflicts and raises awareness about economic injustice and indigenous rights.

By denouncing past and present violence by the State, Udefegua (along with the coalition of organizations, the Convergencia por los Derechos Humanos, or Human Rights Convergence), plays the dangerous but incredibly important role of trying to hold the State accountable, and seeking systemic reforms to root causes of violence.

This work comes with serious consequences. As you'll hear from Claudia, there have been increasing targeted attacks, threats, and smear campaigns against human rights defenders. UDEFEGUA staff themselves have been victim of these attacks. Their tireless efforts, therefore, are a testament not only to their professional expertise, but also their deep commitment, and personal dedication to the struggle for the respect for the rights of all Guatemalans.

Congratulations to the entire UDEFEGUA team for their outstanding contribution to non-violent activism and their tireless defense of the rights of Guatemala's most vulnerable citizens.

Here to receive the award is UDEFEGUA's Coordinator, Claudia Samayoa, whose leadership in UDEFEGUA since its inception has placed her at the forefront of human rights work in Guatemala, and who has helped the organization grow to be recognized for its work around the world.