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A TRIBUTE TO FERN HOLLAND:  
A TRUE AMERICAN HERO  

BORN: AUGUST 5, 1970  
DIED: MARCH 9, 2004  

At only thirty-three years old, Fern Holland sacrificed her life nurturing Iraq’s fledgling democracy. A courageous and dedicated graduate of the University of Tulsa College of Law, Fern used her legal training to fight for human rights around the world. Fern’s last assignment was in Iraq as Program Manager for Women’s Initiatives for the Coalition Provisional Authority. On March 9, 2004, while returning from a visit to the Zainab al-Hawraa Center for Women’s Rights in Karbala—which she had assisted in founding only months before—her vehicle was ambushed by Iraqi extremists. Fern and her two colleagues were killed by a hail of bullets, in what appears to have been a targeted assassination.

Fern was born in Miami, Oklahoma, on August 5, 1970. She attended Miami High School, where she was class salutatorian. She graduated from Oklahoma University with honors in 1992 and from the University of Tulsa College of Law in 1996, where she also graduated with honors. She practiced law in Tulsa at the firm of Barkley & Rodolf from 1996 to 1999, and then with Conner & Winters from 1999 to 2000. Fern was an outstanding young litigator. She possessed a keen intellect, excellent research and writing skills, and the ability to think on her feet. She had an intuitive knack for practical litigation analysis and possessed the ability to relate equally well with clients, witnesses, opposing counsel, and the court. She was dynamic, highly competitive, tireless in accomplishing any appointed task, and had the highest standards of personal and professional integrity. She made many friends in the Tulsa legal community and had a profound impact on those with whom she worked. In short, Fern had a brilliant future in civil litigation practice.

Fern, however, had a different dream. She felt she had a specific purpose in life: making a difference in more disadvantaged parts of the world. She gave up her successful law practice in May 2000 and
joined the Peace Corps, serving in the southwestern African nation of Namibia. There, Fern lived in a hut with a dirt floor while she designed, coordinated, and presented HIV/AIDS educational and training programs for teachers, students, and community members.

Returning to the United States after 9/11, Fern attended Georgetown Law Center to obtain an LL.M. in international law. She interrupted her studies in 2002 to take an assignment for the American Refugee Committee in Guinea, West Africa, where she investigated reported abuses of women and children in a Guinean refugee camp. She drafted a proposal for a solution to the abuse and was sent back to Guinea in February 2003 to design and establish a legal aid clinic to protect the rights of refugee women and children. Upon learning of her untimely death, Willie S. Livingstone, manager of that legal aid clinic, wrote the following tribute about her:

Fern... was someone whose courage, farsightedness and great dream made Gender Justice a reality for the first time in the lives of refugee women and children...

...To be more concise, the clinic which was set up by Fern worked assiduously within the framework she designed and we handled 118 cases of GBV [gender based violence] including rapes, sexual assaults, wife beatings, family abandonment, sexual exploitations, forced prostitutions, threats, paternity, pimping, and child custody, all in the first year of 2003.

Mr. Livingstone also relayed a tribute made by the refugee women themselves, which reads in part:

Yesterday we were beaten, raped, condemned for prostitution, sexually exploited, without security and always in tears without justice. Today, through the grace of Fern, the women and children of refugee status in Guinea can now say thank God the injustice is over.

The clinic has since been renamed the Fern Holland Legal Aid Clinic of Nzerekore.

After returning from Africa, Fern and Professor John Norton Moore of the University of Virginia authored a proposal for a democracy education project in Africa. The project was funded by Congress in 2004 and named the “Fern L. Holland Democracy Institute” in her memory.

In July 2003, Fern went to Iraq to investigate and document atrocities of the Saddam Hussein regime. She was hired by USAID as part of its Abuse Prevention Unit. She recorded interviews with witnesses and survivors of mass executions, two of whom were literally
left for dead but crawled out of mass graves and survived to tell their stories. Her contributions are a major part of a USAID report, entitled “Iraq’s Legacy of Terror—Mass Graves,” that was distributed to Congress.

Fern then transitioned to the Coalition Provisional Authority (“CPA”) to work with Iraqis in establishing a democratic government. She immersed herself in Iraqi culture, listening to the people and learning their wants and needs. She assisted in forming women’s centers in numerous Iraqi cities. The centers provide medical and educational services and promote women’s political empowerment by providing a venue for women to discuss their emerging role in Iraq’s new government. Fern was also an organizer of a major women’s conference entitled “The Heartland of Iraq Women’s Conference” at the University of Babylon in Hillah, Iraq, in October 2003, which attracted over 150, mostly professional, Iraqi women. The conference facilitated discussion of the women’s aspirations for Iraq’s new government, inspired them to pursue those goals, and helped them develop strategies to accomplish their objectives.

Fern’s vision was that human rights, and particularly women’s rights, could best be protected by supporting Iraqi moderates and helping them learn the principles of the rule of law, democratic government, and techniques of running for elective offices. She also believed that giving women a strong voice would help Iraq develop and sustain a moderate democratic government that protects the rights of minorities. Chris O’Donnell, a colleague of Fern’s in Iraq, said that Fern was successful in starting the women’s centers and coalescing a women’s movement in central and southern Iraq because she convinced the Iraqi women that she would continue to help them by regularly returning to each center to continue the education process. This was concrete proof to these Iraqi women of America’s commitment to human rights and democracy. It was on one of these many trips that Fern lost her life.

Professor Noah Feldman of New York University School of Law and the CPA’s former constitutional advisor credited Fern with maintaining the pressure on the CPA and on Iraqis to recognize and attempt to protect women’s rights. She drafted portions of the Interim Constitution that expressly guarantee women’s basic human rights as well as the goal of having women constitute no less than one quarter of the members of the National Assembly. The Iraqi Interim Constitution was signed on March 8, 2004, the day before Fern’s death.
That Fern appreciated the danger is clear. On January 21, 2004 she emailed her close friend, Tulsa attorney Stephen Rodolf:

I love the work and if I die, know that I’m doing precisely what I want to be doing—working to organize and educate human rights activists and women’s groups—human rights and democracy education for independents who are motivated and capable of leading this country. They’ll have to implement and protect democracy when we’re gone. Hope they’re strong enough by then. We’re doing all we can with the brief time we’ve got left. It’s a terrible race. Wish us luck. Wish the Iraqis luck.

Fern was not only courageous; she was also modest. It is only after her death that many of her friends and family, both at home and abroad, are learning the full extent of the truly remarkable things she accomplished. She was much beloved by many people at home, in Africa, and in Iraq. After a memorial service for Fern in Najaf, Iraq, city leaders there declared three days of mourning, an honor previously reserved solely for important male spiritual or political leaders. Aman Arrob, a practicing doctor who headed the Karbala Women’s Center, stated: “She helped us enormously in the work we are trying to do to improve women’s rights in Iraq. Fern would not hurt anyone, all she did was serve the Iraqi society, and everyone who heard about the incident started crying.” Another of her Iraqi colleagues gave the following tribute:

Fern lost her life but won our love. We must follow Fern to show her murderers that we will walk on in the same spirit. Even after decades of repression and of abuse, we can find this spirit and the will to build a better future in every town and every village in Iraq.

Dr. Rajaatt Khuzai, a member of the Iraqi Governing Counsel, wrote: “Fern was an angel—she worked very hard for women. She died while working for and helping Iraqi women. She knew how much they suffered.” Fern wanted to make a difference with her life. Those whose lives she touched bear witness that she did so in a dramatic way.

At Fern’s memorial service in Tulsa, Sandra Riley, Assistant to the Secretary of the Army, posthumously awarded Fern the Defense of Freedom Medal “in recognition of the ultimate sacrifice she made.” The Cherokee Nation, of which Fern was a member, passed a resolution saying she “died as a warrior.” The Oklahoma Bar Association awarded Fern its annual Courageous Lawyer Award and has renamed
that award “The Fern Holland Courageous Lawyer Award” in her honor.

Fern was not only a very fine lawyer but also, more importantly, a very fine human being. She was deeply compassionate and was committed to protecting human rights and alleviating suffering by establishing democracy and the rule of law around the globe. In the hearts and minds of those who knew her and those who hear her story, may her legacy be to awaken a new passion and inspire a new commitment to the principles of freedom and justice. Fern Holland gave her life so that others might be free. She is a true American hero.

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