

Remembering Mary



Mary Frances Diaz
November 2, 1960 - February 12, 2004

Dearest Mary,
You wanted so much to live, and showing us your trust in life – you made our world more important. And now – you proved – in your departure from us – that life – that all you touched – will make you live for years to come.
Thank you for being in the world and making it so much better.
I love you.

Liv Ullmann



I was most saddened to learn of the death of Ms Mary Diaz, the Executive Director of the Women’s Commission. Mary’s death touches us at UNHCR profoundly as she was known and admired by many colleagues. Her death will be a great loss to those who work for the cause of refugees. Ms Diaz was a tireless and committed advocate for the rights of displaced women and children whose voices are so often unheard. Last year I was pleased to honour Ms Diaz as a recipient of the UNHCR Gender Equality Award for her work in promoting the equal rights of refugee women. Under her leadership, the Women’s Commission made a considerable contribution to UNHCR’s policies on refugee women and children, most recently in our efforts to address sexual and gender-based violence. She will be greatly missed.
On behalf of all my colleagues at UNHCR, I offer you and the staff of the Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children our sincere condolences.

Ruud Lubbers, UN High Commissioner for Refugees

I found Mary a most wonderful director. Indeed, I am quite persuaded that the brilliance of her work and dedication will continue to shine and lead the way for all those committed to improving the plight of displaced women and children.

Roberta Cohen, former Women’s Commission board member

Mary’s death is a loss to those of us who knew her, as well as to the multiplied millions of refugee women and children who did not know her but whose lives are being made better around the world due to the work she did at the Women’s Commission. May her soul rest in perfect peace.

Grace Dunbar, former refugee from Liberia

We at the Refugee Women's Network are very sad to learn about Mary Diaz's passing. She was a great friend to many of us individually at RWN and a wonderful supporter of us as an organization, as she was to many many others.

Refugee Women's Network, Decatur, Georgia

Mary was truly an extraordinary woman. She touched my life and the lives of all the refugees she met along the way so deeply — I can only imagine how she touched yours, working with her every day. The work that all of you are doing is such an incredible tribute to Mary — to her vision, her resolve, and her goodness. She will never be forgotten, and she can never really be replaced — but your ongoing work is a continuation of her legacy and something you should all be so proud of.

Rachael Reilly

I have been thinking of our dear Mary for days, trying to imagine this world without her presence, her wisdom, her vitality, her commitment, her heart. I met Mary in the early days of V-Day and she was a source of so much support and encouragement. Mary was the real thing — always ready to find a way to make things work, to move women ahead, to stop the violence, to join forces with those around her. She had a most wonderful calm and a fierce determination. I admired her deeply and felt comforted by her being in this world. I will miss her very much. In her name, I will commit myself further to this struggle to liberate women around the world and make them safe. I will commit myself to struggling for collaboration and unity and mainly, because of who Mary was, I will commit myself to aspiring to make love the center of all I do.

Eve Ensler, playwright



On behalf of Afghan Women Welfare Department staff I would like to express my deepest condolences on the sad occasion of Mary Diaz death. We will always miss her. In the way she served the women society is unforgettable. May God bless her soul.

Jamila, Afghanistan

My deepest condolences to all of you... to all of us!!! I, personally, received the kindness of Mary all the time and since the very beginning when I joined the Women's Commission as a member of the former Refugees' Speakers Bureau in 1996, and just recently when she was still working part time at the office and she said to me "I am O.K." and then took the time to write a reference letter for my job search.

Carmen A. Valenzuela, M.D., Women's Commission board member

I just learned of the passing of Mary from Beverlee Bruce, and I am so sorry. There is nothing more I can think about now except presenting my condolences to you all and her family. She was such a wonderful, compassionate person who has touched many lives, especially us refugees women and our children. She will be missed very much. May she rest in peace.

Julie Nsanzurwimo, former refugee from Burundi

It is with deep sorrow that I report to you that our dear colleague Mary Diaz died yesterday after a long illness.

Mary, as we all know, was a remarkable person. She cared deeply about the women and children whose cause she served, and on their behalf she used her exceptional advocacy and organizational skills to ensure that their needs were addressed at the highest levels. Under her creative leadership over the last 10 years, the Women's Commission continued to grow in stature and influence.

Mary enjoyed the respect, admiration, and affection of everyone who had the opportunity to work closely with her. It was a pleasure to be in her company. She will be greatly missed.

On behalf of the board and staff, the International Rescue Committee today published a tribute to Mary in the New York Times. It said:

“As Executive Director of the IRC- affiliated Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Mary was among the world's most eloquent, devoted, tireless and effective advocates for the protection and empowerment of women and children affected by war and persecution. Her courageous work and vibrant spirit touched the lives of tens of thousands of vulnerable refugee women and children.”

On behalf of everyone associated with the IRC, we extend our deepest sympathies to Mary's family and loved ones.

George Rupp, President, IRC

I really can't express the sadness I feel today at Mary's passing. It is so incomprehensible, despite the many months of hoping, and the encouraging moments at the dinner in her honor — which was a wonderful gathering. So many of the things I do every day on children and armed conflict, and the people I see and work with, are part of a legacy that is a vibrant reminder of Mary's ideas and action. For all of this I am full of gratitude and admiration, and draw inspiration from her, and you all.

Kate Hunt, CARE International

Mary was my greatest role-model. Her unwavering dedication to empowering women and children around the world and her undying faith in the abilities of her staff were unrivaled. Exceptionally brilliant, thoughtful and gracious, Mary will continue to be an inspiration to me. Last week, a Liberian colleague of mine shared the following proverb with me. I think it embodies everything Mary stood for and perfectly captures her success as a leader. I will miss her dearly.

“Go in search of your people
Love them
Learn from them
Plan with them
Serve them
Begin with what they have
Build on what they know
But of the best leaders,
When their task is accomplished,
Their work is done,
The people all remark:
‘We have done it ourselves.’”

**Sarah W. Spencer, former project manager, Women’s
Commission for Refugee Women and Children**

I had the happy occasion to meet Mary just about one year ago — in Cambridge, MA, during the performance of “Children of Herakles,” during a Women’s Commission benefit. What a stunning, strong, impressive woman! No wonder Sarah talked about her so much. It doesn’t seem fair that people like her are cut down so early in their large lives. But then, of course, she was an expert on how unfair things were, wasn’t she?

Deborah Spencer (mother of Sarah Spencer)

On behalf of the youth coordinating group of Precious Resources in Sierra Leone, we wish to express our deep feelings of condolence to Mary’s family and the rest of the staff for losing such an asset and friend of the world wherever there has been a war or disaster. Even though we did not meet her, we had found her inspiring innovations useful for our country and we hope she will be guarded by God and perpetual light will shine on her. May her soul rest in perfect peace.

Yours in grief,

Ngolo Katta (On behalf of the Sierra Leonean Adolescent and youth team)

Dear Mary,

There are so many things I want to say. It was always a pleasure to be in your company and a joy to work with you. I learned so much from you; I respected you; I admired you. And I loved you — I hope you knew that.

Ellen Jorgensen, acting director, Women's Commission

I feel so blessed to have had the opportunity to work with Mary for nine years, but that should have been just the beginning... Mary has been a constant source of inspiration, support, friendship, knowledge, love. So much more than a boss, Mary has been a sister, a friend, a mentor. Someone to talk with about books and films, as well as the latest report or the next event. She was a world class teacher in how to be a leader, the epitome of elegance, and, above all, a tireless and passionate advocate for refugee women and children.

There are no words that are adequate to describe Mary and the tremendous gap her death leaves in our lives. These lines go some way to capture part of Mary's exuberance and joy of life, while maybe inspiring us to remember to appreciate what every day has to offer and to live it to the full, as Mary always did.

For no one knows what tomorrow may bring

You must allow yourself to laugh
And not only to laugh, but to laugh harder, louder and longer
Than you ever have before
You must allow yourself to smile
And to smile wider, stronger and more often
Than you ever have before
When you eat, you must taste your food
When you breathe, breathe deeply
When you hug, kiss or shake hands
Do it firmly and with compassion
And when you say I love you
Mean it
It is your life and you must live it
For that is the greatest honor you can give to anyone
Who never had a chance

Diana Quick, director of communications, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

Thank you for writing such a lovely tribute to Mary. She, indeed, inspired us all and her legacy will be one that lives for generations in the lives of women and children she affected so positively.

Julia Taft, UNDP

Mary Diaz will surely be remembered for her personal grace, charm and humor. Her professional legacy lies in the pioneering substance of her work and her remarkable, original style of leadership. It was a rare privilege to work with and learn from her as a member of the Board of the Women's Commission.

The most unusual and, to my mind, the most valuable manifestation of Mary's leadership was shown in her quiet but unflagging insistence that refugees be allowed to speak for themselves and participate in the decision-making that defines their needs and affects their lives. Mary showed tremendous creativity in finding and nurturing refugee leaders and putting them in the spotlight. She brought refugee women to speak to the UN Security Council and refugee children to speak to the General Assembly. She took a group of refugee women to the office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees during last year's Global Consultations on refugee protection — the first time a group of actual refugee women has been guests in the building. Given an appointment with the U.S. Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs to discuss the importance of Afghan women's participation in reconstruction planning, Mary took with her Jamila, a leader in a grass-roots Afghan women's welfare organization, to make the case. At the 2002 fund-raising meetings for UN humanitarian agencies, Mary introduced Haxhere, an adolescent girl from Kosovo, who made a powerful argument for educational resources.

Mary brought not only compassion but also deep respect to her dealings with refugee women and children. Too often they are seen as victims and dependents; Mary saw them and treated them and presented them to the international community as dignified and resourceful survivors with valuable insights to offer on effective protection and humanitarian response — and on larger issues such as peace-building, democratization, and reconstruction. Simply stated, Mary Diaz led by putting others forward. She was as comfortable with movie stars and millionaires as with refugee kids and mothers, and persuaded each that he or she had something valuable to offer.

In her last two years, Mary took the Women's Commission into an active program of research, advocacy and technical assistance around the particular needs of adolescent refugees — especially but not exclusively girls. Adolescents are an overlooked and especially vulnerable group. Refugee education, where available, often stops with primary school. Teenagers are at risk of forcible recruitment, sexual abuse, trafficking, and the radicalization that comes with boredom, frustration and detachment from traditional social structures. But there are — or have been — very few programs for adolescents. Once again, the Women's Commission is doing pioneering work in an untested field. I have no doubt that it will continue to do so — as a tribute to Mary's leadership, and in particular through the Mary Diaz Fund for Refugee Girls.

Kathleen Newland, Chair of the Board, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

I am praying for comfort and consolation for you and the most appropriate commemoration of her life and its achievements — the continuation of the struggle for the rights of refugee women and children, particularly their right to good education. In playing a leading role in that struggle, you are honouring Mary's life in the way she would have most wished.

Chris Talbot, UNESCO

My organization and personally myself share with you the sorrow of passing away of Mary Diaz who had visited the Bhutanese refugee camps in Jhapa, Nepal in the 1990s and had been helping us through numerous ways towards our cause. We join with you and the members of her friends and relatives that the departed soul may rest in peace. It was great being associated with her and knowing her.

Dr D.N.S. Dhakal, Nepal



Mary's death makes us sad to the very bottom of our hearts.

Our sadness reaches to you, who knew her so well.

True, the loss of Mary will make us work harder for the goals she pursued.

There is some light in that fact.

But for now we are feeling only sorrow. We are thinking of all that we will never know from her.

We are certainly thinking of you.

Barbara and Henry Pillsbury

I worked with Mary during the Special Session and admired her tenacity, optimism, kindness, devotion, optimism and professional spirit.

I was hoping for a miracle.

It was a privilege to know her.

Hourig Babikian

I have learnt with great sorrow of the death of Mary Diaz. I did not have a chance to meet her, but from the description below, one can tell that we have lost a special person who has answered the Lord's call rather too early.

But who are we to question what God has allowed? For sure there is an urgent need to carry on from where she has left, I pray that God raises another of such caliber. May Her Soul Rest in Peace.

Lizzy Mwindilila, World Vision, Zambia

It is with tremendous sadness that the Government of Canada learned of the death of Mary Diaz on February 12 to cancer.

Ms Diaz was a respected and tireless advocate for the rights and well-being of refugee women and children. She was committed to developing effective and practical responses to the challenges facing refugees and other war-affected populations around the world, and to encouraging Governments, UN agencies and other organizations and individuals to fulfill their responsibilities towards them.

The Government of Canada very much valued the partnership we developed with Mary and through her, the Women's Commission. Her passion and advice on issues related to the protection of refugee and internally displaced women and girls, insecurity in refugee camps, and women and armed conflict more broadly was indispensable to us.

On behalf of the Government of Canada, I would like to offer my condolences to Ms Diaz's family, friends and colleagues at the Women's Commission. Her dedication to the cause of the most vulnerable was an example of extraordinary humanitarianism which will be remembered.

**Allan Rock, Ambassador and Permanent Representative,
Permanent Mission of Canada to the United Nations**

Oh, I am so, so sorry. Mary brought such dynamism to the Women's Commission and a bright, fresh voice on a subject that sometimes progresses at only a glacial pace. She was always a joy to meet. I will miss her energy.

Paula Lynch, U.S. Department of State

Even in Sri Lanka I feel the incredible weight of our collective loss of Mary. She was a powerful spirit for peace, a world class networker, and a great human being. I will do some rituals in honor of her spirit.

Mike Wessels

She was an inspiration to so many of us in our fight to improve the lives of refugee women and refugee children around the world. We and the refugees she helped will miss her.

Hazel Reitz, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration

Mary was just so full of energy and dynamism and I don't think I have ever met somebody as kind as she was.

Eylah, International Federation Terre des Hommes, Geneva

Mary had been much in my thoughts and prayers ever since I learned of her illness. Please do pass on to everyone not only my condolences but also my appreciation for all the fine work Mary did, for the fun of working with her, and especially for me, for all that I learned from her.

Rachel Brett, Quaker UN Office, Geneva

Please receive my heartfelt condolences on the departure of someone who was so sorely needed on this Earth, and who had given so much to refugees and to her colleagues around the globe. The fact that someone like her, blessed with exceptional human and professional qualities, should be called away so soon in her life is a tragedy for her family and the international world.

It was my pleasure to work with her at the NGO Committee on UNICEF where I came to admire her for her leadership, her fairness and her concern for others.

Ellen Mouravieff-Apostol, International Federation of Social Workers, Geneva

Dear Mary,

It is with the most profound sadness that I write this letter to you. I wish you could hear me now! I regret the fact that I didn't get the chance to say how sorry I was about your illness. I didn't get the chance to let you know how much of an inspiration you were to me. I didn't get the chance to say to you directly what a wonderful human being you were. This is what hurts most about your everlasting departure. One year ago this month, I had a tele-conference with you and I made a commitment to you that I would stay connected with the Women's Commission after being offered a job at the Special Court. I did all that because of you, because you were such an extraordinary human being, because I felt it would be sinful to let you down, because you were an embodiment of humanity itself. Mary, you taught me something about leadership. You taught me that leadership is most attractive and appealing when it is characterised by humility.

I am thankful for the opportunity I had to meet you and to work with you. You made a difference in the lives of the uprooted women and girls and the youths of Sierra Leone. On their behalf, I pray that your soul rest in perfect peace! You will be greatly missed.

Mary, I promise that I will keep my commitment to you. You shall continue to live through the Women's Commission!

Affectionately,

Binta Mansaray, outreach coordinator, Special Court for Sierra Leone (former Women's Commission protection partner)

So many of us will always be able to recall her grace and dignity, her beautiful smile, her unfaltering energy, her selfless outpouring of her gentle being, full of hope always for a better life and world, for each of us, no matter how difficult our struggles.

I feel great thanksgiving for her inspiration in my life, and great hope just thinking of all the many people in the world whose lives she alone touched and changed for the betterment of all of us.

John Bingham, Lincoln, MA

Mary used to say to those of us on the Women's Commission staff, "When you speak in public, it's important to share the story of a woman or child. That's what people will remember and take away with them."

But how do you tell the story of Mary? There are so many, and I'm sure each of us here tonight has one to share about her. But I thought I would tell you one of my favorites.

Eight years ago, Mary and I drove to the Wicomico County Jail, a prison in rural Maryland, to visit a detained Haitian asylum seeker, who I will call Marie. Marie began to sob, as she told us of her pain, fear, and humiliation when she was handcuffed and shackled on the way to the hospital while she miscarried. Mary quietly reached out and pressed her palm against the divider that separated us from Marie, who in turn pressed her hand against the glass opposite Mary's. Through that simple human gesture, Mary communicated that someone cared enough to listen and restored to Marie a bit of her human dignity.

Mary had so many qualities: intelligence, humor, insight, courage, and strength. But that ability to connect with those around her is what fundamentally defined her. Whether it was policymakers at the highest levels of the UN or government or a refugee child from Kosovo or Afghanistan, Bhutan or Sierra Leone, Mary reached that inner humanity in all of us. At her memorial service in New York, Mary's long-time partner, Tom Ferguson, observed that Mary didn't move in straight lines, but in circles. Truer words have never been spoken.

She moved in the global circle of displaced women and children. She moved in the circle here tonight of refugee advocates. And she moved in the circle of the Women's Commission staff.

In circles lies the strength of an unending connectedness and common bonds. Mary forged that for those of us on staff. She created not only a circle of colleagues or of friends, but one that has become a family.

The head of that family is now gone, but what she left behind will endure.

We all must preserve her legacy by renewing our commitment to and our passion for improving the lives of those to whom she dedicated hers. I know no better way to honor her.

And for myself, while I have so many fond memories, this is the new story of Mary that I like to imagine: I picture her somewhere up there, gazing at God (whoever he might be), and saying, "OK, so maybe you are a man, but you still have to make room for the equal participation of women and children." I'm convinced that she continues to break new ground, pave new ways, and to make the world a better and more peaceful place for all of us. We miss you, Mary, but we are sure that you continue to guide us.

Wendy Young, director of external relations, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

Partawmina, Jamila and I spent the afternoon together reminiscing about Mary and her trip here in November 2002 — even her dinner at Jamila’s house, which they enjoyed so much. They were truly touched by her kindness, intelligence, and dedicated spirit, and this continues to inspire them. Our thoughts are with all of you at this very sad time.

Carrie Morrison, Women’s Commission’s reproductive health focal point, Pakistan

I am so sorry. Mary was absolutely THE BEST.
My sincerest condolences to all.

Eric Hoskins, President, War Child Canada

I know Mary from the UNGASS and the Prep-Coms. She had a lovely and friendly personality that makes everybody likes her. I will never forget her face which always smiles.

We in DCI Palestine will never forget her and continue her mission in our struggle for a world fit for every Child.

I don’t know what to say in my poor English, in this sad news, but be sure our hearts with you and her family in this difficult situation.

With love,

George Abu Al-Zulof, Defence for Children International — Palestine

Mary remains an inspiration to all of us and the influence and impact of her work will be sustained by all of you — that is a tremendous tribute to a wonderful woman.

Heidi Wagner, IRC



On behalf of the INEE Secretariat and INEE members I would like to express my deepest sympathy for you and other Women’s Commission staff for Mary’s untimely passing. Although I never met her personally, the impact of her work on the field of education in emergencies and her personal impact on many of my closest colleagues and friends touches me deeply. Her presence will be missed by all of us, but her dedication, ideas and drive will continue through all of us and our work.

Beverly Roberts, INEE

The ugly disease has won over her energy, her love for life, her generosity, her fun, her compassion, her strength. I remember the first time I met her. I was pretty excited to meet the executive director of the women's commission. I had heard of Mary before, of course, through my work on women. But I had never met her. And then I saw her, and the first thing that crossed my mind was: my gosh, she is so young. For some reasons, the Mary Diaz I had imagined was older, plumper, and certainly not as beautiful as the one I met this day! Mary's beauty was all over, it shone through and through, not only on the outside. It quickly became apparent to me: Mary was a beautiful human being. She was passionate, compassionate, bright, and courageous. She CARED. And then as I met her a few other times, and read more about the work she and the women's commission was doing, I realized that Mary had done and built so much. I was impressed, I was touched, I was part of what I think may have been the informal and unsaid Mary fans club. Mary had packed a lot of things in the too short a time she got. She was given too little of this precious time, while she had so much more to give: to her family, to her friends, to her colleagues, to refugees, to women, to children. I know Mary touched many, many lives in that short time, she touched them all over the world, in her home, in New York, but also in Pakistan, in Sierra Leone, in Geneva. She gave us all a very precious, radiant and generous gift.

Dr. Agnès Callamard, Co-director, Humanitarian Accountability Project, Geneva

I hope that you'll be able to take some consolation from knowing how much Mary accomplished towards bettering the lives of others. A legacy that will make such a difference for all daughters and women around the world.

Carrie Morrison, RH focal point, Pakistan

I write these words of tribute for Mary Diaz in sorrow and with the deepest sympathy for her closest loved ones. It is hard to find the words to describe what Mary meant to me, to all of us at the Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict and the Women's Commission. We ache for her. She was our mentor, our leader, our colleague, our friend, and truly a brilliant woman. Working with Mary was an honor, which I will always cherish. For me, it was a gift. Her essence was of confidence, strength, poise and intelligence, such rare and wonderful qualities. Mary had a gift for trusting and respecting people. She treated all individuals with equality and embraced her work with total confidence in the strength of refugee women and children. When I began working at the Women's Commission, my colleagues said to me, "We love the boss," and we did. How amazing, an office full of women and men who love their boss! We adored and will always adore and admire her. We will miss her eternally, but most of all, we will continue our work with the determination and courage that Mary inspired in all of us.

With love, Julia Freedson, coordinator, Watchlist on Children and Armed Conflict

Such a magnificent light gone out...but what a legacy she leaves...Having served multitudes in our name, we are privileged to have been her friends and to have supported the work of the Women's Commission. With arms around each of you, I feel lucky to be part of a community that has been able to give to the larger community of women whose aspirations are so deserving. I look forward to continuing pieces of Mary's work with all of you.

Nancy Rubin

Mary was such an amazing woman. She will be missed. What a shocking and terrible loss to the entire world.

Rachel Stohl, Center for Defense Information

I am feeling very lucky to have been able to have known, worked with and learned from Mary in her short but rich time on this planet.

Rachel Jones, former program manager, reproductive health project, Women's Commission

I am sorry to hear of Mary Diaz's death. Whether unexpected or not, you and everyone else who knew and worked with her must feel her loss keenly. Although I did not personally know Mary, I of course knew of her as part of my work in the humanitarian field. I am sure that I join with a number of other DFID colleagues in extending my condolences to you at this time. Best regards.

Philip Ryland-Jones, UK Department for International Development

It was a shock for me to hear that Mary passed away!!! Since that time [she visited Afghanistan] her pretty face is in front of my eyes and most of the time makes me to cry. I know it is much more difficult for you losing such a nice colleague and so wonderful friend. I have really lost my excitement for coming to the United States and receiving the award. I dreamt of receiving award from Mary Diaz not any one else. You may not believe that as I am writing this letter my tears are falling down automatically and can't be controlled. We can't do any thing except to pray for her. I hope you accept my heart felt condolence for this big loss and hope to be recovered from this tragedy soon.

Partawmina Hashamee, Women's Commission protection partner, Pakistan

This news has left a large sadness with me. Mary was inspiring both for her work on women's and children's rights as well for her wonderfully large personality. Her kindness and seal for positive change left a real mark on me.

Andrea Khan, Canada



When Mary Diaz died February 12, we lost one of our best friends, strongest advocates and staunchest supporters. Mary was instrumental in the founding of the Council in 1998 and since then had collaborated closely with us, generously offering advice, suggestions and help. Indeed, it was her persuasiveness that prompted a number of us to become members of the Council. What we will remember vividly about Mary was the passion she brought to the cause of the world's uprooted women and children. She worked in a field that by its nature attracts many dedicated, committed, selfless individuals. Even in such company, Mary stood out. She displayed a level of personal commitment, savvy and energy that few others could equal. As an advocate, Mary was a role model. She could vividly recount moving anecdotes about the women and children she met during her visits to refugee camps and conflict zones overseas and to detention centers for asylum seekers in the United States. She connected easily with these vulnerable people, winning their trust and confidence and listening attentively to the painful details of the indignities and maltreatment they had suffered. Then she used her storytelling ability to ensure that policy makers, legislators and others in positions of power heard the stories of these often forgotten women and children — and then took action. As a leader, Mary displayed a rare combination of organizational skills, focus and personal warmth that made working with her enjoyable and rewarding. During her 10-year tenure as its Executive Director, the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children continued to grow in effectiveness and stature, and thus to improve the lives of countless refugees around the world. She will be sorely missed. We intend to honor Mary's memory by drawing inspiration from the example she set and by persevering in our efforts to serve the cause of children affected by armed conflict.

The Leadership Council on Children Affected by Armed Conflict

Mary was always respectful and wonderful to work with, and was by far the most effective public speaker in the humanitarian community that I've ever seen. I always marveled at her ability to gently criticize an organization in a way that allowed officials to respond positively and work with her to think about taking positive steps forward. Mary's character, poise, thoughtfulness, and consideration, in addition to a wonderfully resonant speaking voice, were all shining traits. She was also a classy woman and an inspiring leader. I'm going to miss her a great deal, but more than that, the humanitarian community, and refugees and IDPs, have lost an amazing and truly effective advocate for rights and justice.

Someone from your Board said to Wendy Smith and me last Friday in DC that Mary has left the world a better place than when she entered it. There's just no doubt about that.

Marc Sommers

It's with great sorrow that I have learnt about the death of Mary Diaz. She will remain in our hearts as a person who stood for the rights of women in situations of forced displacement and I must say, I have benefited from the reports and work of the Women Commission.

May her soul rest in eternal peace.

**Kalyango Ronald, Lecturer, Makerere University,
Kampala, Uganda**

I wish to express PRM's sincerest condolences to you and the colleagues and family of Mary Diaz. Mary's dedication, commitment, passion and leadership had a tangible impact on the lives of millions of refugee women and children around the world. Mary was truly admired by many, including by those of us in the bureau that knew her well. She was a shining example of what it means to be a true humanitarian.

Mary has left behind a legacy that will continue to bear fruit for many, many years. We will miss her tireless spirit and everlasting smile. Please know that we share your grief.

**Arthur E. Dewey, Assistant Secretary of State, Bureau of
Population, Refugees, and Migration**

Mary showed her love for the weakest among us through her quiet devotion and hard work. She was an inspiration within the refugee field and greatly admired. In her too short life she had tremendous impact and the world can never again ignore women and children refugees as happened before Mary took up their cause.

Our hearts go out to you and wish you peace.

Lavinia Limone, US Committee for Refugees

On behalf of the more than 680 members of the Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies, we wish to express our profound sorrow at the tragically untimely death of Mary Diaz, Executive Director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. Mary was a passionate advocate of the rights of refugee women and children, especially their right to receive education of high quality. She supported ground-breaking research into ways of increasing access to education in emergencies. The humanitarian education community, represented collectively by INEE, will miss her greatly. Our most sincere condolences are extended to Mary's family, friends and colleagues.

Eldrid Midttun, Chair, INEE Steering Group

I am heartbroken to hear of Mary's passing. It requires a deep faith to understand why such a selfless, caring, intelligent, beautiful lady is no longer with us. I believe she is happily continuing to share her gifts with the angels. God Bless Mary.

Debbie Welch, board member

Everybody at the Refugees Studies Centre knew of Mary's work and contribution to refugee women and children. Mary was a vibrant talented caring person and dearly loved by everyone whose life she touched. We valued her commitment, leadership and community service on refugee issues. Several members of staff had the pleasure of meeting Mary and benefited from her insights. Mary will be greatly missed in the refugee community.

As a tribute to Mary, the Refugee Studies Centre along with the Cumberland Lodge have decided to dedicate the Cumberland Lodge Conference on "The Voices out of Conflict" to her memory.

Stephen Castles, Director, Refugee Studies Centre, Oxford

We and on behalf of GYFA join you in spirit during the hard times. We would also like to express our heartfelt concern and feelings for the untimely death the Late Mary Diaz.

She will not only be missed to her relatives and friends let alone her Colleagues at work place but the entire world for devotion and commitment to improve the lives of the vulnerable women and children. It is now our responsibility to carry her cross and try to realise her goals.

GYFA will remember Mary Diaz for her contribution to GYFA both at a personal and organization level.

Gulu Youth For Action, northern Uganda

Deeply saddened with the terrible news we will remember Mary Diaz as dear friend of the Center for Women War Victims and wish to express our condolences to her family and all of you in the Commission.

Rada Boric and Nela Pamukovic, on behalf of the Centre for Women War Victims, Zagreb, Croatia

It is only recently that I learned about the pass-away of our beloved friend Mary. It is really sad that such a great worker and fighter for the rights of refugees throughout the world could not continue her tremendous efforts for well-being of innocent people.

It is a great loss for everybody who is committed in joining forces for a better and brighter future of all of us.

Please accept a condolence from a person who on a personal level experienced Mary's warmness, kindness and great working spirit. It will be a great loss but we all have to continue the mission where Mary played a key role. I believe this is what Mary would like us to do.

Amir Haxhikadrija, president and co-founder, Kosovar Youth Council, Kosova

Thinking of Mary, I re-read today parts of chapter 31 of the Book of Proverbs, the passage about "the Valiant Woman." Mary did indeed "open her hands to the poor, and stretch out her hand to the needy" in the persons of refugee women and children. I join you in remembering her with gratitude and admiration.

In peace,

Sister Edith Ryans, SND

Mary deeply impressed me with her commitment, her professionalism and her kind heart. She was always a pleasure to work with and on many occasions, her vision and efforts for the world's refugee women inspired me in my own work. I will miss her as a leader, a colleague and a friend.

Darlene Rude

Mary was an exceptional woman and a tireless advocate for the rights of women and children. She has showed us the way but we will terribly miss her. She has moved forward issues around refugee women and children in an exceptional way. The Geneva Sub-Group has worked closely with Mary, first when she was the Chair of the New York Group on Children Affected by Armed Conflicts and then on the occasion of the child rights caucus at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children. Apart from her outstanding professional qualities we will also remember her as being so incredibly kind and full of humanity.

Eylah Kadjar-Hamouda, Sub-Group Convenor, Geneva Sub-Group on Children in Armed Conflict and Displacement

We deeply regret this loss, since Mary was a key person in creating awareness on the situation of my country, Colombia. As the American Friends Service Committee representative for the Andes, we share with you our gratitude for her wonderful life.

Amanda Romero, Quaker International Affairs Representative, Andean Region, Bogotá, Colombia

We are deeply saddened to hear the news of Mary's passing. We worked with Mary on many occasions over the past five years. Her amazing spirit, creativity, energy, and resourcefulness were a constant inspiration to us as we developed our new organization, the Urgent Action Fund. She was tireless in her commitment to the rights of women and girls everywhere and, although she will be missed, we are thankful for her enormous contribution — her gift to us all.

Julie Shaw, Urgent Action Fund

I just want to express my condolences to the whole Women Commission community.

Thinking about her life makes me remind of Galeano's Words:

“When it is genuine, when it is born of the need to speak, no one can stop the human voice. When denied mouth, it speaks with the hands or the eyes, or the pores, or anything at all. Because every single one of us has something to say to the others, something that deserves to be celebrated or forgiven by others.”

Her life, words and work is celebrated despite of her pass away.

Joanna Rojas, Pacific activist, Colombia

We have lost a dear colleague, and a champion for the protection of refugee women, their families and children, Mary Diaz.

I was blessed to work with Mary at the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, where she led ground-breaking work on reproductive health for refugee women, asylum for refugee women and children, adolescent programming and advocacy, and refugee women's protection through meaningful participation.

Mary provided space for refugee women to speak to decision makers internationally, and she brought influential international women to the field where they were able to understand the refugee experience and become informed advocates.

Promoting gender equality requires the vision to recognize the strength of women and their expertise, and the courage and conviction to identify strategic interventions for influencing policy and programming.

No other person has covered this breadth of work on gender equality in refugee work, while ensuring a deepening both of knowledge and good practice. Mary Diaz will be deeply missed.

Maha Muna, UNIFEM



Tragic, tragic news. I am so sorry. Mary was a sensitive effective champion for so many sisters around the globe whose names we do not know.

Lael Stegall, Social Change International

On behalf of the staff at Human Rights Watch, we would like to express our deepest sympathy and support for you all at the loss of our wonderful colleague, Mary Diaz.

Mary was one of a kind. She was not only an outstanding champion for the rights of women and children in the most difficult circumstances, but a warm and loving person who brought great humanity and humility to her work. She touched many of us deeply — as colleague, friend and mentor. We drew special inspiration from the courage, dedication and grace with which she faced these last difficult months.

Be assured of our support at this difficult time. We will continue to work closely with you on the issues to which Mary gave her life.

Kenneth Roth, Ex. Dir, Jo Becker and others at HRW

Her work on behalf of women and children is remembered as a great contribution to humanity. We strive to honor her memory by echoing her dedication and passion in our own work.

This is a loss to us all.

Filippo Ciantia, AVSI-Uganda

With deep sorrow we hear the sad news of the death of the kind lady Ms. Mary Diaz.

Although I had never meet with that great lady but I feel that she was one of our colleague.

As Women Commission is a very esteemed organization and we have worked together last year in a reproductive health project which have very good result so We feel that the death of your kind colleague is great loss for Women Commission as well as for organizations like our also.

We pray that God may give remuneration in heaven for her efforts for Women & Children in her entire life.

Abdul Munem, Admin. & Finance Officer, Afghan Women's Educational Center, Peshawar, Pakistan

Mary was simply one of the very, very best humans I ever knew or heard of.

She contributed more in a short life than most of us can even aspire to accomplish in a full one.

How many women and children (and former children) around the world are alive, safer, healthier and more in control of their own well-being because of Mary?

Ken Curtin, formerly IRC

La Fundacion para la Igualdad de Oportunidades (F.I.O.) organizacion no gubernamental que trabaja por la inclusion de las personas con discapacidad en Panama, Rep. de Panama, quiere por este medio transmitir sus condolencias por la irreparable perdida de Mary Diaz ocurrido el 12 de febrero de 2004.

Por lo que declara lo siguiente:

1. Que la comunidad internacional enfrenta una gran perdida en la persona de Mary Diaz, por su labor meritoria y su gran defensa de los derechos de los mas necesitados.
2. Que todas aquellas personas que se vieron beneficiadas por la labor de Mary Diaz, fueron objeto de un don especial en su favor, por la labor tesonera de una gran activista y defensora de la igualdad.
3. Hacer extensivas nuestras condolencias a sus familiares, colegas, amigos y la comunidad en general.

Liliana Bieberach L., Presidenta, La Fundacion para la Igualdad de Oportunidades

You should be proud to have had such a hard working and caring member of your family. Mary struggled to ensure the suffering refugee women and children had somebody to listen to them. Many will not forget her and so her name will live for ever.

Mary M. Khimulu, Ph.D, Director, Windle Trust Kenya

Mary was a wonderful person and it will take me personally a long time to recover from this. Not sure I ever will. But I want to say something to you and your colleagues which you need to hear and remember, even as you wonder how you can ever fill the hole she leaves. Mary knew talent, and one of her great achievements was to build the Women's Commission into a really strong and committed organization that can carry on her work. The Commission is blessed by its staff, and by its network, and we're very proud and happy to be part of it.

You've probably heard this many times in the past few weeks, but the best way to honor Mary's memory is to make sure that the Commission continues what you started with her. I hope very much that you'll stay in touch and let me know if we can help in any way.

With more affection, and sadness, than I can possibly express.

Iain Guest, Advocacy Project, Washington, D.C.

Like so many in our amazing community of women activists, I was shocked and profoundly saddened by the news of Mary Diaz' death. She was so caring, such an inspiring visionary and dedicated friend, truly fun to work and plan things with... We will all miss this glorious young woman.

Rose Styron

It is truly sad and it will take time before you can think of her without feeling such a great loss — but the smiles and laughs shared with her will come to mind eventually as she was such an extraordinary woman — you likely didn't know how much support she gave to me when I was at AI — she was terrific to me and well, what can I say — the reason the memorials to her are so glowing is because she was simply stated a very warm and welcoming person. I am glad to see her remembered so fully and well.

Leanne MacMillan, formerly Amnesty International

Expreso mis sentidas condolencias por el fallecimiento de Mary Diaz. Paz en su tumba y que las contribuciones de Mary, fortalezcan el trabajo cotidiano.

Martín Villarroel García, Coordinador Regional en Emergencias, Save the Children Bolivia

Stu and I had the very good fortune to know Mary in her first years at the Women's Commission when we were doing the "Knitting Project" in Boston. We traveled with Mary to Croatia in 1994 and always felt glad of that early friendship.

Her death at such a young age is very, very sad. We give thanks for Mary's life and witness, and we make this memorial contribution with gratitude for the life she lived.

Babbie and Stu Cameron

Mary's gentle, articulate and forthright advocacy on behalf of children, particularly refugee girls, will always be remembered. We were all in awe of Mary's professional and diplomatic style of negotiating between the many differing opinions at the Special Session on Children.

Bani Dugal, Bahai International Community

Mary Diaz spoke and acted courageously on her awareness of the plight of refugee women and children all over this world. I did not know Mary well, but I knew of her total commitment to bring protection and relief to the world's refugee women and children. Mary will live on in our memories; we will miss her and remember her as a caring, talented, courageous, heroic young woman who had to leave us too soon.

Inge Jack

We lost a Gem and may her gentle soul rest in perfect peace. Amen

Francis Abayomi, country coordinator, Respect Nigeria



Please accept this token of respect and appreciation for the countless contributions that Mary made to alleviate suffering and support refugee women and children. This is a great loss — but the world is a better place because Mary was in it.

Carole Artigiani, director, Global Kids

I have to say that I was so intimidated by Mary when I first met her! Slowly, I began to enjoy her sense of humor and at some point regained the ability to converse normally with her. I really admired Mary's way in the world which I would sum up in one

word: grace. In the office, even under the most aggressive deadlines, she was calm, reviewed all points, figured out the best approach and gave her usual brilliant response — making us wonder why we hadn't thought of this obvious and simple answer. I also respected how she seemed to keep boundaries for her personal life which can be difficult to do. The way she gave a speech — however factual and professional it was — it was also passionate and personal. Incomparable. In so many ways, I will continue to look to Mary to guide me in my work and personal life as we all move forward from this very difficult place. Our loss is immeasurable. I feel blessed to have known her for the short time I did. My thoughts and love go to her family at this time.

Turn Again to Life

If I should die and leave you here a while,
Be not like others, sore undone, who keep
Long vigils by the silent dust, and weep.
For my sake — turn again to life and smile,
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
Something to comfort other hearts than thine.
Complete those unfinished tasks of mine
And I, perchance, may therein comfort you.

Mary Lee Hall

Julia Matthews, senior coordinator, reproductive health project

The loss of one so young, talented and committed is absolutely devastating to all of us who loved Mary and learned so much from her example of taking practical suggestions and solutions to ease pain and suffering. She served the most vulnerable people in the world, women and children refugees who are survivors of hideous conflicts, civil and economic collapse. She was a role model to many of us who are much older than she. We will serve her best by carrying on her work and helping to strengthen the Women's Commission.

Jane Olson, former board member

Despite knowing for some time that Mary was very ill, this comes as great blow. Having shared some very special times with her, I have a special place in my heart for Mary, as well as enormous respect for her work in this sector.

Margaret Piper, Executive Director, Refugee Council of Australia

Mary was as much an inspiration in her fight for life this past year as she was in leading the Women's Commission to new heights since our more humble beginning some 15 years ago now.

Beth Verhey

Dear Mary,

You were/are an inspiration. You probably would hate to hear that, knowing how modest you were. I was in constant awe of your quiet elegance and whipsmart mind. I remember in meetings when someone would present a seemingly complex problem that the rest of us would discuss and debate. You would listen for a while and then calmly introduce the perfect solution. Your easygoing style made it all seem so effortless. I so much appreciated your support and how you could see opportunities that we couldn't necessarily see. You were always there to offer guidance. I loved your sense of humor and your laugh. You'll be a role model for me for the rest of my life.

Megan McKenna, media liaison, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

Mary was a leading activist and strong voice for the protection of women and children and a great inspiration to those of us who had the privilege of working with her. Mary's enthusiasm, dedication and never ending commitment to the cause is a great loss to the cause of women and children's rights.

Michelle Morris, UN

I didn't know Mary very well except that she was young and a very eloquent speaker.

Words cannot really express feelings at such a juncture. But I hope you will have the courage to persevere with your good work which would be the finest tribute to her and something she would be very proud of.

Tim Brown, UNHCR

All of us who had the honor, pleasure and privilege of working with Mary know what an extraordinary woman she was and I join each of you in mourning her death. There are no words to describe the sadness of such a loss. Mary was a light to so many people here and around the world. I know that each of you will miss her beyond measure. I hope that her life will continue to inspire each of you to dedicate yourselves more fully to the work that you do, which positively affects the lives of those who, without you, would have no voice.

With a full heart and in sisterhood,

Nadine Hack

A butterfly lights beside us
like a sunbeam.

And for a brief moment
its glory and beauty
belong to our world.

But then it flies on again
and though we wish
it could have stayed,
we feel so lucky
to have
seen it.

(Author unknown)

**Elizabeth Walker, former reproductive health project manager,
Women's Commission**

For the past two-and-a-half years I was blessed to know and work with such a dynamic, brilliant and wonderful person as Mary. Assisting Mary with her everyday work allowed me to see first hand why she was admired by everyone she came in contact with as well as how she touched the lives of many refugee women and children. Her eloquence while speaking, knowledge on refugee issues and caring personality helped bring out the best in all of us. I will miss working with such a wonderful person.

**Mary Jane Escobar-Collins, office manager, Women's
Commission for Refugee Women and Children**

I am devastated. She was too young to die. Mary was not only a bright light on the child rights horizon, committed, innovative and brilliant, she was also a lovely human being.

In deep sadness,

**Monique McClellan, Permanent Representative to the United
Nations Agencies, BICE/ICCB**

The longer we live the more possibilities there are for us to grapple with the meaning of life, which all too often requires coping with loss. Mary's transition has left all who knew her asking why now and why at all? We question because we are a selfish lot for which I do not apologize since there is so much evil and wrong-doing in the world that it makes sense to hold on to that which is life-affirming as was Mary. I am speechless at her loss, which I have yet to grasp. We prayed for a miracle, but perhaps the problem is that we specified what that miracle should be. The miracle was the 43 years during which she accomplished so much for so many, as the outpouring of remembrances from around the world attests. As we celebrate her life and its meaning may the miracle of her commitment redound to each of us. With love and continuing admiration to all who witnessed and sustained her dignity and grace during this last year: her partner, her mother, sisters, brothers, nieces and nephews, her colleagues at the commission, and members of the kitchen cabinet.

Beverlee Bruce, Women's Commission Chair Emerita

Mary's energy, elegance and humour did not waver when she traveled overseas. We were together on her last trip, which was to Afghanistan and Pakistan in November 2002. On arrival in Heart (Western Afghanistan) she gently prodded the shy, female IRC staff member to identify some of the local women leaders — to ensure our time was not restricted to hearing from the international community. Mary quickly whipped up a meeting schedule and within a few hours, the shy woman



was asking us dozens of questions, wanting to join in all our meetings. She was an obvious convert to what I call the "Mary Diaz fan club." When meeting with refugees, Mary's gentle manner and calmness was like radar; everyone who met Mary sensed that she was not just interested in a woman or child's situation, but that she was someone to be trusted. Without speaking the language, and often tired of telling their stories to foreigners without seeing results, Mary was able to reach their confidence. Throughout the trip, I was constantly amazed at how comfortable Mary was in wearing her chador, the lengthy scarf covering chest and head. She was like a chameleon, blending in with the women. Unlike me, the scarf never fell off her shoulders, she wasn't constantly adjusting to the new layer. On the trip a woman asked how we knew each other. In the same breath, I said "She's my boss." Mary said "We are friends."

Ramina Johal, senior coordinator, participation and protection project, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children

The staff of the Quaker United Nations Office are deeply grieved to hear of the passing of Mary. She was, and will remain, a personal and professional inspiration to all who knew her. We are so sorry for your loss.

With much sympathy and love,

The staff of the Quaker UN Office

Mary's oh-so-special all-pervasive yet gentle spirit anchored the Women's Commission for a decade. The Women's Commission is a steady-as-she-goes "Grande Dame" now, thanks to Mary's die-hard spirit dressed up in the soft colors of her humility. She set the course, not to worry now. Mary's diehard spirit decked out in those lovely soft hues will continue to guide the Grande Dame, from Mary's perch on high.

Roseanne Murphy, former board member, commissioner

We in UNHCR are deeply saddened by the passing of Mary. She was such a special part of us and has left a void in the refugee and the humanitarian world, where she touched many lives. She will always live in our hearts. May God bless her and may her soul rest in peace.

Bushra Halepota, UNHCR

Mary was truly an extraordinary person and the most amazing mentor — without trying to be— I could ever of hoped to work with. She was the most effective and passionate human rights advocate that I've known, and she always made sure that the voices of refugee women and children were heard (vs. 'expert' voices) and taken seriously. She did all of this with quiet grace and a dedication that never gave in. In thinking of Mary and her commitment to women and children affected by conflict, the first few lines of one of my favorite Czeslaw Milosz poems ('Incantation') ring particularly true:

Human reason is beautiful and invincible.
No bars, no barbed wire, no pulping of books
No sentence of banishment can prevail against it.
It establishes the universal ideas in language
And guides our hand so we write Truth and Justice
With capital letters, lie and oppression with small.

Without being self-righteous in any way, her work embodied the words above.

While I'm devastated by her loss, I know that the most important thing I can do — and what she would want me to do — is to try to bring her passion and commitment to my work.

Allison Pillsbury, former project manager, children and adolescents project, Women's Commission

I am now in Tashkent and thinking of you all. I am not sure which day Mary was being buried but have prayed for her to have peace and for us to continue in her spirit.

I feel so sad that I cannot come to the memorial. Well, I will make sure we are well represented from both the D.C. and NY offices, but for me, as you know, our relationship was that of sister/friend — not only a colleague. Please keep me informed — I feel alone out here and send you all the strongest of sisterly embraces.

Joyce Mends-Cole, UNHCR Senior Coordinator for Refugee Women/Gender Equality



Mary changed the course of my life — meeting her for the first time in an interview at the Women’s Commission five years ago, I decided right there that I definitely wanted to continue my work with refugees alongside this intelligent, passionate and gentle woman.

Fortunately Mary saw something in me and I moved from Minneapolis to New York City to work with the Women’s Commission. My friends and family often asked how I liked my work at the Women’s Commission and I always said, “Its great and I just LOVE my boss — I just love her.” I wanted everyone to

meet this wonderful woman that was Mary.

My feelings for Mary quickly grew from great admiration to amazement to perpetual awe — she was powerful in her brilliance and passion, and at the same time gentle, kind and loving, in her work. Mary was always deeply respectful, whether she agreed with you or definitely did not, whether she’d met you just once or worked with you for the past five years. I am grateful to have worked for a woman who was such an impressive role model in so many ways.

Mary’s loss profoundly saddens me, and it always will. Yet, I am grateful for memories and life lessons, like the hearty laughter that first bemused, then amused me, as it spilled over to my office next door, on an almost daily basis. I wondered (and envied) how she could laugh so quickly and wholeheartedly so often.

I believe Mary’s spirit will live on in all of those whose lives she touched, and in this way, she will continue to make the world a better place, including for refugee women and girls. I am blessed and honored for the gift of knowing and working with Mary.

Sandy Krause, director, reproductive health project, Women’s Commission for Refugee Women and Children

I know what a wonderful friend and colleague Mary was, and can only think of what a pleasure it was to know and work with her. All that you say is true and yet does not do justice to her smile and wisdom.

Alexandra MacKenzie, Second Secretary, Canadian High Commission

Mes condoléances les plus attristées. La mort de Mary Diaz est une grande perte pour nous tous mais aussi un encouragement. La vie d'ici bas passe si vite et pour ceux et celles qui ont marqué leur temps par des bonnes choses comme Marie, la vie continue toujours.

Christian Mukosa

I am very, very saddened to learn of Mary's death. Please accept my deepest sympathies and this poem, written years ago, with Mary and all of our other unknown sisters in mind.

**nile song
(the reed)**

she stands before me,
timeless, like the reed;
strength enough for blackbird
to light upon,
fragile enough to bend
before the hail.
she dances
in the winds,
slow and rhythmic, bending
but not to break.
she is rooted in still waters,
the river's rush and roar
never far away.
rooted in still waters,
her core white as driven snow,
to bake beneath the sun,
pale beneath the moon,
whisper in the rains.
sshhhh, sshhhh,
she soothes the life around her.
in the driest seasons
she has stood before me,
timeless, as the reed.

*celina
february '92*

Celina Tuttle, Canada

Our deepest condolences to you all in this time. Mary was a dear colleague whose leadership, persistence and vision were an inspiration for all of us in the refugee field. Our world is a better place for her having been here.

Ralie Deffenbaugh, LIRS

Three weeks ago, the Women's Development Programme of Youth for a Better World International-Alliance and the Refugee Women and Children Programme International-International Secretariat met in the Gambia to develop an international strategy for 2004-2010. Under one of the strategic objectives were cooperation with other agencies like the Women's Commission, in which a committee was formed to write Mary a letter and to send her a detail document about our operations and programmes. The day the message was to be sent, was the day we discovered an email from Julia and subject Mary Diaz. So it was as if Mary has approach us before we sending our own proposal requesting a cooperative relationship. Suddenly, it was a burial announcement of her death. This shook the entire participants and the Cooperative Committee. This message was then discussed in all meetings, even with the UNHCR Chief of Mission and many other NGOs and even the refugee community and particularly the women and children. This message has been publicized on the media both print (newspapers, radio and television) concerning her death.

In addition to that, the Liberian and Sierra Leonean refugees in the Gambia, Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia and Senegal have send letters of sympathy and encouragement. We however, sharing this with you in Sympathy and Encouragement to both the Women's Commission and the Family she left behind, that Late Mary Diaz did her best, she did what she could to help and respond to the vulnerability, dependence and developmental needs of both refugee women and children, especially in difficult circumstances.

Late Mary Diaz, though she was not knew facially by us, but we learnt about her through her good work. There are special programmes scheduled for her, during the International Day of Women Celebration on the 8th of March. The All Africa Women's Union in collaboration with us to commemorate a special day for her, in remembrance, in the Gambia on the 15th of March, 2004 at the Father Farrel Hall in West Field, KSMD, the Gambia. In line with that, the issue of refugee women will be discussed and the programme is mainly about praying for her, remembering her in prayers for her good work she did and the organisation and entire family she left behind. Yours in the service of refugee women and children

Rosalyn Sesay (MS), International Relations Officer, Refugee Women and Children Programme International, and Peter John Sellu (Evangel.), Executive Director and Chief of International Operations And President, Women's Development Programme - YBW International-Alliance, Gambia



On behalf of all those in the Canadian Council for Refugees who knew and admired Mary Diaz, I send our heartfelt sympathies on your loss — which is a loss for the worldwide refugee advocacy community. She won respect and affection wherever she went. We are proud to have enjoyed her friendship and are happy that she chose to devote so much of her energy and talent to promoting the interests of refugee women and children.

Janet Dench, Canadian Council for Refugees

Mary came to the Women's Commission just a few months after I came to the IRC, and for nine years she was one of my favorite people and most cherished colleagues, even though we spent relatively little time together. Of course I admired her energy and leadership, and the grace with which she went about her work. But the truth is her simple presence was more important to me — her beauty, her ready smile and hearty laugh, and her willingness to take a few minutes to chat even in the middle of a major project. A few minutes' conversation with Mary could brighten up just about any day for me.

If God works in the world, He must do it through people like Mary — they are the only real miracles. I am having a very hard time accepting that He could take her away so young, when she still had so much to give to the world, to her family and friends, and to all of us whose lives she touched. I hate that she is gone, but I will always count it a privilege to have known her. May her memory be a blessing to all of us.

Bill Yaggy

Congressional Record: February 27, 2004 (Senate)

Placed by Senator Tom Carper, Delaware

IN MEMORY OF MARY FRANCES DIAZ

Mr. President, I would like to set aside a moment to reflect on the life of Ms. Mary Frances Diaz upon her passing in February. Mary was a woman who made a remarkable contribution toward improving the lives of refugee women, children, and adolescents around the world. She was a truly selfless woman who dedicated her life to others.

Mary was born in Newport News, VA. She spent her childhood in Pottstown, PA, before going to Brown University, where she graduated with a major in international relations in 1982. After working for several years at WPVI television news station in Philadelphia, she returned to school and received a master's degree in international education from Harvard University in 1988. But Mary's passion and life mission was refugees. While she was still at Harvard she began working for Catholic Charities in Boston, and upon graduation became director of refugee and immigration services there.

In 1994, at the age of 33, Mary became executive director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, an organization that helps some of the most vulnerable people on Earth. For 10 years, Mary traveled to the world's trouble spots, dodging minefields, tsetse flies, and wars on her mission to help refugee women and children reclaim their lives. She went on fact-finding missions to places such as Serbia, Angola, Rwanda, Nepal, Pakistan, Haiti, and Colombia to talk to uprooted women and children first-hand.

Back in the United States and in Geneva, she would plead their cases before the United Nations and lobby lawmakers and relief agencies to improve their conditions. She also fought for the rights of people claiming asylum in the United States.

Her advocacy led to concrete results. After she reported on the situation in Bosnia, the Clinton administration provided a fund to help refugee women rebuild their lives. During a visit to Tanzania, she got the rules changed to allow Burundian women as well as men to distribute food to fellow refugees. As a result, many more women and their children got their food rations. After a visit to Afghanistan in 2002, Mary initiated a fund for programs for Afghan women.

Under Mary's leadership, the Women's Commission grew from a small organization with a staff of 4 and a budget of \$425,000 to one with more than 20 staff and a budget of \$4 million. She believed the international community had a responsibility to help women and children who had been uprooted by war and persecution, and in her quiet, elegant way, used her eloquence and strong persuasive powers to persuade policy makers to change policies and programs.

Mary, who was 43 years old, died of pancreatic cancer. She leaves behind her longtime partner, Tom Ferguson of New York City; her mother, Bertha Diaz of Pottstown, PA; two brothers, Dr. Philip Diaz of Columbus, OH, and Dr. Joseph Diaz of Barrington, RI; and two sisters, Theresa Diaz of Reading, PA, and Bernadette Diaz of Oak Park, IL. She also leaves behind innumerable friends and colleagues.

Mary's legacy will live on in the lives of the refugees around the world whose lives she helped improve and in the work of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children. I rise today to commemorate Mary Diaz, to celebrate her too-short life and to offer her family, friends, and colleagues our support. She will be sorely missed.

* * *

Congressional Record: March 8, 2004 (Senate)

Placed by Senator Edward Kennedy, Massachusetts

TRIBUTE TO MARY F. DIAZ

Mr. KENNEDY. Mr. President, last month, this Nation suffered the tragic loss of one of its most effective and most compassionate advocates for women and children throughout the world.

Mary Diaz was only 43 when she died on February 12 in New York after a long battle with cancer. I know she will be profoundly missed by all who knew her and worked with her and were helped by her.

For the last 10 years, Mary was executive director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, an affiliate of the International Rescue Committee. She was there whenever she was needed and wherever she was needed — in Serbia or Angola or Rwanda or Pakistan or Nepal or Haiti and in many other places, often putting her own safety at risk to see firsthand the hardships of women and children displaced by war or fleeing persecution.

After each of her travels, Mary would return and eloquently share the stories of those she saw who needed help the most. She met with lawmakers and government agencies to urge them to respond. She worked with President Clinton to create a fund for refugee women in Bosnia. Visiting Tanzania, she worked to change the rules allowing Burundian women to distribute food with the men. Even in the all too short time she had, Mary inspired us all with her dedicated and tireless work on behalf of the disenfranchised.

It is easy to see where Mary learned her passion for helping others. Her father was a doctor and her mother is a nurse. Her two brothers are doctors. One sister is an inner-city teacher and another is a librarian. After studying

international relations at Brown University, Mary worked for a television station in Philadelphia and volunteered in her free time to help refugees settle in the city. As her interest in helping refugees grew, she enrolled at Harvard to pursue a master's degree in international education. A few years later, she became director of refugee and immigration services for Catholic Charities in Boston.

She was always there to help. Once, when 112 Haitian children arrived in Boston on a military plane, Mary was there to greet them with a friendly face. The children had lost contact with their families. They were barefoot, in a country they had never seen before. Mary comforted them, and took them to eat at a local restaurant called Buzzy's Fabulous Roast Beef. After that, she took them to a local swimming pool, and then she began the effort to reunite them with their families or place them in foster care. Stories like this about Mary are well known to all her colleagues.

Last year, Mary was honored for her work in protecting the rights of refugee women by Rudd Lubbers, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. When Commissioner Lubbers learned of Mary's death, he spoke for us all when he said that it "left a void in the refugee and humanitarian world, where she touched many lives."

Sadly, Mary died too young. But she made the world a better place, and we will always have our warm memories of her and her inspiring legacy to guide us as we carry on her mission.

Women's Commission Mourns the Loss of Mary Diaz

It is with the deepest sadness that the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children announces that our beloved colleague, Mary Diaz, died February 12, 2004.

As executive director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children since 1994, Mary was an eloquent, devoted, tireless and effective advocate for the protection and empowerment of women, adolescents and children affected by war and persecution. She touched the lives of tens of thousands of vulnerable refugee women and children, as well as those who worked with her at the United Nations, government offices and international and local nongovernmental organizations. Mary had visited refugees and displaced women, children and adolescents in refugee settings around the globe, including in Angola, Tanzania, Afghanistan and Pakistan, Haiti and the Balkans. Under her leadership, the Women's Commission grew from an organization with four staff and a budget of \$450,000 to an organization with more than 20 staff and a budget of over \$4 million.

Mary, who was 43 years old, enjoyed the respect, admiration and affection of everyone who had the fortune to work closely with her.

Prior to working at the Women's Commission, Mary was director of refugee and immigration services at Catholic Charities in Boston, and had previously worked in the production department at a TV news station in Philadelphia. She held a BA in International Relations from Brown University and an MA in International Education from Harvard.

Her death is a loss to the international community. We will strive to carry on her vision to improve the lives of refugee women, children and adolescents around the world.

Mary's family has requested that donations in Mary's memory be made to the Mary Diaz Fund for Refugee Girls. Donations may be sent to the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, 122 East 42nd Street, New York, NY 10168-1289.

A memorial service for Mary will be held on Saturday, February 21st, 2:00pm at The Church of the Ascension, 221 West 107th Street, New York, NY 10025.

Eulogy, Memorial Service New York, 21 February 2004

This is one of the strangest things I've ever done. Mary Frances Diaz was, is, and always will be one of the most vital beings I have known on this earth. Someone who laughed easily and loud and often; someone who was warm to the touch — something I know as many of you do, too, because when Mary laughed hardest, or was surprised, or excited, she had a habit of gripping your arm and shaking it up and down — really hard, sometimes; for a famously private person, she was a great arm gripper. Mary was quick and slight and light, and before she became ill, she was always hungry. (It must be said, though, that I rarely saw her eat a whole meal; she and Tom treated food communally — and not just theirs, other people's, too. I lost many French fries to Mary Frances over the years.) Above all Mary was in motion: she walked fast because she was always running late and there was always so much to do.

What's so strange about all this is that it's impossible to translate Mary's living vitality into words. She wasn't a string of adjectives or even verbs — yes, she and Tom teased each other and went to movies and hit tennis balls; she filled her apartment with photos of her big brood of nieces and nephews; she visited women in detention and in refugee camps in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Tanzania, Haiti, Angola and Bosnia; she lost at ping pong to her nephew Christopher; she took our annual friends' Oscar voting very seriously (she won several times); and she wore Ivoire perfume and she loved to buy shoes — yet right now, here today, I'm trying to make Mary out of words: words, and all the private images we each hold in our mind's eyes. And I just want to say now, at the start, that that's insufficient. Mary the person — Mary the spirit-was and is infinitely more than the sum of anyone's words.

We all know what Mary did: she was Director of the Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, and through her position she gave a voice to the least powerful, least vocal victims of war and repression. It's how Mary did her job that I want to talk about. Mary was smart and sharp and professional — and with a lot of private trepidation she was publicly fearless on behalf of those she represented — and she never once took the urgency of her work for granted. One day a few years ago she and I and Wendy Young, of the Women's Commission, spent the morning and afternoon interviewing a desperate, terrified young Somali woman who was seeking asylum here, and who was being held in an INS detention centre in New Jersey. A few hours after we left her Mary and I spent the evening at a glittering, IRC benefit gala at the Waldorf Astoria. I was whiplashed by the schizophrenia of the day — something I harped on over and over again. Mary finally stopped me and said, "Look: when we were with that young woman, I had to tell myself that if I concentrated on her case alone, I wouldn't be advocating for hundreds of other women just like her. And at fund raisers like these you

just have to say to yourself, I'm doing this for that woman, and make it urgent, and make it personal, and see her face. Or everything will seem futile and you'll feel like a fraud."

Of course Mary was anything but a fraud, and her work was never futile. But here's the thing: this terrible urgency she lived with day and in and day out never touched her spirit — and rarely touched her personality. This is Mary's miracle. Instead of letting the hardship of her job prey on her soul and poke it full of holes, beleaguer her, drain out her amazing joy and vitality and, let's face it, her really goofy sense of humour, her soul proved impenetrable. No external crisis or fuss, not even the endemic urgency of working at the Women's Commission, could budge her out of herself — nor could any person, no matter how exalted or famous or desperate. She treated everyone the same, without airs, with casual, at-ease-putting, offhand grace. Mary was vital and driven, but she was the most laidback vital and driven refugee advocate the world has known. She was fantastically effective, but she was always kind. "What a great loss," said one friend upon hearing she had died, "for the powers of good in the world."

Mary was also one of the least cluttered people I've ever known (let me amend that; I should say she was uncluttered apart from her closet, which was cluttered). Shoes and clothes aside, Mary was indifferent, even allergic, to things. For years the only item in her and Tom's living room at their house on the Cape was a large inflatable globe-beach ball. But that's not what I mean by uncluttered. I can't be sure of this, because it's not something you talk about when it's happening, but I believe Mary fully occupied each present moment of her life. Part of her brain wasn't leaping ahead to all the emails she should be answering when she was lying around the apartment reading the paper, or when, on a whim that took me by surprise, she unexpectedly made me go skating with her in Central Park (that was 2 years ago almost to this day: we sailed around the rink together under a fierce blue sky, and I said to myself, inexplicably — remember this, remember this — then I fell on my bum and sprained my ankle, but Mary was a terrific ice skater). In college, when we all gathered on Monday nights senior year to watch *Brideshead Revisited*, Mary never brought a book to pretend to read just to appear productive. She made "hanging out" an art form, and when you hung out with Mary and Tom anything was possible, from going to see weirdo French documentaries in Brooklyn to sitting around the dining room table at the Cape House, playing "I Spy" with Tom's niece and nephew for hours.

I think that maybe this genius of hers for finding a truce with the present is why so many of us were so comfortable in Mary's company — it almost amounted to sharing a state of grace. That said, I have to add that there was a spring board to her genius: her amazing family may have had something to do with it. When I first met Mary at Brown in 1978 I thought, OK, I want to be her friend — I actually, consciously thought that — and I set out to do it. Then I discovered that there was a whole family in Pottstown, PA just like

her. Everyone always wanted to be at the Diaz's house — I remember her mom once remarking, a little perplexed, “You know, I've never seen that boy who's eating ice cream out of our refrigerator before” — and there was good reason to want to be there: the pool, the tennis court, Bernadette's chocolate chip cake...All that aside, there was freewheeling fun to be had at the Diaz's — it was a place where you really had as good a time as people seem to in television commercials; it was the place that nourished Mary's laughter. But underneath that there was the rock-hard knowledge that you were amongst good people, who had learned from their parents' example that the root of being at peace with yourself is helping others. Remember, Mary's parents — an emergency room doctor and a nurse — produced two doctors, a teacher in inner-city schools, a children's librarian, and a refugee advocate. The fact that they're all beautiful is just sheer good fortune — and maybe the mixing of Filipino and Pennsylvania Dutch genes.

I don't mean to make him squirm, but Mary's graceful passage through life also had much to do with Tom Ferguson. I remember Tom before any of us, including Mary, knew him personally: he was on the Brown tennis team with Mary's brother Phil. All we knew was that he looked a lot like the very handsome baseball player Bucky Dent. Shortly after that Mary and Tom became the mystery couple — they dated like secret agents. Were they together or weren't they? It was a subject that consumed their friends for years.

Now, though, we know that they were together, setting out the foundations of their extraordinary relationship. Mary and Tom had an ability to communicate without talking; I've watched them sense each others' timing, desires, amusements, comforts and discomforts, and react subtly and accordingly, like a pair of intuitive animals living in a den together on Riverside Drive. If Mary had any good fortune at all this past year, it was to have Tom Ferguson as her partner and fiercest advocate; to have her incredible family around her; to have the support of caring workmates at the Women's Commission, and in the larger human rights community; and to have as well the enduring love of a steadfast network of friends. Friends, I should say, like Beth Sullivan, Mary's former roommate, who, when Mary was sick, despite being newly married and pregnant, would invent phantom meetings in New York just to go visit Mary. Beth knew she wouldn't have permitted it otherwise.

Finally, it wouldn't be right to stand here and talk about Mary without saying how much she would loathe all this. The thing she liked least in life was to be the centre of attention. As many of you know, Mary was a world-class master at the art of deflecting questions about her life — though she excelled in asking them about yours. She was the most private member of a large family, and now today, these words are making her dearly-held privacy itself a public thing, and Mare, I ask you to forgive me for that.

Mare-Mary-Mary Frances-Francie (that was her dad's favourite)-Mme. Director. She had many names; she had many hairstyles (I once watched in

horror as she announced she was fed-up with her bangs and sliced them off at the hairline, so they grew back like a unicorn's horn.) She had many addresses: 261 Continental Drive, 174 Marlborough St., 181 County Road, 122 E 42nd, 600 W 115th St., 334 Riverside Dr. I was lucky enough to share her company in other places as well. We once met up — miraculously — on the railroad tracks at St. Jean de Luz in France, when I was studying abroad in Paris, and she in Madrid. A few years ago on her way back from a gruelling trip to African refugee camps, she hustled from Heathrow airport to meet Marguerite and me — we were just setting out on a very long trip — at the Victoria Coach Station in London, just to wish us bon voyage. A year and a half ago, just before she got sick, she and Tom and her brother Joe and I and our friend Annie had the good fortune to share a canal boat in the English midlands. And I want to tell you it was a charmed trip. We laughed for a solid week, especially when Mary ran the barge into the side of the canal, or when she and Tom formed an illegal cartel and beat everyone in Monopoly. She was happy — we were all happy.

In keeping with her peripatetic life, I'll leave you now with this image of Mary-in-motion. Instead of more adjectives — though vital and graceful, intelligent, caring, committed, down-to-earth, even silly and occasionally mischievous, all certainly fit — an image, a speeding image, serves her best. It's appropriate, too, because from the moment she knew she was ill, Mary was more concerned for those she loved than for herself, and I know for a fact she wouldn't want me to conclude on a sad note, and make you all sadder than you are. She'd like this.

I'm sorry to say it's another story about our chamber-maiding days on Block Island in the summer of 1982, like the one I told at the Women's Commission Dinner back in October. After we finished work our favourite place to go was Black Rock Beach, on the wilder, western side of the island. We'd leave our bikes at the top of a cliff near Mohegan Bluffs and then scramble down and spend the afternoon swimming and reading (I remember Mary read *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and kept pretending not to cry), then building one of our famous beach fires. We wouldn't leave till late — it was midsummer and it was dark, so it must have been very late.

Back up at the cliff top we'd get on our bikes and ride home. It was uphill and the sea air was close, and hot, and heavy. We were young and stupid — we had no helmets, no lights, gave no thought to safety. But in 1982 there weren't too many cars on Block Island, and we pretty much had the night to ourselves. After about 10 minutes of hard pedaling we'd reach a peak, dip down, then push like mad up the last stretch and around a bend. And then, from the highest hilltop, you could see a ring of blackness — the sky and water merging in the same utter absence of light — and beyond that, the lights of the mainland in the far distance, lying like a necklace on the flat sea.

From there it was all downhill, a wild, reckless, speeding ride — the fastest either of us ever rode on a bike, through the deepest darkness. This image

has stuck with me for 22 years, slowly evolving from a favourite memory into a cipher for something, though I never knew what. Now I know it's the journey Mary's on now, we'd just rehearsed a prologue of it back then. And I hope the wind is in her hair, and she's riding faster than ever before.

Pamela Petro



