

The  
CENTER for  
VICTIMS of  
TORTURE

THE  
**storycloth**

NOVEMBER 2012

VOLUME 22, ISSUE 4 • WWW.CVT.ORG

## Healing Through Storytelling

For decades, Li (not his real name), a Southeast Asian man who received care in our St. Paul Healing Clinic, repressed the memories of his torture. “He had never told anyone his full story and really didn’t think he would remember much of his experience,” shared Andrea Northwood, CVT director of client services. But his torture haunted him continually.

Like Li, every torture survivor has a story to tell. Left untold, it festers and erupts in nightmares, anxiety, shame and panic attacks. But when survivors tell their stories in a therapeutic setting, they start down the path to healing from the devastation of torture.

“Traumatic memories are stored in our brains differently than everyday memories. Torture is so disrupting and devastating that the memories often remain sensory fragments rather than becoming a story or historical account,” explained Andrea. “What survivors remember of their torture experience might be out of sequence chronologically. It’s often just sensory snippets such as the sound of boots

on a cement floor or the smell of blood.”

In addition to nightmares, survivors might have a physiological reaction such as extreme panic to the sound of laughter or revulsion to the smell of meat cooking on the stove. To cope, survivors like Li may purposefully try to block any memory fragments that arise. But the trauma and memories of the torture are persistent and chronic.

For many survivors, healing involves recalling and telling, in their own words, the truth of what happened. Survivors in individual counseling might take several months to excavate the story from their memories. “It was like finding our way through a fog,” said Andrea, as she and Li unearthed memories from his extended incarceration and torture. Together, they categorized the memories into themes such as family and hunger to put the memories into a chronology of Li’s life.

Having a trusted therapist who becomes a witness to the survivor’s story is crucial. “Torture silences

*See page 3*



*Somali refugees in Dadaab, Kenya.*

In our international projects, group counseling gives survivors the space to talk about the unimaginable. At the end of their counseling sessions, a group of men from the Dadaab refugee camp stood in a circle holding hands. As they raised their hands they repeated, “Spirit is greater than force. We shall work together in our group to overcome this trauma and we shall prevail.”

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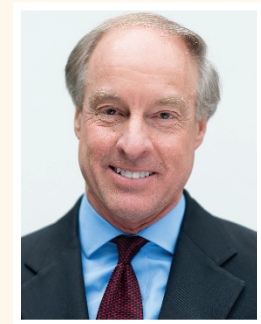
Restoring  
the Dignity of  
the Human Spirit

### INSIDE

- 2 Letter from the Executive Director, Curt Goering
- 4 Donor Profile—Valerie Hurst: Expanding the Circle of Donors
- 4 Your Year-End Gift Creates Hope

## Letter from the Executive Director

As my tenure at CVT grows (six months as you read this), so too has my understanding of CVT's rising impact in the world. Recently, I visited two of our international healing initiatives and represented CVT at a meeting of global leaders working to implement innovative solutions to the world's most pressing challenges. Each trip impressed upon me that not only is our work urgently needed, but it is increasingly recognized and respected.



**Curt Goering**

In September, I visited with CVT staff in Dadaab, Kenya, and in Jordan. The Dadaab refugee camp (actually a four-camp complex) was built 20 years ago to hold 90,000 people. Today 500,000 refugees languish under extraordinarily difficult conditions. Our staff, expatriate and locally-hired and trained refugees, are doing incredibly important work under circumstances that couldn't be more challenging.

I was equally impressed with our work in Jordan, where my visit coincided with the outbreak of anti-American demonstrations in the Middle East. Although Jordan experienced smaller-scale demonstrations, what I found during my visit is a highly committed and motivated staff providing essential and deeply appreciated services to the large community of torture survivors that have fled to Jordan.

Finally, I was pleased to represent CVT at the 2012 Clinton Global Initiative (CGI), where I made our Commitment to Action over the next three years to expand our mental health and physical therapy services in Jordan to reach traumatized Syrian refugees. CGI's invitation to CVT will help raise the profile of our work in Jordan and open up new possibilities to further increase the impact of our work there.

I am deeply grateful for your support. This year, CVT and other torture rehabilitation centers experienced significant cuts in funding from the UN Voluntary Fund for Victims of Torture (the result of dwindling contributions to the fund by the world's nations). With your support, we did not reduce care to survivors. As we approach the end of 2012, know that your contributions to CVT are urgently needed and will help us close that gap in funding so we can continue to provide the best quality care to torture survivors, and maintain our influence in the world to end torture.

Thank you,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Curt Goering". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Curt Goering  
Executive Director

CVT Jordan staff member and information technology officer Ibrahim (left) and psychosocial counselor Samer (center), with Curt Goering outside the office in Amman.



PHOTO © CVT

# Healing Through Storytelling

From page 1

people because the experience is so traumatic,” said Andrea. “By telling their stories to someone they trust survivors reclaim their voices and dignity. They must integrate the sensory fragments, emotions and facts into memories. As they do that, survivors can move from



**Andrea Northwood,**  
**Director of Client**  
**Services**

a place of shame, humiliation and fear to one of strength and hope.” Survivors in both our Minnesota and international healing programs go through a process of telling their stories. As part of the process, they must put the stories into context. They reflect on what their lives were like before

the torture, including their relationships and hobbies. Counselors can guide survivors through the story telling process by asking questions: What did you do when the soldiers took your husband? How did you feel after the beating? These questions help survivors incorporate the chronology of events with their emotions and senses to create a

narrative of their experience. By remembering their pasts and eventually thinking about their futures, survivors recognize that torture is just one part of their lives.

Psychotherapist and trainer Adam Horner recently finished ten weeks of group counseling with men in the Dadaab refugee camp in Kenya. “Group clients need to be very gently led to talk about that which is most terrifying for them,” he explained. “A skilled group facilitator listens intently and is also observant and mindful of each group member’s body language. A simple prolonged vacant staring to the ceiling or disconnected sideways look can mean a dissociative moment, a flashback to a horrifying memory or an intrusive thought.”

Group counseling gives survivors “the space to talk about the unimaginable, the horror of horrors, safely in a room full of other men they hardly know. It’s not an easy task, but definitely doable. Our most recent men’s group ‘Kilmyu’ [meaning togetherness] is a testament to this group of men from different countries and religions coming together to work towards a common goal of recovery,” continued Adam. At the end of each session, the men stood in a circle holding hands. As

What survivors remember of their torture experience might be out of sequence chronologically. It’s often just sensory snippets such as the sound of boots on a cement floor or the smell of blood.

—Andrea Northwood

they raised their hands they repeated, “Spirit is greater than force. We shall work together in our group to overcome this trauma and we shall prevail.” As the men heard each other’s stories, the isolation they felt diminished.

It took Li and Andrea several months to piece together Li’s memories. But eventually he had a written transcript of his story. For now, it’s locked in a safe place. Someday he plans to give it to his family, proving that torture isn’t the end of a story, but rather just a chapter in his life.

For some clients at our St. Paul Healing Center, narrative exposure therapy is a useful method for telling the untold story of their torture, including their physical and emotional sensations. Survivors reconstruct their lives bit by bit to desensitize themselves to the memories of their torture. In some cases, clients use rocks and flowers to mark good times and bad times on a timeline as they develop their autobiography.

PHOTO © PAVEL TIMOFEYEV / ISTOCKPHOTO



# Valerie Hurst: Expanding the Circle of Donors



PHOTO © C.C. STROM

Valerie Hurst first donated to CVT when she was an undergraduate student studying anthropology at the University of Minnesota. She heard about CVT through her involvement with Amnesty International and was eager to get involved.

She soon began volunteering, first by interning with the international capacity building work and then identifying academic articles for use by the research department.

Valerie is now serving as the co-chair for Expanding Circles, a group of young professionals who are combining their support for CVT with social and special events.

Most recently, Valerie served as a table captain at the annual Restoring Hope breakfast. “I’ve wanted to go, but always had class or work,” she said. Valerie’s guests at the breakfast included one of her professors, a few co-workers from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in

America and some friends who are also recent graduates. “My friends don’t have much to contribute, but it’s a way for them to learn about the organization.”

Valerie is committed to staying involved with CVT. She is planning a benefit concert for the Expanding Circles group and thinks about becoming a befriender to a client someday. “The work CVT does makes a huge difference in people’s lives,” she said.

## Your Year-End Gift Creates Hope

The final months of the year are a time when many of our supporters choose to make tax-deductible gifts to underwrite our work. These gifts help us extend care to torture survivors, assess opportunities to open new international sites, and advocate for funding and for an end to torture. Gifts received in 2012 also enable us to plan and allocate our resources for 2013 more effectively.

If you haven’t had a chance to send a gift to CVT this year, please take a moment to do so in the weeks ahead. Or if you’ve already made a gift and you can make another tax-deductible contribution, we will be deeply grateful. Your annual support inspires us at CVT—but to survivors your gift is truly a message of hope—and makes a powerful statement about the

compassion of our community.

This year we are again offering our donors an opportunity to give *Gifts of Hope* as holiday gifts. Your friends and family are sure to appreciate knowing that a person’s life is being restored in their honor. When you give a *Gift of Hope*, we will be pleased to send you special cards that you can use to announce your gift.

Thank you for your continuing generosity and commitment to torture survivors throughout the world. Please feel free to make a tax-deductible gift by check, credit card, or by donating online at [www.cvt.org](http://www.cvt.org). If you’d like to discuss a gift of stock or a bequest gift, please contact Rachel at 1-877-265-8775 (toll-free) or at [rhughes@cvt.org](mailto:rhughes@cvt.org).

## Make a Difference in the Life of a Survivor

Your generous support brings healing to torture survivors worldwide. CVT welcomes all types of donations.

- **Monthly Sustainers** allow for ongoing planning and delivery of healing services.
- **Planned Giving** continues your legacy of support.
- **Gifts of Stock** support survivors while offering tax benefits to donors.
- **In-Kind Donations** of specific items improve the lives of survivors.
- **Tribute Gifts** celebrate events or memorialize loved ones.

Donate online at [www.cvt.org](http://www.cvt.org), send a check to 649 Dayton Avenue, St. Paul, MN 55104, or call 1-877-265-8775 for other ways to give. Thank you for your ongoing commitment to healing the wounds of torture.



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