

# the storycloth

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## Healing Across Cultures

**P**rakash came to the United States as a refugee. He had been imprisoned and tortured in his home country in Southeast Asia for several years. After his release, and over a decade of displacement, he continues to grieve the loss of his native land. Psychotherapist Amirthini Keefe is working with Prakash, and they are slowly writing his life story as part of his therapy. “Prakash comes from an oral tradition so it’s important to help him tell his story in a way that is meaningful to him,” said Amirthini. When she learned how much Prakash enjoys the music of his culture, she suggested they record it as part of his therapy.

“Prakash uses singing to help cope with his trauma. Some of the songs are tied to difficult times and some he sang while imprisoned to find, as he often says, ‘peace within himself,’” explained Amirthini. “Besides being therapeutic for Prakash, it’s a way for him to preserve the past and share an important tradition with future generations in his family.” Prakash will also record a song he wrote

about his gratitude to the United States.

Using music and other customs in the healing process is routine for the clinical staff at CVT. Early on we learned the importance of integrating a survivor’s cultural heritage and traditions into their healing. This requires both a formal research approach to understand what it means to be healthy in different cultures and informal interactions to learn about societal norms. In our healing work we consider word choice, religion, cultural norms, traditional practices, values and economics.

Our work is based on the use of psychotherapy—or talk therapy—to help survivors take control of their lives, respond to their pasts and develop healthy coping skills. While it is Western in origin and practice, psychotherapy is consistent with the universal value of telling a story which is itself a ritual of healing.

To understand survivors’ traditions and learn how different groups of people communicate, we work with community members.



PHOTO © EDIE LEVISON

In our work in West Africa, songs, drums and music were integral in connecting with survivors and bringing healing to communities. Thompson Thomas was a Liberian refugee who worked as a CVT counselor in Guinea.

This ensures that our care is consistent with the values of the survivors. “What is a problem for Iraqi refugees living in Jordan isn’t necessarily a problem for Congolese living in a rural area,” explained Jon Hubbard, CVT director of research. “With each international project, we learn from the local community members about the stories, songs, poems and metaphors that are embedded in the culture. It makes our work much more meaningful to the survivors,” said Jon.

*See page 3*

• Client’s name has been changed to protect his identity.



The  
CENTER for  
VICTIMS of  
TORTURE

**Our mission:** To heal the wounds of torture on individuals, their families and their communities, and to stop torture worldwide.

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## Letter from the Executive Director

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**Douglas A. Johnson**

This last letter to you is a bittersweet moment. As I reflect on what I have learned over the last 23 years, I am keenly aware that CVT would not have accomplished half of what it has without your support. You are the reason CVT has made significant contributions to strengthen what is now a global movement to heal torture survivors and stop torture.

When I first joined CVT I noticed how many of the survivors were leaders in their communities. It was clear torture was used to eliminate leaders and instill fear in their families, friends and followers. I learned how torture's destruction reverberates down generations, shaping societies through fear, and that it is truly the most effective weapon against democracy.

One cannot work in this field without witnessing great suffering. But I've also seen the incredible resilience, strength and hope of torture survivors.

Torture is such an ugly subject that most of us would rather not think about it. While many people are discouraged from thinking about what to do to end it, you are not. Knowing that we can end suffering allows people to think about torture and begin to generate new ideas and deep commitments to ending this horrific practice. As donors, volunteers and advocates, you helped CVT bring a message of hope not only to survivors, but to the broader public.

With your support, we contributed research and knowledge about effective treatment for torture survivors to the torture rehabilitation movement. With your support, leaders in Congress recognized that healing survivors was in our national interest. With your support, we contributed new ways to confront human rights violations.

None of this would be possible without people like you. We thank you for your faithful commitment and the message it sends to men and women around the world. As I leave CVT, I trust that your support will not waver and that we will continue to rebuild lives and restore hope.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Douglas A. Johnson".

Douglas A. Johnson

**Douglas A. Johnson speaking at the Restoring Hope breakfast. Over 350 people attended to support CVT's work healing survivors of torture.**



PHOTO © JEFFREY AUSTIN / WWW.JAUSTINPHOTO.COM

# Healing Across Cultures

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“In West Africa it is a widespread and well-known practice to share kola nuts when you have guests. The practice differs between communities and countries, but the significance of the nuts is widespread,” said Maki Katoh, the Democratic Republic of Congo country director and former country director for the Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia projects. “When we worked with the refugee communities in Guinea, we provided kola nuts at community and group events. It was a simple gesture to show our respect for the local culture and to promote goodwill. It was the first step in helping individuals and communities heal from torture.”

## Young children working in Cambodia.



PHOTO © CAROL WHITE

In the early 1990s, Jon Hubbard, director of research, and Andrea Northwood, director of client services, conducted research with Cambodian refugee children who continued to feel the effects of the Khmer Rouge regime. “To help calm the children while measuring their stress responses we showed them a movie with small, furry animals such as puppies and kittens,” said Jon. “When we asked if they found the movie relaxing the children said that it was okay but asked ‘Why aren’t there any elephants or monkeys?’ because those were the animals prominent in their culture. Twenty years later, we now automatically think about the cultures of our clients and routinely adapt our work to reflect their experiences.”

Psychotherapist Abbey Weiss counsels survivors at our St. Paul Healing Center and leads psychoeducation groups for Bhutanese and Karen refugees. “Our community partnerships and interpreters are essential at helping us understand the cultures of the people we’re working with,” said Abbey. “Interpreters are our cultural brokers. They help us find the words to communicate a concept. The native language of one woman I worked with did not differentiate between thinking and feeling so the interpreter and I worked together to find words to communicate more effectively and continue on the healing process.”

Working with community organizations like the Karen Organization of Minnesota helps clinicians understand the culture of survivors in a more personal way and identify those who need care. Chong B. Vang is the Executive Director of KOM and a partner with CVT.



PHOTO © C.C. STROM

## Psychotherapist and trainer Josephine Anthoine-Milhomme

was reminded how easily a cultural faux-pas can happen when working in our Amman project. “In one of our therapy rooms we have toys to use with children. One day a Barbie-like doll was accidentally left out in the open half-dressed. When the next client came into the room, he was extremely shocked to see the doll half-dressed because nudity is contrary to his social norms,” shared Josephine. “Of course we never want to upset our clients, so we’re always particularly careful and tactful when it comes to discussing or revealing bodies—either humans or dolls.”

CVT’s July/August newsletter about our work in Dadaab, Kenya, neglected to mention that this work was made possible with the generous support of the U.S. State Department Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. We regret the error.

# Volunteer Tom Flynn: From Minnesota to Jordan

Volunteer and Fulbright scholar Tom Flynn first encountered CVT while studying Arabic in Syria. Through a friend, he met the Director of International Services who was traveling in Syria.

When Tom returned to the United States, he began volunteering by translating finance documents for the Jordan project from Arabic into English. But when he was awarded a Fulbright scholarship, Tom returned to Amman and chose CVT for his research project.

From January through August of this year Tom studied how the Jordan project is enacting CVT's

mission to "stop torture worldwide." He interviewed staff to understand how they engage the Amman community to advocate against torture. "What was most meaningful about the experience was the personal connections. It's a fantastic group of people," said Tom. "Everyone brings a positive attitude to their job, and that's inspiring."

Tom also conducted English classes for the Jordan staff. "They were very well received and have brought a new side of some staff into the picture," said Jordan Country Director Simone van der

Kaaden. "It is fantastic to see how within a few weeks staff who hardly spoke English are now able to have small talk because of Tom's work."

After a month back in the United States, Tom returned to Jordan in early October to work with a business consulting group as he finishes up his Fulbright project. His conclusions will give CVT insight into how we can continue to advocate internationally against the use of torture.



PHOTO © CVT

## Please Consider a Year-End Gift

The final weeks of the year are a time when we ask our supporters to make tax-deductible contributions to sustain our vital work: healing torture survivors in the U.S., Africa and the Middle East; strengthening colleague organizations in the U.S. and abroad through technical assistance and training, and by securing federal funds to support their efforts; and working for an end to torture—no matter who commits it.

If you haven't had a chance to send a gift to CVT this year, please take a moment and make a contribution today. If you've already made a gift this year, but you're in a position to make another contribution, we'll be doubly grateful. You can make your gift by check or credit card, through the mail or online at [www.cvt.org](http://www.cvt.org).

Again this year we're offering our supporters the opportunity to give *Gifts of Hope*. When you give a *Gift of Hope*, we'll mail you special cards that you can send to friends and family letting them know you've made a gift in their honor. *Gifts of Hope* contributions can be made through our Web site or by calling Ashley Gotreau toll free at 877-265-8775. Ashley can also help you with gifts of stock and bequest gifts, as well as contributions via credit card.

Thank you so much for your generosity and your compassion. Your financial support extends a hand of hope and healing to people who've suffered in ways that are scarcely imaginable. You are helping rebuild lives and restore hope for thousands of torture survivors the world over.

## 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.



The CENTER for  
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