2012 Ludwik and Estelle Jus Memorial Human Rights Prize Recipient: Dr. Joan Simalchik
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The Department of Historical Studies is proud to celebrate Dr. Simalchik’s receipt of the 2012 Ludwik and Estelle Jus Memorial Human Rights Prize. When one reads the selection criteria for the award it is hard to believe that this award was not instituted in 1995 with some premonition that Joan Simalchik would one day be its very deserving recipient. The award honours those from the University of Toronto community who have “made a positive and lasting contribution to education and action against discrimination, supporting the University’s mission to realize an exemplary degree of equity and diversity and to extend our knowledge as a consequence of our diversity.” As is clear from her impressive CV and glowing praise from community activists, colleagues and students, Dr. Simalchik combines education and action like no other. In all areas of her multi-faceted career as an activist, scholar and educator Dr. Simalchik has made working to end torture, genocide and related gender discrimination her life’s work.

Though her students and colleagues in the Historical Studies department at UTM know her as a senior lecturer and programme coordinator for Women and Gender Studies (WGS), Dr. Simalchik’s extensive CV highlights the extent to which her educational activities reach far beyond the UTM classroom. Her students are the fortunate beneficiaries of her varied career in local, national and international organizations. One associate characterized Joan Simalchik as “a catalyst for change, and someone who uses her incredible talents, experience and insight to ensure that some of the most vulnerable people in our society are treated with dignity and care and provided with the space to participate in important global issues and change.”
Dr. Simalchik is the founding Executive Director of the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture, an organization that works to support and protect survivors of war and torture as they recover from their experiences and integrate into Canadian society. She is also a founding Board member of Canadian Centre for International Justice, a national charitable organization that is devoted to bringing people accused of genocide, war crimes and other international atrocities to justice. A fellow activist noted that Dr. Simalchik’s impact on the Canadian Centre for International Justice was “to promote a commitment to working with survivors, not simply on their behalf.” Her influence led the Centre to develop an inclusive, participatory organizational model that provides survivors with an outlet for public education and engagement with the issues. As a member of the Gender working group, Dr. Simalchik is helping to develop gender protocols for the federal War Crimes Program. These protocols will ensure gender issues are considered in investigations and prosecutions of war crimes.

At UTM, many students and colleagues praise Dr. Simalchik’s ability to blend her real-world activist experience into her scholarly and educational pursuits. She was instrumental in designing a service-learning component into the WGS program. Fourth-year students not only gain valuable experience in community organizations but share those experiences with students in the Introduction to WGS course. Commenting on Dr. Simalchik’s talents as an educator, a former student notes that she is “an excellent teacher. Learning with her is not only stimulating and thought provoking but a collaborative process as well, with much give and take between lecturer and student. She has a wealth of knowledge, but more importantly, she is always open to learning more.” Students note her modesty and grace. Even as she deals with serious subjects in her courses on Gender and Human Rights; Introduction to the Study of Women and Gender; Women, Migration and Diaspora; and her community practicum course, the five-time recipient
of the UTM Dean’s Merit Award retains a delightful sense of humour. Students also appreciate her open mind and her great respect for others – their ideas, their cultural backgrounds, and their emotional issues. The Department has heard praise from students about a professor who “is sensitive to the needs of her students,” “encourages them to think critically” and “goes the extra mile to help them with their ideas and projects.”

Joan Simalchik’s office is right in the centre of the Historical Studies Department, and her door stands open to students, staff and faculty. The door, in fact, stands open to a much wider constituency, which extends to Chile, Israel, Somalia, and flashpoints around the world. The Ludwik and Estelle Jus Memorial Human Rights Prize acknowledges the tireless activist we have in our midst. Congratulations, Dr. Simalchik!