



BARBARA FREY – HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATE, GUIDED COMMITTEE'S TRANSITION AWAY FROM COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

A big surprise awaited Barbara Frey when she arrived for her first annual meeting of the regional committees affiliated with the Council on Foreign Relations. It was 1995, in Manhattan. Leslie Gelb, who had been named two years earlier to lead the Council, opened the gathering with a stunning announcement: his organization was dropping ties with the committees, which the Council itself had created more than half a century earlier.

"This is the first 15 minutes of a two-to-three-day conference," recalls Frey, who along with Bob White represented the St. Paul-Minneapolis Committee of Foreign Relations at the meeting. "We're all sitting at the table waiting and Les Gelb says to us that the Council is shifting direction, that it's going to focus on its core mission and so it has decided to spin off the committees."

The committee leaders promptly concluded that they didn't want to hear the speakers lined up for the meeting, which was then cancelled. Instead, they spent the rest of their visit to New York organizing a new entity, the American Committees on Foreign Relations (ACFR). The ACFR, rather than the Council, would help the regional committees secure speakers for their monthly meetings.

Chair for Seven Years

Later that year, Frey succeeded White as chair. She led the Committee for seven years, steering it through the transition from its 55-year affiliation with the Council to a new relationship with the ACFR. It worked. By 2000, the Committee's roster had grown to about 150 from roughly 130 in 1996.

By the 1990s, Barb Frey had become widely known for her advocacy of human rights causes around the world. Her career in this field began when she took a 50 percent pay cut in 1985, leaving the Dorsey & Whitney law firm in Minneapolis to become the first executive director of a tiny and little-known nonprofit, Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights. There, she led 12 years of growth. Today, the organization, known simply as "The Advocates for Human Rights," has become one of the largest independent human rights programs based in the U.S., with a staff of 23 employees and annual revenue of \$6.4 million. It investigates and exposes human rights violations; represents immigrants and refugees seeking asylum; trains and assists groups that protect human rights; and combines research, education and advocacy to engage the public, policymakers and children in human rights work. Since its founding, Advocates for Human Rights has been joined by other Twin Cities initiatives which, taken together, now account for one of the country's most significant concentrations of human rights activity. Frey has been director of the Human Rights Program in the College of Liberal Arts at the University of Minnesota since she helped establish it in 2001. She teaches human rights courses at the University and led the development of the school's Graduate Minor in Human Rights, a program she directs. Other leading players in the cluster of human rights activity here today include the Midwest Coalition for Human Rights, a network of 56 human rights organizations coordinated out of the University; the Center for Victims of Torture; and the American Refugee Committee.



Doing Good Things in Bad Places

Minnesota Advocates for Human Rights got started when Minneapolis attorney Sam Heins created a committee of lawyers to deal with human rights issues. Initially, Frey served as its secretary, working closely with attorney and fellow CFR member Jim Dorsey and others to help persuade and organize attorneys and their firms to provide pro bono assistance on human rights cases around the world. "No one has been more important than Barb" in building up human rights activities here, says Dorsey. "She combines deep knowledge of human rights law and scholarship with gumption, inspires students to be creative and is not afraid to go bad places."

The University's Human Rights Program supports teaching, research, outreach and events such as speaking engagements and conferences. It won the largest of three grants that the U.S. Agency for International Development awarded to three universities to build capacity in 2012-14 for human rights initiatives in Colombia. Exchange students there and in the Twin Cities have worked on applied projects.

Frey speaks frequently on human rights issues and has published a number of articles and research papers on the topic over the years, most notably on the human rights violations committed with small arms and light weapons. She has won many honors for her advocacy, including recognition by President Clinton for her leadership in women's human rights and the Twin Cities International Citizen Award, both in 1996.

Her imprint at the Committee on Foreign Relations has been enduring, as the Committee has heard from numerous speakers that she has recruited or suggested over the years to address human rights issues and many other topics. She remains on the Committee's board today. "Our speakers have always been impressed with our members' questions," she notes.

In an era when dark scenarios often dominate conversations about the way the world is going, she is upbeat about the explosion of human rights initiatives. "These efforts are making a difference," she says.

