

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Nansen Award 2007

Biography - Dr Katrine Camilleri, assistant Director JRS Malta

Born in 1970 on the small southern European island of Malta, Dr Katrine Camilleri first became aware of the plight of refugees as a 16 year old girl when a Jesuit priest visited her school to talk about his work. Her strong belief in universal human dignity motivated her, as a law student, to undertake research into access to rights and protection for refugees.

After her graduation from the University of Malta in 1994, she began working in a small law firm, where she was to come into contact with refugees. One such case was of a Libyan refugee who was about to be deported back home where he risked persecution. Katrine's interest grew and she started to work with the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) office in Malta in 1997, first as a volunteer, then on a part-time and eventually full-time basis.

JRS Malta was but a fledgling organisation, when Katrine started to offer legal services to refugees and asylum seekers in the community. In 2000, she was referred the case of an asylum seeker in detention and others soon came forward to ask for legal assistance. JRS became the first organisation to offer a professional legal service on a regular basis to detainees.

In 2002, the number of asylum seekers reaching Malta's shores by boat increased sharply, and NGO access to detention centres was facilitated. Believing these detainees to be in greatest need, JRS shifted its focus more and more to the detention centres. Despite her significant legal caseload, the young mother of two devoted considerable energy to expanding JRS services. She consequently secured funding to employ more professional staff and to set up new projects offering social work, health and education services to refugees - regardless of their race, religion or ethnicity.

Conscious of the need to increase the number of lawyers trained in refugee law, Katrine formed part of a team that set up a study unit for law students at the University of Malta. The credit includes a practical placement where students take cases, thus coming into contact with asylum seekers. Katrine leads the JRS Malta legal team of two lawyers and two case workers, which apart from handling asylum claims, also challenges detention in individual cases and monitors the conditions and the treatment of detainees in the centres.

With the rise in the number of asylum seekers reaching Malta, irregular migration has become a high profile political issue. JRS raises public awareness about refugees, the right to asylum and intercultural issues. In agreement with Maltese schools, refugees visit and talk to students about why they fled their home countries. The asylum debate often hits national headlines and JRS staff, including Katrine, are regularly interviewed.

In 2006, Katrine's house and car were the objects of an arson attack, reflecting the negative opinion of migrants, and those who work with them, widespread throughout Malta society. Fortunately, Katrine and her young family were not hurt.

Notes to the editor:

JRS works in over 50 countries in six continents around the world. It employs over 1,000 staff: lay, Jesuits and other religious to meet the education, health, social and other needs of over 450,000 refugees and IDPs, more than half of whom are women. Its services are provided to refugees regardless of their race, ethnic origin, or religious beliefs.

For further information contact

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