

IHRP Fellowship Final Report: Ashley Peoples - PEN Canada (Toronto)

This summer, I had the privilege to work as the IHRP summer fellow at PEN Canada. PEN Canada (www.pencanada.ca) is a nonpartisan organization of writers that works with others to defend freedom of expression as a basic human right, at home and abroad. PEN Canada promotes literature, fights censorship, helps free persecuted writers from prison, and assists writers living in exile in Canada. As the summer fellow, I had the opportunity to work on a variety of different projects in defense of the freedom of expression and to draft documents and build meaningful connections to amplify PEN's work in the future.

Fighting Censorship

As part of PEN's efforts to fight censorship, I followed the ongoing debates about the hate speech provisions in the since amended Quebec Bill 59. I kept close tabs on media and social media platforms and listened to the Quebec National Assembly meetings discussing the bill (online). When the hate speech provisions were struck out, I wrote a short news piece for PEN's website highlighting PEN's support for the amendment. Next, I gathered research to respond to the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada's (OPCC) position on the internationally contentious internet search-blocking practice that is widely termed, "the right to be forgotten." Lastly, when Comedian Mike Ward was fined \$42,000 by the Quebec Human Rights Tribunal for a joke he made at the expense of a disabled boy, I researched and wrote a short report on the competing perspectives surrounding the decision. The report will be published in a PEN newsletter this fall.

Finding Funding

In late June, I represented PEN Canada at the Scholars at Risk Conference in Montreal. I connected with other like-minded organizations, writers living in exile from around the world, and found a potential funder worth \$100,000. PEN Canada is developing a Canadian city of refuge in Surrey, BC in cooperation with Simon Fraser University and ICORN (icorn.org), an independent international organization of cities and regions that offers safe havens for writers and artists at risk. The \$100,000 would go directly to funding the city of refuge.

Building Relationships with Government

My largest project of the summer was finding a way to strengthen PEN Canada's political relationships. During the Liberal government of the 1990s and early 2000s, PEN had open lines of communication and collaborative partners in Ottawa. With the new Liberal government in power, PEN is looking to rekindle these relationships. Specifically, in the past two years, PEN has found itself working more frequently with writer refugees and refugee claimants. They have learned that effective advocacy on behalf of a writer at risk (and a writer's family) seeking asylum requires a close and cooperative relationship with government.

To educate myself and the office on the best strategy to rebuild these relationships, I conducted extensive research on Canada's immigration and refugee system and spoke to several immigration lawyers in the process. I looked at case studies of writers who came to Canada because they feared or faced persecution in their home countries. I looked at best practices undertaken by other PEN Centres, particularly in Scandinavia, who work cooperatively with their own countries' immigration systems.

When I learned that the Canadian Standing Committee on Citizenship and Immigration was holding an impromptu summer session on how to improve immigration measures to deal with vulnerable populations in inaccessible regions, I presented the idea of submitting a brief to the Committee. Writers at risk are certainly a vulnerable population and are often in inaccessible regions. The PEN team agreed and helped me gather the research I needed. I scoured PEN's archives and interviewed former PEN presidents and board members to draft the brief and prepare it for submission.

While in Ottawa to attend the Committee session, I coordinated an engagement with the Department of Human Rights in Ottawa (Global Affairs Canada). Working closely with the Chair of our Writers in Prison Committee, we met with over twenty GAC officials and argued for PEN's renewed collaboration with the government. PEN plans to meet with some of these officials again in September to work together to develop better procedures for offering refuge in Canada to foreign writers and journalists who have been forced into exile.

Involving the Community

The final project of my summer was to revamp PEN Canada's advocacy program for imprisoned writers. I recruited almost thirty participants Canada-wide to correspond with imprisoned writers around the world. To create context for the advocates, I invited those living in Toronto to a potluck dinner at Romero House where PEN celebrated the safe arrival of a writer-in-exile's family to Canada. The advocates who attended seemed fascinated to learn about the work PEN does to help writers-in-exile, and were moved by speaking with the writers present who had been imprisoned in their home countries before escaping to Canada.

The greatest reward of working at PEN Canada was undoubtedly advocating on behalf of writers being persecuted for exercising their right to freedom of expression. The greatest challenge was to hear about the violence and inhumane treatment writers and their families, some of whom we were in contact with, faced daily. Mostly, I feel privileged to have spent the summer at a small office of brilliant people who worked collaboratively and inspired me to become a more informed and active human rights advocate.

To repeat what I said at the end of the mid-term report, thank you for this invaluable opportunity.

Sincerely,

Ashley Peoples