

# Staff and Board news

*Western States Center staff member Tarso Luís Ramos is completing his first year as a Rockefeller fellow. We asked him to tell us about the program and his participation. We are also happy to welcome new board member Jen Ray, and asked her to tell us about herself and her thoughts as she comes onboard.*



Photo credit: Tarso Ramos

Comrades of slain leader Chris Hani demand truth of his assassination.

## Tarso Luís Ramos

*Rockefeller Fellow and Western States Center staff member*

This year Western States Center staff member Tarso Luís Ramos, was selected as one of 24 participants in a pilot fellowship program of the Rockefeller Foundation, called the “Next Generation Leadership” project. He spoke about his experiences shortly after returning from a Rockefeller-sponsored trip to South Africa, where he and other fellows met with leaders in the newly democratic South Africa.

Tarso explained, “that the purpose of the Rockefeller fellowship is to support and develop individuals who they’ve identified as effective leaders not in the traditional sense of positional leadership — but rather people who are bridge-builders between different communities, who are problem-solvers, and who are committed to training and promoting the leadership of others. Then there’s me; I guess I’m the control group. The program examines a variety of challenges facing democracy in the United States.

“The fellowship is the brainchild of Angela Glover-Blackwell, former director of the San Francisco-based Urban Institute,

who serves as Rockefeller’s Senior Vice-President. To the credit of the program, racism and race relations are key areas of examination and about 50% of the participants are people of color.

“The fellowship lasts two years. We come together six times during the first year for sessions ranging from four to ten days, with each focused on a different topic. These modules include a session on race and economy held in Mississippi, one on immigration and identity in Los Angeles, and one on international relations in South Africa. We’ve been privileged to meet a number of truly inspirational activists and thinkers. Among them is Unita Blackwell, a leader in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Mississippi Freedom Democrats in the 1960s, now mayor of a small Mississippi town.

“The trip to South Africa definitely stands out, though as a bittersweet experience. It was inspiring and humbling to meet with freedom fighters who’d struggled under the most difficult circumstances and since the transition have become leading figures in government, academia, the arts, and business. Among others, we met with Desmond Tutu, staff members of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), Nkosingithi Biko, and Miriam Makeba.

“It was sobering to see up close just how constraining the political compromise is under which the ANC government labors. Given the stringent ‘structural adjustment’ standards demanded by foreign lenders and businesses, it’s hard to imagine how the ANC will be able to deliver substantial material improvements for the black majority, despite its intentions. Since the transition, revenue available for social spending has diminished while the size of the population which government seeks to serve has probably tripled.

“By staying on for an additional week after the official trip ended, I was able to meet with the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), a gay youth group, and

various community activists. One very interesting meeting was with COSATU's communications director, on the challenging transition from protest movement to inside player with some degree of influence over economic policy. For those of us who hope to see progressives governing in the U.S. one day, there are some valuable lessons to be learned from their experience.

"I attended two days of the TRC's amnesty hearings for the assassins of Chris Hani, a South African Communist Party

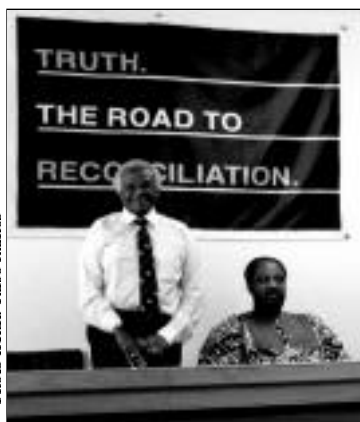


Photo credit: Tasso Rannos

Standing: the Reverend Desmond TuTu

leader who would have been Mandela's vice-presidential running mate in the first post-apartheid elections. It was a chilling affair with at best only a small fraction of 'the truth' in utterance and even less 'reconciliation' in evidence. For many South Africans, justice remains a precondition to reconciliation.

"Overall, one of the most useful aspects of the fellowship has been the chance to step back from my work and reflect on national and international developments and trends. Also, I've had a chance to build relationships with some of the other participants, a number of whom are social justice activists.

"In the program's second year, each fellow applies for a grant to fund a project in line with the program's goals. By the time this goes to press, I'll have had to decide among a few competing project ideas."

## Jen Ray

*Executive Director, Idaho Women's Network, Western States Center board member*

"My interest in the Western States Center goes back to 1993, when I was working on the campaign to defeat the the Idaho Citizen's Alliance, an anti-gay and lesbian effort. It was my initiation into hard-core activism.

"I attended the Western Progressive Leadership Network conference in Boise that year. It was instrumental in helping me build my skills and learn about organizing, how to work in coalitions, and about the radical right. I've been to every WPLN conference since, and I've gotten more involved with Western States Center as I've matured as an activist.

"At the Idaho Women's Network, where I'm now executive director, we've gained from exposing our staff, board members, and coalition members to Western States Center trainings and conferences. We've particularly appreciated the Center as our Network strives to become anti-racist. Also, we've appreciated help with fund development training.

"As a member of the Western States Center board, I look forward to continuing the battle against the increasingly powerful religious and

political Right. We must continue responding to their attacks while still moving our own agenda for progressive change forward. I want to work closely with the Center on how we address racism in our own organizing and in our organizations, and also expand how we address sexism and homophobia. In other words, even as we work for social change, we need to address the same questions internally.

"I'm honored and excited to be part of the board of Western States Center, and able to help build the progressive movement in the Northwest.

*PS. They have the coolest staff!"*



Jen Ray and her dog, Maude.