

A Life Not Ordinary: our colleague Barbara Harrell-Bond

Matthew Gibney, Dawn Chatty and Roger Zetter

During Refugee Week 2018, the Refugee Studies Centre showed a new film entitled *A Life Not Ordinary*. The film illustrates the life of a woman born in a remote town in South Dakota, US, during the Great Depression. It traces her career from her initial engagement with the civil rights movement in the late 1950s to her move to the UK in the '60s where she studied social anthropology at the University of Oxford – and then to her travels in Africa where she carried out much of her academic research. Her first-hand experience of the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria in 1980 and the humanitarian crisis in Sudan in 1982 led her to establish the Refugee Studies Centre (RSC) in Oxford.

That woman is of course Barbara Harrell-Bond, OBE, Emeritus Professor, founder of the RSC, and our colleague.

She pioneered the field of refugee studies as an important area of academic concern but only in so far as rigorous scholarship and research served to empower refugees by providing a critically constructive engagement with policy and practice. The RSC's independence from humanitarian organisations, alongside the stature of the university, added significantly to the force of her analysis. Far from limiting her horizons to academia, Barbara fought throughout her life for refugee rights, to keep refugees at the centre of humanitarian interventions and to give refugees voice and thus agency. These are issues which resonate even more deeply

now, in an age in which safe havens for refugees are increasingly being eroded and violations of human rights are on the rise.

We have each had the privilege of serving as Director of the RSC – although it's hard to follow in the footsteps of a woman like Barbara. Colleagues still talk of her relentless energy and her expectation that everyone would work the hours she did, of her conviction that nothing should stand in the way of securing funds for both the academic research and the dissemination channels – such as FMR – needed to support understanding around refugee rights, and of her forthright confrontations with institutions and individuals in positions of power. The articles that follow in this tribute section reflect on these and many other aspects of Barbara's life and work. We hope they will inspire understanding, respect and a determination to continue to work for the rights of refugees – and perhaps raise a few wry smiles as well.

Barbara attended the film screening in June 2018, despite her growing frailty. She died three weeks later. We are proud to have directed the Centre she established.

Matthew Gibney (Elizabeth Colson Professor of Politics and Forced Migration and current RSC director), Dawn Chatty (Emeritus Professor of Anthropology and Forced Migration) and Roger Zetter (Emeritus Professor in Refugee Studies).

See also www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jul/30/barbara-harrell-bond-obituary



This documentary explores the achievements of Barbara Harrell-Bond – academic, refugee activist and life-long advocate of refugee rights.

<https://vimeo.com/260901002>

Enrico Falzetti (writer and director); Katarzyna Grabska (researcher, writer and producer). Produced in collaboration with AMERA International.

Our grateful thanks to Barbara's family for their assistance and to those who have provided financial support for this special tribute to Barbara: Carolyn Makinson, the Martin James Foundation, Mary E McClymont, the Refugee Studies Centre and a donor in Belgium.