

AWARDS, PEOPLE, PROFILES

White House honors student working to stop human trafficking

By Gretchen Kell, Media relations | APRIL 29, 2013



Minh Dang, a UC Berkeley graduate student whose courageous personal story prompted her work fighting the commercial sexual exploitation of children and launched her into the national spotlight, was named by the White House today (Monday, April 29) as a Champion of Change.

Dang and 14 other Asian American, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander women -- recognized for their "extraordinary commitment to their communities, fellow citizens and the country" -- have been invited to travel to Washington, D.C., to speak on May 6 at a Champions of Change event about the challenges and opportunities they've encountered. Their stories will be featured on the [White House website](#).



Minh Dang, Champion of Change

"There was a time that I could only imagine breathing beyond the next day, let alone being at the White House," said Dang, 28, a student in the School of Social Welfare. "I am honored to receive this recognition, but more importantly, I am honored to serve as a Champion of Change.

"The sexual enslavement of children is not just another social issue to be addressed... it is *the* social issue to be addressed. In the roots of child abuse and slavery are the roots of violence, discrimination and dehumanization."

Dang, a Vietnamese American who has lived all her life in the Bay Area, will graduate this spring with a master's degree in social welfare. She is the executive director of Don't Sell Bodies, a campaign founded by actress Jada Pinkett Smith to help end the sex trafficking of youth in the United States. Dang hopes someday to write about her own life story, the subject of a 2010 MSNBC documentary called "Sex Slaves in America: Minh's Story."

As a UC Berkeley freshman, Dang said she had her first experiences of freedom and also learned to "stand up for justice" because of the campus's strong and longstanding commitment to activism. She soon was running REACHI, a group to help recruit, retain and empower Asian Pacific Islanders in higher education, with help from the Cal Corps Public Service Center, where she also became a professional staff program coordinator for the Bonner Leaders Program. In 2011, Dang received a UC Berkeley Chancellor's Award for Public Service.

"Academically," added Dang, "I came to UC Berkeley saying I would pick a major to help explain my life. In my sociology and ethnic studies classes, I heard people talk about relationships between self and society. I was able to understand that I existed in a social context, an environment, which had shaped my life, and I began to question the deep-seated belief that I was being mistreated because there was something wrong with me.

"The fear that I had about a big public university being impersonal and a place where it's hard to make connections is not an experience that I had at UC Berkeley. I found staff and faculty willing to sit down with me who cared about my academic and personal journey. I also discovered a group of students who wanted to build community and support each other, and who cared about the world at large."

Jill Duerr Berrick, professor of social welfare, said Minh "inspires others to follow their passion for making a difference in the world. She's a woman who lives with grace and determination." Berrick mentored Dang during graduate school and in Dang's internship and public service work with vulnerable young people approaching adulthood.

"Receiving this award helps me in my work telling the nation the truth about slavery," said Dang. "Slavery has not ended, and children -- boys and girls in the United States -- are enslaved in 2013. Every child deserves to live in freedom.

"This award also celebrates what is possible when people come together and take slavery, child abuse and the precariousness of freedom seriously. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for each and every person on my journey who kindled the fire of freedom within me."

The Champions of Change awards are given by the White House each week to different groups of Americans who are creating change in their communities. The May 6 event for Dang and other awardees is in recognition of Asian-Pacific American Heritage Month.

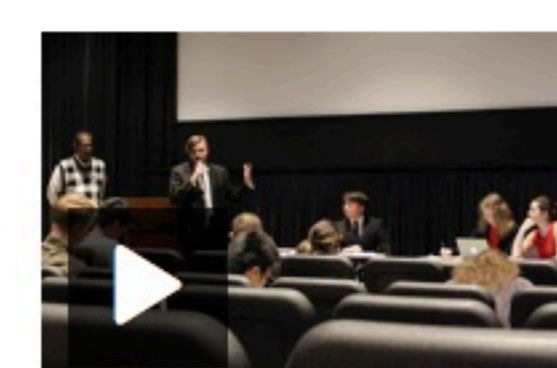


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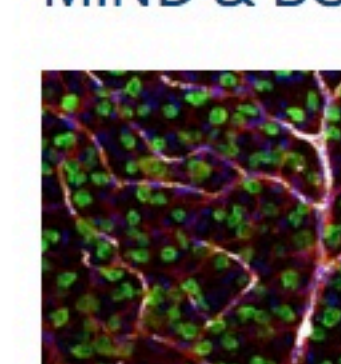
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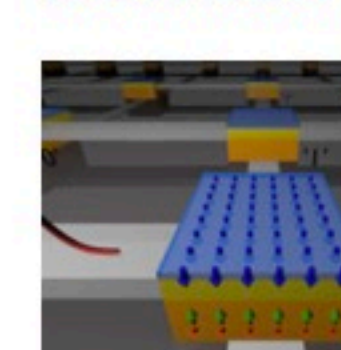
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