This semester at Mansfield University we chose to advocate for Niloufar Bayani and Ahmadreza Djalal who are unjustly imprisoned in Iran. We worked closely with Scholars at Risk during this time.

PSC 3350 Human Rights

Dr. Jonathan C. Rothermel

Students Involved:
Lindsey Bay (co-editor), John Brunetti, Ky'Le Cole, Shelby Davis (co-editor), Alexis Filan, Alexandra Fisher, Larissa Fisher, Josh Groff, Todd Grater, Kayonna Hennigan, Harrison Ledda, Breanna Minnier, Brittany Murphy, Lacey O’Donnell, Rebeca Pizzo, Valentina Salas, Aniya Sicovitch, Kristina Slyter (co-editor), Danielle Smith, Alexis Tedesco, Ashley Wattles

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Mansfield University became affiliated with Scholars at Risk in 2017. The first student advocacy seminar was offered in spring 2019, when students advocated for the release of Xiyue Wang, an imprisoned American scholar in Iran. The class was successful as it contributed to the advocacy that helped secure the release of Xiyue Wang in December 2019.

In spring 2021, Mansfield University offered PSC 3350 Human Rights as an upper level general education course. Dr. Rothermel adapted the course into a student advocacy seminar with support from SAR. This course is now more accessible to students from across all disciplines. Furthermore, there is the potential of collaboration with other universities in the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education (PASSHE).

Scholars at Risk (SAR) is a non-profit non-governmental organization that advocates for academic freedom and condemns attacks on higher education and imprisoned scholars. According to their annual report, Free to Think 2020, there have been over 300 attacks on higher education last year in 58 countries.

“This class was an unexpected eye opener. I came into it expecting to learn a little and left with so much more, including a real feeling of accomplishment.”

- Shelby Davis

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During the spring 2021 semester, the class met virtually over Zoom (Tuesdays/Thursdays, 10-11:15 am) due to protocols taken in response to the outbreak of COVID-19. While this posed a challenge for our student advocacy seminar, Dr. Rothermel designated Thursdays as “working group meetings.” These days were dedicated towards collectively planning, strategizing, and setting goals for our advocacy efforts. At the beginning of the semester, students were given a list of imprisoned scholars around the world. It was up to us to conduct outside research and select two scholars who we felt passionate about advocating for. After much debate, we chose Ahmadreza Djalali and Niloufar Bayani, two scholars arrested for espionage and held in the same prison (pictured below) in Iran -- the notorious Evin prison.
Niloufar Bayani is a scholar and activist that has received degrees in Canada and the United States and is currently imprisoned in Iran. Niloufar Bayani and her colleagues from the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation were arrested in Iran in January 2018 on falsified charges of spying and espionage. She was forced to confess to these charges after being subjected to over 1200 hours of torture. As a result, Bayani has been sentenced to ten years in an Iranian prison. She has also been threatened with sexual and physical abuse. When Bayani and her colleagues were arrested in Iran they were conducting research on the Asiatic cheetah, a critically endangered species in Iran.

“Scholars should never have to fear retaliation from their government for their research - we are here to advocate on their behalf.”
-Lindsey Bay

Ahmadreza Djalali is an Iranian-Swedish doctor in disaster medicine who travels worldwide preparing hospitals for disasters. In April 2016, he was arrested and convicted of espionage and “corruption on earth” while attending a conference in Iran. He has been denied legal counsel, contact with his family, and medical care during his imprisonment. He was sentenced to death and faces imminent execution as his health deteriorates. Although he was recently released from solitary confinement after months of being there, his family and supporters are gravely concerned about his health.
Iran is an Islamic theocratic government, meaning the clergy dominate this authoritarian country with religious authority. Currently, Iran has a Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, who is the second Supreme Leader in Iran since the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Xiyue Wang, a former scholar imprisoned in Iran, explained in a SAR webinar held in April 2021 that Iran often engages in kangaroo courts where defendants do not have attorneys present and evidence cannot be introduced or challenged. Iran uses unjustly imprisoned scholars as pawns for prisoner swaps with other countries. In the current geo-political context, Iran has been isolated by the international community for fear that its nuclear energy program is being weaponized.
One of our first class projects consisted of working together on Amnesty International’s Nowruz Card Campaign. The international campaign draws attention to the Persian holiday of Nowruz, which celebrates the first day of spring. Students created and mailed out Nowruz (“new day”) cards to our beloved scholars’ families and the Iranian government to raise awareness and appeal for their freedom.
Abuse of a Family Man

Dear Editor,

My name is Shelby Davis and I am writing on behalf of Mansfield University Scholars at Risk. As part of my human rights class, we are advocating for Ahmadreza Djalali, a disaster medicine doctor who is currently imprisoned in Iran. We believe he was imprisoned under false pretenses, and are fighting for his timely release. Dr. Djalali is a family man who has been taken away from his wife and kids for 5 years as of April 25, 2021, and they miss him dearly.

Before his incarceration, Dr. Djalali taught at Karolinska University in Sweden and returned to Iran to tour campuses and speak to students about his work. He was unexpectedly arrested and charged with “corruption on earth” and quickly sentenced to death without due process. Since his incarceration, Dr. Djalali has been tortured, denied his basic rights, and has had deteriorating health. It is believed that he is likely suffering from untreated cancer and is in need of proper treatment immediately. You can help us advocate on his behalf. Please go to https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/ahmadreza-djalali-iran/ to take action. Thank you.

Shelby Davis

Ahamadreza Djalali
Could you withstand over 1200 hours of interrogation?

Dear Editor,

The imprisoned Iranian wildlife activist and scholar, Niloufar Bayani, has had to do so. I am a student at Mansfield University. My human rights advocacy class, in conjunction with Scholars at Risk (SAR), is seeking public support to pressure the Iranian government to free Niloufar Bayani. In January 2018, Bayani and her colleagues from the Persian Wildlife Heritage Foundation were arrested in Iran on trumped-up charges, including espionage. Bayani was sentenced to ten years in prison after she was forced to confess to the charges. The admission was coerced and extracted under duress. Bayani was forced to undergo over 1200 hours of interrogation. There are also incidents of sexual abuse and torture being threatened against Bayani.

Niloufar Bayani was educated in Canada and the US. At the time of her arrest, she and her team were working on tracking and protecting the Iranian/Persian cheetah that had become an endangered species. National Geographic published information regarding the work they were doing in Iran.

In our class, we are studying the importance of academic freedom to democracy. Iran needs to be held accountable, and scholars like Bayani do not deserve to be unjustly imprisoned. You can help by taking action here: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/niloufar-bayani-iran/ You can also follow the efforts of our class on Twitter: @MansfieldSAR

Kristina Slyter
Dear Editor,

With the arrival of springtime comes a sense of hope and renewal. Today, you can help someone who is in desperate need. Five years ago, a scholar of disaster medicine, Ahmadreza Djalali, was arrested in Iran on the grounds of espionage and “corruption on earth.” Although Dr. Djalali was born in Iran, he had lived in Sweden to study and start a family. Later, he returned to Iran to share his research and was subsequently arrested and sentenced to death.

His health situation has been deteriorating considerably in the past five years, and many fear that his execution is imminent. United Nations human rights experts and scholars from around the world maintain that Dr. Djalali is innocent and is unjustly imprisoned. I am a student at Mansfield University and my human rights class is advocating on his behalf.

Please help up us in our mission to help see Dr. Djalali released and reunited with his family. You can take action here: https://www.scholarsatrisk.org/actions/ahmadreza-djalali-iran/

John Brunetti
Student, Todd Grater, wrote an article about our class and our scholars for the university newspaper, *The Flashlight*.

### Standing up for scholars

**BY TODD GRATER**

Mansfield University students often hold their professors in high regard. Unfortunately, this element of respect for intellect is not universal, as governments around the world are silencing scholars.

According to the Academic Freedom Monitoring Project, between the months of September 2019 and August 2020, there were 341 attacks on scholars in higher education in 56 countries around the world. These attacks debase free thought and disrupt societies' ability to solve problems.

At Mansfield University, Dr. Jonathan Rothemel's Human Rights and International Activism class is taking a stand against this mistreatment by advocating for scholars who are oppressed.

Students learn about human rights and forms of transnational advocacy and apply those skills to real life situations. Since 2017, Mansfield has been a proud affiliate of Scholars At Risk (SAR), an organization that advocates for imprisoned scholars around the world. SAR offers guidance and support as students gain firsthand experience in the field of advocacy. This semester, students are advocating on behalf of Niloufar Bayani and Ahmadreza Djalali, two scholars imprisoned in Iran.

Bayani is a wildlife activist from Iran who was working on a wildlife project on the endangered Asiatic cheetah. She was arrested in January 2018 for espionage. Bayani holds a BS in Biology from McGill University in Canada and a MA in Conservation Biology from Columbia University. While in Evin prison in Iran, she has endured sexual assault and torture since her sentencing in 2020, when she was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Djalali is a disaster medicine doctor and an Iranian-Swedish dual citizen. He was invited to give a lecture at the University of Tehran and Shiraz University when he was arrested by Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence and Security. He was charged with espionage, tortured, and coerced into giving a confession. He was transferred to solitary confinement in Evin prison where he awaits his death sentence. He is reported to be suffering from leukemia and has been denied medical assistance.

Mansfield students are working to bring attention to the victimization of these scholars and to remind them they are not forgotten. Junior Brittany Murphy said, "In addition to studying theoretical concepts and case studies, we’re able to help raise awareness about the plight of specific scholars who desperately need our help now." Students are writing advocacy letters to local newspapers and politicians to spread awareness. They are planning a week of action on campus in April. To connect with the class virtually and show support, follow them on Twitter @MansfieldSAR or go to scholarsatrisk.org and learn what you can do to stand up for scholars. Join your fellow students in advocating for scholars around the world and help be the voice that has been taken from them.
Students, Aniya Sicovitch and Alexandra Fisher, were in charge of our social media accounts, which included Twitter and Instagram: @MansfieldSAR and @SAR_Mansfield, respectively. They kicked off the social media campaign by creating a TikTok video of students holding signs in support of Bayani and Djalali. Throughout the semester they posted a series of tweets and Instagram posts outlining our progress and allowing people from around the world to support us. Our social media accounts have gained a lot of traction. In addition to their tweets and posts, students submitted their own content to be added to our social media accounts, spreading awareness and encouraging individual advocacy. Valentina Salas and Alexis Tedesco worked on social media filters, as well, allowing for the increase in shared media across social media platforms.
We hosted a week of action (April 26-30, 2021) dedicated towards increasing awareness of human rights injustices and engaging students, faculty, and staff on campus to act on behalf of our imprisoned scholars. Students volunteered over 25 hours collectively to sit at tables on campus to appeal directly to our campus community. Student, Shelby Davis, designed a large (3’ x 4’) poster that was set up on an easel to draw attention to our table. Our call to action consisted of a “take action” campaign directing petitioners to Scholars at Risk’s website via QR codes on a flyer created by students, Alexandra and Larissa Fisher.
We also promoted and encouraged students to take action by handing out pens, and stickers. The pens, which included our Twitter handle and SAR’s website, were drafted and ordered by student, Ky’Le Cole, and funded by Mansfield University’s Student Government Association. The stickers were designed by student, Todd Grater, and produced by student, Ashley Wattles. Flyers, pens, and stickers were also delivered to all faculty mailboxes, and Dr. Rothermel encouraged his colleagues to spread awareness among their students.
During our time advocating this semester we met with people to help grow our outreach efforts.

These meetings included:

- A meeting with Adam Braver the chair of the SAR-USA Steering committee (attended by the entire class)

- A meeting with Mansfield University Provost Dr. John Ulrich (attended by Ky’Le Cole and Brittany Murphy)

- A meeting with Dr. Denise Pearson, PASSHE’s Vice Chancellor and Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer (attended by Ky’Le Cole, Brittany Murphy, Dr. Ulrich, and Dr. Rothermel)

- Student Ky’Le Cole presented about the class at the Spring 2021 Showcase of Student Scholarship
In the future, we plan to continue spreading awareness on our social media and through future student advocacy seminars. Dr. Rothermel will always encourage his students to advocate for those who cannot speak up for themselves. He plans to offer student advocacy seminars every other year to enhance learning opportunities and to support the rights of the higher education community worldwide.

In addition, students, Ky’Le Cole and Brittany Murphy, met with MU Provost Dr. John Ulrich to discuss our advocacy efforts and to explore options to strengthen our partnership with SAR. To that end, Dr. Ulrich facilitated a meeting with Dr. Denise Pearson who is the Vice Chancellor and Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer for PASSHE (PASSHE represents 14 public universities). Ky’Le and Brittany had a fruitful discussion with her about expanding SAR affiliation and activities to other PASSHE universities and to promote the student advocacy seminar as a high impact, experiential learning course.
Danielle Smith – “I learned a lot about how to use my skills to advocate in meaningful ways. I also learned that there are different ways to advocate, and we must always keep the wishes of those we are advocating for in the front of our minds as we plan any and all campaigns.”

Todd Grater – “This course is important because we are addressing something that is bigger than ourselves”.

Kayonna Hennigan - “The course has opened my eyes to the mistreatment of people, and why it is important that we step in and help no matter how small. We need to get the word out about scholars who need to be advocated for.”

Alexandra Fisher - “This class is different than any other I’ve taken because, it is more rewarding. You have the opportunity to personally advocate for others giving you a hands-on experience working on a campaign.”

Brittany Murphy - “Overall, I’m glad I took this course. While learning more about human rights atrocities all over the world, I was able to put myself aside and advocate for someone else. Ahmadreza Djalali is, above all else, a father, and every night when I put my kids to bed, it was really heartbreaking knowing that he’s not able to put his kids to bed and kiss them goodnight.”

Ky’Le Cole - "When students advocate for change, the world can only benefit from listening."

Alexis Tedesco – “This class was an eye-opener on things I did not even realize that were happening. I learned things I didn’t think there was to learn. I am glad that I decided to take the course, it was more than I expected.”

John Brunetti - “I believe this is a course that is ultimately one of the more important classes that I will ever take. For starters, many of the things you learn in this class as it relates to working with others, helping those in need, and public relations are all tools that we can use in the rest of our daily lives.”
A special thank you to everyone who participated and helped us during our class.

Our special thanks include:

Dr. Jonathan C. Rothermel, Associate Professor (Political Science) at Mansfield University

Adam Braver, Coordinator of SAR Student Advocacy Seminars and Associate Professor at Roger Williams University

Dr. John Ulrich, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs at Mansfield University

Dr. Charles Patterson, President Mansfield University

Dr. Denise Pearson, Vice Chancellor and Chief Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer at PASSHE

MU faculty, staff and students for their participation in our advocacy efforts.

MU print shop

*The Final Report was created and edited by students, Lindsey Bay, Shelby Davis, and Kristina Slyter.

*If you would like more information about our advocacy campaign, please contact Dr. Jonathan Rothermel at jrotherm@mansfield.edu