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A First for RWU, Ashley Barton '15 Honored as Newman Civic Fellow

Senior legal studies and creative writing major recognized for human rights activism and promoting freedom of speech



April 16, 2015 | Sabrina Polin '17

BRISTOL, R.I. – For her advocacy work to free imprisoned scholars around the world, graduating senior Ashley Barton has been honored as a [2015 Newman Civic Fellow](#), a prestigious award recognizing a select group of student leaders who create lasting change in communities throughout the country and around the globe.

Barton is one of 201 students across the nation – and the first from Roger Williams University to be nominated and selected – to receive the honor from Campus Compact, a national coalition of college and university presidents who support and promote public service in higher education. A legal studies and creative writing double major, she is being recognized for her involvement in [a project-based learning partnership between Roger Williams University and Scholars at Risk](#), the nonprofit organization that promotes academic freedom via advocacy to governments and the general public for scholars and intellectuals around the world who have been jailed for expressing their beliefs.

“I’m really proud and honored to receive this recognition, because it means my work reaches more than just our campus – it reaches a national community,” says Barton. “The goal of my work is to shed light and spread awareness for how important social justice and advocacy for human rights is.”

Under the leadership of Associate Professor of Creative Writing Adam Braver, Barton and a small group of students involved in RWU SAR have served as case-minders for three detained scholars in Turkey, Ethiopia and China. Barton has drafted letters to senators, engaged in discussions with high-level officials in the state and federal government, as well as the NGO community, presented updates to the national SAR office and the campus community, and worked on associated social justice initiatives at the local and national level.

RWU President Donald J. Farish nominated Barton for the award, noting in his letter to Campus Compact that, "Over time, Ashley has raised herself out of an apprentice status, and into one of a colleague that SAR and Professor Braver can call on for help with projects, as evidenced by her behind-the-scenes leadership in helping to create SAR's *#Free2Think international awareness campaign*."

"There are a lot of people that work to reverse the effects of injustice, but there are very few who work to change the systems that perpetuate injustice in the first place," says Director of the Feinstein Center for Service Learning and Community Engagement KC Ferrara, who recommended Barton be nominated. "Ashley is one of those people that take the deep dive, that take action, and she really shows her level of commitment to human rights and democratic ideals."

By her own admission, Barton's involvement with RWU SAR has quickly transitioned from learning experience to life mission.

"I really became impassioned in my role and how important advocacy is through this work," she says. "In America, we have a lot more tools, especially with the written language and spoken word – what we can do here with our voice is so powerful."

Most recently, Barton has been putting her powerful voice to work for Uighur author and intellectual Ilham Tohti, a moderate voice in China advocating for peace and coexistence between ethnic sects, arrested on charges of separatism.

Tohti's case has become personal for Barton. With social media skills and a little luck, Barton found and connected with Tohti's college-aged daughter, Jewher Ilham, on Facebook. Jewher – who had arrived in America by herself when her father was arrested by the Chinese government as they boarded a plane for the U.S. – began working collaboratively with Barton and RWU SAR on her father's case since then. For Barton, it was the first time a case yielded a real-life connection.

"In other cases, there's this detachment between us [RWU SAR] and the people we're defending. They usually don't know who we are," Barton says. "But with Jewher, she was a person, a human being that we could get close to, so we were able to make her case and her father's case really come alive."

Their first time meeting in person was at an airport when Barton and Jewher traveled to Washington, D.C., to meet with congressmen and senators to earn support in negotiating with China's president regarding Tohti's detainment.

Her ongoing relationship with Jewher has deepened her appreciation for the freedoms she enjoys as an American, Barton says. It inspires her passion to pursue a law degree after graduation – she has been accepted to five law schools – and Barton’s work on a book she is co-editing with Professor Braver based on their interviews with Jewher; their book will be published by the University of New Orleans Press.

In addition to advocating on behalf of human-rights violation cases around the world, Barton also helped to conceive and launch SAR’s *#Free2Think* – an international social media campaign encouraging individuals to express what they are grateful to be free to think about and share it with the world. She will present the project at the NAFSA: Association of International Educators Conference in May.

Barton expresses gratitude for the inroads RWU has paved to pursue social justice work, noting the University’s role in supporting her aspirations and achievements.

“The intimacy you can create with your faculty has no parallel at any other university – it allows you to thrive if you want to thrive,” Barton says. “Had I gone to a different school, I don’t think I would have been able to seek these avenues and pursue human rights activism the way I have been able to here.”