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PTV is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization. Your contribution is tax deductible to the fullest extent of the law



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**THE PTV MISSION:**  
To provide medical, psychological, and case management services to survivors of torture.



*For the survivors, torture is a past that will not go away. But at least the survivor is no longer in the wilderness.*



PTV Case Manager Noemi Rossler with Igor Mkhitarov.

## Igor Mkhitarov: No Longer Running

Igor Mkhitarov's escape from Armenia could be straight out of a suspense novel. Born in the ethnic Armenian enclave in Azerbaijan known as Nagorno-Karabakh, Igor experienced riots orchestrated by government supporters when ethnic Armenians voted to secede and join Armenia. In four days at the end of August 1988, dozens of Armenians were massacred, and Igor's family joined the mass of people fleeing Azerbaijan. Igor remembers hiding in the basement of a local movie theater with 200-300 other Armenians who feared for their life and were fleeing Azerbaijan.

Despite his Armenian ethnicity, Igor was considered an outsider, vulnerable to taunts and prejudice. Police routinely conducted raids on houses of non-native Armenians whom they believed were communists. One day the police arrived at his family's door and began to rummage through the apartment.

*"When I lost peace, I didn't know how I would live. . . . PTV gave me hope that I could find another way to live."*

When an officer tried to hit his mom, Igor stepped in and took the blow. The force was so strong that it broke his wrist. Years later the improperly healed bone would be critical evidence in his asylum case.

After the police raid, Igor moved to Kazakhstan where he studied aviation technology. But again, he was considered an outsider, and experienced hostility and prejudice. Once he finished his degree, he moved to Moscow to look for work, but without special work documents legitimate jobs were unavailable, and he returned to Armenia to be close to his family.

Igor had always been troubled by the evident corruption in the refugee camp. Food and necessities sent by the International Red Cross were not getting to the people, and Igor suspected that the government was hoarding the aid. Igor and his brother organized a group of refugees to deliver a petition to the Prime Minister.

Special Forces, however, beat and arrested the group. Bail was set at \$1,000—a sum impossible to raise. Igor and his brother were released after his mother sold a ring for \$300 that had been in the family for more than 100 years.

Igor enrolled in computer classes at an American University. One day, Igor saw a poster that read: "Think not what your country can do for you. Think what you can do for your country." These words inspired Igor to again try to alleviate his people's suffering. He received funding to develop a human rights website where Armenians and Azerbaijanis could communicate, but had great difficulty purchasing a license from the suspicious Armenian government.

On the day the license arrived, Igor was picked up by the police, and interrogated about his connections to dissident Armenians. At the time, Igor was waiting for a response from a competition that provided business internships in America. He stalled by telling the police that he would cooperate but needed time to compile the list. When he received the internship, Igor fled Armenia for the United States and applied for political asylum.

Igor was reading the local Russian newspaper in Los Angeles when he saw an ad for the Program for Torture Victims. He now credits PTV with referring him to a good lawyer at Public Counsel who helped him win his asylum case.

Igor now proudly displays his California driver's license and identity card showing that his asylum was granted. "When I lost peace, I didn't know how I would live. When I came to PTV, I felt comfortable. PTV gave me hope that I could find another way to live," Igor said.



## What is an impunity case?

Impunity is a noun that means exemption or freedom from punishment.

## What is Filartiga v. Pena-Irala?

In 1976, Joelito Filartiga was brutally tortured and murdered by Pena-Irala, a senior Paraguayan police officer. After attempts failed in Paraguay, the Filartiga family filed a federal lawsuit against Pena-Irala, who was living in the U.S. In 1980, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit awarded the Filartiga family \$10 million and ruled that torture victims can file lawsuits against their perpetrators using the ATCA. Pena-Irala was deported back to Paraguay prior to the ruling for a visa violation.

## What is the Alien Tort Claim Act of 1789?

The Alien Tort Claim Act (ATCA) allows foreigners to sue in U.S. federal courts for crimes committed abroad. Since 1980, victims of torture, genocide, and other violations of international law have used the ATCA to seek compensation for their injuries by filing impunity lawsuits in U.S. courts. More recently, the ATCA has been used to sue multinational corporations accused of violating human rights in foreign countries.



Hector Aristizabal with Clinical Director Ana Deutsch at a PTV event.

## Surviving Through Theater

When Hector Augusto Aristizabal was ten years old, he learned that his first name, Hector, means “entertainer,” and his middle name, Augusto, means “intelligent.” “Somehow I lived up to the meaning of these names with both my professions as an

actor and as a therapist,” said Hector, who has dedicated his life to fusing theater and therapy in the service of healing.

Born in Columbia in 1960, a repressive government, powerful drug cartels, mafia, and revolutionaries all served as the background to his formative years: “By ten I was becoming a streetwise kid, and a precocious teenager, experimenting with new religions in search of God, discovering Marxism, and revolutionary activism.”

At the University of Medellin, Hector attached himself to a theater group, traveling the breath of the country, and learning about how people lived and died in Columbia.

When Hector was 22, he and his brother were arrested after someone tipped the military that “subversives” were gathering in his parent’s house. During a search, the soldiers found a pamphlet produced by guerillas that his brother had hid. Accused of being an urban guerrilla, he was tortured for three days and incarcerated for ten days. He used his mime and physical training to his advantage, he said, by “flying off the walls like a feather,” or exaggerating his distress when his head was submerged in water. After he was beaten with electric cables and hung with his hands tied together and his arms extended over his body in a backward position, he acted exhausted to convince his torturers that he could not be coherent. After ten days, he was released: “I had completed the most important performance of my life as an actor and theater once again had saved my life.” His brother’s was not as lucky, and was later kidnapped, tortured, and murdered by the paramilitary.

Hector left for the United States in 1989, and studied English at Clarke College in Dubuque, Iowa. He spoke no English, and did not know anyone.

He met his future wife there and moved to California where they married. Soon after, he was offered a job in Pasadena for a social worker who needed a Spanish-speaking counselor.

Hector quickly became part of the theater scene in the Los Angeles area, and received grants from foundations and public agencies.

Hector was introduced to PTV by someone he met at a party, who invited him to one of PTV’s monthly Healing Club meetings. He brought his drums and told stories to the members. In 2002, Hector received a grant from the California Arts Council to work with PTV’s clients by using theater to explore survivor’s lives—not just their torture—and to rebuild community. He draws from traditions as diverse as the myths of Australian aboriginal tribes, Samoan initiations rites, and stories from the Kaguru tribe in Tanzania. “Since I work with diverse populations, I use elements and concepts that are universally meaningful, that we all share in common.”

What guides and gives Hector his strength and inspiration? “The fabric of our soul is made of poetry, not ideology. We always have the ability to remake ourselves. It is only through living for what is right that we will achieve a meaningful death.”

*“The fabric of our soul is made of poetry, not ideology. We always have the ability to remake ourselves.”*

Hector Augusto



## Agape International Children's Choir

Agape International Children’s Choir performs at the June 29 UN International Day in Support of Victims of Torture event co-sponsored by PTV, LA Museum of the Holocaust, Amnesty International, and the Inter-Religious Council of Southern California.

## Message from the Executive Director

Dear Friends,

*The torture survivor's unthinkable nightmarish experience is not simply a private reality. Such extreme trauma prevents talented, intelligent, and motivated people from participating fully in society. Survivors suffer from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, a complex syndrome that includes feelings of estrangement from family, friends, and community. This impacts the survivor's ability to establish social and professional ties. Other symptoms include memory loss and trouble concentrating, making it difficult for the survivor to remain in school or at work. PTV sees its task as returning survivors to the community of human beings, freeing and giving them the inner resources to be “caught up in the bundle of life,” as South African Archbishop Desmond Tutu puts it. Your support helps us return survivors to the community of human beings. This year PTV raised \$100,000 in grants and individual gifts. This feat is remarkable for an organization that only gained the capacity to engage in fundraising two years ago. We want to thank each and every one of you, and look forward to your continuing support.*

*Michael Nutkiewicz*



Friends of PTV and clients who performed at the book release party for Nigerian poet Chris Abani.

## Medical Student Activist Realizes Dream

Arghavan Alimony, a USC medical student, was raised in Colorado, but never forgets her childhood in Iran. Her parents were members of the Bahai faith, a religion considered heretical by the Shiite Muslim regime that came into power in the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Although they are the largest religious minority, Bahais are not recognized in the Iranian constitution. Consequently, Bahais do not have access to education or government jobs, and property seizure, imprisonment, and even murder are not uncommon. “I remember my parents listening to radio announcements every day to hear about the death of Bahais in case it was one of their friends or family who were murdered or imprisoned,” Arghavan said.

Wanting to give their children hope and a future, the family fled Iran. They arrived in Pakistan and joined the Bahai refugee community in Karachi. After a year, they settled temporarily in Vienna and then relocated to the United States.

Arghavan remembers walking in Karachi at age 5, and seeing poor, hungry, and homeless children in the city streets. Many were in need of medical attention that young Arghavan realized would never be granted. These images are part of her earliest awareness that she wanted to become a doctor and help people who do not have proper medical care. Growing up among the working class in America, Arghavan’s own experience as a patient at understaffed community clinics influenced her decision to work in public hospitals.

As president of the USC student chapter of Physicians for Social Responsibility Arghavan met Dr. Jose Quiroga, PTV medical director and a board member of Physicians for Social Responsibility, Los Angeles. Dr. Quiroga invited Arghavan to do a four-week elective rotation at PTV as part of her medical training.

Like most people, Arghavan did not realize that so many



PTV Medical Director Dr. Jose Quiroga reviews client chart with USC medical student Arghavan Alimony.

torture survivors live in Los Angeles, but said that medical students should be taught about torture: “These are people you see on the streets everyday. It is not such a rare thing.”

During her rotation at PTV’s office and the Venice Family Clinic, Arghavan conducted initial intake assessments, performed medical exams, learned how to document signs of torture used for asylum petitions and how to testify in immigration court. Although she mainly addressed her patients’ medical needs, she said mental health counseling was also a part of her training at PTV.

Arghavan was moved by the resiliency of the survivors she met. “I expected them to be in a much worse psychological state. Even after all they went through, they still believed in what had gotten them tortured. That is what inspired me,” she said.

Arghavan is in her third year of medical school at USC and plans to attend a residency program in ophthalmology next year.

### PROGRAM FOR TORTURE VICTIMS

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