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Vancouver nurse and Pivot Legal Society receive Canadian human rights awards

Fight human rights abuses that drive AIDS epidemic

MONTREAL, 10 September, 2004 – Vancouver nurse **Megan Oleson** and **Pivot Legal Society**, also based in Vancouver, are the 2004 Canadian recipients of the “Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights” from the **Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network** and **Human Rights Watch**.

“Human rights abuses, in Canada and internationally, continue to fuel the HIV/AIDS epidemic,” said Ralf Jürgens, Executive Director of the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network. “In Canada, governments have been too slow at introducing effective measures to reduce the spread of HIV and hepatitis C infection among injection drug users, such as safe injection facilities. Instead, we continue to rely too much on costly and often ineffective law enforcement measures,” he added.

“Ideology, rather than concern for public health and human rights, is driving government action. In this context, the 2004 recipients of the Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights are true heroes who have injected reason and passion for health and human rights in a debate that is too often dominated by ignorance and prejudice,” Jürgens concluded.

Megan Oleson is a 26-year-old nurse who works tirelessly to protect and promote the health and human rights of the most vulnerable residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. As a member of the Anti-Poverty Committee and the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users (VANDU), Megan has spearheaded various actions to address the issues that continue to plague the Downtown Eastside: lack of access to harm reduction measures, lack of appropriate housing, poverty, and police brutality.

During the spring 2003 large-scale police crackdown on local drug users, Megan acted quickly to organize local activists and drug users who operated the “327 Carrall Street” safe injection site, North America’s first-ever such site. The site would not have been possible without Megan, who supervised injections, taught drug users about safe injection practices, and referred individuals to available health and social services.

“Vancouver had waited for years for a safe injection site to finally open. In the face of further delays, Megan acted when others continued to drag their feet,” said Thomas Kerr, the Legal Network’s Vancouver-based director of Health Policy and Research.

Pivot Legal Society, the other recipient of the 2004 Canadian awards, is a non-profit organization that uses law reform, legal education, and strategic legal action to advance the interests and improve the lives of marginalized people in new and innovative ways. Formed in the fall of 2000, Pivot works with few resources, but with great vision and dedication, to address the legal and human rights challenges faced by sex workers, drug users, and the homeless in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside.

“Pivot’s brave and tireless work has not only helped to empower the most marginalized drug users in British Columbia,” said Joanne Csete, director of the HIV/AIDS Programme at Human Rights Watch. “It has also forced both city and provincial authorities to grapple more seriously than ever with police harassment and due-process violations against drug users and sex trade workers.”

At an awards ceremony in Montreal today, lawyer John Richardson, who has been the driving force behind the organization, working with a dedicated team of volunteers, will accept the award on PIVOT’S behalf. Also present will be Megan Oleson, as well as Karyn Kaplan and Paisan Suwannawong of the **Thai Drug Users’ Network**. The Network received the 2004 “International Award for Action on AIDS and Human Rights” from the Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network and Human Rights Watch during the International AIDS Conference in Bangkok on 14 July.

“During a crackdown that cost the lives of many drug users in Thailand in 2003, the Thai Drug Users’ Network threw a spotlight on horrific human rights abuses, informed drug users of their rights, and worked for policy change,” said Csete. “The Network’s courageous and peaceful work in the face of atrocious violence exemplify human rights heroism of the first order.”

Previous recipients of the Award for Action on AIDS and Human Rights include Wan Yanhai of China, the AIDS Law Project of South Africa, the Vancouver Area Network of Drug Users, and deceased Canadian prison activist Laurence Stocking.

For more information about the *Awards for Action on HIV/AIDS and Human Rights* and this year’s recipients, visit: <http://www.aidslaw.ca/Maincontent/awards.htm>

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The Canadian HIV/AIDS Legal Network (www.aidslaw.ca) was founded in 1992 to promote the human rights of people living with and vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, in Canada and internationally, through research, legal and policy analysis, education, advocacy, and community mobilization. The Network is Canada’s leading advocacy organization for legal, ethical and human rights issues raised by HIV/AIDS.

Human Rights Watch (www.hrw.org) is an independent, non-governmental organization that conducts regular, systematic investigations of human rights abuses in about eighty countries around the world. Its reputation for timely, reliable disclosures has made it an essential source of information for those concerned with human rights. Human Rights Watch addresses the human rights practices of governments of all political stripes, of all geopolitical alignments, and of all ethnic and religious persuasions. It defends freedom of thought and expression, due process and equal protection of the law, and a vigorous civil society; it documents and denounces abuses of internationally recognized human rights. Its goal is to hold governments accountable if they transgress the rights of their people. Human Rights Watch began in 1978, and today includes divisions covering Africa, the Americas, Asia, and the Middle East as well as three thematic divisions on arms, children's rights, and women's rights, and special programs on business and human rights and HIV/AIDS. The organization maintains offices in New York, Washington, Los Angeles, London, Brussels, Moscow, and Tashkent.