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ESQ. HUMAN RIGHTS BATTLE HITS HOME

By Peter Blumberg

For Karen Musalo, the campaign seeking justice for the murder of a Guatemalan human-rights activist has special significance: The victim was her friend. And even though Musalo has advocated for two decades on behalf of oppressed people in the often-violent arena of human-rights work, never has a loss struck so close.

More than 1,600 people around the world have signed a petition demanding that Guatemalan authorities conduct a full investigation into the August 2007 death of Pepe Mendez, a 27-year-old activist slain after he publicly denounced election-season violence.

"I saw Pepe grow up, I know his family," says Musalo, a law professor at UC Hastings College of the Law in San Francisco who is spearheading the Justice for Pepe campaign. Her close relationship with Pepe's father, renowned peace activist Amilcar Mendez, dates back to the 1980s. "The role of really being there for the family as a friend to support them during their grieving process certainly adds a dimension that is challenging."

Musalo, 56, is perhaps best known for winning landmark court decisions on behalf of refugees seeking political asylum. But she says grassroots advocacy plays a vital role in promoting the rule of law worldwide. "When the voices of people join with those using the law, it's all the more powerful, and it can overcome what might seem like insurmountable obstacles," she says.

In the Pepe Mendez case, Musalo took out a full-page ad in a leading Guatemalan newspaper. She has gone through diplomatic channels to seek the assistance of forensic investigators from the FBI to help with the local investigation. And in December, she worked to get a special commission affiliated with the United Nations to take up the case.

Musalo's "unbelievable, phenomenal passion" is rooted in "an unquenchable optimism," says Debbie Smith, a longtime colleague and friend who also works on immigration issues. "She is able to feel sorrow for the family of this murdered young man, but it doesn't break her," continues Smith, a San Francisco attorney and a project director for Catholic Legal Immigration Network. "She keeps on trucking [and] is able to keep motivated."

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