

**MEMORIAL DEDICATED IN DELAWARE PARK TO HONOR  
DR. ALISON L. DES FORGES, “ONE OF THE GREATEST ADVOCATES FOR  
HUMAN RIGHTS IN OUR TIME”**

As the Senior Advisor to the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, Alison Des Forges was returning home to Buffalo from a presentation about the Rwandan genocide to the British Parliament when she died in the crash of Continental Flight 3407 on February 12, 2009.

Called “one of the greatest advocates for human rights in our time” by Human Rights Watch, the Alison L. Des Forges Memorial Committee (the “Committee”), as a tribute to her life and work, planted three trees and dedicated a memorial bench on October 27 next to the path in Delaware Park where she regularly walked. The bench and trees are located on the Nottingham Terrace side of Delaware Park along the Ring Road cinder path between the zoo and food kiosk. The Committee invites anyone who wants to remember Alison to take a moment to visit the site and reflect on the legacy she left.

An influential historian of Africa and a leading human rights activist. Dr. Des Forges was also a forceful advocate for public education in Buffalo.

### **The Scholar**

As a scholar with a Ph.D. in African History from Yale University, Alison wrote *Defeat is the Only Bad News: Rwanda under Musinga, 1896-1931*. She taught at the University at Buffalo, Oswego, Beijing University, and Berkeley and served as an influential public intellectual on Central Africa. She counseled numerous students and colleagues who recently published in her honor *Remaking Rwanda: State Building and Human Rights after Mass Violence*. As a scholar-activist and Senior Advisor to the Africa Division of Human Rights Watch, she authored the most comprehensive and authoritative account of the 1994 Rwandan tragedy, *Leave None to Tell the Story: Genocide in Rwanda* (1999).

### **The Human Rights Activist**

As an expert on Rwanda, Des Forges was asked in 1991 to co-chair an International Commission to investigate human rights abuses in northern Rwanda. The resulting report in 1992 warned the world of the initial signs of genocide. When the systematic killing of the Tutsi began in 1994, she worked day and night to save as many people as possible. She met with National Security Advisor Anthony Lake, members of the Congressional Black Caucus, Senator Ted Kennedy, Secretary of State Madeline Albright and others to exhort them as world leaders to stop the carnage. Many Rwandans say they owe their lives to Alison. "She fearlessly and unreservedly committed to helping Rwandans whose lives were in danger in Rwanda during and following the

1994 genocide by intervening on behalf of those who could not leave the country, helping others seek safety outside Rwanda, and assisting those who sought asylum in the USA, Canada, and other countries,” said Aimable Twagilimana, professor at Buffalo State College and friend of Des Forges. Des Forges played a central role in preparing legal cases and testifying as an expert witness at eleven trials of the United Nations-initiated International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) meeting in Arusha, Tanzania. Her work contributed heavily to the conviction of many of the most active perpetrators of the genocide.

### **The Advocate for Public Education**

In 1972 Alison and her husband Roger came to Buffalo to teach at the State University. When Judge Curtin ordered the Buffalo Public Schools to integrate by creating Magnet Schools that would attract students from across the city, Alison threw herself into helping to insure the success of the policy by lobbying the Board of Education for funds and by volunteering in the Bennett Park Montessori Center attended by her children Alexander and Jessie. According to Roger, “In addition to speaking truth to power in her inimitable way, Alison derived great joy and satisfaction from teaching young children, often getting down on her hands and knees with them to build relief maps and to read about the world.”

Alison never sought recognition or even remuneration for her work, but she was recognized with a MacArthur Foundation “Genius” Award in 1999. She was an international figure who interacted with world leaders, but she remained a warm and unassuming friend and colleague of the many whose lives she touched deeply.

“One of my fondest memories during my twenty years of walking around Delaware Park with Alison were of young men and women approaching Alison to thank her for teaching them to read when they were children at the Bennett Park Montessori School,” said Helene Kramer, a close friend.. “During those moments, I saw the human connection – a glow of pride in her eyes, and theirs. There is a no more fitting place to remember Alison than in Delaware Park.”

To those who knew Alison she was a down-to-earth and compassionate human being with a great intellect and a passion for justice, one who made a difference in the world. No one who met her can doubt that heroes exist.