

banter

## HIGH STAKES

*A Bethesda human rights attorney has spent more than 20 years working to free political prisoners. Now he's caught the eye of Hollywood.*

BY CARALEE ADAMS

**LAST SUMMER, JARED GENSER** was at home on his couch in Bethesda when he got a call from a client in Kenya. The man, Peter Biar Ajak, said a death squad ordered by the South Sudanese president was on its way to abduct or kill him. Genser, an international human rights attorney, had helped secure Ajak's release from jail in January 2020 after he was arrested in his native South Sudan for speaking out against the government. Now the man's life was in imminent danger.

Genser worked around the clock contacting lawmakers and other U.S. government officials to get emergency visas for Ajak, his wife and three young children so they could escape to the United States. He suggested ways for Ajak to keep a low profile, including the use of encrypted platforms to communicate. Genser was "one of the very few people I could speak to," says Ajak, an economist who had moved to Kenya because of the threat in South Sudan. "He did his best to calm me down and figure out ways to keep my family safe." Now living in a townhome in Bethesda, Ajak credits Genser's tenacity and compassion for helping to get his family out of danger.

"The day he arrived at Dulles was one of those airport moments I live for,"



Jared Genser at home in Bethesda

Genser says. "Literally the stakes were life and death." He brought Ajak and his family to stay at his house for five days. On the second night, Genser included Ajak in the family's Shabbat dinner, along with his wife, Elaine Smith Genser, and his two children, Zachary, 12, and Alexandra, 9.

"The cases that I work on are, undoubtedly, circumstances where truth is stranger than fiction," says Genser, whose clients have included former Czech Republic President Václav Havel and Nobel Peace Prize laureates Elie Wiesel and Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Genser calls them "human rights heroes of our time."

The real-life drama of Genser's work recently caught the attention of Hollywood, and the 48-year-old is now developing a television series with Amazon Studios based on his 20-year career. Genser is a co-executive producer of the project, along with actor Orlando Bloom and Bruce Richmond, a former executive at HBO. Aiming for a smart show the likes of *Homeland* or *The West Wing*, Genser wants the series to focus on the people he represents and the struggles they face. "My clients take extraordinary risks every day, putting their lives on the line for the sake of their family, community and country," says Genser, who grew up in North Potomac

PHOTO BY ERICK GIBSON



Genser (center) spoke at a press conference on Capitol Hill in June 2014 calling for the release of his client Chen Kegui, who was being held in China. Also pictured: New Jersey Congressman Chris Smith (left) and then-House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (right).

and graduated from Landon School in Bethesda. “They inspire me, and I want people to know about their stories.” He’s optimistic that the series will air sometime next year.

Genser’s roots in advocacy run deep. He says his mom, Lyne Genser, a social worker, and his father, Dr. Sander Genser, a psychiatrist, instilled in him a commitment to service. As a teenager, Genser served meals to the homeless and volunteered with children who have disabilities. His grandparents on both sides fled Jewish persecution in Eastern Europe in the 1890s, and he often was told how lucky the family was to have freedom in the U.S.

After studying policy analysis at Cornell University, Genser went to graduate school at Harvard University, where he helped organize a 5,000-student protest against Chinese President Jiang Zemin’s appearance on campus in 1997. Genser was moved by the people he met who’d suffered under the Chinese regime, and realized that while the event had an impact in Boston, it was not even seen in China. “That experience persuaded me to go to law school to be a human rights lawyer,” he says.

Genser was a second-year law student at the University of Michigan when he

spent a semester in London working for a human rights group. He took on a case involving a British man, James Mawdsley, being held in Myanmar (formerly known as Burma) for bringing attention to military atrocities he’d witnessed; the man was sentenced to 17 years in solitary confinement. Genser applied pressure through political and media channels—a strategy that’s proved effective over the years. He won the case at the United Nations and got support from lawmakers on Capitol Hill. Back in Ann Arbor, he got a call in his dorm room that the man was going to be released. Genser flew to Heathrow Airport in London to meet him. “He gave me a handshake and said, ‘Thanks—you saved my life,’ and I was just speechless,” Genser recalls.

In 2001, Genser founded Freedom Now, a D.C.-based organization that works internationally for the release of political prisoners. After several years as a partner at a global law firm, he struck out on his own; he’s been managing director of his own public interest firm, Perseus Strategies, since 2011. He also teaches at Georgetown University Law Center, has written three books about human rights law, and devotes about half of his time to pro bono work on behalf of human rights defenders.

Last December, Genser received the 2020 Tällberg Eliasson Global Leadership Prize, one of three winners selected from more than 2,100 nominees. “A lot of what I’ve been doing over the course of my career is about holding people in power accountable for their decisions—whether it be repressing the rights of their people, in the case of dictators, or people in power in this country or around the world failing to do the right thing,” he says.

Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, former U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights, says Genser is “utterly relentless” when defending a client. “The work is hugely important,” says Al Hussein, who nominated Genser for the award. “To some it may seem glamorous—perhaps on the day the person is released there is a fanfare to it. But a lot of it is very hard work.”

Genser is both excited and nervous about being portrayed on TV, and doesn’t know who will be cast to play him. He just wants it to be a high-profile actor who can get the show to a second season. Genser says he hopes the series ultimately will bring exposure to the plight of those he represents: “It’s never about me,” he says. “It’s about the cause or the case.” ■

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