

## Acting as an advocate



*M.C. Sungaila, a graduate of Corona del Mar High School, filed a legal brief for Amnesty International in regards to Mexican women who disappeared from Ciudad Juarez in 1990s.*

By Tom Ragan, Corona Del Mar

One person can make a difference. You just have to believe in yourself, be patient, put in many hours of work, and, sometimes — just sometimes — search far and wide for Spanish translators.

That was the message delivered to students at Corona del Mar High School on Tuesday by M.C. Sungaila, a graduate of the school and an appellate attorney. Tuesday's visit was her first visit to her alma mater since Sungaila graduated from there 25 years ago. She joked to the students that the last time she was in the Little Theatre was when she performed a burlesque dance in the high school's production of "Cabaret." "And you're not going to get me to dance again up here," she said. "The first time was hard enough."

In her profession as a lawyer, the 1985 CdM graduate has made a difference for the memories of more than 100 women who disappeared from the U.S.-Mexico border town of Ciudad Juarez in the 1990s. In July 2009, Sungaila filed a 100-page legal brief on behalf of Amnesty International, claiming that the Mexican government was responsible for more than 100 deaths of Ciudad Juarez women because it failed to investigate their disappearances. Amnesty International won the case.

It was Sungaila's brief that paved the way to the decision by the Costa Rica-based Inter-American Court of Human Rights on Dec. 10, 2009, which ruled that the Mexican government had violated a pair of international treaties — the American Convention on Human Rights and the Inter-American Convention on Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence Against Women.

As a result, the Mexican government had to publish portions of the world court's decision in newspapers across the country, said Sungaila, adding that journalists in Mexico could not easily write about the decision because of possible repercussions due to Mexico's conditions.

The government was also supposed to establish a memorial to honor the deaths of the women in Ciudad Juarez, the border town across from El Paso, Texas, Sungaila said. In the 1990s, many women from Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, disappeared while returning home from their work in the maquiladora industry. Later, many of their bodies were found in a remote area on the city's periphery, where they had been tortured, raped, then killed. So far, the Mexican government has published the court's decisions in the newspapers, and Ciudad Juarez is poised to establish a memorial in their honor on Friday to honor the women.

"But what's really important from a legal standpoint is that the world court recognizes there's an underlying gender discrimination that has become a pattern in Mexico," Sungaila said. "When the government failed to investigate the deaths, it created, by its action or inaction, a culture of impunity, where there were no consequences." Before beginning her speech to the students, Sungaila asked the students to raise their hands if they thought they'd have no problem going home that evening after the school day. All of them raised their hands.

Sungaila stumbled onto the Juarez case via the Internet. She was tipped off after Ariel Dulitzky, a clinical professor of law and director of the Human Rights Clinic at the University of Texas at Austin, went searching for an attorney to represent Amnesty International. He came across Sungaila's name online at her L.A.-based firm, Horvitz & Levy. She'd been working on another international case at the time, the outcome of which is still pending, she said.

As Sungaila tells it, she only had a few months to write the brief, which took a great deal of international research and, ultimately, tracking down a translation company that would translate the brief for relatively cheap. They were not easy tasks, she said. But in the end it was satisfying, she added, to know that maybe a few changes in Mexico could possibly result from her work. "This is the first time that a treaty for women has been interpreted and applied by world court," said Sungaila, who went on to Stanford University from CdM, eventually receiving her law degree from UCLA in 1991.

The students, who attended the forum to recognize Human Rights Day on Friday on behalf of the high school's *Human Relations Committee*, were impressed by Sungaila's story. "She's an amazing woman," said Rachael Somerville, a senior, who said she'd like to find a career in international relations and/or international development. "It's really inspiring to think that one person, one woman could have an effect on the lives of hundreds of other women — in her own small way."