

UW student group raises awareness of Japanese religious persecution

By [Joon Yi](#)

November 22, 2010

When he lived in Japan, Luke Higuchi said he was drugged by his family 21 years ago and later woke up in a mental hospital — all because of his faith. He shared this story on campus Saturday.



Photo by [Tarik Walmsley](#).

SAFE President Luke Higuchi speaks about his experiences in Japan at an event held at the UW campus this past Saturday.

“If I acted crazy, I would stay longer, so I had to give up my faith and tell my parents that I would be a good boy at home,” he recalled.

Higuchi, founder and president of Survivors Against Forced Exit (SAFE), is one of an estimated 4,300 victims of religious persecution directed at members of the Unification Church in Japan. He told his story to students at the Human Rights and Religious Freedom conference hosted by the UW chapter of the National Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles (CARP) on Saturday.

“Being aware is the first responsibility of this issue,” UW CARP president Kayeon Amaral said. “When groups are silent and issues are shut in the dark, that allows the biggest tragedy to take place.”

Amaral first became interested in raising awareness about Japanese persecution after listening to a speech Higuchi gave this past summer in New York. She worked with Chun-Mi Araki, executive secretary of the Washington chapter of the Women’s Federation for World Peace (WFWP), to organize funding for an on-campus event.

“When we heard that [Amaral and Araki] wanted to stand up for the Japanese human rights, we knew we wanted to support them right away,” said Friederike Buczyk, chair of the Washington chapter of WFWP. “Our theme this year is ‘Stand Up for Human Rights and the Dignity of Women,’ so it fit directly with this event.”

While in Washington, D.C., a few months ago, Amaral and Araki also met with Raymond Mas, deputy director of the International Coalition for Religious Freedom, who shared an interest in bringing awareness of the issue to the UW.

With financial support from WFWP, Amaral and Araki were able to work together to bring Higuchi and Mas to this event.

Speakers at the CARP event said that the abuse, starvation and forceful conversion faced by members of the Unification Church in Japan stemmed from familial pressure. When believers announce their faith to their families, the family then contacts ministers of other religions to “deprogram” its son or daughter and force him or her to abandon allegiance to the church, the speakers explained. They said that often the family sends its son or daughter to a mental hospital or locks him or her in a completely sealed-off apartment, with no access to the outside world and bars on the windows.

“The bars are not to keep someone from the outside [out]. They’re there to keep someone inside,” Mas said in his introductory remarks at the conference.

Families pay a large sum of money to ministers for providing this “deprogramming” service. Higuchi estimated that his parents paid his minister more than \$100,000.

Persecution of members of the Unification Church began in 1966, and is allowed to continue in large part because Japanese police and civil courts are hesitant to intervene in what they regard as a family matter, according to presentations and speeches at the event.

At the event, Mas and Friederike encouraged UW students to write to their congressmen to bring attention to the issue and prompt a hearing. Mas and Higuchi are also circulating a petition to raise awareness among representatives, and Higuchi asked students to make their voices heard via social networking sites such as Facebook.

“This is not just a church-related religious issue. It’s a human rights issue,” said freshman Leon Granstrom, vice president of UW CARP. “Revolutions always start with young people, and UW can stop this issue by spreading awareness about it.”