

## Remembering Philip Kara, human rights, and nonviolent resistance

By Kenneth Maes

A cherished member of the Emory community recently passed away, killed in an early morning car accident on his way home from a night shift at Emory's campus.

Philip Kara – known to his comrades as Brother Kara – served Emory as a campus security guard since 2001. And yet his role in strengthening our community extended beyond this position.

At Emory, Kara was a leader in efforts to make known the menace of oil extraction in his homelands in southern Nigeria. Bringing together a diverse group of Emory staff, undergraduate and graduate students, Kara co-founded the Niger Delta Justice Network, which focused on raising awareness and protecting human and environmental rights in the Niger River Delta. He helped organize Emory's 2007 Human Rights Week, inviting a prominent Nigerian activist, the President of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization, to speak at Emory.

Kara's stories personalized injustices and brought us closer to struggles with which we often fail to identify. Every Emory community member has a life story, but we rarely inquire into those of people who are not in our same class, department, or office. We only realize how much we might be missing when we hear narratives like Kara's.

Since 1958, farmlands and fishing waters throughout the Niger Delta have been destroyed in the rush to extract oil and sell it to the highest bidders. Over the years, the vast majority of profits from the oil trade have gone to the executives of a few Western oil companies and Nigerian government officials.

For years, inhabitants of the oil-rich delta witnessed state- and corporate-sponsored destruction of their livelihoods and habitats. They received only nominal compensation for their losses, and their voices were largely unheard by the world. And yet these communities knew that some privileged people were profiting immensely, and that millions of people around the world were using Niger Delta oil to run their cars.

But environmental destruction and disenfranchisement is only part of the story.

With many of his colleagues and neighbors, Kara came to fear imprisonment, torture, and death at the hands of the Nigerian government. His alleged crime was supporting the nonviolent Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People – MOSOP.

MOSOP represented one of many ethnic groups living in the Niger Delta. Its members began acts of civil disobedience in 1990, nonviolently campaigning for equal rights and environmental protection. In 1993, Kara became a university student leader in the organization.

After MOSOP brought a massive protest to the Nigerian capital, the government began to retaliate. MOSOP's well-known leader, Ken Saro-Wiwa, was arrested, tried in what the world recognized as a kangaroo court, and hanged along with 8 other MOSOP organizers on November 10, 1995. Woodruff library owns copies of several films and print materials documenting this tragic history.

In the wake of these events, Kara fled Nigeria along with several hundred other Ogoni people, and lived apart from his wife and children for several years as a refugee in Benin. After gaining entry to the U.S., he finally settled his entire family in Georgia.

Residing outside Atlanta in Loganville, Kara and his beloved wife have raised their five children in Georgia for nearly a decade. They became members of the Emmanuel Seventh Day Adventist Church in Lithonia, restoring important spiritual and community ties. Living in peace and helping to keep the peace five nights a week at Emory, Kara considered his family blessed. "We felt we were in paradise," Kara was quoted as saying in the Emory Wheel in 2006.

But he also blessed Emory with his presence. For it is not often that we have the privilege to meet an individual involved in an international, nonviolent political movement like MOSOP. This was the organization with which Kara identified his political

heritage and destiny. At his memorial service, held at the family's church last Sunday, his coffin bore the blue, gold and green Ogoni/MOSOP flag, created by Ken Saro-Wiwa.

These days, we do not hear much about MOSOP. Why?

One reason is that the group has faced internal strife, precipitated by the violent tactics of the state-corporate power structure. Another is that, today, international media often pay little attention to nonviolent organizations.

In the past few years, we have heard the media sensationalize the violent uprisings of Niger Delta militants, led by bosses who are fed up with decades of exploitation and are eager to get their hands on oil money.

But back in the 1990s, MOSOP's practical philosophy of nonviolent resistance was the greatest threat to the government-backed oil corporations drilling in the Niger Delta.

Kara's death, though tragic, can serve an important purpose. Let it be a potent reminder of the injustices that live on in the Niger Delta and around the world, and of the call to bring these issues center-stage with nonviolent action and resistance. As Kara knew, nonviolent protest is a powerful way to broaden and build dialog for the democratic resolution of injustices.

Kara's colleagues at Emory shared a deep respect for his commitment to strive for more peaceful and secure lives back home in the Niger Delta. If more of us could live and die by the principle of nonviolent struggle for justice, our community, our world, would surely be a better place.