

BRILLIANT, BEAUTIFUL, SELF-EFFACING.  
ONLY A GUNMAN'S BULLETS COULD STOP HER  
FEARLESS PURSUIT OF THE HUMAN RIGHTS CAUSES  
THAT SHAPED HER TRAGICALLY SHORT, REMARKABLE LIFE.

# FERN HOLLAND



Steven Moore, '90 ba Journ

**BY DEBRA LEVY MARTINELLI** ■ **W**hen Fern Holland was a senior in high school in Miami, Oklahoma, she painted a picture of a red rose suspended in air against a background of blue sky meeting the horizon, giving the illusion of space and distance. In the center of the rose was an eye with a solitary tear.

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OU Delta Gamma sorority sisters like Marny Dunlap, center, and LeAnn Harmon, right, knew from Day 1 that Fern Holland, left, was destined to make a difference in the world of inequities that she was determined to challenge.



**“She had an aura like no one else. We knew**

At the time, her sister Vi Holland, now of Oklahoma City, found the painting somewhat disturbing. Years later, however, she discovered that the image that had given her pause represented the essence of Fern’s short but remarkable life.

“When I started doing research for Fern’s headstone, I got on the Internet to find out the universal symbol for world peace,” she says. “I found one Internet site that described the meaning of headstones. It said that a rose signifies beauty, hope and unfailing love; a rose in full bloom represents someone who dies in the prime of life; a red rose represents someone who dies a martyr; an eye symbolizes an all-seeing, all-knowing, ever-present God; and a tear signifies a blessing from God.”

There was no question: This was the image that would be engraved on her sister’s headstone.

**The life of Fern Holland**—brilliant, beautiful, vibrant, kind and single-mindedly driven by the two core beliefs that all people are entitled to the same human rights and that one person can make a difference—was tragically cut short when she and two other civilians were gunned down in Iraq on March 9, 2004. They were returning to their home base in the town of Hillah from Karbala, where she recently had opened one of 18 centers devoted to teaching the Iraqi people the fundamentals of democracy and humanity in government and society.

She was 33 years old.

Fern Holland was no stranger to hardship and death. Her family split up when she was six years old. She and Vi lived with their mother, who worked full time while pursuing bachelor’s and master’s degrees in psychology. Her two older brothers lived with their father; her oldest sister was already out on her own. In

1983 her father died of a heart attack. She lost her mother in 1998.

A 1992 OU graduate who later earned a law degree at the University of Tulsa, Holland could have had a relatively easy life. But even as a child, her sister recalls, Holland knew that was not her destiny. “There were events in our lives that I’m certain shaped Fern, but I don’t think she *became*; I think Fern *was*,” Vi says. “She really was on a different spiritual level than the rest of us. Fern had a purpose in life. She knew there was something larger than herself, something calling her away because there was a need in the world.

“There was something magnetic about Fern, something that instantly drew people to her. I enjoyed experiencing people meeting her for the first time. They may have initially been attracted to her physical beauty, but they immediately became engaged and knew they were meeting someone unlike anyone they’d ever known or would ever know.”

Holland had that effect the minute she stepped on the OU campus in fall 1988. “I met her the first day of rush,” says LeAnn Harmon, of Oklahoma City, who pledged Delta Gamma sorority with Holland that year. “I started talking to her, and we clicked.”

That day, Harmon discovered some of Holland’s most endearing traits. “Fern never was interested in herself. Three minutes into a conversation she’d have it completely turned around, and you’d be talking about you,” she says. “She was sparkly and warm and good natured. She was very peaceful and quiet until she had something to say, and she forgave almost instantly.”

Christine Wagner Cleveland, of Norman, a junior when Holland pledged the sorority, was one of her roommates the first year Holland lived in the house. “If you wanted to find out about



Fern, you had to grill her. She was so humble and never, ever boasted," recalls Cleveland. "She had an aura like no one else. We knew she would be somebody and make a difference in the world."

Holland's Delta Gamma sisters nicknamed her "Fearless Fern." "She wasn't ever afraid of anything," says Harmon. "It was almost like she knew she'd always be fine. She never deliberately put herself in harm's way unless she was helping someone else. At that point, her own safety became secondary. Fern never really had a plan for her life. She did what she felt she should be doing at that time. The signs would be there, and she would follow them."

**Undecided about whether** she wanted to be a physician or a lawyer, Holland took some time off after earning her undergraduate degree in psychology to travel in Europe and Africa, where she volunteered at orphanages and children's hospitals. When she came home, she described in her law school application three- to five-year-old youngsters with whom she worked at a preschool in South Africa. "I looked at those

Tulsa firm of Barkley & Rodolf. Three years later, she was recruited to Conner & Winters, also in Tulsa, where she worked primarily with partner Jim Green. "Fern was an outstanding young lawyer. She was very intelligent and related well to people. And she was a fierce advocate for her clients," says Green. "But after a year at the firm, she said she wanted to work in the area of international human rights. She joined the Peace Corps to explore the possibility of using her law degree and legal skills to work for human rights."

In May 2000, the Peace Corps dispatched Holland to Namibia in southern Africa. She chose to go to a rural area, where she lived in a primitive structure with no running water and no sewer. "She thought it was more interesting to live among the people," says Harmon. Green recalls that Holland walked nine kilometers each day to a road and thumbed a ride the rest of the way to a school where she taught traditional subjects to students as well as the basic tenets of democracy to both students and teachers.

Her stay in Namibia was curtailed by September 11, 2001. "She was very upset about the attack and was unsure what to do,"

**she would be somebody and make a difference in the world."**



Robert Taylor

A few months after her death, a group of Fern Holland's friends gathered at the commemorative bench that honors her near OU's Panhellenic Garden. From left, seated, are Marny Dunlap, Traci Brannon and Sara Vesely; standing, LeAnn Harmon, Christine Wagner Cleveland and Katy Quinn Powers.

Green recalls. "She came back to work with us for three months, then moved to Washington, D.C., where she pursued an L.L.M. degree in international law at Georgetown University Law Center. She didn't finish because she kept taking off to do other things."

Those "other things" included investigating human rights violations in Guinea, West Africa, for the American Refugee Committee

and establishing a legal clinic there funded by the American Red Cross. "She helped find the facilities, hired and trained lawyers, wrote protocols and forms, started the clinic and developed related proposed legislation," he says. "The clinic, which was established in March 2003, was a spectacular success, and ARC wanted her to replicate it."

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**But a few months later,** Holland had an opportunity to go to Iraq. Her first assignment, for a non-government organization was to investigate atrocities committed under the Saddam Hussein regime and gather evidence for war crime prosecutions. "Fern located three survivors who were left for dead in graves and covered by earth bulldozed over them. She preserved their testimony," recalls Green. "She was so effective, the U.S. Agency for International Development took over her contract, and she wrote the majority of the chilling report that was submitted to Congress."

The Coalition Provisional Authority hired Holland as a human rights adviser. Her responsibilities included helping to set up women's centers in south central Iraq to educate Shiite women and political moderates on how to get involved in the political process. Holland started three main centers, the largest and most successful of which opened in Karbala in February 2004. She had promised the women at the center that she would not forget them and that she would return. That is where she had been on March 9.

"Fern felt that the women of Iraq were the greatest chance for

things, organizing a conference that brought together women leaders from all over the country, paying for women to attend a conference in Africa and bringing a group to the United States to learn about democracy.

"She was persistent in cutting through bureaucratic red tape," Green says. "She assisted an elderly Iraqi woman evict a Baathist thug from the Saddam regime who had squatted on her family land and built a house. A court order had been issued to remove him, but the police were afraid to enforce it. Fern was fearless. Two days before she was killed, she went with the police to evict the squatter and bulldoze the house."

Holland also drafted the portion of the Iraqi interim constitution dealing with women's rights and giving women a voice in the new government for the first time. It was signed the day before she was killed.

Numerous awards and a foundation have been established to honor Holland's life and work. Vi Holland and her brother, James Holland, had Green and Stephen Rodolf, another Tulsa attorney and friend, appointed co-trustees of the Fern L. Holland Charitable Foundation, created by family and friends to

## "They're going to stay the course. They write, 'Your

democracy to take root there. They make up 60 percent of the country's population. They've been oppressed for centuries and are the ones who most want change," Vi Holland says. But she emphasizes that her sister's passion was the rights of all humanity. "There's been so much publicity about Fern's work with women's centers and women's rights, but she really didn't become aware of women's rights until she went to Iraq. She always spoke of *human* rights."

Harmon remembers that Holland was the most passionate she had ever seen her when she talked about Iraq. "She'd been trained in bioterrorism and was given a bulletproof vest. The League of Arab Women had taught her how to dress. 'Fern,' I said, 'remember they gave you the bulletproof vest for a reason. Are you going to wear it?' 'If I can,' she answered. I knew she wouldn't. She said the vest interfered with how close she could get to people, and she didn't want them to think she was afraid of them. I thought at the time, 'I'm never going to see her again,' " says Harmon.

The FBI investigation into Holland's death is ongoing. The agency has told Holland's family that she was targeted for assassination, but Vi Holland says her sister did not feel she was being targeted. "Fern was intelligent; she was smart. If she had felt she was targeted, she would have had security; she would have ridden in an armored car; she probably wouldn't have left the compound," Vi says. "At the time of her death, no civilians had been killed. She was the first."

Green, however, believes Holland was targeted for any number of activities that were unpopular with extremists. She helped coalesce the women's rights movement in Iraq by, among other

provide economic and other support to causes for which she gave her life. To date, the foundation, funded solely by individuals, has received more than \$30,000. Some of that money was used to follow through on something Holland started before her death.

In an e-mail to Rodolf dated January 21, 2004, she asked for funds for life-saving surgery for a 17-month-old Hillah boy with a prolapsed colon. His parents could not afford the operation, which would have to be performed in Baghdad.

Rodolf sent her a check for \$1,700, the amount she had requested. But Holland later learned that the surgery could not be performed in Iraq after all. She was searching for a location for the boy's medical treatment when she was killed.

The uncashed check was returned to Holland's family with her personal effects, and Rodolf donated it to the new Fern Holland Foundation. Hilary White, Fern's roommate in Hillah and a Coalition Provisional Authority employee, continued the search for medical treatment and located a surgeon in Amman, Jordan, who indicated the cost of the surgery and related expenses would run \$7,200. After consulting a pediatric surgeon in Tulsa to ensure the medical treatment was appropriate, the foundation covered the entire cost.

"This was an emotional first project for the foundation because we were literally finishing something Fern started that we knew was very important to her," Green says. In mid-June, word came that the surgery had been a success.

Tributes at OU include the Fern L. Holland Award, to be given for the first time at next spring's Campus Awards ceremony, which will recognize a young woman making a differ-



ence in such areas as democracy and human rights. The \$1,000 annual award is sponsored by the Division of Student Affairs and OU's chapter of Delta Gamma, which also has established a humanitarian scholarship in Holland's name. The national sorority honored her at its convention in June in Washington, D.C.

The University also has honored Holland with a campus bench located between Adams and Buchanan halls, facing the newly endowed and christened Panhellenic Garden of Sisterhood. The bench will carry a plaque that reads: "In Loving Memory of FERN HOLLAND, '92 B.A., who, at age 33, gave her life in Iraq on March 9, 2004, while actively championing the cause of peace and human rights for all people."

Katy Quinn Powers, of Norman, who served on the OU Panhellenic board with Holland, remembers her being most content and at peace when she was serving others, especially when she could serve humbly and privately. "Fern could be serving her sorority sisters, fellow students, strangers on the block or needy people around the globe. It didn't matter. She didn't seek or want the spotlight," she says. "Fern would have found all this attention peculiar."

better. On hearing of her death, refugee women and children in Guinea, where Holland established three legal clinics, said in a statement read at a tribute to her: "... Yesterday we were beaten, raped, condemned for prostitution, sexually exploited, without security and always in tears without justice. Today, through the grace of Fern, the women and children of refugee status in Guinea can now say thank God the injustice is over..." The first clinic Holland established, located in Nzerekore, has been re-named the Fern Holland Legal Aid Clinic.

Of course, her memory is still very much alive in Iraq as well. "I still receive e-mails every day from Iraqi women," says Vi Holland. "They tell me that they're going to stay the course. They write, 'Your Fern will not have died in vain. Her life inspires us.'"

"I'm asked by so many people what justice I would want for Fern's death. There isn't any. The people [who killed her] need to be removed from society because they'll commit the act again. But they don't know what they destroyed. For them to fully realize what they destroyed would be punishment enough.

"Fern would not want to be remembered because of her death

## Fern will not have died in vain. Her life inspires us.' "

In fall 2003 Fern Holland conducted a seminar on democracy in Hillah for the Iraqi women she believed could be the key to lasting democracy in that war-torn country.

Nevertheless, the tributes keep coming. This past May, Vital Voices Global Partnership, a nonprofit bipartisan organization dedicated to improving the political, economic and social status of women, honored Holland's memory with its inaugural Fern Holland Award, established to recognize and encourage outstanding women who are advancing women's rights and full participation in their communities. Vi Holland presented the award to Fatima Hassan Mohammed Al-Migdadi, of Iraq, before an audience that included U.S. senators Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.) and Kay Bailey Hutchison (R-TX), newswomen Andrea Mitchell and Gwen Ifill, actress Sally Field and Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan.

Halfway around the world, Fern Holland is loved and remembered by many others whose lives she changed for the

or the way she died," Holland adds. "She would want to be remembered because of her life and the way she lived."

*Debra Levy Martinelli, '00 m jourm, a freelance writer for Sooner Magazine, is communications director for the OU College of Engineering. More information on the Fern L. Holland Charitable Foundation can be found on its Web site at [www.fernholland.org](http://www.fernholland.org).*



Steven Moore, '90 ba jourm