ROBERT H. KIRSCHNER, M.D.
MEMORIAL HUMAN RIGHTS LECTURE

House of Secrets: The Place of Storytelling in Human Rights
Alex Kotlowitz

Thursday, June 5, 2008 at 7 p.m.
International House, Assembly Hall
University of Chicago
1414 E. 59th Street

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A special thanks to the University of Chicago Development staff Maureen Loughnane-Colligan and Paul Seeley for their dedication to the Human Rights Program. Thanks as well to the Center for International Studies staff for all of their support: Steven W. Wilkinson, Irving Birkner, Evalyn Tennant, Vera Beard, Tom Gaulkin, Shayna Plaut, and Jamie Bender.
This lecture series honors the life and work of Dr. Robert Kirschner. The Kirschner family, together with friends and colleagues of Robert Kirschner, have generously established a fund in his name to support this lecture series and student internships in the Human Rights Program.

Dr. Robert Kirschner, M.D., was an internationally recognized authority on forensic pathology, human rights violations, police brutality, torture and child abuse and an outspoken opponent of the death penalty. He was a Clinical Associate in the Departments of Pathology and Pediatrics at the University of Chicago and a founding member of the Human Rights Program. Kirschner's human rights activities took him to more than a dozen foreign countries in Central and South America, Europe, the Middle East and Africa, where torture, extra-judicial executions and mass killings had occurred. He was a forensic consultant to the United Nations International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and Rwanda, and was involved in the exhumation of mass graves in those countries. He worked with the U.N. Truth Commission in El Salvador, the Inter-American Court for Human Rights and other international human rights associations. He was also a key contributor to the development of the United Nations Manual on the Effective Investigation and Documentation of Torture, informally known as the “Istanbul Protocol” -- the first such standards to be developed for international use. Kirschner also devoted considerable effort to the detection and prevention of child abuse, especially shaken baby syndrome. He lectured and wrote textbook chapters on the diagnosis and pathology of child abuse. In 1985 Kirschner joined a team pulled together by the American Association for the Advancement of Science to investigate skeletal remains found after the “disappearance” of more than 20,000 people during the previous military regime in Argentina. Kirschner and the team collected evidence of widespread murder and torture, identified many of the bodies, and trained Argentine students in the techniques of forensic science. Their evidence helped convict nine former junta members of human rights violations. The trip also left Kirschner hooked on human rights work. In 1987 and 1988, as a volunteer for Physicians for Human Rights, he went to Kenya to investigate deaths in police custody -- and wound up briefly in police custody himself. Trips soon followed to Czechoslovakia, and to Israel and the West Bank, where he worked to assure independent observers at autopsies of Palestinians who died in Israeli custody. In 1989, he went to South Korea for a death-in-custody case, then to El Salvador to investigate the murders of several Jesuit priests. From 1985 to 2000, he was involved in 36 international human rights missions at the request of PHR, the Organization of American States, the United Nations or the AAAS. In 1997, he was a key member of the faculty committee which founded the University of Chicago Human Rights Program.

In addition to his professional work, Dr. Kirschner loved the arts and was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. He died of cancer in September 2002. He was survived by his wife Dr. Barbara Kirschner, Professor of Pediatrics at the University of Chicago, his sons Joshua, Daniel and Benjamin, his daughter-in-law Emily, his grandchildren Alanna, Madeleine and Zach, his brother Richard Kirschner, and his sister Joanne Oppenheimer.