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Hesperian Executive Director Receives Ruth Roemer Award for Social Justice

Sarah Shannon honored for increasing access to health information and empowering communities to organize for improved health conditions

Berkeley, Calif. – Sarah Shannon, Hesperian Health Guides executive director, has been awarded the Ruth Roemer Social Justice Leadership Award, presented by the UCLA Fielding School of Public Health.

Shannon accepted the award during the sixth Annual Ruth Roemer Social Justice Symposium, held April 8, 2015, at The California Endowment Conference Center in Los Angeles. The award is presented to an individual who has shown commitment to social justice issues through outstanding service and support of vulnerable populations and whose work is replicable and scalable.

“One aspect of Ruth’s amazing career that resonates for me was her insistence on a broad view of public health – her determination to work across disciplines and to do so in a way that addresses the underlying social and economic conditions that create poor health,” Shannon said in her acceptance speech.

“My experience is that people, especially those who are marginalized, actually see those connections quite clearly – it is part of their lived experience. And we can learn a lot from them,” she added.

The award is named in honor of the late Ruth Roemer, JD, a champion of health equity and social justice. A 1939 graduate of Cornell Law School, Roemer served as a member of the Fielding School’s faculty for more than four decades. She used the law to protect and promote health and made lasting contributions to the fields of reproductive health services, environmental health, tobacco control and the organization of health services.

“Sarah Shannon has lots in common with Ruth Roemer,” Davida Coady, MD, MPH, who knew Roemer as a colleague and friend, said in her introductory remarks. “She sees the big picture, she has very similar values, and she doesn’t run from the tough issues. She works incredibly hard and accomplishes more in a day than anyone I know.”

Shannon became Hesperian’s executive director in 1996, after spending 15 years working on health and development issues in war-ravaged Central America. She has led Hesperian’s work with grassroots groups in the creation of health materials on such topics as women’s health, disability, child development, primary care, environmental health, and more. These resources have been translated into more than 80 languages and distributed worldwide.

Her new book, *Health Actions for Women: Practical Strategies to Mobilize for Change*, published in 2015, provides tools and activities that challenge violence against women, promote strategies for better sexual health, improve access to family planning, and support healthy pregnancies and safe births. It

has received praise from numerous health advocates, including Cecile Richards, Paul Farmer and Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchu Tum.

Shannon has also overseen the development of Hesperian's Digital Commons Initiative, which includes a searchable HealthWiki available in 16 languages that is visited daily by more than 25,000 people.

In support of Shannon's nomination for the award, the Rev. David Dolan, who had Ruth Roemer as a professor during his graduate studies at UCLA, wrote: "Sarah has expanded the boundaries of what is considered primary healthcare by asking the question: *Primary for whom?*"

He noted that Shannon's commitment to addressing the underlying social and cultural barriers to women's health are reflected in other Hesperian resources that include workers' rights and environmental justice in a primary healthcare approach.

"All of Hesperian's efforts and publications in these areas have deeply influenced the practice of primary healthcare in international health," wrote Dolan, "and more importantly, continue to provide people organizing to improve community health with effective tools to challenge these conditions."

Shannon is a founding member of the Peoples Health Movement and has served several terms on its Global Steering Council. She lives in Berkeley with her family.

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About Hesperian Health Guides | hesperian.org

Hesperian Health Guides is a nonprofit organization dedicated to developing low-literacy health content in numerous formats and languages. We strive to support communities as they take action to improve their health and address underlying causes of poor health.

Beginning with the development of the classic *Where There Is No Doctor* in the mountains of Mexico in the early 1970s, Hesperian has developed and distributed health materials in more than 80 languages and in 221 countries and territories. Topics include primary care, women's health, early childhood development, environmental health, workplace health and safety, and HIV/AIDS.

Information on the newest book, *Health Actions for Women*, is available here:
<http://hesperian.org/health-actions-for-women>