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# Think Dignity leader has history of fighting for social justice



Emily Howe, shown in a storage center used by homeless people on 16th Street in San Diego, is the new executive director of Think Dignity, a nonprofit that operates the center and several other programs for the homeless. (Howard Lipin)

By **Gary Warth**

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**E**mily Howe is still new at her job, but she's on familiar ground as the new executive director of Think Dignity, a San Diego organization that provides services for people living on the street.

"I've always been motivated by public interest, having a heart for underrepresented groups and vulnerable populations," said Howe, who took over the helm of the nonprofit last month.

She replaced Anne Rios, who left in November to work for Al Otro Lado, a binational legal services organization serving refugees and asylum-seekers in Tijuana and San Diego.

Howe, who earned a law degree from the University of San Diego in 2011, also has advocated for refugees and said that as a South Korean who grew up in the northeast United States, she had identified with underrepresented groups much of her life.

“It wasn’t until I moved to San Diego that I saw people who looked like me,” she said.

The nonprofit [Think Dignity](#), which began in 2006 as Girls Think Tank, operates several services for homeless people in San Diego, including a storage center for their belongings, mobile showers, a legal clinic for homeless youth, a Street Boutique for women and a mobile Street Cafe that provides nutritious food.

Howe has dedicated much of her life to working for social causes, a motivation she said may be in her blood.

“My whole family has served in some type of service,” she said.

Adopted as a baby from South Korea, Howe said her father was an attorney and her mother’s family roots can be traced back to the American Revolution.

Looking into her family’s roots, Howe also discovered that her great aunt served in the Army during World War II and was a [Red Cross](#) staff member, a grandfather was a prisoner of war in World War II, an uncle served in Vietnam and a great-great grandfather was a police chief in Massachusetts.

“It was so interesting because it almost felt like some universal sense of purpose to why I’ve had some experiences,” she said.

Howe’s interest in public service was sparked in 1998 as a high school intern for Rep. [Jim McGovern](#), a Democrat who represents a congressional district in Massachusetts.

“He had raised awareness about human rights issues in El Salvador, and I really gained an interest in human rights advocacy,” she said.

Partly inspired by her family’s history of service, Howe joined the Peace Corps after college and served as a health program manager in Benin, West Africa, from 2005 to 2007.

While abroad, she took the Law School Admission Test and was accepted at a school back home. Once returning to the cold Northeastern winter, however, Howe said, she began to have second thoughts.

She headed west and began a master’s program in public administration at Middlebury Institute in Monterey. While there, she became involved with Global Majority, an international conflict-resolution organization created by one of her professors.

She put her master’s pursuit on hold after less than a year in the program after earning a scholarship and

being accepted at USD.

While at the university, Howe also worked on the Distinguished Lecture Series at the Joan B. Kroc Institute for Peace, helping bring the Dalai Lama and a representative of the United Nations' General Assembly to campus.

After earning her degree, Howe worked for a law firm and for a legal assistance program in City Heights. She also was active in the campaign to lift the cap on the number of taxi permits in the city and the campaign to provide earned sick leave for part-time workers.

In a cause that felt closer to home, Howe most recently worked as an advocate for people born in foreign lands who were adopted by American parents.

Some adult adoptees in that situation are at risk of being deported because they never acquired citizenship, she said.

“It’s one of those things that should be such a simple fix,” she said. “If children of U.S. citizen parents are not protected, then how is anyone protected?”

Looking ahead, Howe she is excited about working with the Think Dignity staff, which includes several new faces, as well as newly elected officials on the San Diego City Council and county Board of Supervisors.

She only recently discovered some of the programs at Think Dignity, which in April will introduce a new career fair.

“I love the mission of Think Dignity,” she said. “‘To inspire, empower and organize our San Diego community to advance basic dignity for those living on the streets.’ Each of us have basic dignity and basic human needs. All of our clientele have stories and sorrows and hearts and aspirations.”

**[gary.warth@sduniontribune.com](mailto:gary.warth@sduniontribune.com)**

**Twitter: @GaryWarthUT**

**760-529-4939**

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