



COURTESY SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND

SALLY CHIN (LEFT) IS WORKING ON CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF CONGO FOR THE ORGANIZATION SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND, WHICH IS LED BY SHAMIL IDRIS. IDRIS IS SHOWN (BELOW RIGHT) IN BURUNDI, WHERE HE HAS WORKED TO REBUILD TRUST AFTER A CIVIL WAR.

CREATIVE APPROACHES TO peace

SALLY CHIN '95 AND SHAMIL IDRIS '94 ARE COMMITTED TO THE SEARCH FOR COMMON GROUND.

By Elizabeth Redden '05

The U.S. National Wrestling Team—those five words bring forth a variety of images: sweaty men rolling around on big blue mats, for one. Perhaps the familiar high school wrestling cheer: “Wrestle, wrestle, twist ‘em like a pretzel.” Red, white, and blue spandex uniforms. But to imagine the national wrestling team as a prime resource for seeking more open diplomatic relations with Iran—that takes some creativity.

The Search for Common Ground (SFCG), an international conflict-resolution organization with almost 400 staff members and offices in 13 different nations, seeks such creative and nontraditional solutions to reconciling international and domestic conflicts all over the world. Shamil Idriss, chief operating officer (COO) for SFCG, explains that traditional methods of conflict mediation compose only 5 percent of the kind of work SFCG does; the other 95 percent is devoted to finding more creative solutions to the world’s problems. “It’s

not just mediation and negotiation. SFCG is almost like an entrepreneurial business, except instead of looking for creative ways to make money, we’re looking for creative ways to enhance social co-

hesion,” says Idriss. These include creating multiethnic kindergartens in Macedonia; running programs for youths with histories embattled by ethnic violence in Burundi; and, more generally, using music, sports, and mass media as tools to bring people of different backgrounds and political positions together.

For instance, take the Iran-American wrestling tournament, a project Idriss worked on directly. U.S.-Iranian relations, Idriss explains, have been relatively sparse since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. In 1998, some of his colleagues noticed a thaw in diplomatic tensions and sought a way to use that as an opportunity to foster greater communication and understanding between the two nations. They hit on the idea of an American-Iranian wrestling tournament, explaining that in Iran, wrestling is of great cultural significance.

“It’s sort of like baseball here,” says Idriss. The wrestling tournament was, Idriss explains, an ice-breaking exchange that he and his colleagues expanded on by fostering further exchanges among scientists, academics, theologians, filmmakers, and others. Although Idriss says diplomatic progress has been relatively slow in the wake of recent events, he remains confident that, “If there were to be an opening again, the kind of work SFCG has been doing could open the door to new possibilities for understanding.”

SFCG employs such nontraditional solutions from a political to a grassroots level. Sally Chin, for instance, has been working in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) since April 2002. As program manager for SFCG’s newly opened branch office there, Chin has worked on a variety of issues surrounding conflict resolution and the Inter-Congolese Dialogue, a fundamental portion of that country’s peace process. Chin and her SFCG co-workers have attempted to foster greater discussion of the dialogue by producing radio discussion pro-



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