

## Alumna in Action — July 2005

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**Roberta Cohen '60**, who received the 2005 Distinguished Alumna Award at reunion 2005, says a quote from Margaret Mead '23, prior winner of the Distinguished Alumna Award, has always been a great guide and inspiration to her. "She said, 'Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has,'" Cohen reflects. "I've always thought it is important to do something with your knowledge to make a difference."

In her efforts to raise international awareness of human rights issues and the plight of internally displaced persons—those forcibly uprooted inside their own countries as a result of civil wars and ethnic strife—Cohen played a significant role in getting appointed a special representative of the U.N. secretary-general on

internally displaced persons and in producing together with Francis Deng, representative of the United Nations secretary-general on internally displaced persons from 1992 to 2004, the first major study about the 25 million persons uprooted in more than 40 countries. Refugees who cross borders receive aid from an international system of protection and assistance, "but there was no attention being paid to people who are caught up in rampages of violence, assaults, and starvation in their own countries," says Cohen. She has worked to put the issue on the international agenda through writing articles, books, and op-eds that promote awareness; speaking in a variety of international fora; organizing an international consultative process with Deng to help define internally displaced persons and to develop human rights standards applicable to them; advocating with governments and international organizations; and working with groups and local organizations in their own countries to build their capacity.

"I have always had a great attraction to the rest of the world," she says. After studying government and history at Barnard, she earned her master's in international relations at Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. "I didn't want to just pursue the academic direction; I wanted to do both scholarship and practical applications. It's a big world so there's a lot of work."

Now a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, a leading think tank based in Washington, D.C., Cohen also serves as co-director of The Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement and as principal adviser to the representative of the United Nations secretary-general on the human Rights of internally displaced persons.

"When I began focusing on internally displaced persons in 1989, I had an empty desk; nothing was being written on the subject," she says. "I can barely get into my office now. Over the past 15 years this issue has come onto the international agenda in a big way—there is attention and money—and we played a role in getting it there."