

# My Dinner with Thor

By Julia M. Klein

## Julia! It's Thor!

I was starting to get used to the phone calls. The line would ring, usually on the cusp of evening, and it would be Thor L. Halvorssen '66 '69 filling me in on his latest crisis or coup. The biggest mystery would be where he was calling from. Would it be Montreal, where one of his documentaries was premiering at an international film festival? Or New York, where his Human Rights Foundation is based? Perhaps Los Angeles, where he's been overseeing a film based on a Kurt Vonnegut short story and huddling with such stars as Jon Voight and Gary Sinise?

Lately, though, Halvorssen has been telephoning from his native Caracas, Venezuela, the focus of much of his human-rights work. A vocal opponent of President Hugo Chávez's regime, he called one January day to report jubilantly on the freeing of a Venezuelan political prisoner whose case the Human Rights Foundation had championed. Then came a sober call about the shooting of the foundation's Venezuelan director of research, former Judge Monica Fernandez. Halvorssen was supposed to have been with her at the time; he ended up holding a vigil at her hospital bed.

The purpose of today's call, however, is to put me in touch with his Hollywood "buddy" Sinise. "I'm having lunch right now with the former president of Venezuela, Ramón Velásquez," Halvorssen informs me by way of a greeting. "But I told him I had to call you because I knew you were on a deadline."

**All along, frankly, I've been wondering how he does it**—how he manages his relentlessly peripatetic, highly networked, multi-tasking existence. The charm is clearly part of it, along with a striking precocity and seemingly boundless energy and self-confidence. In what he calls his "day job," Halvorssen, 32, is the founder and president of the Human Rights Foundation, which runs undercover missions to Cuba and adopts "prisoners of conscience" throughout Latin America. But Halvorssen is also a movie producer and "chief inspirational officer" of the Moving Picture Institute, a film company he founded that specializes in anti-Communist, libertarian, and conservative documentaries. The two pursuits—film and human-rights advocacy—are synergistic. Says Halvorssen, who describes himself as a "classical liberal," heavily influenced by John Stuart Mill: "Everything in culture has a political message of sorts: You either affirm freedom as a value, or you don't."

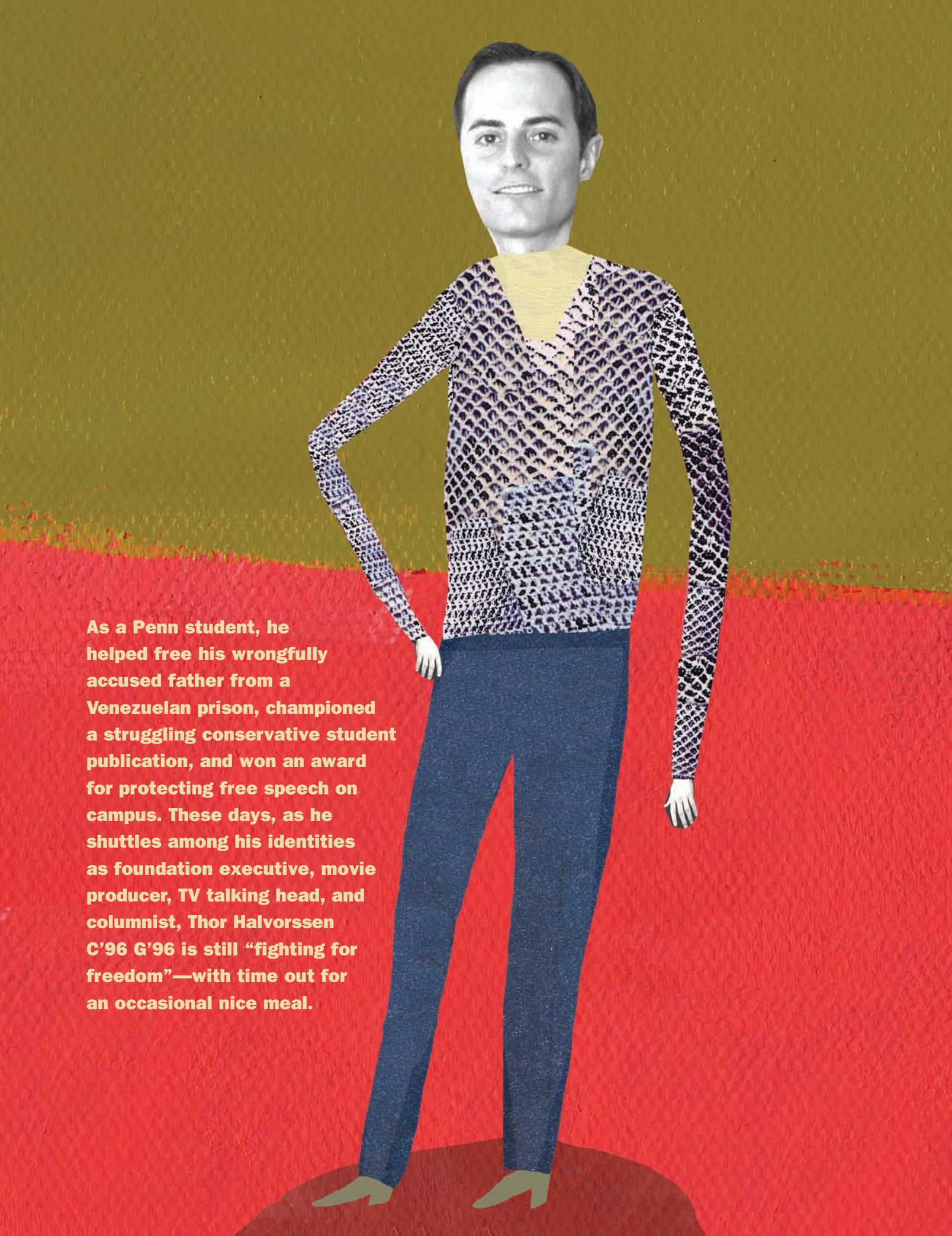
The central thread in Halvorssen's career has been his advocacy of freedom from tyranny, whether it's the life-threatening or merely mind-numbing sort. Several MPI films (*Hammer & Tickle*, *The Singing Revolution*, *Freedom's Fury*) focus on East European efforts to throw off Communist rule, while *Indoctrinate U* entertainingly assaults what writer/director Evan Coyne Maloney sees as the ongoing scourge of left-wing "political correctness" on campus. "What surprises me," Halvorssen says, "is that other people

aren't interested in these issues. It's the air we breathe. It's the most important thing there is."

As a freshman at Penn, Halvorssen organized a successful international campaign to secure the release from prison of his father, Thor Halvorssen W'66 WG'69, a businessman and Venezuela's former anti-drug czar who had been unjustly accused of involvement in a bomb plot. "My father was going to die. They were going to kill him," Halvorssen says. "The moment we raised our voices and started screaming bloody murder they realized they can't get away with it." The case was chronicled in detail in a November 1994 *Gazette* article. (Visit [www.upenn.edu/gazette](http://www.upenn.edu/gazette) to download a PDF.)

In 1999, Halvorssen served as the founding executive director and, later, chief executive officer of the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), best known for challenging university speech codes ["Gazetteer," Jan/Feb 2000]. He stepped down in 2004 and started the Human Rights Foundation two years later.

Halvorssen combines a dizzying capacity for work with a knack for endearing himself to powerful people across the political spectrum. Rob Pfaltzgraff, executive director of the Human Rights Foundation, calls his boss "a force of nature." In pursuit of his ideals, Halvorssen travels constantly—140,000 air miles in 2007, he says—and maintains apartments in Manhattan, Los Angeles, and Miami. En route, he turns out ele-



**As a Penn student, he helped free his wrongfully accused father from a Venezuelan prison, championed a struggling conservative student publication, and won an award for protecting free speech on campus. These days, as he shuttles among his identities as foundation executive, movie producer, TV talking head, and columnist, Thor Halvorssen C'96 G'96 is still “fighting for freedom”—with time out for an occasional nice meal.**

gantly written commentary pieces on his BlackBerry. It's a career on speed—though Halvorssen eschews even caffeine.

He does nothing halfway. Asked for a few people who can talk about him, Halvorssen supplies a laundry list of famous names. The well-known pollster Frank Luntz '84 ["All Things Ornamental," July/Aug 2007] befriended Halvorssen partly by accident: Luntz accepted his invitation to meet a Venezuelan presidential candidate in New York—but only because he thought Thor was a congressional aide he knew. When he realized his mistake, he says he thought: "What could this kid ever do for my business?"

Now, he raves, "Thor is Bill Gates circa 1978."

"What makes him unique," continues Luntz, is "a combination of charm, brilliance, intensity, and youthful exuberance." Halvorssen, he says, is "at the nexus of business, politics, and Hollywood," with "the ability to break out in all of them."

Edwin Meese '3d, a U.S. Attorney General under Ronald Reagan now affiliated with the Heritage Foundation, calls Halvorssen "one of the most innovative and entrepreneurial young people on philosophical issues that I know." Faith Whittlesey, former U.S. ambassador to Switzerland and chair of the American Swiss Foundation, describes him as "very articulate and very passionate about his beliefs." She notes that "he's also very deferential to people who might hold another point of view."

"I think Thor is an honest person," says Michele Goldfarb, director of the Penn Women's Center, "and he's a very hard person to categorize, which I like about him. I think his politics are very different from mine, but he was always interested in a well-grounded argument, not just polemic." The two met during Halvorssen's undergraduate years, when she ran what is now the Office of Student Conduct and he was a student adviser. "He was very challenging of adults and authority, but in a way that was very well thought out," she says. They still argue amicably over lunch.

Thanks in part to their friendship, *Indoctrinate U* is scheduled to have its Philadelphia premiere this semester at the Women's Center, in tandem with a panel discussion. The pairing is rife with irony, since the film mocks the concept of a women's center—not to mention

what it views as the academy's pervasive intolerance of conservative dissent.

Goldfarb describes the film as "a little heavy-handed," but adds that it "raised incredibly important points." While she says she doesn't believe that the university is the "greatest offender" when it comes to intolerance, "these are conversations that need to be had, and we shouldn't shy away from them—we should welcome them."

**W**hen I arrive at The Ginger Man to meet Halvorssen in person for the first time, the midtown Manhattan bar is bursting with holiday throngs, and the din is deafening. Amidst the investment bankers, I'm looking for the Human Rights Foundation's Christmas party, which turns out to be about eight staffers, looking impossibly young, huddled around a table with a couple of plates of appetizers. Halvorssen, however, is nowhere to be found.

Rain, it turns out, had delayed his shuttle flight from Washington. Running late, he is headed straight for the Fox News studios where, along with chess champion-turned-Russian-political-dissident Garry Kasparov, he is slated to be a talking head. I am supposed to be there, too, so I grab a cab and head uptown to intersect him. From the taxi, I call to say I am on my way, only to be informed of another change in plans: The traffic is bad, so he will be doing the interview by phone, from his chauffeured car. Whereupon I beg my disgruntled taxi driver to pull over, overpay him for the six-block ride, and retrace my steps through the drizzle.

After another call, Halvorssen finally swoops down on me in the plush lobby of the Carlton Hotel. He is a bit short, model-handsome, with perfect cheekbones and a gentlemanly mien. He points out that he is actually early for dinner. He has booked what he calls his "usual table" in the café at Country, with a relatively affordable bistro menu. Unfortunately, the café is filled with holiday revelers, so we retreat upstairs to the main dining room, a fantasia of candlelight, white tablecloths, and Tiffany glass.

"I like to have some stability in my life," explains Halvorssen, "and I can usually control where I eat and what I

eat. Today is a normal day: I pulled an all-nighter last night to finish work, left my office at around 7 a.m., got home, showered, shaved, left my home for JFK, [flew to] Washington, got off the plane, [went] straight to meet the Colombian ambassador," before returning to New York. He doesn't even look tired. "There's enough drama and enough variety in my life," he says, "that I kind of like to have the same food."

That won't be happening tonight. We'll have to make do with the \$105 per person four-course prix-fixe menu—or a *really* expensive truffle menu. Halvorssen orders a martini "half Bombay Sapphire, half Grey Goose, straight up" while we contemplate our options.

*Por favor, caballero, amigo...*

Halvorssen resorts to his native Spanish to try to get the waiter's attention. Later, he will speak flawless French to the sommelier, who, in appreciation, will pour us each free glasses of Muscat de Beaune de Venise. But first we have to get past the *amuse-bouche*. "You like frog's legs? I did not think that we'd be eating frog's legs here tonight," he says. "This is the bone. Don't eat the bone."

Halvorssen's cosmopolitanism reflects his aristocratic background. His maternal great-great-great-grandfather was Cristóbal Mendoza, the first president of Venezuela and the author of its Declaration of Independence. On his mother's side, he is also related to Simón Bolívar, the great South American liberator and Venezuela's second president—as well as the subject of Halvorssen's master's thesis. On his father's side, Halvorssen is also well-connected: His late grandfather, Oestein Halvorssen, was the Norwegian consul to Venezuela.

Though his family has extensive business interests in Venezuela, Halvorssen says he was raised in "a culture of thrift." When he was 12, his parents divorced, and his mother moved to London. Halvorssen, who acquired his perfect English in British schools in Venezuela, attended secondary schools in Switzerland and England, where he liked "the discipline and the rigor" and participated in a march to demand Nelson Mandela's release from prison.

Penn was a family tradition (16 degrees all told) started by his maternal great-grandfather, who attended

the University's dental school, and continued by Halvorssen's father and his uncle, Olaf ["Alumni Profiles," July/Aug 2007], who reportedly dated Candice Bergen CW'67 Hon'92 here. "I didn't want to go to the same school" at first, says Halvorssen, "but when I visited the campus I fell in love with it: the diversity of buildings, the architecture. Penn had this funky soul."

Kevin Harper C'98 W'98 WG'08, who met Halvorssen in the Psi Upsilon fraternity, remembers him as "intensely genuine," and notes that his intensity "freaks people out sometimes." Harper, from a working-class background, says that Halvorssen took him under his wing and even helped him buy a suit. "He was really a champion of the oppressed," says Harper, now a portfolio manager at Drexel Hamilton Asset Management, as well as MPI's vice president and a member of its board of directors. "Thor rescued his father as a freshman and just didn't take 'no' for an answer. It's one of his defining characteristics."

Halvorssen's four years at Penn included the "water buffalo incident" of 1993 and its aftermath, and he became enmeshed in his share of the era's controversies. He says that he didn't set out to be a free-speech advocate at Penn. But in British schools, "the very concept that an idea can be banned is out of the question. So I get to Penn and suddenly you can't discuss certain things because of political correctness? I thought to myself, 'This is really bizarre.'"

He says that the trigger for his involvement was the murder of his mathematics teacher, Al-Moez Alimohamed, which set in high relief a crime problem in West Philadelphia that he believed the University was reluctant to address. In September 1994, Halvorssen wrote a bristling guest commentary for *The Daily Pennsylvanian* that concluded by suggesting that the University "at least be fair to prospective students and their parents and stamp the next set of applications with a warning: 'It may be hazardous to your health to attend Penn, it may be deadly to live in West Philadelphia.'"

The piece inspired the editor of *The Red & Blue* student magazine to recruit him, and he eventually took over the struggling conservative publication as editor. When the magazine was evicted

from its space in Irvine Auditorium and back issues were trashed—either a "deliberate and malicious attempt at sabotaging *The Red & Blue*," as Halvorssen told the *DP* at the time, or because the magazine hadn't kept up with the paperwork required to save the space (according to the Office of Student Life)—Halvorssen demanded a full-scale investigation. When the Student Activities Council rescinded recognition and funding for the publication over its

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general rightward political slant and one particularly controversial article about Haiti, Halvorssen led the fight for its restoration. (He also put out an issue without SAC funding, paid for, he said at the time, by "lovers of liberty.") The controversy would help lead to a change in SAC rules banning funding decisions based on a student group's politics.

In time, Halvorssen says, *The Red & Blue* "went from being a magazine that nobody wanted to read to being the most popular magazine on campus. When the head of the gay and lesbian association came out as a Republican, he wrote his essay in our magazine. Talk about diversity: Whereas Penn had a wonderful diversity of color and sexuality and race and nationalities, it was kind of lacking in diversity of opinion—and we provided it."

In four years, Halvorssen earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in history and political science, graduating magna cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa. On Ivy Day, then-President Judith Rodin CW'66 Hon'04 (whose administration had supported *The Red & Blue*'s position in the SAC funding matter on free-speech grounds) presented him with the Sol Feinstone Award for Protecting Student Speech.

(Not that it was all politics all the time for Halvorssen at Penn: Another *DP* article from 1994 describes the introductory meeting of the Penn Cigar Club, including several quotes from "Club President and College sophomore Thor Halvorssen.")

Halvorssen's first post-graduation job, on Wall Street, lasted exactly three days. "I realized ... that this was not what I want to do with my life," he says. Halvorssen recalls that the idea for FIRE, which would defend civil liberties at universities, developed over a bottle of wine with Dr. Alan Charles Kors, now the George H. Walker Endowed Term Professor of History at Penn and the co-author, with Harvey A. Silverglate, of *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America's Campuses* (1998).

As FIRE's executive director, Halvorssen lived in Washington Square—"my commute was 60 seconds"—and used to pass the square's Revolutionary War Tomb of the Unknown Soldier on the way to the office. Behind the statue of George Washington, he says, was an inscription reading: "Freedom is a light for which many men have died in darkness," reminding him daily of the struggle waged "against tyranny, so that we could be free."

Now, he says, "I have the extraordinary luxury of fighting for freedom in a country where you're not going to get arrested or taken away in the middle of the night for standing up for human freedom. And that's really remarkable. People say, 'Faculty members who do this are so courageous, or students.' No, no, students in Tiananmen Square—they're courageous. Students in Venezuela marching against Chávez—they're courageous. Students in Cuba are courageous ... Standing up and fighting for freedom in the United States does *not* take courage. What surprises me is that more people aren't doing it."

Over time, Halvorssen came to see "defending [college] students' rights while there were people in Venezuela being shot

for disagreeing with the government” as “a little absurd.” One of those people was his own mother, whose shooting at a 2004 protest rally he watched, horrified, on television. “She was wounded by a high-powered handgun with hollow-tipped bullets and was told she would never be able to walk again,” says Halvorssen—a forecast that happily proved inaccurate. The protesters had been requesting that former U.S. President Jimmy Carter stay in Venezuela to monitor election results in the wake of fraud allegations. “When one of the people you love the most in the whole world is hit by an assassin’s bullet, it’s a strong reminder why it’s so important to fight for individual rights. My mother was lucky—she survived,” Halvorssen says. “The woman next to her left several orphaned children.”

Existing human-rights organizations, he says, seemed to be “much more obsessed with the United States than with countries where human rights are basically going down the drain.” The Human Rights Foundation was launched in 2006 with Halvorssen as president and Elie Wiesel as one of its board members.

“In that time,” says Halvorssen, “we’ve established an office in Bolivia, an on-the-ground undercover mission in Cuba.” The mission involves smuggling in educational and humanitarian supplies—books, movies, and medicine. “We’ve written guides on human rights. We’ve done a movie on slavery in the Dominican Republic—pretty powerful stuff. We’ve defended individuals in Bolivia and Venezuela. We got a guy released from prison in Bolivia. We’ve established campus chapters—we’ve been busy.”

On Christmas Eve, the HRF helped secure the release of a Venezuelan political prisoner, Francisco Usón, a retired army general and former cabinet minister who had been jailed for what the foundation said was “a statement showing concern for human rights.” Then, about two weeks later, came the shooting of Fernández—evidence, Halvorssen says bluntly, of “the high price of crossing Hugo Chávez and the Venezuelan government.” In December, Chávez lost a referendum in which he sought to become president for life, but Halvorssen notes that “to this day, there is no vote tally.”

Another recent HRF project is *The Sugar Babies*, a documentary written,

directed, and produced by Amy Serrano. It details the collusion of sugar planters and the Dominican government in trafficking Haitian sugarcane workers and the desperate poverty in which the workers live. The film, which has been the subject of protests and alleged bribery attempts by the Dominican government, is being shown at film festivals, and Serrano says that she is “very grateful” for the Human Rights Foundation’s financial support.

Even as he was getting the foundation off the ground, Halvorssen was creating the Moving Picture Institute because “I didn’t want someone else to build MPI before I did.” While he has no official position at the institute, he has been a producer on several MPI films. *Hammer & Tickle* uses animation to detail the history of humor under Communism. *The Singing Revolution* is a moving depiction of how music helped the Estonians launch their democratic revolution, while *Freedom’s Fury* (whose producers also include Quentin Tarantino and Lucy Liu) focuses on the bloody Olympic battle between the Soviet and Hungarian water polo teams after the failed Hungarian Revolution,

For *Indoctrinate U*, Halvorssen matched Maloney with an editor, Chandler Tuttle, who added professional polish. “He’s the guy who understood not only what we were looking for, but knew exactly the right person to provide it,” Maloney says. And MPI has been instrumental in promoting the film, the director adds. A website ([www.indoctrinate-u.com](http://www.indoctrinate-u.com)) invites potential viewers to vote for a screening in their city of choice.

Halvorssen spent much of the fall over-seeing a short narrative film, *Harrison Bergeron*, based on a Kurt Vonnegut story and directed by Tuttle—his toughest project yet, he says. “It’s about a future in which if you are good at anything, you have to be handicapped,” he explains. Only Harrison Bergeron—“a true Adonis, a genius”—resists and “delivers a speech about excellence and achievement, and most importantly about individualism.” The story attracted him with its tale of “the danger posed by a rogue state, and the willingness that heroes have to die for what they believe in.”

While the privately funded Human Rights Foundation and MPI are separate entities, Halvorssen is their point of convergence. So it’s not surprising

that the foundation is spiriting into Cuba anti-Communist MPI movies, dubbed in Spanish, along with such classic and contemporary films as *Animal Farm*, *Ninotchka*, *The Lives of Others*, *Braveheart*, *Before Night Falls*, and even Woody Allen’s comedy, *Bananas*—all “movies that inspire people about human freedom.” Along with the DVDs, says Halvorssen, “we are smuggling in DVD players, and we’re setting up underground film clubs to watch the films.”

Later this year, Halvorssen says, the Human Rights Foundation, with the support of the John Templeton Foundation, is planning a conference in Oslo, Norway, involving “all of the main political prisoners that are still alive that have reached legendary status”—such figures as Wiesel and Nelson Mandela. The goal is to formulate a definition of human rights, he says, and also “to discuss the nobility of the human spirit.”

“I think you need to live your life as if you were a free person,” Halvorssen says. “You don’t have a say in what historical moment you are born into, but you do determine how you’ll respond to that historical moment. My father’s an inspiration, my mother, my grandfather. My first cousin was the mayor of Caracas, who has suffered eight assassination attempts. This has been going on in generations of my family.”

By now, we’ve finished the truffled risotto, the lobster, the exquisite bass fillets and chicken and our different chocolate desserts. To our horror, the waiter wheels out a cart loaded with chocolate truffles, meringues, and other candies, clearly too much of a good thing. We fill our plates.

After Penn, “I was expecting to go back home,” Halvorssen says. “Things didn’t turn out that way. I fell in love with the American experiment. I love, love, love this country: what it means and what it represents. It has flaws. The remarkable thing about this country is that it recognizes its flaws. This country is a beacon. This is not some racist, sexist nation. There’s a reason why people get into leaky boats and come here, and not the other way around.” ♦

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