

# ADAPTING TO CIRCUMSTANCES AND GIVING BACK

Dr. Liisa North knows what it's like to be woken up by police pounding on the door in the middle of the night.

This experience, among others early in life, laid the foundation for her remarkable life's work and her charitable giving. "I am preoccupied with what happens to people who have been displaced and who lack opportunities," says Dr. North. "What happened to my family, in one way or another, has happened and continues to happen to thousands upon thousands of others."

Her story begins at the age of nine when her family fled Finland after World War II because her father, for fear of a Soviet invasion, became involved in an illegal military movement that distributed guns to the people instead of demobilizing when the war ended. They tried to build a new life in Venezuela where her father and a friend saved up enough to launch an ice cream company, called the *Oso Blanco* or Polar Bear. Unfortunately, the business competed too successfully with an enterprise owned by the most powerful man in town. It was confiscated and the family was forced to move again, this time to the Bronx.

Liisa was now 11 and because she had been living on a farm in a remote rural area of Finland and then moving from country to country, she had attended only a few weeks of school. Although she spoke no English, she was placed in a Grade 6 class in

the Bronx and left to face the taunts of her classmates. Nonetheless, she eventually thrived at her studies, crediting her love of reading with bridging the gaps in her education. "My parents were very resilient people who adapted to very difficult situations and always remained supportive of others," says Dr. North. "The world needs people like them."

She went on to earn a PhD at the University of California, Berkeley with a thesis that examined the now ruling party of Peru from the perspective of politics at the local level.

---

**"What happened to my family...continues to happen to thousands upon thousands of others."**

---

She became a political science professor at York University where her fascination with Latin America resulted in her helping found the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC).

This past year, she took advantage of a York University matching program to encourage giving to students at the graduate level. Her \$50,000 donation to establish The Paavo & Aino Lukkari Human Rights Fund will be matched by York's Graduate Support Matching Program to create a



Liisa North

\$100,000 named endowment fund. York will also match the distributions on the endowment to further the impact of her gift.

The fund, which will also be supported through a bequest in her estate plans, will provide annual student awards as well as a scholarship for one graduate student per year researching human rights and issues in Latin America and the Caribbean. "The opportunity

to have a good education can do much to fulfill an individual's aspirations and to promote creative and critical thought. It is important for both the individual and society," says Dr. North.

"I am honoured to name this award after my parents because I inherited my passions from them," she says.