The contrast could not have been more stark. The view from Afsan Chowdhury’s office in the Diamond Building—vivid blue sky, flickers of early fall foliage, the immaculate lawn leading to Miller Library—and the Oak Fellow’s firsthand description of environmental devastation in Bangladesh.

Chowdhury is a journalist and an activist. He also is witness to the clear and present danger of climate change: flooded farmland and hundreds of thousands of refugees in the overwhelmed city of Dhaka.

Mayflower Hill, Chowdhury said, offers what millions of people can only dream of: peace and security in a place where nature is not an enemy and life isn’t an endless struggle. Having seen a place like Colby, he said, he can understand why people in the West may see dire reports from the front lines of climate change as unreal or exaggerated, why they may see Chowdhury as Chicken Little.

They aren’t. He isn’t.

You can read more about this remarkable and courageous fellow in the news section of this issue. I introduce you to him here as well for a couple of reasons.

One, the situation is dire, and Chowdhury is imploring the West to act now. For too many people in places like Bangladesh, it’s too late.

And two, to suggest that there are people for whom these issues are not something turned off with the television.

I had the honor of speaking with Chowdhury, whose career has been spent challenging government officials who trample the rights of the less powerful. And in the course of writing about him, I met another equally inspiring activist whose office is right down the hall.

Janette Bulkan is the Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow in International Environmental Human Rights at Colby. It’s a mouthful of a title, but it doesn’t do Bulkan or her work justice.

Bulkan is from Guyana and is a noted international researcher on documentation and control of illegal logging and state corruption. The two go hand in hand in many parts of the world because there is a fortune to be made in the exploitation of the world’s forests. And where there is big money, there are people who will do anything to get their piece of the action. And then there are a few people like Bulkan, soft-spoken but with a steely resolve. She, like Chowdhury, refuses to look the other way.

It’s not surprising that both activists are persona non grata in certain halls of power in their home countries.

But they are more than welcome at Colby, where they’ve been teaching students—and a magazine editor—about pressing environmental issues that may be out of sight on Mayflower Hill, but shouldn’t be out of mind. Google them. Their work is important. Their quiet courage is inspiring.

Gerry Boyle ’78, P’06
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