

Report on El Salvador trip

April 2006

El Salvador is a country I remember hearing about so much during the 1980s when local churches in Berkeley were offering sanctuary to El Salvadorans. I had met a number of El Salvadorans but had never visited that country. When this opportunity to visit and learn about El Salvador came up, I mentioned to our housekeeper at the YWCA—a woman from San Vicente, ES—who discouraged me from going. She said it was “not a beautiful country, nothing nice there.”

As it turns out, for me she was wrong. Yes, it is a country with vast environmental problems, polluted rivers and lakes, denuded hills, crop failures and so on, but it is a country of warm and generous people. It is the people and their stories that stay with me, that changed the way I look at the world. I learned that often we need very little language to understand another. How smiles, a small vocabulary, listening, eye contact, sitting side by side, all bring us closer.

The unexpected kindness I witnessed and the dignity of the people – the old woman in the church who tried to explain to me how she draped the material on the statues for the Semana Santa parade and then told me to climb up the steep ladder behind the tabernacle so I could get a good picture of the church; the families living in extreme poverty who offered us chairs and fruit and welcomed us to their homes; the bus driver who talked about the life of a 27 year old who really just wants to party more; the family patriarch who is most proud of his family of 11 grandchildren; abused and victimized women helping one another live each day without drugs; and so much more.

On our first day when we had breakfast with El Salvadoran women leaders, I sat with Maria Jose Hernandez and Mirna Perla, one of the few women in the Supreme Court, and I asked them what I could do, what women in the US could do, and they said they want us to tell their stories. This request I have heard numerous times over the years, from a Palestinian woman, from a black South African woman in the early 90s, from Tunisian women, Fijian women, Japanese and Vietnamese women, and so many more. We as women so want others to understand us and to tell our stories. When Maria asked us to sit on the steps of the church where the Jesuits had been killed during the civil war and reflect on our journey, this was the first thing that came to mind and what I talked about: the incredible power and importance of listening to another’s story and being completely present.

Since my return so many people have asked what they can do to aid the people of El Salvador. How can they help? For the YWCA, Maria asked if I would please try to encourage the YWCA of El Salvador to become a member of RED and work with other women’s groups to better the lives of women through political change. I am doing that, starting with speaking to the World YWCA Executive Director about it last week. Friends want to send materials and supplies and I am asking Maria’s help for direction in some of this. The Peace Corps has some wonderful programs in El Salvador dealing with

environmental education and resource rehabilitation, but wouldn't a teacher for the El Playon schoolhouse be a wonderful PC position? In ways large and small I think we can help the women of El Salvador in supporting the changes they are trying to make. We are listeners following their lead.

Thank you to NARDA and Sally Simmel for this incredible opportunity to see, feel and hear all that we did in El Salvador: the warmth and dignity of the people, the poverty and yet the lack of beggars, the acceptance of the good and bad in life, the economic disparity, the pupusas, the beauty, the crafts—a week living in another's culture and having opportunities that are completely unavailable to the ordinary tourist. It was a week of changes in our lives, in our perspective, and in the way we move forward as a citizen of the world.

Sharon Bettinelli
Executive Director
YWCA Berkeley
2600 Bancroft Way
Berkeley CA 94704