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PARTNERSHIP, DEPENDENCE AND PROTEST:
THE UNITED STATES AND EL SALVADOR,
SEEN THROUGH POCKETS OF INTERNATIONALS

By

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Professional Paper

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Dedicated to Lil' R.C. and Tamarack Berry

PREFACE

El Salvador is intimately connected to the United States, though most U.S. citizens may not realize it, even if they remember the days of El Salvador's civil war. As it is for much of the world, the United States is for Salvadorans a promised land of plentiful work and peaceful lives. Unlike the rest of the world, however, every Salvadoran has a fighting chance to get here, and a fourth of the population has done so.

Salvadoran news in the United States is mostly limited to updates on youth gangs and violence. Violence was the media draw of the 1980s as well – the U.S. government was spending millions to help the Salvadoran government fight socialist guerrillas. As they are over any armed conflict, U.S. citizens were divided in their ideological support of the war. This war, however, was only three countries away by land, which made it very possible for Salvadorans to come here, and for concerned U.S. citizens to visit El Salvador. The civil war ended in a stalemate in 1992, and El Salvador went off the map for much of the world. Salvadorans, however, continued their pattern of immigration to the United States, and the United States continued to influence El Salvador's government. After El Salvador's peace accords, the two sides of the civil war essentially faced each other in political parties, which are still the leading parties and still side directly opposite each other in major political battles.

In the first article of this paper, I try to show the general state of El Salvador, 15 years after its peace accords, with an emphasis on the influence of the United States.

The second and third articles show glimpses of the present relation of the two countries, seen through the eyes of North Americans in El Salvador (“Protesters of U.S. war in El Salvador continue their uphill march”) and through Salvadoran immigrants in the United States (“At home in Washington: Salvadorans unite in charity and struggle”).

My interest in El Salvador, and in journalism, came out of the three years I lived in San Martín, El Salvador, and worked as a church and community volunteer through the Mennonite Central Committee (1999 through 2002).

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Fifteen years after the war, El Salvador remains subject to violence, division and total dependence on the United States

January 2007

SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR – On Jan. 16, a tiny country with nearly 10 times the murder rate of the United States – and a fourth of its people living there – celebrated 15 years of peace.

El Salvador's 1992 Peace Accords put an end to a dozen year clash between the U.S.-sponsored government and a mostly rural army of socialist guerrillas. According to the Salvadoran Embassy in Washington, the war's 75,000 deaths, proportional to the country's population, would be like wiping out 3.2 million U.S. citizens. The treaty cut the nation's military by 70 percent, established a civilian police and sought to integrate fighters from both sides into civilian and political life.

The United States government is intimately connected to El Salvador and continues to hold great sway with the administration of Salvadoran government, as it did during the civil war. El Salvador is an economic, military and public security partner with the United States. Most Salvadorans want to go north, and the remittances sent from the ones who have made it are the life-blood of the Salvadoran economy. The U.S. government is not shy about recommending policies and agreements, which El Salvador's politically conservative executive branch is apt to agree with, such as the dollarization of the economy in 2001 and last year's free trade agreement with the United States. Leftists in El Salvador accuse the United States government of influencing elections through thinly veiled warnings against their political party, the same organization the U.S. tried to destroy during a decade of war.

A historical influence

El Salvador's leading political parties are direct descendants of the two sides of the war, and they regularly blame each other for the war itself, for pandering to the

United States (the right, according to the left) or for putting flames to the goodwill of the same (the left, according to the right).

A U.S. Embassy representative here acknowledged both sides committed “very serious” human rights abuses during the war, but said the country has distanced itself from the days of political kidnapping and torture. Citizens are no longer afraid of the army and the police, said Phillip Thompson, then-Deputy Political Counselor for the U.S. Embassy. He said the U.S. waged a “brushfire war” here in the 1980’s; a cold-war battle against international forces of communism.

From both sides, many of the country’s peasants took up arms for self-preservation or out of forced conscription. Guerrillas fought for land redistribution, among other goals. They found a moral base in leftist sectors of the historically conservative Catholic church, which was in the throes of endorsing the right of the poor to the prosperity of the rich. Thousands of church workers and human rights advocates were murdered by the military or by ultra-conservative death squads.

In a meeting with North American university students the week before the commemoration of the Peace Accords, the political section of the U.S. Embassy said it appreciates the governing Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) for its commitment to free-market economics, transparency in government and the security of property. In contrast, Thompson said, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) is rooted in the Communist Party and is “completely out of step with today’s world.”

Speculation on the motive of U.S. interests in such a small country ranges from loyalty in friendship to immigration concerns to maintenance of a foreign policy testing ground, but clearly some of it is historical momentum.

The U.S. Embassy, built during the war, is by far the region’s largest. “This whole country could fall down and this embassy will be here,” Thompson said. The 28-acre complex has its own water supply and electric generating capability. It is earthquake proof and resistant to rocket-propelled grenades.

Including 134 Peace Corps volunteers and 273 Salvadoran workers, its 13 agencies employed 553 people at the start of the year. The United States also has a military base

here, and an agreement to build an International Law Enforcement Academy, which it currently operates out of the military base. For 13 years, U.S. soldiers have collaborated in development projects in rural El Salvador.

While the end of military and guerrilla violence was a relief to the United States, polarized politics, exodus of the citizenry and epidemic levels of street crime keep El Salvador under close U.S. inspection. In an interview in late 2006, then-Ambassador H. Douglass Barclay referred to the U.S.-Salvadoran relationship as one of the world's closest, and said continued military partnerships are extensions of a good partnership in the 1980s.

Barclay, a banker from New York, hoped the Central Free Trade Agreement would bolster the economy, reducing poverty and violent crime. He commended the Salvadoran government for working quickly to approve economic partnerships like CAFTA and a \$461-million development loan, but was adamant that the state collect its highly evaded taxes, and drastically improve funding for police officers.

Amid mild protest from social movements and the FMLN, U.S. and Salvadoran governments agreed in 2005 the United States should base an International Law Enforcement Academy here.

While some Salvadorans see U.S. collaboration in Salvadoran crime fighting as dangerously similar to the military collaboration of the 1980s, representatives of the U.S. Embassy said these concerns are outdated. U.S. soldiers do training exercises in El Salvador, but they are building schools and digging wells, said then-Embassy Spokeswoman Rebecca Brown-Thompson.

Under President Antonio Saca (ARENA), El Salvador was last year the first country to implement the free trade agreement with the United States, and is the only Latin American country with troops in Iraq. El Salvador has so far sent to Iraq eight rotations of several hundred soldiers, who are doing humanitarian work. Five Salvadorans have been killed there.

The FMLN, the former guerrilla movement that signed the Peace Accords with the Salvadoran government, opposed both of these collaborations, calling instead for

partnerships with Venezuela and Cuba. The Salvadoran left continues to plan toward socialism. In an 2005 interview repeatedly cited by officers at the U.S. Embassy, FMLN leader José Luís Merino projected an eventual end to elections and extolled the social justice of the former Soviet Union. Its candidate for 2009, however, will most likely be popular television journalist Mauricio Funes, who is known for objectivity and openness.

Small country, big challenges

Aside from extremely divisive politics, one of the government's biggest challenges is leading a country that is proportionally less at home every day. According to representatives of the U.S. Embassy, approximately 2.5 million Salvadorans live in the United States, compared to approximately 7 million here in El Salvador. Some 700 leave for North America every day, according to embassy representatives.

In 2005, Salvadorans abroad sent family members in El Salvador \$2.83 billion, roughly equal to 17 percent of the country's gross domestic product. Last year's figure was closer to \$3 billion, according to embassy representatives.

About 250 people line up four days a week outside the U.S. Embassy, just west of San Salvador, having paid \$100 each in application fees for non-immigrant visas to the United States. Nearly \$4 million-worth of these requests were denied last year: the embassy's consular section says it processes 50,000 to 60,000 yearly, turning away two-thirds of the applicants for not proving they'll return. Salvadorans make up the sixth-largest immigrant group in the United States, and are in second place for illegal immigrants there. Of the top sending nations, no country has a greater percentage of its population living in the United States.

The U.S. Embassy believes CAFTA will strengthen the Salvadoran economy, though initial exports are "sluggish," according to The Economist magazine. Salvadoran exports to the United States fell by 6 percent during the first six months of the agreement's implementation (\$959 million from March through August 2006, compared to \$1.02 billion March through August 2005), but rose by 64 percent when textiles were

excluded. The U.S. Embassy pinned the drop on a temporary overlap of trade agreements in which previous tax breaks were superseded by the new agreement, which hadn't yet been implemented by El Salvador's suppliers of raw materials for textiles. During the same period, U.S. exports to El Salvador increased from \$1.3 billion to \$1.5 billion.¹

The trade agreement immediately eliminated taxes on most imports and exports, but will phase out taxes on U.S. agricultural exports over a 10-year period. The treaty is filled with legislation on intellectual property and other commercial protections, which has some people worried about national sovereignty. Others applaud the list of built-in requirements for working conditions and anti-corruption measures.

El Salvador's exports, \$3.4 billion in 2005, are principally textiles and apparel, light manufacturing, coffee, medicines, sugar and shrimp, according to the U.S. State Department.

Working Salvadorans have yet to see any meaningful advantage of the trade agreement, as most wages are still below the country's cost of living. Apparel assemblers make \$157 each month, or \$5.24 daily, or 65-and-a-half-cents an hour. This, the minimum wage for the type of work, went up last September from \$151 monthly, the rate since 2003. The agricultural per-day minimum wage is about half that of textile workers. A modest diet for an urban family of 3.9 persons costs \$147 a month, according to the government's price index for January.

While economics drive the unstoppable emigration to the United States, polls reveal El Salvador's top concern is security. In 2006, police statistics showed El Salvador's murder rate rise to 12 homicides daily – more than 55 deaths per year per 100,000 people, a U.S. Embassy representative said, which is slightly higher than Colombia's figure. Last year, the United States deported 3,000 Salvadorans with criminal backgrounds, a factor that contributes to rising violence here.²

¹After the first year of CAFTA, March 2006 through March 2007, exports to the United States were 2 percent below the same period one year prior. Since March, the Salvadoran government reported the drop in textile exports has been recovered. First year exports from the U.S. to El Salvador came in at a 16 percent rise over the previous year's, and have risen another 11 percent through August, according to the U.S. Commercial Service.

² This year, the U.S. deported 20,000 Salvadorans, one-fourth of them with criminal records.

Many of the country's murders are between street gangs with roots in Los Angeles, or are extortion-ring killings of transportation workers and small business operators who refuse to pay the "taxes."

An uneasy peace

During January's commemoration of the Peace Accords, representatives of the Salvadoran right and left presented a "social peace accord," in which they pledged to work together on electoral and tax reform. Working together remains a challenge, as the top parties maintain a political separation that harkens memories of the cold war. While ARENA's legislative leader Guillermo Gallegos referred to the 1992 accords as "peace in the face of terrorism," FMLN legislative leader Sánchez Cerén said El Salvador lives a "restricted democracy" that "admits the FMLN as an ornament."

The insinuation that the FMLN is a group of ex-terrorists surfaced repeatedly in campaign battles of El Salvador's last presidential election, along with privately paid television ads alleging the United States would interrupt the \$7.5-million-a-day flow of family remittances to El Salvador, should the FMLN win the presidency. The United States quietly dismissed this possibility, though Otto Reich, then-U.S. Special Envoy for Western Hemisphere Initiatives, said just before the elections that relations between the two countries might deteriorate if the FMLN won.

The ARENA party took the 2004 elections by a large margin, as it did in other post-war elections (1994 and 1999). El Salvador has never elected an FMLN president. ARENA holds 34 seats in the current legislature, compared to 32 of the FMLN, which maintains the mayorship of San Salvador.

Protesters of U.S. war in El Salvador continue their uphill march

March 2007

SAN SALVADOR, EL SALVADOR – Twenty years ago in northern California, 8-year-old Alejandra Castillo tagged along with her mother at an anti-war protest at Concord Naval Weapons Station. It was a Tuesday morning. Some protesters were set to begin a 40-day fast on the railroad tracks. Trains leaving the military base carried munitions bound for the wars in Nicaragua and El Salvador, and a handful of concerned citizens thought they might interrupt this flow.

Castillo and her mother were there to represent their home country, El Salvador, where Castillo's father had been killed as a guerrilla combatant. The rebel army encouraged her mother to travel the United States and speak against U.S. military aid, and a U.S. organization had sponsored her mother's tour.

Growing up, political protest was common terrain for Castillo, but in the memory of a young girl, this was especially dramatic: some Vietnam veterans were going to tie themselves to the tracks.

At the time of the protest, the U.S. government was pumping millions of dollars into El Salvador's military, desperate to thwart a socialist insurgency. The government used death squads, torture and mass shootings to terrorize potential guerrillas. To a lesser extent, the guerrilla army also used kidnapping and murder.

Thousands of U.S. citizens disagreed with the U.S. military aid so much they went to where the 500-pound bombs were falling, they partnered with Salvadoran churches in war zones, they harbored refugees in the United States, they did whatever they could to stop the supply of weapons.

They were not actually tied, but Duncan Murphy and S. Brian Willson sat on the tracks that September morning as the train bore down. Fatal punishment for political dissidence was common fare in El Salvador, but in the United States, everyone expected the train to stop. It did not. Murphy jumped at the last second, but Castillo and her mother

watched as the train rolled over Willson's legs, severed them from his body and fractured his skull.

"That was kind of the image that I saw as a kid," Castillo said this January over a beer at a café near the National University in San Salvador.

She returned to El Salvador as an adult, picking up the torch of international solidarity first raised by North Americans like Willson and Salvadorans like her mother. Castillo recently took a post in San Salvador with the same organization her mother worked with in the United States.

Castillo is now 27, Willson is 65 and El Salvador's peace accords just turned 15. Her country's plight has long left the stage of world predicaments, but for Castillo and thousands like her, the struggle goes on.

In the 1970s and '80s, solidarity with Central America meant standing against U.S. intervention, as activists called it, in the wars of El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala. The governments of El Salvador and the United States were especially close, and the brutal aspects of their 1980s military partnership fostered a community of protesters unique to this relationship.

Fragments of the solidarity movement struggle on, uphill, unfazed by failure in most of their political and social goals. The United States continues to ally with El Salvador's clique of conservative leaders, making agreements that highlight old tensions. For solidarity organizations, this is fodder for fresh activism. Half a dozen organizations in San Salvador have hosted thousands of international visitors since the war, and they host more every year. The "solidarity" happens when a U.S. student delegate, church group or political organization meets a likely counterpart in El Salvador and works together on a community project, stands against an unfavorable international policy or simply declares the United States guilty in what these groups considered a war on the people.

Solidarity tourism

Salvadorans who once faced murder by soldiers, police or guerrillas today face murder and extortion from organized criminals. Emergency emigration was common then, and it still is, though the motives have become principally economic. Now as then, work is scarce, insufficient for the number of mouths to feed. During the war, solidarity workers blamed the deaths of innocent people on U.S. support for El Salvador's military. Today, they blame U.S. economic and immigration policies for exacerbating the crime and poverty that marks most Salvadorans' daily lives.

"The U.S. has not rebuilt what it helped to destroy," Jesuit priest Dean Brackley told a group of U.S. students touring El Salvador in January. Brackley, originally from Ohio, came to El Salvador to teach theology and ethics in 1990, filling a position left by a one of six priests assassinated at the University of Central America. For Brackley, solidarity with El Salvador is alive and well. Last year he preached the story of U.S. dominance over his adoptive country to 82 international delegations.

El Salvador is an average country, not a poor one, Brackley told the students, who sat in small desks crowded in a room lined with posters commemorating the death of Oscar Romero, the Catholic archbishop of San Salvador killed while celebrating Mass in March 1980. But the students, traveling from Holy Names University in California, saw plenty of poverty during their two weeks in El Salvador, and they heard plenty of stories of war. Their visit was coordinated by Christians for Peace in El Salvador, or CRISPAZ, which has been bringing North Americans to El Salvador since 1984. The organization takes groups like this one to see what the war destroyed, visiting especially sites of human rights atrocities such as the El Mozote massacre, where government troops killed upward of 800 men, women and children on Dec. 11, 1981. They also visit offices of the major political parties, the U.S. Embassy, social activist groups, trade unions, and homes of poor people throughout the country.

All of the solidarity organizations take visitors to the University of Central America, El Salvador's prestigious Jesuit school, where a hall of relics displays personal

items of church people killed before and during the war. Bloody shirts, unwashed and with bullet holes, hang behind glass next to books and notes of priests like Rutilio Grande, who was gunned down March 12, 1977, for inciting peasants to what the government worried was communism. On a glass-covered bench are pictures and personal effects of four North American churchwomen who were raped and murdered Dec. 2, 1980, by U.S.-trained soldiers of the Salvadoran army. Visitors can tour the rooms and see the photos of six Jesuit priests and their housekeepers who were dragged from their rooms by soldiers Nov. 16, 1989, filled with bullets and left in the garden.

Organizations like CRISPAZ came during the war and decided to stay for the peace, though most say a real peace was never achieved and the conditions that led to protest and guerrilla uprisings have barely changed. They echo Salvadoran social activists who say the country is bent under economic forces favorable to the rich. Solidarity bulletins go out across America, urging constituents to pressure the U.S. government on one issue or another regarding this Massachusetts-sized country of 7 million, 1,200 miles southeast of Texas. In the '80s, the plea was to stop the bombs; now the issues are trade agreements and police academies. A year ago, the movement lost its last major battle as the United States and El Salvador launched the controversial Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), but the tours keep coming.

Brackley, 61, was thin, witty and said the most pessimistic things with underlying hope and optimism. "El Salvador and the United States are united in unholy wedlock, and no divorce is possible," he told the group from Holy Names. There is no short-term political solution to break Salvadoran dependence on emigration and foreign remittances, even if the leftist opposition party should take control and tax the rich for schools and health care, Brackley said.

The U.S. Embassy here estimates 700 Salvadorans leave for North America every day, Brackley said – if all of them made it and the population didn't change, the country would be empty in 27 years.

"Of course, what we're talking about is hunger," Brackley said.

A few days earlier, U.S. Embassy staff told these same students fewer than half of the northbound emigrants make it to the United States, but some 2.5 million Salvadorans, a fourth of the country's population, live there, principally in Los Angeles, Washington and Houston. Last year those expatriates contributed most of the approximately \$3 billion in foreign remittances to El Salvador, an amount equal to nearly 17 percent of the country's gross domestic product.

Salvadorans need to better invest their remittances, rather than squander them on electronic goods, Brackley said, as did U.S. Embassy representatives. But, while the U.S. government has faith free trade will get the economy going, Brackley told the students El Salvador would need something like the Marshall Plan of post-war Europe to put El Salvador on its feet and to keep its population in El Salvador.

Economics drive today's emigration, as violence drove yesterday's. But the war didn't end without consequence. Besides claiming 75,000 lives, the civil war built a legacy of violence and corruption. The Peace Accords cut the military by 70 percent and created a civilian police force from the ranks of ex-army soldiers and ex-guerrillas, but, Brackley pointed out, the government never purged corrupt elements from the police and the judiciary. The guerrilla movement that signed the Peace Accords with the government, the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), became a political party in 1992, and has been the principal contender to the Republican Nationalist Alliance (ARENA), which is favored by the United States and has won every presidential election since the war's end. The country's legislature passed a blanket amnesty almost immediately after the United Nations released a 1993 report on wartime human rights abuses, which indicted the government and its armed forces in the great majority of violence against civilians.

"The Salvadoran Diaspora, which is a symptom of all the problems, has to become an integral part of the solution," Brackley said. "The remittances have to be harnessed for local development, and the international solidarity movement, of which you people are stellar representatives, has to grow in maturity and in collaboration with Salvadoran people in the north," he said. He congratulated the students for being part of a

new thing in higher education – international trips and class visits are “exposing a whole new generation of people to the problems of countries like El Salvador,” he said.

Across San Salvador, where ramshackle buses roar past North American restaurant chains, street vendors and triple-locked gates of steel and razor wire, dozens of Salvadorans and North Americans sit in offices with “solidarity” in their name or mission. The University of Central America has a growing “houses of solidarity” student exchange program, and Minnesota’s Augsburg College runs a solidarity-based Center for Global Education out of San Salvador, where students study the church in the context of “political oppression and social injustice.” CRISPAZ plans to lead 24 solidarity tours this year, and they offer a summer volunteer program for international students. At the Center for Exchange and Solidarity, or CIS, international visitors can study Spanish while learning about U.S. intervention here. The CIS was born out of the still-active Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, or CISPES, which regularly distributes anti-free-trade, anti-privatization, anti-military appeals to U.S. citizens. Other groups, mostly church-based, visit sister communities or sister parishes through the SHARE Foundation. North American volunteers work at all these institutions, and at church-based solidarity promoters Maryknoll and the Mennonite Central Committee.

The movement represented by these groups has matured, Brackley said. International sister relationships started during the war between churches have blossomed, along with community development collaborations. People who visited during the war are now bringing their children, he said, and some U.S.-born Salvadorans are joining solidarity delegations to learn their country’s recent history.

Others, like Leslie Schuld of the Center for Exchange and Solidarity, hesitate to claim the movement is still alive. “There are still strong solidarity ties that were built and established from that movement,” she said, mentioning all the people from North America who were in El Salvador during the war and are now labor organizers, professors and peace activists – but it’s no longer a real movement, she said.

Half a mile away in another solidarity office, CRISPAZ director Jeanne Ridders said that contrary to a true movement, each organization works independently. “There are

a handful of organizations who kind of stuck with the Salvadoran issue post-war, and we're fraternally in communication, but there's not any sort of formal relationship even," she said.

But they band together to fight U.S. initiatives like the free trade agreement and the U.S. police academy here, and they take hundreds of people to the same sites, and they learn the same history of church and civil leaders who stood up to state repression. Solidarity delegates like the ones from Holy Names learn that in El Salvador's recent history, sticking up for labor rights could get you killed. They learn that Archbishop Romero was killed at the start of the war for speaking against rising military repression – not only against the socialist insurgency, but also against peasant farmers, students, trade unions and catechists. Words from his sermons are now on T-shirts and posters, in folk songs, and in Christian devotional literature. The day he was shot, Romero "ordered" soldiers, over national radio, to disobey orders to kill. His death helped call to life an international solidarity movement. "If they kill me, I will rise again in the Salvadoran people," Romero declared. His denouncement of governmental oppression struck a chord with U.S. activists concerned about the killing of poor people, and left room for implicit support of a resistance movement. The new generation of solidarity workers takes hope from the hope of the Salvadoran martyrs, and from peasants and working people who still hang on to these memories.

In the hallway after Brackley's talk, Holy Names student Joe O'Neill told how this trip "put it all together" for him. He had been to three protests at the former School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Ga., where the United States trained many Latin American soldiers later known for torture and brutality. "Now I know why I went," O'Neill said.

Protesters at the School of the Americas raise their voices against military partnerships across Latin America, but El Salvador's takes an especially prominent position. Between lectures, Brackley explained the particularity of U.S. protest here – the post-Vietnam peace movement saw potential for a similar war here, one much closer to home. Church people were being killed. The media coverage was good, and the FMLN guerrillas worked hard to court the sympathy of the U.S. citizens. El Salvador is just three

countries, a four-hour flight, from the United States. In the 1980s, Brackley said, “We got the faces, we got the refugees – and we got the SHARE Foundation.”

One of the organization’s leaders, Danny Burrige, was not yet born 26 years ago when the SHARE Foundation brought its first North American church groups to Salvadoran war zones. He came here from Ohio two years ago as a theology student through Augsburg College’s Center for Global Education, and was captivated by the hope of ordinary, poor Salvadorans. “If people in tin shacks can have hope,” he said, “surely we can work for a brighter future.”

At 22, Burrige brings a fresh exuberance to the foundation, where he now coordinates church delegations to parishes here, one of the organization’s specialties.

“They keep coming back,” he said recently. “Hopefully, that’s a stepping-stone for them feeling solidarity with everyone in the world.”

These organizations lost the battle against the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States, which most said guarantees free trade for big companies at the possible expense of small farmers, but Burrige still hopes grassroots social movements will catch fire and will change the country in favor of the poor. The SHARE Foundation does its part by financing community development projects and by helping North Americans mingle with Salvadorans – “accompaniment” is the old-school solidarity term. At one time this meant staying at the side of people targeted for political assassination; now it might be listening to a mother tell her tale of hard work, little pay and a family split between north and south.

The foundation spends about \$1 million yearly on its current program of faith-based solidarity, which is about three times the budget of the Center for Exchange and Solidarity or CRISPAZ.

The Center for Exchange and Solidarity is one of the few solidarity organizations born after the war, in 1993, and union leaders and members of the FMLN sit on its board of directors. Leslie Schuld, 44, has directed the center for 10 years, and has been an activist for El Salvador since she was a student at the University of Dayton, Ohio, around the time the four churchwomen were killed. One of them, Dorothy Kazel, was from

Cleveland. This news prompted Schuld to join her local Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador, and she eventually became network's national coordinator. After the Peace Accords, she helped launch the Center for Exchange and Solidarity, responding to calls from Salvadorans concerned that international partnerships would dry up when the gunfire died.

The organization runs a Spanish school and supports women's cooperatives and other rural development projects. It channels money to communities after natural disasters and to families of union members fighting their companies (or the government) for better conditions, but the organization is perhaps best known for their program of election observation. Nearly 300 international observers volunteered through the center during the 2004 presidential election, when ARENA's Tony Saca, a former sportscaster, handily defeated the FMLN's Shafick Handal, a former guerrilla commander and Peace Accords signatory.

CRISPAZ also is directed by a North American woman, Jeanne Ridders. She first worked with the organization in 1996, as a delegation leader, when CRISPAZ was 12 years old. It ran five delegations that year and wasn't sure if it would continue, Ridders said. It did, and its two dozen delegations this year will be an all-time record. The organization sends newsletters on Salvadoran social issues to 3,000 addresses, mostly in the United States. CRISPAZ has nine fulltime staff, six community volunteers and two interns in different sites throughout the country.

Solidarity versus foreign policy

Some governmental projects look like better-financed versions of their own projects, but the solidarity movement sees U.S. government agencies as meddlers in El Salvador's politics and economy.

The U.S. Embassy here is Central America's biggest: including Peace Corps volunteers and local workers, the embassy's 13 agencies employ more than 500 people. The group from Holy Names University went through two security checkpoints to take in

a two-hour briefing this January, the week before the anniversary of El Salvador's Jan. 16 Peace Accords.

The embassy's diplomatic and public relations staff meet with about 50 groups like the one from Holy Names each year; they explain the recent history of El Salvador and discuss U.S. programs here. The U.S. Agency for International Development (U.S.A.I.D.) supports small businesses, helps farmers preserve their land, funds scholarships and so on. The Peace Corps, too, is here with 134 volunteers. They live in rural communities throughout the country, as do volunteers with "solidarity" in their organization's name. At their meeting with U.S. Embassy staff, the student delegation from Holy Names University learned U.S.A.I.D. put \$35.8 million into projects here last year.

Unlike official U.S. programs, however, organizations like SHARE and CIS and CRISPAZ and CISPES see the free trade agreements and big infrastructure projects as opportunities for transnational corporations to plunder, rather than benefit, the average Salvadoran. An upcoming \$461 million, U.S.-sponsored rural development project meets a wary gaze from solidarity organizations, who say most of the money will go for roads to help international mining companies haul gold out of the northern zone. They also see U.S. police training here as dangerously similar to wartime military support.

Over the past several years, organizations such as CIS and CRISPAZ joined a Salvadoran opposition network called Sinti Techan, "Corn of the People" in the indigenous Náhuatl tongue. The network, which includes a national environmental group among other organizations and social activists, sought to rally Salvadorans against the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States. Solidarity organizations say the treaty will further destroy the livelihoods of peasant farmers and will give the country less say in their own laws, that the U.S. wants the trade agreement in order to take the region by the throat.

If these organizations hadn't activated their alarm networks in their North American constituencies, the treaty would have breezed through the U.S. House and Senate, solidarity groups say. Similar to how it fared in the U.S. Congress, the treaty was

narrowly passed by the Salvadoran legislature. El Salvador was the first country to implement the treaty, which it did last March amid great protest. After one year of the treaty, the country saw “ethnic” exports to the United States, like Salvadoran hard cheese, go up, while assembled clothing, the biggest export, fell by 11.7 percent, yielding an overall drop of 2 percent in exports to the United States. U.S. exports to El Salvador grew by 23 percent, according to government statistics here.

They lost the battle, but Sinti Techan continues to fight what its members consider the ill effects of free trade, said Elizabeth Hernández, a Salvadoran who works for CRISPAZ and volunteers with Sinti Techan. The network gives legal advice to copyright-breaking DVD vendors, for example, who are more at risk for arrest and jail time since the trade agreement was approved. The network is also fighting privatization of water and healthcare, and solidarity organizations publish these concerns in their periodic newsletters and e0-mail lists.

Most of these groups raised their flags against the new International Law Enforcement Academy, proposed by the United States and approved by El Salvador’s legislature – but, according to Jeanne Ridders, the issue never became an international rallying point. As was the case with the free trade agreement, solidarity groups (and the FMLN faction of the legislature) were unable to stop the academy from coming. Last year U.S. police forces began training Latin American police out of the U.S. military base near El Salvador’s airport. According to Leslie Schuld, the United States and Salvadoran governments easily justified the training center in this country that leads the region in murder, but solidarity groups worry the police academy could help the country to remilitarize its police, as U.S. military trainers are eligible to teach there.

At the U.S. Embassy’s meeting with the students from Holy Names, a political official questioned the “solidarity” of groups like the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador (the group that sponsored Castillo’s mother in the 1980s) who so ardently opposed the police academy, when street crime is one of the nation’s biggest concerns. The official dismissed the U.S.-based organization as pandering to a leftist political agenda.

Last year in El Salvador, approximately 4,000 people died at the hands of others – a homicide rate surpassing Colombia’s, and nearly 10 times that of the United States, according to officials at the U.S. Embassy. While solidarity organizations fish to blame the United States for many of the country’s problems, the old concept of solidarity makes an awkward landing in today’s El Salvador, where the U.S.-backed forces aren’t strafing civilian peasants and butchering priests.

At the meeting with Holy Names students, deputy political counselor Philip Thompson called El Salvador’s 12-year war a “brushfire war” between the United States and the Soviet Union, and said both sides seriously abused human rights. People used to live in fear of the army and the police, he said, but they don’t anymore. Thompson said the biggest threat to democracy comes from the FMLN, which has eliminated open primaries and moved closer to its communist roots. But the country has come a long way, and is on track to take advantage of the new free trade agreement, he said, though it is hard to recruit foreign investors to a country with such a reputation of violence. The embassy is hopeful the International Law Enforcement Academy will lead to a police force better equipped to deal with the crime that plagues El Salvador.

The Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador and the U.S. Embassy are longstanding adversaries, as the solidarity organization has openly supported the FMLN’s “right to self determination” since 1987, when the United States still classified the FMLN as a terrorist organization. Contrary to the U.S. assessment, the committee held, the socialist rebels were not pawns of the Soviet Union, but were leaders in a “just struggle” for democracy and human rights in El Salvador.

Former committee director Leslie Schuld (now director of the Center for Exchange and Solidarity) said most of the other solidarity organizations did not knowingly support the armed resistance, but all of them tried to get Washington to stop sending weapons and helicopters. At one point, Schuld said, “people were chaining themselves to desks of congressional offices.” When Salvadorans with ties to the solidarity movement were arrested or “disappeared,” members of the Committee in Solidarity and other organizations called their political representatives in Washington and

San Salvador. This saved some lives, she said. “I think the U.S. was limited in what kind of intervention it could carry out, because there was such a strong awareness of the human rights situation,” she said.

The violence that united solidarity groups against U.S. policy in the 1980s has turned into common crime with no common enemy – much less galvanizing for a potential movement, but still threatening to Salvadoran social activists, as it is to every Salvadoran. The solidarity movement no longer claims to be saving lives, but it continues to remember the ones that were lost, and to speak against the policies it considers harmful to poor people. The U.S. Embassy here continues to consider these groups politically motivated tools.

Holding onto memories

Many Salvadorans in their 20s or younger know little of El Salvador’s military partnership with the United States. Alma Guillermoprieto pointed this out in a March 14 Washington Post obituary for Rufina Amaya, survivor of the 1981 El Mozote massacre. Guillermoprieto was one of the first journalists to report on what she called the largest massacre in modern Latin American history. “The events of El Mozote are no longer in dispute,” she wrote, “but after a quarter of a century they are also no longer even a memory for the majority of Salvadorans, most of whom had not been born on the day when young girls were dragged screaming to the hills to be raped, and children cried out to their mothers as they were murdered. In (the United States), people who once argued passionately over El Salvador would be hard pressed to remember when they last talked – or care – about the fate of that tiny country.”

According to the U.S. Embassy, 19,500 U.S. citizens live in El Salvador, which is less than 1 percent of the number of Salvadorans in the United States. Perhaps 100 of the 19,500 consider themselves solidarity workers (most U.S. citizens here are dual nationals). Maybe 1,000 North Americans a year come on solidarity tours or sister church visits. An insignificant number, perhaps, and U.S. citizens have a much better chance of

meeting Salvadorans in the United States than they do of traveling to El Salvador, assessing the impact of U.S. policy here and visiting Salvadorans who are still in El Salvador.

Nevertheless, there are handfuls of people like Alejandra Castillo, who remembers the history of the war through the activism of her parents, though most of her adolescence was spent in the United States. By 1987, Castillo and her mother had lived in Costa Rica, Canada and the United States, where they were active members of the Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. Unlike many Salvadoran exiles and contrary to today's migratory pattern, Castillo returned to El Salvador as a teenager, eventually falling in love with her birthplace, and with the unrealized political dreams of her parents. She has worked for two solidarity organizations, and she recently took a job in the funding department of the European Commission in El Salvador.

The man who evoked Castillo's strongest images of solidarity, S. Brian Willson, survived his incident with the military train and continues to post anti-war essays on his Web site.

"The formerly slow moving trains at Concord Naval Weapons Station had always stopped and awaited removal of blockers," Willson said in an e-mail. "That day was very different, as the train crew had orders NOT to stop, fearing I and two others were to hijack the train. That notion apparently came from higher ups who were likely listening to the F.B.I. investigations of two of the three of us... I certainly joined the barefoot and shirtless people who get crushed for disobeying the MAN," Willson wrote.

In El Salvador, a relatively small band of young volunteers, students on exchange, activist churches and two-decade collaborators have seen fit to remember the history of the war, and the history of international solidarity. The noun solidarity – *solidaridad* – has a distinct usage here, where a sector of U.S. and Salvadoran citizens invoke it to describe their stance with ordinary people against the world's oppressors.

For Castillo, traveling as a political refugee in the United States with her mother gave her a taste of North American solidarity that lasted beyond the confines of war.

“Feeling the level of humanity and caring of people in the U.S. was the deepest form of solidarity I’ve ever seen,” Castillo said.



Sunrise on the Pan-American Highway silhouettes the San Vicente Volcano, 50 kilometers east of San Salvador. During El Salvador's civil war from 1980 to 1992, thousands of U.S. citizens supported a solidarity movement that sided with the people of El Salvador facing U.S.-sponsored state repression. Fifteen years later, several organizations here still have "solidarity" in their name or mission, and their programs have switched from exposing the war to telling its history, emphasizing that United States' policy still dominates the country.



Students from California's Holy Names University tour a museum at San Salvador's University of Central America. The museum displays personal effects of murdered church workers, such as the shirt of Rutilio Grande, who was killed while making pastoral visits in 1977. Before the tour, the students met with Jesuit priest Dean Brackley, who told them the United States Government was behind the war and "has not rebuilt what it helped to destroy."



Jesuit priest Dean Brackley discusses U.S. relations with El Salvador against a background of posters commemorating the death of San Salvador’s Catholic Archbishop Romero, who was assassinated in 1980. “El Salvador and the United States are united in unholy wedlock, and no divorce is possible,” Brackley told a group of students from California’s Holy Names University. Last year Brackley spoke to 82 similar delegations, explaining how El Salvador’s dependence on the United States is a product of U.S. dominance over El Salvador.



Goods with trademark-breaking logos and pirated DVDs flood the sidewalks of San Salvador, despite the Central American Free Trade Agreement's intellectual property copyright provisions. International solidarity organizations have joined a network called Sinti Techan, which unsuccessfully fought the trade agreement and continues to work against its effects: one of the network's actions was to help DVD vendors know their rights and resist police crackdowns.



Danny Burrige of the SHARE Foundation discusses church-based solidarity in front of a poster proclaiming “No to mining, yes to life.” The SHARE Foundation is one of half a dozen solidarity organizations with offices in San Salvador. Most of these organizations set up during El Salvador’s civil war and continue to host international church groups, university students and other delegations. They try to show the connections between war and poverty, and promote international solidarity across both of these divides.



El Salvador's war is 15 years over, but graffitied posters crying for revolution still pop up around San Salvador, including this one by the Popular Youth Bloc: "Organized to fight." The FMLN, initially composed of several guerrilla resistance units fighting the government in the 1980s, is now a political party with dozens of seats in congress and a mayor in San Salvador. Some solidarity groups openly support the FMLN and others remain neutral, despite their basic political and social congruence.

At home in Washington: Salvadorans unite in charity and struggle

October 2007

WASHINGTON – As they left a party in Sterling, Va., Luís Felipe and Blanca Romero spoke to each other about the music, the locale, the hosts and the guests. Tomorrow, the husband and wife from Gaithersburg, Md., would go back to work as an auto mechanic and a publicist. Tonight, they reveled in the memories and the troubles of their homeland, El Salvador, which they left 30 years ago. The Romeros got in their Chevrolet and drove away from the small house, which was still throbbing with dance music. Middle aged and dressed business-casual, they looked like chaperones leaving a high school dance – and they did say the music was too loud – but the Romeros had engaged in the spirit of the evening as much as anyone.

Many of the party's Salvadoran revelers were illegal immigrants, but it wasn't a point of conversation beyond a few people comparing stories. Some came illegally and were now protected under a temporary amnesty program, some overstayed their tourist visas and were still without documents; and some fled the country's civil war in the 1980s and were now citizens or legal residents. Most of the little ones were born in the United States, though their parents might be here illegally.

“Did you hear Miguel's wife got deported?” Blanca asked, and repeated the story of immigration authorities knocking on the family's door, taking her from her husband and four children. She had been ignoring a deportation order for 10 years, and was caught when Miguel tried to apply for her residency. Miguel's children are U.S. citizens. He is a legal resident. His wife, the children's mother, was shuffled between three prisons before authorities deported her to El Salvador.

“The kids were quite traumatized,” Blanca said.

Miguel and the Romeros and about 50 others were at the party to support people in Guatajiagua, an ordinary village in eastern El Salvador. Many of Guatajiagua's expatriates live in suburban Virginia, where at least two associations have sprung up for

camaraderie and to support the old hometown. The evening's party met both objectives. Proceeds from the sale of pupusas – fried tortillas filled with cheese and meat – were to help an old man with his medical bills.

The Romeros lead a Washington, D.C. syndicate of Salvadoran hometown associations, and they go to parties like this nearly every weekend. They eat Salvadoran food, listen to Salvadoran dance music, talk to Salvadorans about fundraising, and listen to the troubles of El Salvador's immigrant community.

For Salvadorans in Washington and its suburbs, legal residence is not a moral value. Citizenship or residence curbs the looming threat of deportation for some, but all sectors of Salvadoran immigrants find strength in community, and their commitment to their homeland unifies them much more than their immigration status.

Immigration and organization

This summer, while northern Virginia's Prince William County Supervisors planned a crackdown on illegal immigrants, Luís Felipe Romero was planning a giant Salvadoran party in the heart of the same county, 30 miles south of Washington. County leaders proposed to examine the immigration status of anyone they could: speeding drivers, addicts in rehab programs, entrepreneurs applying for business licenses, senior citizens using public services. Before the measure even came to a vote, one Prince William town canceled its annual "Latino Fest" for lack of sponsors, and some Hispanics stayed away from public places. Central Americans and Mexicans throughout Virginia, Maryland and Washington, D.C., held their breath as they speculated the implications of what they called the anti-immigrant law.

Romero got on a Spanish language radio station to promote his organization's Festival Salvadoreñísimo. He called Hispanics to support the undocumented among them by turning out en masse Sept. 16, the day after Central American Independence Day. Thousands of them did – they came to dance, socialize, consult with immigration lawyers, get cholesterol screenings and enjoy Salvadoran food. Romero's United

Salvadoran Communities (C.U.S.) collected thousands of dollars to distribute among other associations sponsoring community projects in El Salvador.

For every 10 people in El Salvador, one Salvadoran lives in Washington, Maryland or Virginia. Every year they send home millions of dollars, regardless of whether they're legally entitled to work here. Of every hundred illegal immigrants in the United States, four are from El Salvador – second only to Mexico's 57, according to recent estimates of the Department of Homeland Security. Of the largest immigrant groups in the in the United States, no nationality has a greater proportion of its population here.

Salvadorans have put family security before legality since the 1980s, when hundreds of thousands fled their country's civil war and took up whatever type of immigration status they could manage here. The United States saw the war as an extension of the cold war, and it pumped millions of dollars into El Salvador's government to fight a movement of socialist guerrillas, which is now the second largest political party there. Refugees are now economic ones – the war is 15 years over, but Salvadorans keep coming here to work.

So far this year, the U.S. government has shipped 15,000 people back to El Salvador.

Approximately 15 times that number, or 230,000, registered before a late-October deadline for an amnesty program called the Temporary Protection Status (TPS) and are eligible to work here legally, regardless of whether they came with proper documents and visas. The criterion for this loophole was El Salvador's earthquake of 2001 – El Salvador needed some time to recover, U.S. officials decided. The amnesty program has a maximum duration of 18 months, but the United States has extended these periods for Salvadorans five times, for an effective total of eight years.

Remittances sustain the Salvadoran economy, and El Salvador's government did all it could to help its qualifying citizens register for the amnesty program. The catch: applicants must prove they've been here since Feb. 13, 2001. The protection is set to

expire in March of 2009, at which time the immigration status of protected Salvadorans will return to what it was in 2001.

Barring more extensions or changes in U.S. law, most Salvadorans who squeezed in the window will once again become illegal immigrants in 18 months, alongside the hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who have come here since the program began.

For Salvadorans, legal immigration is a throw on the dartboard. The U.S. immigration debate frames a complex issue in its most basic terms, and the proponents of opposing sides usually miss each other completely in attempts at dialogue.

In Prince William County, where Salvadorans make up a good portion of the Latino population, an all-white board of supervisors unanimously approved their immigration crackdown Oct. 17 after 12 hours of public commentary, most of it opposing the divisive measures.

“People are leaving the county by the rows,” said Ronald Luna, a Salvadoran doctoral student at the University of Maryland. Luna is studying Salvadoran churches in the United States. For his master’s degree, he researched D.C.-area soccer leagues of Salvadoran immigrants. “If you want to summarize the studies, it’s all the same: Salvadorans have very strong community ties,” he said.

For Luna and his parents, legality was a matter of 13 years and \$30,000-worth of lawyers, he said. They came when he was 10, in 1986, at the height of El Salvador’s civil war.

Because the U.S. was backing the Salvadoran government in its war, requests for political asylum were often complicated. Historically, however, Salvadorans who have dodged deportation long enough eventually got some form of residency. In 1985, the American Baptist Church won a lawsuit against immigration authorities for discriminating against certain asylum applicants from war-torn El Salvador and Guatemala. The American Baptist Church (ABC) status, which one could attain after any interview with an immigration officer, became a stepping-stone to legal residency for many Salvadorans. After 1997, many filed for residency under the President Clinton’s Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act.

Unlike these programs, the latest amnesty program does not build any bridges to residency or citizenship. Nevertheless, for a few hundred thousand Salvadorans, it is still the U.S. Government's best offer.

Four days before the filing deadline, Ana Ferrufino sat among 20 or 30 others waiting for their turn at the windows of the Salvadoran consulate on the District's Wisconsin Avenue, next to a post office and across from a Whole Foods Market. Postcard views of El Salvador's beaches and volcanoes lined the walls of the consulate, and a tourism show played on a television set, hiding the image of El Salvador as Central America's most deforested, densely populated and crime ridden country. Ferrufino, 30, came in 2000, before the amnesty cut-off. Like others who qualified, she's renewed her protected status and work permit in 2002, 2003, 2005 and 2006. The renewal will cost her \$420, which is a good week of work at her \$10-an-hour job cleaning offices. Even under the amnesty program, without legal residency, she can't visit her native La Unión, a port city on the eastern end of El Salvador, and expect to return legally to the United States. Like many in her shoes, she has a young child who is a U.S. citizen by birth.

"Perhaps half of El Salvador is here," Ferrufino said. Literally, the figure is more like one-fourth of the population: El Salvador's population is just under 7 million, and El Salvador's Department of Exterior Relations estimates there are 2.6 million Salvadorans in the United States. One of San Salvador's leading dailies, La Prensa Gráfica, has a section called "Department 15," which relates news about Salvadorans living outside the country's 14 departments. Thanks to daily flights from San Salvador, one can buy the same day's newspaper in certain Salvadoran restaurants in Washington.

The headlines of August through October were familiar turf for the Temporary Protection Status, and La Prensa Gráfica's online pages linked to a guide to complete with forms, instructions and news about mobile Salvadoran consulates.

"Department 15" also features a directory of Salvadoran associations abroad, and a find-a-person service. The Web site lists 137 associations, 82 of them in the Los Angeles area, where the most Salvadorans in North America live. Many associations are resident groups that partner to support their old hometown: "Community for the

Improvement of Estanzuelas,” “United Community of Chinameca in Los Angeles,” “Mantillana Sisterhood,” and so on. There are 25 Salvadoran associations listed in the Washington, D.C. area, six in New York, three in Chicago and one apiece in Canada, Italy and Sweden.

Transnational community building in the suburbs

The Romeros lead three associations out of their home in Gaithersburg, Md.: the C.U.S. umbrella organization, The Associated Salvadorans of Maryland, and the Salvadoran Association of Parents of Exceptional Down Syndrome Friends.

On a recent Saturday, in the last of a row of suburban townhouses, Luís Felipe snacked on ethnic Salvadoran foods and discussed how Salvadorans in the Washington area support their families and communities in the old country.

“This is something different,” he said, telling how C.U.S. is a legally registered nonprofit organization. The goal of the umbrella organization is to help hometown associations organize themselves to sponsor good projects back in El Salvador.

Luís Felipe had put in a long week at the auto shop, and he sank into the sofa on his one free afternoon.

“I’ve been sick,” he said, “and two guys at the shop, they quit.”

Nevertheless, his charitable enthusiasm for El Salvador came across stronger than his frustrations of running an international nonprofit organization while also working full-time. Luís Felipe, 49, is a clean-cut man with a warm smile and friendly presence. He came to the U.S. in 1978 and pumped gas for \$1.50 an hour.

“The Salvadoran dream is to come here for two years, work hard, and go back to El Salvador with money to start a business and live well,” he said.

But it rarely works. Expenses start to add up, and the wages that seemed to abound at 15 times the rate they did back home start going toward a more secure life here, if they’re not leaving in money transfers straight back to one’s family. The Romeros

have three children; the last one in the house is 18 years old, which is the approximate amount of time Luís Felipe's worked at the Community Auto Service in Bethesda Md.

Despite living more than half of their lives in the United States, the Romeros are intimately connected with El Salvador. They speak in Spanish, discuss Salvadoran politics, eat Salvadoran food and are constantly subject to the events and ideas of 30 Salvadoran associations under the C.U.S. umbrella. Community associations help immigrants maintain the hometown ties, especially for those whose legal status won't permit them to travel. This wasn't a problem for the Romeros, who came when it was easier to get residency and citizenship, but Luís Felipe wanted to help his home country beyond just sending money to individuals or particular communities.

Associated Salvadorans of Maryland came to life in 2000, just in time for El Salvador's earthquakes of early 2001. Like most of these fraternal organizations, the Associated Salvadorans is volunteer-run and exists mainly during fundraisers and in the cell phone network of its leaders. Its first project, which pulled together Salvadoran immigrants from different regions of El Salvador and the D.C. area, was to supply lumber and corrugated steel for 252 families made homeless by the earthquakes. The association has a Salvadoran partner organization called Roots and Watercolors, which every year since 2001 distributes 5,000 school kits with notebooks, pencils and the like. In exchange for their school packets, Roots and Watercolors' kids help out with reforestation projects. Through the Pan-American Development Foundation, Associated Salvadorans of Maryland has sponsored the building of four rural schools this year, with a total cost of \$20,000.

Other hometown associations repair schools, support old folks and promote income development projects for Salvadoran youth. Luís Felipe hopes organizations like his can dissuade others from emigrating; one of its strategies is to support artisan skills training for young women. Luís Felipe wants to help young mothers and children to "not have the goal of leaving when they're 12 years old."

He also wants Salvadorans at home to better invest their remittances from North America, which have become the primary source of the country's income, but which are mostly spent on household necessities and consumer goods.

"If we get \$100, we spend \$100," Luís Felipe said. After 30 years of life in Maryland, however, the Romeros send few personal remittances. Most of El Salvador's foreign money comes from recent arrivals who tend to send home the greater portion of their wages. Now that their children are leaving the nest, Luís Felipe and Blanca talk about retiring one day in El Salvador, if they can find a quiet place in the countryside.

Sitting in his home of 23 years, Luís Felipe explained how C.U.S. is an apolitical, nonreligious organization, though these topics run deep among Salvadorans. The leftwing FMLN party and the ruling, rightwing ARENA party tend to treat each other like the bitter enemies they basically were during 12 years of civil war, and Pentecostal and Catholic Christians tend to draw each other outside the box of Christianity. But in the United States, Luís Felipe said, national unity trumps ideological differences, and Salvadorans are known for their charity, whether the cause is clean water for a rural Salvadoran village or for earthquake victims in Peru.

As his conversation progressed, Luís Felipe became more and more excited, and claimed Salvadorans are 10 times more active per capita than Mexicans in terms of community organizing for hometown support. The umbrella organization tries to work with the Salvadoran government and embassies, but Luís Felipe was frustrated that the government of El Salvador doesn't put more money into education. "We're fighting up here, having meetings and selling pupusas to build some classrooms, and the government doesn't send them teachers ... it's not our job to build schools," he said.

Though his organizations are nonpartisan, Luís Felipe holds strong opinions on Salvadoran politics. He was and is strongly against the year-and-a-half-old free trade agreement with the United States, which was championed by the ruling right-wing party and the U.S. Embassy in El Salvador, but fought by the left-wing opposition party.

"Look at NAFTA," he said, claiming Mexico's poverty worsened after their free trade agreement, and El Salvador's will do the same. He said farmers will have a hard

time competing with U.S. imports. The winners, according to Luís Felipe, are the banks, telephone companies and other big businesses, like the Pollo Campero chicken joints next to the remittance centers in Salvadoran malls.

As he snacked on mango slices, soft bread, avocados, coconut water and Salvadoran cheese, the phone rang, and it was Patricia Campos, another co-founder of the umbrella organization. After a hearty greeting, Luís Felipe passed the phone to Blanca, and told how Campos, from a small town in El Salvador, was recently appointed to a board overseeing New Jersey casinos.

Luís Felipe's organization has a 12-member board of directors, but there's no office or paid staff.

"Imagine the fundraising we could do if it were someone's job," he said. As it is, he does what he can, after hours, to pull small Salvadoran hometown associations into a broader network. The previous weekend, Luís Felipe and Blanca had been to a dance party for people in Santa Marta, a village of 3,500 in central El Salvador. Seven hundred fifty people came with \$10 each, Luís Felipe said.

"What's going on tomorrow?" he called out to Blanca, who was upstairs.

Blanca, a full-time publicist, uses some of her spare time to direct the Salvadoran Association of Parents of Exceptional Down Syndrome Friends, the group that put the Romeros on this path of community organizing for collective remittances. One of Blanca's cousins in El Salvador was born with Down Syndrome. They realized there was a group of kids with Down Syndrome in El Salvador, marginalized from most of society but wanting to start a Boy Scout chapter.

So, 10 years ago, Blanca and Luís Felipe started hosting dinners in their home, collecting donations for Scout uniforms and special outings. The group is still active, and Blanca plans to host a fundraising ladies brunch in November. Two years ago she accompanied a group of 24 Scouts, young men and young women ages 15 to 33, each of them with Down Syndrome, on an outing from El Salvador to Guatemala with their parents.

"Tomorrow..." she said – tomorrow, Sunday, there was a party in Sterling, Va.

“This is a new group,” Luís Felipe said, referring to the association of emigrants from the village of Guatajiagua. Its leaders began talking with the umbrella organization about three months ago, which has given the group fundraising advice and moral support.

Twenty-four hours later, the Romeros were leaving suburban Maryland across the Potomac for suburban Virginia. Sterling is about 45 minutes away from Gaithersburg, and the party was in a neighborhood of single-story homes. Quiet, but not sterile, and plenty of cars parked along the street.

Someone from the Guatajiagua association guided Luís Felipe to the house by cell phone. He opened the door, and was met by a billow of smoke – this was a dance party with colored lights and a fog machine. The living room was cleared except for a few plastic chairs, the DJ’s folding table, colored lights and two enormous speakers blasting cumbia dance music. From time to time someone would put down a few rhythmic steps on the beige carpet, but mostly people sat on the edges or at the plastic-covered tables in the modest dining room.

A handful of people were drinking beer in the backyard, and about 25 people inside shouted their conversations over the music, which rattled the walls. Pupusas sizzled silently on a griddle atop a circa-1970s Kenmore range. A young man with a ball cap sat with a notebook, writing the amounts of money as people donated it for what they ate throughout the evening. The hostess, one Ana V., was pleased to see the Romeros.

“Do you want to dance?” she shouted as they greeted their way into the kitchen. Between bustling to bring pineapple fruit drink, pupusas, beef soup, thick tortillas and other national staples to people around the house, Ana shared some of her story as the president of the United for the Communities of Guatajiagua P.A.C. committee. (P.A.C. are the initials of Guatajiagua’s surrounding hamlets.)

“I’ve been here 15 years,” she said, shouting to be heard above the music. “I don’t have papers. I haven’t seen my daughter – one of them – in 15 years.”

Ana, 48, sent for her other four children in four trips. Under the amnesty program, she can work, but she hasn’t yet applied for residency, so she can’t risk a trip to El Salvador.

Nelson, a young man helping coordinate the party, said the proceeds from events like this go to families back in the remote communities outside Guatajiagua, a place that was thick with war in the 1980s. Only 22, Nelson's been here five years, but his manner of speech showed a sense of urgency for the folks at home; he could have been on a weekend visit.

"I've seen what it is for kids to have worms – parasites," he said, explaining that he grew up a two-hour hike from a clinic.

Someone with legal U.S. residence will bring the money to its destination, Luís Felipe explained. There is little accountability on the part of the umbrella, but the organization encourages members like the Guatajiagua committee to track which projects and people get how much money.

Miguel Diaz, whose wife was recently expelled from the United States, drove down from Baltimore, where he works for the Laborers Union. He studied labor laws in high school, in El Salvador, so he had an idea of the regulations governing construction firms in the United States. He said his curious inquiries with union organizers as a recent immigrant were enough for his boss to fire him. He was a legal worker, under the American Baptist Church legislation. He said he sued the company and won.

Miguel went to pay for \$10 of pupusas, and told Ana to keep the change on his \$20 bill.

Around 8 o'clock the music stopped, and everyone gathered in the living room for speeches. Ana thanked everyone for coming, for supporting her humble town, and thanked Luís Felipe for his organizational help. Luís Felipe gave a few words of encouragement and passed the microphone to Jorge Granados, member of a separate Guatajiagua association.

Jorge took the microphone, tipping his hat to the camaraderie of transnational neighborhoods.

"You all might not know me," he said, "I left as youngster. But one remains connected at the belly button, and we're from the same place... I congratulate you, P.A.C."

The disc jockey hit the applause button on his sound system, and soon the room shook once more with music.

Standing in front of 12-inch speakers in full vibration, Sandra, a young woman from northeastern El Salvador, spoke of her hometown, Perquín. She was a founder of the town's war museum, which displays all manner of guerrilla relics, including bits of the helicopter that brought one of the El Salvador's most notorious generals to his death, courtesy of a radio-controlled rebel bomb.

While her 4-year-old daughter played in the swirling lights, Sandra explained how she came five years ago on a tourist visa and never left. Had she done the same thing seven years ago, she would have qualified to work legally under the amnesty program. As it is, she works as a nanny for cash under the table. As with most others at the party, with or without protected status, traveling to El Salvador isn't a likely prospect anytime soon.

The Romeros left after about 50 handshakes, and best-wishing on everyone's behalf. They reminisced about life in El Salvador, and prepared themselves for another week of work in suburban Maryland.

Creating El Salvador in Washington

One Sunday in October, Phil Anderson, a Lutheran minister from the Midwest, walked through central Washington, D.C. and spoke about the area's Salvadoran history. He recently served as interim pastor in two northern-Virginia Lutheran parishes, where he witnessed the anxiety of Salvadoran and other immigrants over an atmosphere of anti-illegal immigrant legislation.

Anderson lived in El Salvador at the peak of the civil war, from 1985 to 1990. His main jobs were to get innocent people out of jail and to keep church groups like his Lutheran organization from being thrown out of the country. Between guiding El Salvador's Lutheran bishop on a short visit to Washington and attending meetings with the Save Darfur organization, he found time to point out Salvadoran landmarks.

“This is where Salvadorans first came in the 1980s,” he said, walking along Columbia Road in central Washington. Salvadoran restaurants, street vendors and social service organizations are still all around the neighborhood, but the real explosion has been in the suburbs like Langley Park, Gaithersburg, Arlington and so on, where recent immigrants have a better chance of affording a place to live.

Still, Sunday at the District’s Catholic parish of the Shrine of the Sacred Heart is heavily Salvadoran affair. Walking up 16th Street from Columbia Road, the conglomeration of booths outside the cathedral was visible from three blocks away.

“It’s a market straight from El Salvador,” exclaimed an older woman, perhaps a visitor or a recent arrival.

At 12 o’clock the church was packed for mass, and dozens of vendors outside sold Salvadoran street food to an equal number of customers.

Pupusas, sweet corn tamales, fried yucca with cabbage salad, corn porridge – the delicacies of El Salvador – are available throughout the region, in run-down strip malls, pupusa trucks and even the colonial looking shops of places like Olde Towne Gaithersburg, 25 miles north of Washington. Alongside restaurants and traditional groceries are the money-transfer and international package services.

Gaithersburg’s Gigantic Express displayed a “Renew your TPS here” sign, and on a recent Saturday, the line was composed of half a dozen Salvadorans at a time, not so much for applications to the amnesty program, but to send home two or three 50-dollar bills.

Payments like this sustain the Salvadoran economy, which was injected by approximately \$3 billion in remittances last year, around 17 percent of its gross domestic product.

Salvadoran immigrants like Luís Felipe Romero and Ronald Luna say this pattern has created a consumer society, and say many have left farm work behind to wait for remittance checks, to buy the latest clothes and cell phones.

Stateside, Salvadorans who've been here longer are starting to decrease their visits home, opting to create a Salvadoran environment in Washington, Los Angeles or Houston.

Luna has some relatives in Soyapango, just east of San Salvador, but his family's main connection is his one remaining grandmother.

"She doesn't want to come," he said. His parents send her money and occasionally visit, but, Luna said, "When she dies... that's it."

His uncles no longer travel to their native country, he said; they prefer the Caribbean or Europe.

Luna still goes to El Salvador, but that could change when he's married and has children. People used to go back to get the Salvadoran things not available in the north, but now there are whole communities of Salvadorans living here.

"Will I go? I don't know. Anything you can think of, we have it here," he said.

Official optimism, popular skepticism

On Oct. 22, the last day Salvadorans could extend their protected status, El Salvador's consul here, Ana Margarita Chávez, was busily tallying numbers and talking with other consuls across the country. The total number of qualifying Salvadorans was expected to be between 200,000 and 234,000. The Wisconsin Avenue consulate would be open until 11 p.m., Chávez said, leaving time for applicants to get to the Union Station Post Office by midnight.

It's not explicit in the forms, but TPS is a program for illegal immigrants who happened to come at the right time and are eager to work. Several large businesses – Marriott, Whole Foods, Oncore Construction – asked the consulate to help register their Salvadoran workers, Chávez said.

Pointing to an application on her desk, Chávez said the particular applicant here was a rarity; she overstayed her tourist visa. Most applicants declare their entry as Texas,

Arizona or New Mexico, Chávez said – they came by land, most of them having paid smugglers thousands of dollars each.

Asked if the program could lead to citizenship, the consul applied the wishful thinking common to her country folk here. “I think it’s feasible,” she said. If Salvadorans show they’re hard working, good citizens, the U.S. Government should give them a break.

Chávez pulled out a calculator, multiplying the \$420 in fees for protected status and a work permit by 234,000.

“Imagine, we’ve put \$98,280,000 in their treasury just for the TPS,” she said.

But the very name of the program, the Temporary Protection Status, defies Consul Chávez’ optimism.

The protection Salvadorans seek is not so much from the effects of earthquakes – which will have happened eight years ago by the time the program expires – but from an economic system that makes it more feasible to support one’s family and community from thousands of miles away, despite the risks of breaking immigration laws and paying thousands of dollars to smugglers. With wages in El Salvador about \$5 a day, street crime on the rise, agriculture on its way out and a fourth of the country already here, there is no question Salvadorans will keep coming, with or without temporary amnesty, legal residency, stronger borders or anti-immigrant legislation in local governments.

For Salvadorans like Ana Ferrufino, the Washington area will be home until further notice. Being able to travel would be nice, but for now, the amnesty program is a good shelter from the threat of community round-ups. There is work to do and a family to feed – not just in El Salvador, a land Ferrufino’s daughter has never seen, but here in Washington, where many a young citizen is raised by parents who are illegal immigrants.

Waiting in the lobby of the Salvadoran Consulate, Ferrufino’s hopes ran in the same direction of Consul Chávez, while her skepticism paralleled hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans who grab hold of any legality they can reach.

“They haven’t told us if they’ll give us residency,” Ferrufino said.

For Miguel's wife, the answer was no. For thousands of other Salvadoran immigrants, U.S. citizenship is a far-away dream. The wages they make, however, and the communities they build are real, and their allegiance to the people and customs of El Salvador is not lost over thousands of miles and dozens of years of separation.



El Salvador's Monument to the Distant Brother, on the road from San Salvador to the airport. For every two Salvadorans at home, one has emigrated to the United States. After Los Angeles, the metropolitan area of Washington, D.C. hosts the world's largest concentration of Salvadoran immigrants. Most of those who came in the 1980s during El Salvador's civil war and escaped deportation have managed to get legal residency or citizenship. Legal or not, Salvadorans in the exterior sustain the country's economy by sending remittances equivalent to 17 percent of the gross domestic product.



Consular officials in Washington hand out the first Salvadoran passports with new security measures in the United States. The Salvadoran Consulate here was in a flurry of promotion from August until Oct. 22, the last day qualified Salvadorans could extend their work permits under the Temporary Protection Status (TPS), which the United States approved for Salvadorans after their country's earthquakes in 2001. Renewed TPS grants amnesty through March 2009 to Salvadorans who immigrated illegally before February 2001. The consulate set up offices at fairs, community centers, banks and workplaces of Salvadorans throughout Washington, D.C., Maryland and Virginia; this consulate and the one in Woodbridge, Va., assisted with 5,000 of approximately 200,000 applications.



Signs face off at a bus stop in Langley Park, Md., a Salvadoran hotspot just northeast of Washington: The advertisement on the electric pole is from an immigration lawyer hoping to attract Salvadorans who need help with their applications for Temporary Protection Status.



A dance party for Guatajiagua – loud music and the aromas of ethnic foods filled this house in Sterling, Va., as organizers hoped to raise money for poor people in their hometown in eastern El Salvador. Lack of legal residence here doesn't stop committees and hometown associations from fundraising, and recent immigrants tend to send the most money home.



Jorge Granados and Luís Felipe Romero of Washington, D.C., and Gaithersburg, Md., enjoyed pupusas, Salvadoran tortillas and grilled beef at a fundraising event for the Salvadoran village of Guatijiagua, Granados' hometown. Both men have lived in the metropolitan area of Washington the better part of their lives, and both men and their wives are active leaders of transnational communities. Besides their volunteer work, Granados is a realtor and Romero is foreman at an auto repair shop. Proceeds from the party were destined to pay an elderly man's medical bills in Guatijiagua.



As president of United Salvadoran Communities (C.U.S.), Luis Felipe Romero (center left) congratulated the transnational Guatajiagua committee in Virginia, and encouraged them to work hard and support good projects back home. Associations under the United Salvadoran Communities (C.U.S.) umbrella decide independently what to do with their money; C.U.S. simply helps them with fundraising ideas and recommends complete transparency in their donations.



Salvadoran restaurants and groceries have proliferated in places like Olde Towne Gaithersburg, Md., where the Hispanic population is growing at a much faster pace than the white majority. Forty miles southwest of Gaithersburg in Virginia, Prince William County Supervisors passed Oct. 17 what is commonly known among Hispanics as an “anti-immigrant law.” As much it can, the county will deny public services and business licenses to undocumented immigrants, and police will begin checking immigration status at routine traffic stops.



Day laborers, many of them Salvadoran, can expect \$10 to \$15 an hour for work coordinated through the non-profit Casa de Maryland out of this office near Gaithersburg, Md. Those who congregate in parking lots waiting for contractors make around \$7 an hour and have no legal protection. Casa de Maryland has placed an average of 40 workers daily since the temporary worker site opened in April, and most employers are repeat customers.

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