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REVOLUTIONARY MEMORIES AND BUILDING NEW WORLDS IN EL SALVADOR

By Frank Coughlin

In the context of the west coast of the US on fire, the continuing superstorms hitting the US, and the growing fear of real nuclear war, I went to the heat and the rain of El Salvador last fall, to celebrate with old friends the 30th anniversary of Santa Marta's repatriation to their community after the country's bloody 12-year civil war: October 10, 2017.

As we continue in the process of understanding autonomy, there is an emphasis on the "to come," on the future of where we will be. Western culture and capitalism are ingrained with a belief of progress, that each day we become more "civilized," more "perfect," more true to the selves that we can become. We are told that our children will always live better than we do. But as late-capitalism continues its undeniable destabilization, we can no longer place a blind faith in mere progress. There is no ability to return to the past, and so in some sense, moving forward is all we can do, but in these times of such uncertainty, we must look towards the past to remember where we have come from.

“ One of the larger projects is **The Greenhouse**, a rapidly growing group of structures at the edge of town, run by a collective of young adults in the community, with the goal of transforming food cultivation in the region and providing food autonomy to the town. ”

For humanity, the past has always been something to hold dear. In oral traditions, lessons were passed on to new generations by the retelling of myths and stories; a constant reminder that the struggles of today were the struggles of yesteryear. In our western culture, we maintain cer-

tain memories of the past to further bolster our sense of the world. With the recent passing of Columbus Day in the US, we praise a man and a mindset that is nothing less than genocidal. We praise our presidents as bastions of democracy, albeit forgetting the fact that they were slave-owners. And recently, we passed the memory of September 11th, a day in the US that is used to justify the hundreds of thousands of deaths wrought by the US military.

Yet not all memory is used for these purposes. In our own collective, I wrote this as we neared the year anniversary of the tragic death of a dear comrade. As we approached the date, there was clearly a sense of sadness, but as the grief grows more distant, his memory becomes a way to celebrate the life and vision he planted within us. There are the family memories, the anniversaries of



love, of sadness, of all kinds. For so many of us, time does not function in a linear fashion, but perhaps we are always cycling between the past, present and future.

From roughly 1980 to 1992, the small country of El Salvador was devastated by a brutal civil war. Heavily funded by the US, the El Salvadorian government and the guerrilla army of the FMLN waged a war that tore the country apart for more than a decade. Countless massacres of civilian populations, the implementation of “scorched earth” fighting taught to Salvadoran military elite at the School of the Americas in the US, and continued poverty, forced the communities of El Salvador to flee the country.

In the area of Cabañas, in the northeast, many community members became refugees in Honduras, living in large encampments. After seven years as refugees miles away from their own communities, many populations decided to relocate to El Salvador, even though the war raged on. It was a decision of desperation and desire for a new way of living, courageously deciding to no longer live in fear, but rather, to forge ahead in their own land.

In the camps, abject poverty was rampant, along with the continued abuses of the Honduran and El Salvadoran governments. For anyone who has been to a refugee camp, it is barely a life, let alone a place to raise a family for seven years. And so, with the war raging on in the country, the populations returned to

their homeland. Many were not able to return to their specific lands or they returned to a community infrastructure demolished by years of war.

In the town of Santa Marta, in the Department of Cabañas, the first of three large contingents of refugees returned to rolling hills, pot-marked by deep holes left by US-made bombs. Receiving some assistance from UNHCR and other NGO groups, they were given building materials to construct a community. In the 30 years that followed, a community blossomed.

Being *campesinos* themselves, there was a lot of support for the guerrilla movement, many of the combatants being from the communities themselves. Houses were built, dirt roads created, land was bought from the landowners and communalized, with each farmer caring for a small plot. Educational programs such as ADES (Association of Economic and Social Development in Santa Marta) were built to create varied structures in which to support the overall social development of the community. Surrounded by conservative, pro-government strongholds, the community focused on developing its own material power and autonomy.

“As the years progressed, a new generation of youth, many of whom were born in the refugee camps began to take on the struggle for autonomy. They formed groups to address needs that were present within the communities.”

work for years without compensation, going to school full-time, and helping with family duties, they built organizations that have become vital to the community. Greenhouses for communal food autonomy, teaching new methods of agriculture to older farmers, physical therapists bringing massage and movement therapies to the clinic, youth groups working to create space for LGBTQ struggles, working against centuries old patriarchy and violence, psychiatrists providing communal mental health services, and finding ways to avoid the traps of mass emigration or gangs that the youth in rural poor areas always face.

In so doing, these youth find ways to honor the memory of those who have come before. Not a blind faith, but a continuation of the vision for a new world. From the historical figures like Che (whose face can be seen everywhere in the town), to the injured combatants of the community, to the beautiful faces of the next generation running through the mud, the memory of what has been infuses the town with a strength. As explained in the theme of the festival, “with the injured, we build the future which will strengthen us by honoring those who have fallen.” The cycle of generations finds its rhythm in the ebb and flow of past and future.

One thing that permeates the town is a sense of connec-

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FIRST PAGE: DGH Board Member Elvis ‘Peter’ Nataren with his son at the anniversary celebration in solidarity with the Santa Marta community. ABOVE TOP CENTER: Greenhouse created by a community youth collective to grow pesticide-free crops. ABOVE TOP RIGHT: Mural on the rehabilitation clinic wall.

TAINTED WATER: WATTS RESIDENTS ORGANIZE FOR WATER JUSTICE

By Puvvula Jyoti

During a nutrition health education talk for a group of residents and parents in Watts, while I was discussing the need to drink ample water every day, and more when exercising, a young mother pulled out her phone and showed us the picture of a bottle filled with what looked like brown sediment water from the bottom of a riverbed. It was actually water from her tap. She told us this was not an occasional event, but rather something she experienced frequently.

As physicians and public health professionals working both locally and globally, we are keenly aware of the public health consequences caused by the lack of safe, clean and affordable drinking water. It is responsible for the deaths of millions of individuals throughout the world. Drinking contaminated water can result in a range of poor health outcomes. However, what many – including myself – did not realize is that even today, poor water quality is a pervasive issue in many of our local communities, primarily impacting poor communities of color.

In disbelief I followed the lead-tainted water story of Flint Michigan, which shed yet another light on the longstanding environmental injustices faced by communities of color; in this instance it revealed how the city had been providing its predominantly people of color residents with water from a known contaminated water supply source. Nationally it revealed that poor water quality is not just a reality in Chiapas or India or other DGH community partners, but is in fact a grave issue in our own backyard. Until that moment, I did not realize that this was the reality for many of my patients living in the Los Angeles communities of Watts, South Los Angeles and Maywood.

Watts! For many the first images that come to mind when we hear of ‘Watts’ are The Watts Riots, the Watts towers, gangs, Ice Cube, or Hollywood movies like “Boyz in the Hood.” But below all that is a lost rich history of a once thriving community. During World War II, with the opening of large steel ammunition factory in the community of Watts, came a large migration of African Americans from the south. Despite many racist California laws that red lined and kept the African American segregated, Watts was a thriving community. Even after the closing of the factories, it remained a community of organizers – from SNCC to the Black Panthers – with a thriving economy that included restaurants and corner nightclubs; people gathering for intellectual discourse to chart and change the course of social injustice in this nation. However, as jobs left and

the government dismantled the community leadership, a void was created, part of which came to be filled with gangs and drugs.

A small neighborhood in South Los Angeles, Watts is not only one of the densest populated communities in California, but it is predominantly a poor, young community of color. It is also among the top 5% of the most polluted neighborhoods based on the CalEnviro screen that rates the cumulative burden of pollution on communities based on other factors such as income, education, dependency, etc. With a paucity of grocery stores and green spaces, and an abundance of fast food restaurants, residents in Watts boast one of the highest rates of obesity, heart disease, stroke and other chronic diseases. This has ultimately resulted in a life expectancy difference of more than a decade among the residents of Watts from those living only a few miles away in the communities of Brentwood and West Los Angeles.

Now we had to add the problem of contaminated water. The preliminary results from a randomized household survey that we conducted in the Jordan Downs community of Watts showed that 87% of the households reported having murky, brown tap water. Most of these survey respondents stated that it took more than an hour to clear, and often did not clear at all. Furthermore, a preliminary scan of the local Consumer Confidence Reports for Watts found that in several instances, individual water samples for certain secondary contaminants were found to be near or even over the regulatory maximum contaminant level requirements.

As physicians, we understand that safe potable water is critical to an individual’s



TOP: Community residents organizing for clean water and soil. BOTTOM: Advocating on the Hill in Sacramento for SB 623 Safe and Affordable drinking water bill. From left to right: Thelmy Perez (Los Angeles Human Right to Housing Collective), Gilberto Granados (Physician, Doctors for Global Health), Jordan High (Watts high school student), Martha Jordan Downs (public housing and Watts resident), Alexander Harden (Legal Aid foundation), Monika Shankar (Physicians for Social Responsibility-Land Use and Environmental Justice Coordinator).

ELECTORAL PROCESSES OF THE *TRIANGULO NORTE* AND TRUMP


By Elvis 'Peter' Nataren

health and for avoiding many acute and chronic illnesses. However, 95% of those surveyed stated that they did not feel comfortable drinking the tap water and 62% were not comfortable using it for cooking. Most survey participants indicated that they had to buy drinking water, adding an additional financial burden to their already stretched budgets. Worse, residents who lack safe, clean drinking water were turning to sugary alternatives that are so detrimental to health.

However, instead of giving up, the Watts community residents started organizing. They asked why they should feel unsafe drinking this water that they are paying for, and asked why – in the richest country – people do not have safe water to drink. Under the banner of Watts Water Justice Coalition (WWJC), a group of community residents, physicians, human rights and legal advocacy groups started organizing other residents to not only disseminate the information through a series of workshops, but to advocate for change and clean water legislation.

The work of WWJC has already resulted in a large health summit in Watts; a second educational workshop was held on Watts water quality (including the contaminants found in the water); reading your water quality report, and how to file a complaint. This has been followed with bimonthly meetings with the water regulatory board and Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to do further needs assessment and household water quality testing for the Watts residents.

Finally, the coalition has been working with water advocacy groups in the central valley and northern CA to advocate for the passage of SB 623, which would guarantee safe and affordable drinking water for all CA residents. While the bill is facing a stiff challenge from the agribusiness and other water companies in CA, the residents of Watts continue to fight every day as they work towards making clean and affordable drinking a human right.

The story of Watts has not been completed yet. The residents continue to write the narrative of what the future of this community will look like for their children. 

After the electoral process for Mayors and Congress on March 4, 2018 in El Salvador, we must make a profound reflection not only of the results, but also of the political context that is taking shape in the *Triangulo Norte* (Northern Triangle of Central America), in addition to the attacks by Donald Trump's administration.

One of the serious problems of the three countries in question is their economies based on a model full of corruption that does not allow for the fairer distribution of wealth in society. This results in a painful level of extreme violence and waves of migration to other countries: many people as refugees from threats or violence from gangs and drug traffickers, though migration has traditionally been associated with poverty and the search for better economic options.

The political class of the Northern Triangle also has many things in common. Included are aspects: They are a class that does not contribute to solve common social problems, generating high levels of distrust in the citizenship, and the great majority sees the political officials as synonymous with corruption. The electoral processes themselves do not offer much hope for changing the future of life for many people. Most believe that everything will always be the same, a campaign lie from no matter who, is what they call electoral promise.

The judicial, governmental, electoral and military systems are in the control of the most economically wealthy elite of the region. The historical violence of the region continues in what appears to be the service of those economic interests. For example, the murder of Berta Cáceres, a teacher and community activist leader against a dam project in Honduras, is typical of that (a high-ranking executive in the hydroelectric company involved in the dam project was arrested in March of this year in connection with her murder).

On March 4th, the elections in El Salvador left the bitter news that the FMLN party, which fights for economic justice, suffered the worst defeat in its history. This defeat is worrisome because the result is not due to a right-wing ARENA party on the rise. It is simply the population upset that the current FMLN government did not change anything in the administrative model of the State.

And El Salvador is not alone in this disaffection. Guatemala has suffered an escalation of public trials due to the levels of despair in which the people live. The acceptance by many sectors of Guatemala that an international commission be set up to investigate all types of institutional fraud, is proof that the Guatemalan people have no confidence in their ruling class anymore and do not believe that anyone can move institutions in their country on a more positive path.

Honduras is the most aberrant case in the region of the last eight years. A coup d'état was carried out against the democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya, who proposed to give more space for social development to his people in general. The marginalization of the entire sector that now accompanies the former president of the LIBRE party, including a part of the family of Berta Cáceres, is very evident. Since the coup, there has been repression of every social protest, as well as an escalation in rapes and murders, that have made Honduras the "most dangerous country on the planet outside of a full-fledged war zone."

The Northern Triangle now has less government unity than it did five years ago, and that is without even yet counting the effects of the probable rupture and differences that Donald Trump's administration will create in the region. Trump's suspension of programs such as the Temporary Protective Status (TPS) or the Dreamers as well as his policy of mass deportations, have exacerbated the problems of the region.

The government of El Salvador has

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BUILDING NEW WORLDS IN EL SALVADOR

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tion. Not just to each other, but to history. Walking with a doctor friend from Mexico, who had participated in the war, it becomes impossible to walk more than 10 feet without someone calling his name, a chance encounter that leads into story after story. The way the history of each other comes out humbles the mind. The man we meet walking to his farm is a dear friend from the war, who begins recalling the stories of working within enemy lines for 12 years, stealing arms from the government forces. “We never fired a shot, but used our heads,” he keeps saying, as much a lesson for us as for his younger self. The path we walk is no longer just a path in a beautiful countryside, but the “guerrilla path.” And over there by that tree, that’s “where I stepped on a mine and lost my eye,” says our friend. The stories from a fellow comrade in the US, who was doing field research in the beginning of the war in this community, recalls the 14 days he spent in El Salvador, 12 of which were under fire. His story of being a young idealist coming up against the real terror of machine gun fire, running through the hills with the community, losing track of time and his mind as fear overtook his body, still cause you to forget to breathe decades later.

The photos of old comrades, most of them dead it seems, the older generation laughing and at the same time holding a far away look into memory. The stories of heroism alongside the complex stories of fear taking over. And even now, the anger still felt at decisions made, sacrifices made, the way the PTSD permeates relationships often more than 30 years later.

This is the history that fuels the work of many of the younger generation, those that are now new parents and community leaders, who were born in the refugee camps. They returned to El Salvador with their families in the midst of the civil war. They have since developed into the leaders of many of the autonomous projects within Santa Marta. While there is some funding to these projects, mainly from community groups, international grants, and some NGO sponsorship, like DGH, most of the people are volunteering many hours a week to the projects.

Five years ago I worked with CoCoSI, which is a youth led organization to increase awareness around HIV and domestic violence. It has since blossomed into a large group with more than a decade of experience of increasing education around HIV and sexually transmitted diseases, reproductive rights and sovereignty, LGBTQ issues, and eradication of domestic violence. In addition, it has been vital in facilitating access to health resources such as anti-retrovirals for vulnerable populations, including sex workers and prison inmates.

One of the larger projects is The Greenhouse, a rapidly growing group of structures at the edge of town, run by a collective of young adults in the community, with the goal of transforming food cultivation in the region and providing food autonomy to the town. They have taught themselves, through extensive travel and study, many of the diverse practices of organic farming. In a region where the use of pesticides is rampant, they strive to re-create more traditional ways of farming. Because of the eco-

nomie climate, most farmers focus on corn and beans, used for some level of subsistence living but also for sale. This practice has led to a decrease in vegetable growing, which becomes problematic as it is coupled with the rise of processed food dependence seen all over the world. The leaders at The Greenhouse recognize that most of the produce one can buy in the nearby town are the rejects from prosperous nations, such as the US, and

are likely grown with heavy reliance on pesticides. So they hold classes for people to learn to start their own small scale gardens, sell most of their produce at below market rates, and hold classes for the local farmers to learn pesticide free ways of growing food.

In addition, there are a wide array of health and care related projects. Two young women run the Rehab Center, utilizing massage and physical therapy to work with many of the residents with disabilities. There is the local psychiatrist who is forming community mental health groups where people can talk about their mental well-being in safe environments.

Many of these projects arise from a failure of the government to provide such resources. It also stems from a general understanding that the government will likely not provide such services and that they must own their own models of care and social reproduction.

As we move beyond the OpenVillage Festival, we must remember the paths we have come from and work to develop a strong sense of cultural memory. The dominant culture has its own models of memory, which for many of us, no longer hold a viable future. The community in Santa Marta has been pivotal in my understanding of that failure. Instead, we must look to our revolutionary pasts to be able to reimagine a new world, a world in which we can walk together towards a reinterpretation of what a “good life” is.

“Two young women run the Rehab Center, utilizing massage and physical therapy to work with many of the individuals with disabilities in the community. There is the local psychiatrist who is forming community mental health groups where people can talk about their mental well-being in safe environments.”



Bandstand where various musical, dance, and theater groups performed throughout the day of the 30th anniversary celebration.



DOCTORS FOR GLOBAL HEALTH
Promoting Health and Human Rights
"With Those Who Have No Voice"
Box 1761, Decatur, GA 30031, USA
Tel. & Fax: 404-377-3566
E-mail: dghinfo@dghonline.org
www.dghonline.org

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ELECTORAL PROCESSES AND TRUMP

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been almost alone in its struggle to get support of their citizens at the doors of the US Congress. Honduras has not taken much interest in the issue and Guatemala has remained silent.

In 2019 there will be new elections in El Salvador. Everything indicates that the FMLN will lose the presidency. What will be left is a struggle between the ARENA right-wing party and a movement that is perhaps forming a political party with the current Mayor of San Salvador, Nayik Bukele. The Northern Triangle region will undergo another change that is undoubtedly transcendental for the White House, not only for El Salvador.

The biggest difficulty of this would be if ARENA returned to the government administration. For now, after March 4th it will be a party with a majority in the congress that will not need anything any votes from the FMLN to change laws. They have enough with its minor allies in congress, the other right-wing parties, to do so.

If it were to take over all of the government next year, the policies would almost be the same we currently see in Honduras and Guatemala, with citizens who have no official voice in their defense in Washington, DC.

ARENA will be especially dedicated to changing the processes that the FMLN had generated in some areas, and also to take revenge against some leaders of the FMLN who worked to bring some former ARENA officials to face justice.

Without a doubt, we would have a difficult juncture to confront Donald Trump and his white nationalist apparatus. Both in Central America and in the United States, only social unity among movements that agree with this panorama can have the political counterweight to defend the Human Rights of our fellow citizens at home and abroad. Those organizations acting in solidarity are necessary to surpass the barrier of the particular interests of the ruling elites of the Northern Triangle of Central America and the White House.

► **Mark Your Calendar! 2018 DGH General Assembly.** The 23rd Annual DGH General Assembly will be held in Austin, Texas, August 3rd-5th, 2018!

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DGH Reporter

Edited and designed by Monica Sanchez. Send suggestions by mail to P.O. Box 1761, Decatur, GA, 30031, USA, or by e-mail to newsletter@dghonline.org.

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