

Reflecting on the 30th Anniversary Gathering of the Massacre in El Salvador

By Laurel McGrath, Mercy Associate

I joined the gathering that marked the 30th anniversary of the massacre at the Central American University in El Salvador—the killing of six Jesuits, their housekeeper and her daughter—at the invitation of Sisters JoAnn Persch and Pat Murphy. I knew that there were many martyrs in Central and South America but didn't know enough about the cause and effects and accepted their gracious invitation to learn more at the [School of the Americas Watch](#) in Fort Benning, Georgia.

I like to be prepared for a trip like this so I read two books: [School of Assassins: The Case for Closing the School of the Americas and for Fundamentally Changing US. Foreign Policy](#) by Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer and [The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas](#) by Lesley Gill. The books gave me a bit of an historical perspective, as did conversations with the sisters. JoAnn and Pat brought the stories into focus because they knew people who were impacted, by which I mean tortured and suffer greatly still to this day.

It's hard to believe that human beings, real people, can do such horrendous harm and kill others who have not done nor could do anything to deserve such treatment. And it's here, in the United States, at places like the School of the Americas (SOA), that they are taught to do this.

Greed. From the very beginning it's about what *we* want: land for crops; valuable ores; corporate, military, political and governmental control. There is no concern for the citizens of the countries; they must be silenced or disappeared.

It strikes me that many U.S. citizens know little about the impact the United States and the SOA have had on the vast numbers of people trying to live in their *own* countries. And I was one of those U.S. citizens until I went to Fort Benning the weekend of November 15–17, 2019.

Now, U.S. Border Patrol and ICE are being trained in the same school, now called WHINSEC (Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation). What does that mean for us when our own countrymen and women will be trained to torture and kill?

I was heartbroken to hear of all those who were disappeared. Families don't know and will never know what happened to their loved ones. SOA/WHINSEC teaches that life is of no value.

I listened to the mother and grandmother of the boy who was in *Mexico* playing when he was shot 10 times by a Border Patrol agent in *Texas*. Their sorrow was overwhelming. Their courage telling us about this horrific murder was unbelievable. How do you go on after something like this is done to a child? Your child? No one from Border Patrol or any other governmental agency has arrested the man who is known to have fired those shots and killed that boy.

Do we understand that we, the United States of America, have played a huge role in creating and continuing the immigration crisis? The massive killings by the military in El Salvador, Guatemala, Chile and elsewhere had at least one thing in common—the military leaders were trained at the School of the Americas. *We* are still causing people to flee from the people they love and homes they've known for fear of their lives. They come to America to ask for a safe place to live and because of our current immigration policies are turned away or put in prison. (Current immigration policies are *not* the same policies that enabled my grandparents to come and stay here.) I asked myself that weekend what my role is in the immigration crisis.

American citizens who witness people dying of thirst in the desert are arrested criminalized for placing water where people are known to cross. All religions, as well as basic humanity, teach us to love our neighbor. Yet in our country, the America we love, we punish those who provide water to those who thirst.

The tribute to the prisoners of conscience who went to prison for their beliefs was moving. The panel discussions were amazing and insightful. They also gave us hope. The Pax Christi presentation told us of the children who have died in detention in the U.S. and those who were separated from their parents and have not been reunited. During the Litany, Presentes, Procession of the Fallen, the names of those who died were sung and those walking responded to each with “Presentes.” This gave us an opportunity to remember and pray for those who have died. It gave me a sense of the magnitude of human destruction that was and continues to be delivered by the graduates of SOA/WHINSEC.

But I have hope. SOA Watch continues to inform, educate, promote change and fight for the rights of all. Those who have taken this challenge on—past, present and future—deserve our unending gratitude and support.

I hope and pray that SOA/WHINSEC will be closed. I will support the efforts of SOA Watch. Please pray for those who have died, their loved ones and those who must flee their homelands. Please pray for those who support and attend SOA/WHINSEC that their hearts will be changed.

For more information, visit www.soaw.org or email info@soaw.org.

