

At the SOA Watch: Guided by the Breath of the Spirit

By Mike Poulin

For the morning session of my first School of the Americas Watch (SOAW) gathering in Columbus, Georgia, I was seated in the middle of Sister JoAnn Persch and a man named Daniel. In between songs during the opening segment, Daniel turned to me and said, “It’s good to see some younger faces here.” I chuckled and asked him whose younger face he was referring to. From his reaction, I’m pretty sure he meant mine.

I’m 49 years old.

While I understand that “young” is a relative term, I don’t think of myself that way anymore. Admittedly, I was definitely younger than the median-aged participant, and many of us with “younger faces” were sporting some grey hair. This was in contrast to the crowd that took part in the SOAW event I attend a year ago on the border at Nogales. While the School of the Americas Watch has gathered at Fort Benning annually for more than two decades, for the past three years the event has shifted to the U.S.–Mexico border. It returned to Fort Benning this year to commemorate the 30th anniversary of the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter in El Salvador by graduates of the SOA.

As I reflect upon both of my SOAW experiences, younger people were more evident in two places: at the border event and in the makeup of the SOAW staff itself. I can only guess at the reasons that more young people would travel to the border than to Georgia. Perhaps the media attention the border has drawn over the past few years makes it a more attractive destination for activism. The staff demographics seem to be intentional, as SOAW has made an effort to hire a more diverse group of activists to guide the daily work of the movement. In doing so, they also told the group gathered this year to expect changes in strategy moving forward.

As the SOAW charts a strategic way forward as an organization, my impression is they are being strategic about several things. They are listening to voices from south of the border, where people are actually impacted by the actions of individuals trained at the School of the Americas. They are also exploring new ideas around communication and the types of gatherings that will engage a broader community of people.

Initiating change can be challenging. Reconciling the wisdom and experience of committed elders with the new vision and enthusiasm of emerging voices is a delicate art. Doing so successfully requires listening ears, understanding hearts and only the loosest grip on pride.

Much like the work of our own greater Mercy Community, the work of the School of the Americas Watch engages many issues: immigration, violence, racism, militarism, to name just a few. Moving forward—for the SOAW, for Mercy, for us as a faith-filled people—offers the hope of encountering new blessings and the possibility of numerous pitfalls as we reach toward a new horizon. May we, young and old, new to this work and long committed to it, be guided by the breath of the Spirit.