

By Elizabeth DiNovella
Illustration by Dongyun Lee

Sister Cities Success Story



IT WAS APRIL 1986, IN THE MIDST of El Salvador's civil war, when Madison, Wisconsin, became a sister city to Arcatao, Chalatenango, a tiny Salvadoran village that the U.S.-backed military was in the process of razing.

Soldiers came in, rounded up the young people, and forced everybody into the church. The army told people that if they didn't leave soon, they'd be killed.

This was no idle threat. The army and paramilitaries had killed thousands of civilians in a series of massacres throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

By coincidence, the attack on Arcatao took place at the same time that the Madison city council voted to become its sister city. The International Committee of the Red Cross informed people within Arcatao that Madison had sistered with them. The people in Arcatao decided to stay. And residents of Arcatao who had previously fled into the mountains decided to come back.

"We took out an ad in the Salvadoran papers stating that we held the government of El Salvador responsible for whatever happened to the people of Arcatao," says Marc Rosenthal, a Madison-based nurse who has been involved with the sister city project since its inception.

This type of sistering went beyond the usual cultural exchanges. This relationship was based on a firm

Elizabeth DiNovella is culture editor of The Progressive, and has been a member of the Madison-Arcatao Sister Cities Project.

commitment to human rights and economic justice in both countries.

"The sistering didn't take place in a vacuum either here or there," says Rosenthal. "We were bringing together two organized people in a common program that made it politically viable."

The sister city relationship between Madison and Arcatao didn't end when the peace accords were signed in 1992. The work simply changed. It's a fluid, dynamic relationship. Instead of a focus on moving refugees out of camps and down from the mountains, the emphasis changed to land reform, debt relief, and the fights against privatization of social services such as health care and water. Sister cities activists were talking about privatization, neoliberalism, and austerity before *The Shock Doctrine* was even written.

Alexandra Early is a staff person for the U.S.-El Salvador Sister City Network. Before moving to El Salvador, she was involved in student-labor organizing and also worked at a union. She says that one of the great things about the network is that Salvadorans and Americans get to learn from each other.

"It's a sistering of social movements just as much as it is a sistering of people and individual strong ties," she says.

One network project is to create and support alternatives to unequal free trade agreements. Another supports efforts to stop mining in El Salvador by transnational corporations. It's globalization from below.

"It's the best model of grassroots-based development because in the end, the communities have their own voice, they make their own decisions," says Estela García, co-coordinator of the network. "Sister cities accompany them for real in this process."

One of the projects that Arcatao has prioritized is rescuing its historical memory. Activists have created a tiny museum and are going out into

the mountains to recover the remains of loved ones who didn't get proper burials during the war, and placing them in a newly created memorial garden in town.

In the past two years, delegations from Madison have brought their own memorabilia from the civil war era—T-shirts, photos, magazine articles—to give to the museum. Rosenthal had collected Salvadoran kids' drawings from the war zones over the years and brought them back. García says that the people in Arcatao were crying because "they were so happy and so excited to see all these materials."

García says that this historical memory project is important for the younger generation, which wasn't alive during the civil war.

Esmeralda Villarta, an organizer in San Vicente, El Salvador, says the erasing of their history is part of a system that pushes people toward a consumerist culture.

"All of that consumer culture of spending and spending is based on money that comes from migrants that are living in the U.S.," she says. "So that's the focus: Forget your history, and move people onto this path of a more consumerist future."

Madison is one of seventeen American cities partnered with communities in El Salvador. Madison also has sister relationships with the same commitment to social justice with Ainaro, East Timor, and San Jose Apartadó, Colombia. (The attempt to make Rafah, Gaza, an official sister city was fraught with controversy and did not win enough votes on the Madison city council.)

In 2011, the Madison-Arcatao Sister City Project celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. Agustin Menjivar of the Arcatao Town Council traveled to Wisconsin's capital for the celebration.

"We put our trust in Madison, so that the massacres happening in our town would reach the international community," Menjivar told the

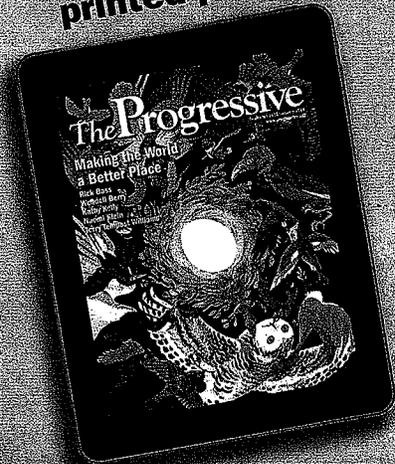
Madison city council. He went on to ask for support, as his country was now in a fight against mining conglomerates.

Mining is also a topic of concern in Wisconsin, where townships, indigenous groups, and environmentalists are fighting a company that is pushing aside regulations and local control to open an iron ore mine in the northern part of the state.

The sister-city project brought Salvadoran organizers to the Bad River reservation in northern Wisconsin, beginning an ongoing dialogue between campesino and Native American activists.

The mining issue shows how much our sister communities have in common, says Marc Rosenthal. And while neither the people of El Salvador nor the citizens of Wisconsin have beat the mining companies yet, Rosenthal believes that together they will stand a better chance. As he puts it: "Sistering remains a strategy that works." ♦

Read
The Progressive
beyond the
printed pages!



As a subscriber, you can view issues of *The Progressive* from your desktop, laptop, and tablet at no extra cost when you subscribe at our website.

Found out how and subscribe at

www.progressive.org