

History of Sister Cities

In the early 80s, the state-sponsored violence against civilians led thousands of Salvadorans to flee their homes in the countryside. After years of being packed into camps in San Salvador or in other Central American countries, the refugees tired of their condition. They formed their own organization (CRIPDES, The Christian Committee in favor of the Displaced of El Salvador) to defend their rights as civilians and to organize to return to their places of origin even as the war continued. As part of a strategy to protect themselves and their rights, the refugees reached out for international support.

In 1986, the people in the town of Arcatao, Chalatenango courageously returned to their homes. For years community members had hid in the hills from brutal Salvadoran army attacks that involved torture, disappearances and, in some cases, Army troops ripping fetuses out of their mother's wombs and throwing the unborn up onto bayonets. Madison, Wisconsin school board Mary Kay Baum arrived in El Salvador with a delegation to deliver a City Council proclamation adopting Arcatao as Madison's Sister City. This Madison effort built upon the city of Berkeley, California's 1983 initiative to declare itself a sister of the war-torn village of San Antonio Los Ranchos, Chalatenango.

Arcatao community leader and now National Assemblywoman Maria Navarrete recalls:

We were weary and frightened. But then came this woman (from the United States)...It gave me such strength. I knew there was hope for us, that somewhere – I did not know exactly where at the time – there was a city called Madison, and in that city were people who cared about Arcatao.

The Arcatao-Madison relationship began roughly at the same time that Cambridge, Massachusetts's citizens organized a relationship with the town of San Jose Las Flores, Chalatenango. Las Flores had been bombed out by army operations in the early 80s. When refugees passed through army barricades to resettle Las Flores in 1986, Cambridge residents pressured their city council to pass a resolution recognizing Las Flores as their Sister City. In December of '86, a Cambridge delegation made their first official visit, walking several miles through conflictive territory to avoid army blockades. This action let the world know that Las Flores was not alone in its courageous resettlement.

Leaders of the resettlement movement suffered jailing, torture, and violent searches at the hands of Salvadoran military, police and paramilitary death squads linked to the security forces. Sister Cities organized national phone and fax pressure campaigns to call directly to the military installations, leading to release of the detainee. This was true in the case of Isabel Hernandez, a refugee leader who was captured and then freed after intense international pressure. In April 1989 after army troops had ransacked and occupied the refugee's office in the capital, this emergency advocacy system helped force the army to leave the building.

More and more US citizens accompanied the Salvadoran's caravans to return to their homes. After witnessing the Salvadoran's suffering, many returned to the US to form sister city relationships with the resettled communities. Baltimore, Maryland sistered with El Barillo, Cuscatlán; Columbus, Ohio with Copapayo, Cuscatlán; and Wichita, Kansas with La Bermuda, Cuscatlán, among other. The US Sister Cities sent delegations to their Salvadoran sister

communities on a regular basis. This served as a strong deterrent to the massacres, bombings and other operations the military had carried out in the early eighties. By helping to protect Salvadorans, the delegations gave peasant leaders the opportunity to renew public organizing efforts. This, in turn, allowed the civil organizations to play an important role in calling for a negotiated solution to the war.

Sister Cities also contributed huge amounts of material aid. Military blockades and government troops' burning of crops frequently left the returned refugees without food or medicines. As a result, the thousands of dollars worth of emergency food, medicine and school supplies from Sister Cities often meant the difference between life and death.

Sister Cities consistently organized in the US to follow-up on the returned communities' priority plea: stop the war by stopping US military aid and intervention. Sister Cities organized teach-ins and demonstrations, lobbied their congressional representatives, had their city councils pass resolutions calling for an end to US military intervention, and brought the reality of the Salvadoran people's suffering into communities throughout the US. Media work, delegation reports and hosting Salvadorans on tour in the US were key pieces of this public education and advocacy. The anti-intervention work played an important role in eventually leading the US government to accept a negotiated solution to the conflict. This change in US policy, together with the civil organizations efforts for peace and the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front's revolutionary struggle, led to the 1992 UN-negotiated Peace Accords. The Accords initiated unprecedented processes of democratization and demilitarization in Salvadoran society.

AFTER THE SALVADORAN CIVIL WAR

Peace brought new challenges. In the US, El Salvador was no longer a lightning rod issue that drew big media headlines. Funding sources turned to other priorities. Lawmakers showed little interest in Central America.

In El Salvador, the Peace Accords did not bring development, or social justice. The sister communities were no longer on the verge of a revolutionary change in their country. Yet, the modern economy offered few alternatives. Urban jobs were scarce. Labor seemed unable to protect workers' rights and wages. The safety valve of immigration to the North became an increasingly harsh option as US policymakers adopted strong anti-immigration legislation.

The global economy marginalized more and more people from opportunity. This made the promotion of new models of economic and social organization, and of people-to-people North-South relations, urgent. Sister Cities worked towards these new models. The organization continued to bring the questions of Human Rights, one of the most vital questions of our time into the forefront of debate in cities and communities in North and South. At the same time, Sister City ties helped to break isolation, offering a new vision of global relationships that puts human rights, and not profits, first.

In El Salvador, the sister communities established a new mission: to reorganize themselves and work with other rural communities in a movement for development with social justice. The resettled peasants then began to identify major threats to their model of communally organized social structures based in local, agrarian economy:

- 1) An absence of essential services, such as schools, medical clinics and roads, and

- 2) Limited economic opportunities due to: poor access to markets, lack of appropriate technology, inadequate credit systems, etc.

The peasants' organized return to their home communities in El Salvador, beginning with the resettlements of Arcatao and Las Flores, was a heroic gesture in the face of difficult odds. At the same time, it was a simple statement that the land is their best hope for survival in a global economy that offers few other options.

1994 AND BEYOND

In 1994, dozens of Sister Cities delegates traveled to El Salvador to observe the first national elections since the 1992 signing of the Peace Accords. The delegates stood by the side of the members of their sister communities, as the Salvadorans voted for mayors, deputies, vice-president and president.

In 1995 and 1996, US and Salvadoran Sister Cities engaged in a collaborative planning process that culminated at a July 1996 Sister Cities Conference in San Salvador. At the event, Salvadoran communities and US cities analyzed their organizing realities and jointly developed new strategies. This led to a renewed commitment to programming focused on advocacy, strategic dialogue, and empowerment of community organizing efforts.

In 1997, there were over 20 Sister Cities delegations to El Salvador. An Edgewood College delegation opened the eyes of more than 20 students to the history of the Salvadoran people, leading the college to establish a sister city with Las Vegas, Chalatenango. After visiting with its sister community, Cinquera, Chicago's 1997 delegation participated with people from throughout the US as elections observers in the March 1997 vote for posts in the national legislature and municipal offices. Sister Cities delegations spent several days with Salvadoran sister communities, improved their understanding of the country through meetings with Salvadoran popular organizations in the capital, and visited US embassy officials to discuss the US role in El Salvador.

Sister Cities organized service auctions, charity dinners, dances, work-a-thons, direct mailings, and door-to-door visits to raise tens of thousands of dollars for community development/organizing projects throughout El Salvador. In New Jersey, members raised funds to cover Los Amates women's travel and food to participate in regional trainings for women's rights, health and literacy. Bangor, Maine and Carasque, Chalatenango teamed up to improve community health conditions by putting cement floors into Carasques' homes. Bangor raised the money for materials and Carasque provided all the labor through community workdays on weekends.

Sister Cities accompanied the call of their Salvadoran sister communities for forgiveness of hundreds of thousands of dollars in peasant land and credit debts. These debts threatened the livelihood of thousands of Salvadoran peasant families and, as a result, endangered the peaceful rebuilding of El Salvador. Sister Cities made countless contacts with US and Salvadoran officials via delegation visits, letters, faxes, and calls to the US Embassy, AID, and Congresspersons. This advocacy from the US, in coalition with other US-based organizations, combined with ongoing pressure campaigns from the Salvadoran communities themselves in alliance with other peasants, led USAID to agree to finance a vital multi-million dollar piece of the debt forgiveness program.

This agreement ensured that tens of thousands of ex-combatants and civilian peasants families most affected by the war would not lose the lands they had gained as part of the Peace Accords.

1997 ELECTIONS

Sister Cities played an important role in facilitating participation in the March 1997 Salvadoran elections. Eighteen Sister Cities raised over \$5,000 for their partner communities to contract buses and trucks to move thousands of people to distant polling places. Sister Cities also helped protect human rights in the electoral process. Many cities advocated alongside other organizations and called upon US officials to strongly denounce killings of opposition activists and the capture of an international observer. The campaign successfully brought the issue to the US Secretary of State, Madeline Albright, who made an important public declaration for free and fair elections in El Salvador just days before the vote.

US-El Salvador Sister Cities (June 1998)

- 1) Binghamton, NY – El Charcon, La Libertad
- 2) Woodstock, NY – El Buen Pastor, San Salvador
- 3) Spokane, WA – Ita Maura, La Libertad
- 4) Crested Butte, CO – Izotalillo, Chalatenango
- 5) Belmont, MA – El Higueral, Chalatenango
- 6) Arlington, MA- Teosinte, Chalatenango
- 7) Watertown, MA – Nueva Esperanza, Chalatenango
- 8) Cambridge, MA – San Jose La Flores, Chalatenango
- 9) New Jersey – Los Amates/San Isidro Labrador, Chalatenango
- 10) Los Angeles, CA – Ignacio Ellacuria, Chalatenango
- 11) Bangor, ME – Carasque, Chalatenango
- 12) San Francisco, CA – Las Vueltas, Chalatenango
- 13) Madison, WI – Arcatao, Chalatenango
- 14) Edgewood College (Madison, WI) – Las Vegas, Chalatenango
- 15) Chicago, IL – Cinquera, Cuscatlán
- 16) Columbus, OH – Copapayo, Cuscatlán
- 17) Delaware – Copapayo, Cuscatlán
- 18) Baltimore, MD – El Barillo, Cuscatlán
- 19) Concord, NH – Aguacaliente, Cuscatlán
- 20) Lawrence, KS – El Papaturo, Cuscatlán
- 21) Manhattan, KS – El Papaturo, Cuscatlán
- 22) Newton, KS – Las Americans, Cuscatlán
- 23) Wichita, KS – La Bermuda, Cuscatlán
- 24) Austin, TX – Guajoyo, San Vicente
- 25) Philadelphia, PA – Las Anonas, San Vicente
- 26) New York, NY – Tecoluca, San Vicente
- 27) Sacramento, CA – San Bartolo, San Vicente
- 28) Bellingham, WA – Montecristo, San Vicente
- 29) Williamson St. Coop (Madison, WI) – Los Potrerillos, Chalatenango