A People's History of War

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Cover Page Footnote
This article is from an earlier iteration of Diálogo which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."
It is not often that two undergraduate juniors receive about $13,000 in grant money to conduct an oral history project in a foreign country. Thanks to the Vincentian Endowment Fund and the DePaul Liberal Arts and Science Summer Undergraduate Research Grant, we were able to respond to a request from the rural community of Copapayo, El Salvador. We recorded their memories of the war that ripped their country apart from 1980-1992, and violently displaced them from their homes. The community has wanted to record their memories and their designs for the project at the center of what we did. As much as possible we want this project to belong to the community itself. The desires they expressed to us were: (1) to share the tragedies and pain they endured with as many people as possible around the world in the hopes that wars and suffering like this might never happen again and (2) to record their memories for the younger generations now being born and growing up, so they too can know the history of their relatives and their community. We feel it is important to share with as many people as possible, in any way possible, the history and story of the people of Copapayo. Eventually, all of the audio recordings of the testimonies and the corresponding transcripts in Spanish and English will be placed in the DePaul University’s John T. Richardson Library Special Collections and Archives. It is also our hope that this oral history project will be an ongoing work in collaboration with other interested groups at DePaul University, as well as the community of Copapayo.

The combatants in the civil war that was fought in El Salvador were overwhelmingly Salvadoran. The campesinos had suffered decades of poor wages and landlessness, because of the consolidation of the highest quality cultivatable land in the country by the wealthy landowners, who used the land and the campesinos to grow crops (mainly sugar, coffee, and cotton) for export. In response to this and the constant violent persecution at the hands of the wealthy landowners and the government, the campesinos organized themselves in the spirit of the liberation theology movement that was spread throughout Latin America by parts of the Catholic clergy. In 1980...
several political, worker, student/professor, and military groups united in a
guerrilla coalition known as the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation
Front). For twelve years the FMLN fought
the United States trained and supplied
Salvadoran army to a military draw. The
army used a strategy they described as
catching the fish (the guerrillas) by
draining the ocean (the campesinos). As a
result of this strategy hundreds of
thousands of innocent campesinos were
forced to flee from their homes as
refugees while tens of thousands of
others were killed, caught in the crossfire
or in deliberate massacres.

The United Nations sponsored refugee
camps, for those who chose to flee the
country, these were terribly overcrowded
and lacked the basic freedom of
movement into and out of the camp. The
people of Copapayo expressed their
appreciation for these refugee camps and
for the protection they provided them
during a violent and frightening time, but
told us they could not stand to live
outside their own country in a place
where they could not work the land and
did not have the right to move. As a
result, in 1987, a group of 4,000 refugees
got together and decided they would
pressure the UN, Salvadoran government,
and Honduran government to give them
their right to return to their homes,
despite the fact that the war still raged.
Through their own hard work and with
the help of accompanying international
(for safety) the refugees established five
communities in El Salvador after nearly
nine months of negotiations.

Their story is incredible. They were
uprooted from their homes, endured
walking through the mountains with no
food or water, constantly under the
threat of attack from the military, and
crossing the border into a country that
did not want them. In Honduras they
lived in Mesa Grande, an overcrowded
UN refugee camp. Against the best
efforts of the Salvadoran government
and military, and with little help from
the UN or anyone else, the people of
Copapayo (and the four other
communities established at the same
time) were able to safely return to their
own country.

It is important that their testimonies are
documented, because they add a human
element to history. Usually history is
written by the powerful and the poor
are forgotten, lost behind the military
strategy, economic and political
negotiations, and lives of the ruling class.
The people of Copapayo want everyone
to know the real stories of war, because
telling them is a crucial element of the
healing process that continues today in
the lives and communities throughout El
Salvador. Talking about what happened
and sharing their story with the rest of
the world helps the healing process
move forward.

As this article is sent to the press, all of
the testimonies have been transcribed
and we are in the process of editing and
organizing them. In accord with the
wishes of the people of Copapayo, we
plan to send each person who gave a
testimony a copy of their testimony,
both on CD and in written form. Additionally, all of the complete
testimonies will be put in the Copapayo
library. The community would also like a
book that is a compilation of the history
of the community, using pieces of every
person’s testimony to tell their story
collectively. We are exploring funding
options to make it possible to translate
this compilation into English so these
important testimonies can be more
widely read in the United States. Copies
of all of the transcribed interviews in
Spanish and, hopefully, the compilation
in English will be available in DePaul’s
Library. The work for this project will
continue throughout the upcoming year.

Sarah Gelsomino and Samuel Pearson
are currently seniors at DePaul
University. They will graduate in June,
Sam with a degree in Geography and a
minor in Biology, Sarah with a degree
in Political Science and minor in
Spanish. Sam is from Kalamazoo,
Michigan and Sarah is from Cleveland,
Ohio, but we both plan to stick around
Chicago for a while longer. Sam plans
to pursue a Masters in Education and
has hopes to teach elementary school.
Sarah would like to study Law and
Social Work, possibly at DePaul!
Contact Sarah at sngels@depaul.edu

Samuel Pearson and his best Salvadoran buddy, Dimas Murillo. The Copapayo soccer
team won a tournament in a nearby community. Copapayo, El Salvador. 2003

The Rivera family, Sarah Gelsomino and Samuel Pearson lived within Copapayo. Nina
Angelita, Don Santos and their daughters Marta, Mima with son Javier, Jasmine and
Estella in the chair. Copapayo, El Salvador. 2003