

## Big Business in the Place of Little Men

by Chris Ortman

*An Israeli-owned, state-of-the-art factory with a Mayan name brings a mix of jobs, pollution and conflict to a farming community near San Salvador. Names of local residents have been changed.*

Located just 30 kilometers outside of San Salvador in the Tecualhuya valley, the municipality of San Pablo Tacachico's proximity to El Salvador's polluted, densely populated capitol makes its serene beauty all the more remarkable. Given that most of the area's inhabitants dedicate themselves to the low-tech cultivation of basic grains, sugarcane, dairy, fishing and raising livestock, one could draw the conclusion that the landscape of San Pablo Tacachico—which means “the place of little men” in Nahuatl—in large part, has remained the same since the time when the Pipil Mayans tilled the land.

Upon closer inspection, a visitor to San Pablo Tacachico would discover some startling contrasts. Covering an area close to 130 square kilometers, Tacachico and its approximately 30,000 inhabitants have been thrust into the middle of the free trade, neoliberal economic model. Newly paved asphalt roads now connect the municipality's scattered towns and an enormous, state-of-the-art factory—consisting of row upon row of greenhouses roughly equivalent to the size of 100 football fields (with the end zones)—was inaugurated a year and a half ago. Many Tacachico residents are less than pleased with their new neighbor's arrival. They accuse the plant of dumping toxic chemical waste into the Tecualhuya valley's rivers, killing the fish and putting the health of community members at risk.

The factory, named Zona Franca Pipil after the same Mayan tribe, is financed by an Israeli company called Rizk Allah Brothers and a group of 18 unnamed Salvadoran investors, who reportedly have historically invested in coffee. In all, Rizk Allah Brothers has plants in 22 countries, including Nicaragua and Mexico.

From the highway above the valley, Pipil's conspicuous 54 hectares of greenhouses could not appear more out of place. The company's land encompasses a total of 104 hectares. At its full operating capacity, Pipil can employ up to 650 workers, who earn around five dollars a day. The factory is located inside

the neighboring municipality of San Juan Opico, just outside of San Pablo Tacachico, where the majority of the workers reside.

### Rio Sucio lives up to its name

The Tecualhuya valley has three rivers: the Rio Lempa, Rio Sucio (dirty river) and the Rio San Juan, and during the rainy season there are several streams that swell, providing more water to benefit the area's inhabitants. In comparison to other parts of El Salvador, the Tecualhuya valley was known for having a cleaner water supply. Locals use the river for fishing, washing clothes, bathing, irrigation for their crops and drinking water.

That is, until the pollution began. “The river stunk and it would turn red,” says Patricia Ramirez, a health promoter in the area who was part of a group that filed a complaint against the factory with the environmental division of the police department. Local residents say the contamination seems to have slowed down since, but aren't sure if that could be attributed to the rainy season's higher water level. Moreover, they don't have the resources to conduct a thorough investigation of the water quality.



Palacios speaks at a Seed Fair sponsored by the GMO Network.  
Photo: APROCSAL

Maria Elena Paredes, another local health promoter and mother of four says she has seen more frequent and more serious health problems in her community since the factory opened. “The worst part is the environment is being polluted. It’s not just the people who work there who are being affected, it’s those who use the water who have had more health problems—diarrhea, skin infections, respiratory problems, there are women with vaginal infections and puss secretions from their breasts.”

In addition to tending to the sick, Maria Elena and other health promoters have organized community cleanup projects, vaccination drives and a reforestation initiative. “When there is more vegetation, there are fewer problems, so we are planting more trees. We’re also asking outside organizations to come in to increase awareness, to help the community come together and decide how we are going to confront this problem. We have a Committee on Risk Prevention and Management, and we’re organizing to be able to tell them: ‘No more chemicals in our water.’ We have to be prepared for anything.”

### Consumer Advocate Wary of Pipil Products and Practices

Pipil’s main products are tomatoes and green peppers, and the factory is also doing tests with melons and other types of fruits. Julio Palacios, who works with APROCSAL, an organization that promotes public health in rural communities, says the vegetables Pipil is creating are not your average tomato or green pepper. “The tomatoes they’re producing are called ‘beef tomatoes’ because they’re trying to make them as big as hamburger buns. They aim to make a super tomato, products larger in size and with brighter colors to appear more attractive to people.”

Palacios is a member of the Salvadoran Citizens’ Network on Genetically Modified Organisms

(GMOs), a coalition of environmentalists, health workers, and farmers that is working to raise awareness about the potentially dangerous effects of the consumption and cultivation of GMOs and to encourage regulatory legislation. While the possible effects of GMOs are uncertain, some scientists fear GMOs could potentially threaten biodiversity and non-GMO crops, disrupt food chains and pollute drinking water. Palacios suspects the Pipil products are genetically modified.

Zona Franca Pipil exports 90% of what is produced in the factory to supermarket chains in Canada and the United States; the remaining 10% is sold for local consumption. The agroexporter expects to produce 16,000 tons of tomatoes this year and to increase to 25,000 tons of tomatoes next year.

Of the working conditions, Palacios says:

“They are hot, closed in areas with poor ventilation where the employees are handling pesticides and other chemicals to enhance the product and generate a larger yield. As a result, the workers are suffering from respiratory problems and skin and urinary infections. They haven’t provided their employees with any type of protection--no masks or gloves.”

Because of this, Palacios questions the Israeli company’s motives for choosing



“Giant Corn” at a Seed Fair

### From the Editor

In my last letter, I discussed the limitations of the word “development.” One person’s favorable development is another person’s exploitation, environmental destruction or cultural imperialism. For practical purposes, in this issue we will use the term “development” in the least politically-charged sense of the word—a process experienced by countries mired in poverty hoping to achieve some measure of prosperity—and address the ecological impact of development.

This edition of *Salvanet* is titled “Ecology of a Developing Nation” because El Salvador’s development damaged ecology, in all its bleakness, is similar or identical to the experiences of dozens of other developing nations throughout Latin America, Africa and Asia.

CRISPAZ collaborates with a number of organizations who work to challenge destructive environmental policies, raise public awareness and create alternative behavioral, agricultural and industrial models that protect and preserve the environment.

- Chris



*CRISPAZ, Christians for Peace in El Salvador, was founded in 1984. We are a faith-based organization dedicated to mutual accompaniment with the church of the poor and marginalized communities in El Salvador.*

*In building bridges of solidarity between communities in El Salvador and those in our home countries, we strive together for peace, justice and human liberation. As an organization, we are non-partisan and committed to nonviolence.*

Comments or questions regarding *Salvanet* can be sent to: [salvanet@crispaz.org](mailto:salvanet@crispaz.org)

El Salvador. According to Pipil's former Latin American representative Ravonovich,\* there were various factors that led to the decision to choose El Salvador. The principal reasons were the climactic conditions, proximity to the United States, low interest rates, government support and abundant cheap manual labor. "But if you look at their more recent publications on the internet," Palacios explains, "when they refer to manual labor, it isn't the 'cheap' labor anymore—it's the 'quality' labor. The language has changed."

Free trade proponents always emphasize the benefit of jobs created, but given Zona Franca Pipil's low wages and alleged poor working conditions, the detrimental environmental and public health consequences seemingly outweigh any positive individual economic impact felt by a small number of workers.

Nevertheless, like the governments of most Latin American nations, the Salvadoran government is so desperate to create the short-term illusion of economic progress that it is willing to sell out the long-term futures of communities like San Pablo Tacachico. PROESA, the government agency responsible for promoting foreign investment, is actively seeking out companies like Rizk Allah Brothers and doing everything they can to please them.

PROESA's website says: "Foreign direct investment has been playing a vital role in driving El Salvador's rapid modernization. It has not only helped sustain economic growth, but has also brought improvements in social conditions and in overall development indicators."

Those directly affected disagree. When asked if Zona Franca Pipil's foreign investment has brought any benefit to her community, Patricia Ramirez says: "Just that the workers there earn their five dollars, beyond that everything else is having a negative impact." She stresses the environmental costs that are a burden on local residents. "We use to have a clean, healthy river. But now, they have put an end to that. There aren't any fish, and before people use to fish there." ❖

*\*When asked to speak with their Latin American representative, Giora Ravonovich, Rizk Allah Brothers' only response was that he no longer works for the company. There was no response to a second request to speak with another representative.*

## Environmental Martyrs

Compiled by Amy Clemente, Jenny Peirce and Chris Ortman

Because advocating for environmental protection and preservation often means direct confrontation with powerful economic interests, environmental activism is often dangerous work, especially in developing countries with less-than-reputable human rights records. Here are a few individuals who took courageous action and paid the ultimate price.

### Sister Dorothy Stang, NSD

US-born Catholic nun Dorothy Stang, a Sister of Notre Dame de Namur, worked for more than 30 years in the Amazon rainforest in the Brazilian state of Para accompanying the struggle for human rights, land titles and preservation among rural farmers and landless people. She was shot by hitmen hired by a local landowner on February 12, 2005. Sister Dorothy is one of more than 500 people who have been killed since 1985 in Para over land disputes.



**Chico Mendes, Brazil:** Chico Mendes, leader of the Xapuri Workers Union and the Rubber Tappers Workers Union in Acre, Brazil, brought international attention to the destruction of the Amazon forest through more than 45 nonviolent actions. He was assassinated on December 22, 1988. His position was widely supported by peasants, and his name has become a powerful legacy in the struggle against deforestation.

**Ken Saro-Wiwa, Nigeria:** Shell struck oil on the Ogoni lands in 1958 and has since extracted an estimated \$30 billion of oil, destroying once fertile farmland and the livelihoods of 550,000 farmers and fishermen. Ken Saro-Wiwa, author and leader of the Movement for the Survival of the Ogoni People, organized a march of 300,000



Ogoni in non-violent protest of the environmental damage Shell has caused in Nigeria. Along with many other Ogoni people, Saro-Wiwa was kidnapped from his home and jailed for 17 months, while the Nigerian military took over Ogoniland, and Shell maintained its "quiet diplomacy" with the regime. A military tribunal accused Saro-Wiwa of murder and hanged him and eight co-defendants on November 10, 1995.

**Las Abejas, Acteal:** On December 22, 1997, forty-five Tzotzil indigenous people (21 women, 9 men, 14 children, one baby) were killed and 19 others wounded when the Mexican army ambushed the Acteal temple, a simple wooden building where people had taken refuge and were praying. The victims were members of Las Abejas, a pacifist religious community advocating for indigenous autonomy and justice in Chiapas. Since the Zapatistas initiated an indigenous uprising in Chiapas on January 1, 1994, the day of the signing of NAFTA, communities in resistance have faced constant violence from the Mexican army. NAFTA eliminated Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, which guaranteed communal land holdings known as "ejidos" and excludes indigenous autonomy over land and resources in one of the most biodiverse regions of the world. ❖

## Hurricane Stan Adds to Political Storm over Ecological Issues

On October 5, as El Salvador was hit with relentless rain from Hurricane Stan, Mauricio Sermeño, an engineer and the Executive Coordinator at the Salvadoran Ecological Union (UNES), reflected on El Salvador's latest natural disaster, development's threat to environmental stability and making the prevention and mitigation of natural disasters into law.

### What is your analysis of the current national emergency provoked by the heavy rain from Hurricane Stan?



*In the first place, our analysis of the origin of the problem is that these tragedies are products of global warming, a phenomenon caused by greenhouse gases that are heating the atmosphere. Unfortunately, since the United States government does not*

*wish to sign the Kyoto Protocol, there is no real plan on how to reduce gases on the planet. This situation is what produces these kinds of tragedies, and not only in El Salvador; we have already seen 18 hurricanes and large tropical storms this year. They keep getting stronger and more numerous, and this is going to continue happening as long as we fail to reduce greenhouse gases. We should be clear on this and it should also help us to prepare more to confront these new events that are going to occur.*

*In terms of nature, this has been the hottest year not only in the last dozen years but in centuries. In thousands of years, there hasn't been an average temperature like this year's. This is going to cause nature to function in a certain way. Nature has its laws; when the earth heats up, there is more evaporation, more cloud formation and therefore more precipitation. This is what is happening now. So we have to prepare ourselves.*

*What happened in El Salvador is another reminder of the extreme poverty our people live in and how "development projects" have increased the vulnerability of the people. They've left the highways with steep slopes, on top of which are small houses whose inhabitants live on these new ravines. They are not constructing houses according to the necessary security standards and this has provoked landslides, runoff, new flooding that we did not have before and the areas where we've had flooding are now worse.*

***"What happened in El Salvador is another reminder of the extreme poverty our people live in and how 'development projects' have increased the vulnerability of the people."***

*It is a serious problem, and politicians have not grasped the gravity of the situation. The version of the Law of Civil Protection and Prevention and Mitigation of Disasters that's been passed does not respond to this reality. (UNES, along with other environmental activists, proposed the original Disaster Prevention bill responding to concerns that followed Hurricane Mitch and the 2001 earthquakes. The National Assembly recently passed a watered-down version into law.) The government has made a fool of itself up until this tragedy and is again taking advantage of the circumstances. Now the government is putting out its hand soliciting international aid. We already know what happens to that aid. Who is propping themselves up on the suffering of the people?*

*Many of these people who have suffered great loss, in some cases losing their loved ones, receive absolutely no assistance. Meanwhile, the political candidates are already campaigning with the aid they are giving to the communities. This is really an illicit exploitation of the tragedy that Salvadoran citizens have lived through.*

*In general terms, this is the panorama El Salvador is experiencing. I hope we don't just turn the page, wipe the*

*slate clean and forget what the politicians are doing. This morning I heard the President of the Republic say: "Fortunately, the sun has come out now and we can turn the page and begin to work with more energy and force as we Salvadorans*

*have always done." I sincerely hope we do not forget...because the rainy season is not over. We do not know what is going to happen next week. So it would be really bad if we forgot and simply turned the page. I believe the experiences should serve to construct a better society towards the future and the citizenry should not forget what happened.*

### Aside from the government, were there other powerful interests opposed to the Disaster Prevention Law?

*Yes, more than anything the construction industry. Frankly, they are the ones responsible for the increased vulnerability through their engineering projects. They are not following*

the necessary safety guidelines to avoid these floods, large land slides and having steep slopes where the poor people's houses are left on top. They are the main opponents to the law because they want total freedom to do what they want. UNES, for example, is asking that in light of everything that is happening that construction be prohibited in the water basins of the San Salvador metro area because they can no longer handle the conditions. Large construction companies do not want to hear this. They are powerful interests, and they have political ties to the government.

**What are your thoughts on the new highway project that will cut through more forest near the already controversial Multiplaza Mall in San Salvador?**

That's part of the Anillo Preferido (Peripheral Beltway: a large highway project) and it goes through the Finca del Espino... there are various projects. There is the golf course that would be 60 manzanas (102 acres). The Minister of the Environment (also owner of Diana, a Salvadoran company that makes snack foods) has already come out in a television interview saying that the golf course is speculation, that they have not yet given the environmental permission. "But," he says, "the grass has a more important ecological function than the trees." With an environmental minister like this, what can you expect? It's a difficult situation because those governing are not just employees of the large companies; it is the very heads of large businesses that are in charge of the Ministries and the land belonging to the Republic. We can no longer trust that there's an honest politician in the role of public servant; it's a business leader.

**We just saw in the United States with Hurricane Katrina how the poor people in the affected region were the most vulnerable. The circumstances for poor people in El Salvador are the same or worse. Does the Disaster Prevention bill aim to address this problem?**

No, not completely, here I repeat that it's a matter of language. Rather, it says that it gives more possibility for the organization of emergency committees and disaster prevention committees at the municipal and local level, pretty much everywhere. But when you see the resources these people have to work with, they don't give them a red cent...not even enough to pay for coffee when it comes time to hold a meeting, much less the resources that would be needed to be able to respond to an emergency. So really, what's the point of having a law if there is no logistical backing, no logistical infrastructure that allows the law to function? They are saying that a single project needed in one community could cost up to a million dollars. Where are these people going to get that kind of money? Every day they are poorer, and paying taxes always fall on those at the bottom. They just get passed on to the end of the line. The

taxes then are the burden that keeps building up and making the poor continually poorer... and the rich richer.

---

**"With each calamity in El Salvador, there is a group that comes out stronger--a group that benefits financially."**

---

**So the poor people are living in the most vulnerable areas?**

Clearly, vulnerability is linked to poverty. It's ridiculous, for example, when the President of the Republic comes out simply saying that those in high risk should leave their houses, and it is better that they go and live in a different area. It's quite irresponsible. How is a poor person who is already paying for the little piece of land that he bought going to go and live somewhere else when they won't even pardon his debt? He would have to be paying off the debt and the new property.

**You said that the National Emergency Committee (COEN) themselves realized that they were not ready when Hurricane Adrian came through in May. Has anything changed since Adrian?**

No, not at all. The situation is the same or worse because now it appears that they don't even know what to do. They don't know if they are applying past legislation or the new legislation. Irresponsibility and complete chaos has befallen the country in deciding how to confront this situation. It's different than in the United States because at least there we know they have more economic recourses. A situation like this could be dealt with in better conditions. Here, none of the politicians are going to sacrifice a dime of their salaries to help the poor. On the contrary, now they are asking for international aid, and the commissions putting their hand out to receive this international aid are formed by private businesses. That's why with each calamity in El Salvador, there is a group that comes out stronger--a group that benefits financially. Meanwhile, the people whose houses have collapsed and whose families have died cannot even get help to buy a box to be able to bury their family members in. That is shameful.

**Is there any hope in all of this?**

The hope is in the awakening of the citizens. We hope these experiences aren't falling into a black hole, that the people little by little start opening their eyes and they become aware that this political breed being exposed does not work for them—they won't get out of the hole they are sinking in like this. The situation must be changed. This is the hope: that the people wake up. ❖

## **ILEA Already Functioning in El Salvador**

Without ever being debated in the Salvadoran National Assembly, the International Law Enforcement Academy (ILEA) reportedly began training police officers on July 25 at the Comalapa Air Force Base. At the Academy, U.S. officials will train Salvadoran law enforcement officers. Civil society groups and the Human Rights Ombudsperson are condemning the installation of the Academy saying it violates constitutional law. An ILEA in El Salvador is particularly worrisome given the United States' history training Salvadoran soldiers and the Salvadoran government's own dismal human rights record. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced that El Salvador would host the ILEA at a meeting of the Organization of American States in June. See the Spring-Summer 2005 edition of *Salvanet* to read more about the ILEA.

## **25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Four Churchwomen**

This year marks the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the martyrdom of the four churchwomen. On December 2, 1980, while returning home from the airport, Sisters Maura Clarke, Ita Ford and Dorothy Kazel and lay missionary Jean Donovan were stopped by the Salvadoran National Guard, raped and murdered. They were working with the Archdiocese of San Salvador, helping refugees flee the violence of the erupting war. Watch the CRISPAZ website for information about commemorative events.

## **Costa Rica Hosts VI Mesoamerican People's Forum**

The VI Mesoamerican People's Forum will be held in San Jose, Costa Rica, December 12-14, bringing together more than 1500 people representing civil society organizations throughout Mesoamerica, from Mexico to Panama. Each country's delegation will report on local resistance to neoliberal economic policies, such as the privatization of water, electricity and natural resources. At the regional level, the forum will focus on creating popular alternatives, translating political awareness into political action and increasing coordination and effectiveness of social movements in the region.

## **CAFTA Goes into Effect on January 1st**

The Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) officially begins on January 1, 2006. On December 15, the U.S. Congress will certify the legislation. Until then, participating countries—Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, the Dominican Republic and the United States—will be busy making sure local laws comply with the international agreement. Costa Rica's Legislative Assembly has not yet ratified CAFTA. ❖

## **CRISPAZ Receives "Gift" in New Volunteer**

New long-term volunteer Colette Hellenkamp arrived in late August and has begun a two-year commitment to Generation XXI, a CRISPAZ partner organization, under our Alternatives for High-risk Youth program. Originally from Tacoma, Washington, Colette majored in Social Work and International Studies at Saint Louis University.



In her junior year at SLU, Colette participated in the Casa de la Solidaridad (Solidarity House) program in El Salvador, which provides the opportunity for university students from the United States to encounter Salvadoran reality. It was during her "Casa" experience when Colette "fell in love with the people of El Salvador and fostered a deeper commitment to social justice and living out solidarity."

Colette has worked at the Center for Survivors of Torture and War Trauma in Saint Louis, where she helped to develop and facilitate a leadership program for refugees to assuage violence and racism among ethnic groups in the city's public schools. "The kids taught me so much," she says. "Working with youth is something I feel a calling to, particularly working through methods of nonviolence and critical consciousness."

Drawing on this experience, Colette is accompanying Generation XXI, a youth center located in the San Salvador neighborhood of Mejicanos, which aims to create a space for youth from the area to seek alternatives to violence.

Colette's parents, both former volunteers in Africa, nicknamed her "Mpho," which means "gift" in the Besotho language. CRISPAZ agrees with the moniker and is happy to welcome Colette to our community. ❖

## Summer in El Salvador: Seeking Answers to the Big Questions

Reflections and photos from participants in this year's Summer Immersion Program (SIP).

---

***“I walked into a community with little to no knowledge of their language or their lives and they welcomed me into their homes and hearts as a daughter and a friend.”***

---



SIP Volunteer Paul Mitchell with Salvadoran family

**Cheryl Clark** is from Rancho Cucamonga, CA, and is a Theology Major at the University of San Diego. She lived in the town of El Porvenir in the department of Ahuachapán and worked with the Salvadoran Ecological Union (UNES), accompanying a women's artisan group.

*The past 2½ months have changed my life. Before I went to El Salvador, I would say that I was committed to social justice. Now, I am deeply rooted in social justice. The things I learned have impacted the entirety of who I am. I think that every story for the next few years will begin ‘When I was in El Salvador...’ Because somewhere along the way, I learned that it is not what I am doing that matters, but how I am living.*

*Through living in El Salvador, I learned more than I ever thought I would. I learned that faith is more of an action than a statement, that giving is something you should never stop doing, that laughter makes any situation better, that life should never be taken too seriously, that hammocks are the most comfortable way to lounge around, that no matter what the language barrier love shines through, that sometimes you learn things from the most unlikely teachers, that the world God created is much more beautiful than I ever imagined, and that I have so much more to learn.*

*Above all, I learned how to be humble. I walked into a community with little to no knowledge of their language or their lives and they welcomed me into their homes and hearts as a daughter and a friend. The last week everyone kept telling me: ‘No se vaya.’ (Don't go). I really have not left; my heart is still in El Salvador. ❖*

**Paul Mitchell** is from Ft. Myers, Florida, and is a student in the Liberal Studies and International Peace Studies program at the University of Notre Dame. He lived in San Rafael Oriente in the department of San Miguel and worked with OIKOS Solidarity in community organization.

*My life at the University is very self-oriented. I focus on ME and MY studies and MY formation and often forget my intense dependence on those around me. After the first few days in my community in El Salvador, I was quickly forced to acknowledge my dependence. I quickly depended on new friends and complete strangers for emotional, spiritual and physical support. Our dependence on others is undeniable and its acknowledgement is honest and healthy.*

*This acknowledgement came through the very relational life I found in the community. I was almost never alone. My family and I would sit and talk for hours. Complete strangers greet each other in passing. We packed the morning bus into town to the seams. The walk from the bus stop to home every day after work got increasingly longer as I met more friends and neighbors to share time with. Everyone had time for everyone else. I learned that we are healthiest and most beautiful surrounded by healthy relationships and thriving communities.*

*I also found communities wrecked by the war, relationships broken by immigration and economies weakened by unjust international economic relationships. These injustices erode the beauty of the communities that welcomed me this summer, and although responsibility and accountability in these structures is elusive, it can be found. Therefore, I hope that I never stop learning about how I best fit into the global community. I hope I never stop asking myself big questions: Who will I become? But more importantly... Who can I be for every community of which I am a part? ❖*

**Kristina Leszczak** is from Cleveland, Ohio, and is a Political Science and Spanish major at Notre Dame. She lived in La Florida, in the department of La Libertad, and worked for the Permaculture Institute of El Salvador accompanying the organic farming and community organizing training programs in the area.

*Sometimes I am afraid that I will never be able to explain my summer in El Salvador to someone who was not there with me—someone who never met my beautiful Salvadoran family or heard the laughter of small children as they danced the ‘Hokey Pokey’ or saw*

**“Walking amidst the natural beauty of La Florida, I was struck by the contrast between the physical and socio-economic landscape of El Salvador.”**

*how my daily journey to my home in La Florida offered one of the most stunning views of El Salvador.*

*I am worried that I will never be able to express myself well; and yet, I am comforted by a passage from Philippians 4:8, “Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.” Though my words to describe all that I experienced in El Salvador are still inadequate, nothing hinders my ability to reflect over and think about the most challenging and rewarding experience of my life.*

*Walking amidst the natural beauty of La Florida, I was struck by the contrast between the physical and socio-economic landscape of El Salvador. I began to ask myself: How can a country be so beautiful when its people live in houses made of little more than metal sheets or, at most, a mixture of dirt and clay and wood? Why can I attend one of the best universities in the U.S. whereas my young Salvadoran English students will be lucky to complete high school? Walking, therefore, became a time for reflection and a time to release the tears I could no longer hold back.*

*For ten weeks, I lived in solidarity with a dynamic—though simple—Salvadoran community. Despite my vulnerability and patent “foreignness,” my family and community in El Salvador accepted me without question. I am forever grateful for their patience, compassion and friendship. I was fortunate to experience a side of El Salvador that few ever have the opportunity to see. Stripped of my status as an independent and self-reliant individual, I was continually amazed by the selfless generosity of those who have very few material possessions to their name.*

*Some dispute whether we, as citizens of the richest country in the world, have a moral obligation to help those less fortunate than ourselves. I believe the answer is clear. We should aspire to live in solidarity with our neighbors, whether rich or poor, near or far. We should also view helping others not as a moral obligation, but as an act of compassion, kindness and love. ❖*

**Amelia Iraheta** is from Seattle, WA and is a Film & Psychology major at Emerson College in Boston. She lived in Ciudad Romero in the department of Usulután, while working with the Bajo Lempa Coordinating Committee supporting the community radio station *El Mangle*.

*El Salvador is the smallest Latin American country, but what it lacks in size it makes up in heart, resilience, spirit and good humor. Admittedly, when I first arrived I felt overwhelmed. There were so many stories, and all of them so big, that I felt I would never be able to grasp the essence of the country. By the time I left I was still overwhelmed, but for a different reason: there was not a day that passed when I wasn’t inspired by someone or filled with emotion at the beauty around me—I felt like by walking with the people of El Salvador, I had come to walk with God.*

**“In this country, faith manifests itself in the simple hope of daily living.”**

*If a country is its people then never has there been anything with a more fitting name: El Salvador. The Savior. Though they have suffered through decades of repression, which they suffer still in spite of a twelve year war to end it, the faith of Salvadorans is unshakable. In this country, faith manifests itself in the simple hope of daily living.*

*This summer I spent nights talking to my “father” as he lay in the hammock—a candle cart-wheeling its light to the wall behind him. I stood in the kitchen attempting to imitate my “mother” as she made food to sell. I watched novellas with my sister Diana and took to playing hide-and-go-seek games with my brother and sister in the firefly-haven dirt road. Although I went to museums, heard well-known people speak of their experiences, it is these indelible images of daily life that for me most embody the resilience and hope of the Salvadorian people. ❖*



(L-R) Cheryl, Paul, RCA Coord. Javier Rivera, Gina, and Kristina

**Gina Meyer** is from Cincinnati, Ohio, and is a Pre-med and Theology major at Saint Louis University. While in El Salvador, she worked with APROCSAL, an association of health promoters, conducting research on environmental contamination of rivers near her community, San Jorge.

*Wow. Oscar, my 17-year old neighbor in El Salvador, asked me what the word "wow" meant the first time I met him. He has been homebound for 8 months because he broke his leg in December. The area's limited medical services and his family's limited economic means prevented him from being able to go school for a year because of the accident. It is difficult to explain a word like "wow" but I'll use it to explain how I feel about El Salvador. I wanted to get to know this country, and this summer I did.*

*You come to give but you receive, you come to help but you accompany, you come to learn about them and instead you learn from them about yourself. This was my SIP experience. I tried to come to this beautiful country with a clean slate. However, I came with imperialistic notions of us and them, of the North and the South, of a divided reality. I did experience a divided reality, but one that is inextricably bound. In one way, we are connected because the U.S. has such a huge impact in El Salvador that my Salvadoran mother says she lives in a colony of my country. Our culture, our money, our language suffocate this land. However, more than that, we are bound because of this human experience we are living. My Salvadoran family may eat more tortillas, get up earlier, sit and talk more, have experienced more loss, and live more simply than my family in the States, but we all seek love, peace and joy.*

*It was difficult to adjust to life in the campo at first, but by the end, I was sad to leave the people and their rhythm of life. It was also difficult to know that I could leave, that I had so many more opportunities than they did, that my country seems to never cease to make their life more difficult, but I learned from them how to forgive. The people of my community and of many others accepted me into their homes, their lives, their school, their experience. El Salvador is a beautiful country full of pain and loss and injustice but also full of love because God is there. ✚*



**Kristina working at the Permaculture Institute**

**CRISPAZ has four focus areas:**

- † Economics for People
- † Rural Community Accompaniment
- † South-North Solidarity
- † Alternatives for High-Risk Youth

SALVANET, a project of CRISPAZ, is published four times a year.

Chris Ortman, Editor

**CRISPAZ Board Members:**

- Don Barker, *Chair*
- Bill Van Lopik, *Vice Chair*
- Jennifer Collins, *Secretary*
- Wayne Titus III, *Treasurer*
- Claudia Asprer
- Kevin Burke, S.J.
- Angela Casanova
- Joseph Currie, S.J.
- Patricia Best Dion
- Brenda Hilger
- Peter Hinde
- Irene Hodgson
- Kateri Koverman
- Sue Lake
- Dan Long
- George Mangarelli
- Martha Miller
- Chris Nauman
- Kelli Oborn
- Sue Severin
- Jon Weller

**CRISPAZ Staff:**

- Patricia Adams, Delegation Facilitator
- Idalia Argueta, Youth Coordinator
- Amy Clemente, Program Assistant
- Brendan Goodwon, Interim U.S. Coord.
- Elizabeth Hernández, ES Office Admin.
- Jenna Miller, EPP Coordinator
- Chris Ortman, CINES Coordinator
- Eduardo Perdomo, Receptionist
- Nelson Pérez, Human Resources
- Cristina Pineda, ESE Assistant
- Terriah Proechel, Delegation Facilitator
- Jeanne Ridders, ES Coordinator
- Javier Rivera, RCA Coordinator
- Erin Yost García, SNS Coordinator

**CRISPAZ Volunteers:**

Colette Hellenkamp

CRISPAZ relies on your contributions to produce this publication and to continue its accompaniment with the Salvadoran people. *All contributions are tax deductible.*

For more information about our programs or to make a contribution, please contact us at:

**CRISPAZ**

2 Lexington Street  
East Boston, MA 02128  
617-567-2900  
info@crispaz.org

**CRISPAZ**

Apartado Postal 2944  
Centro de Gobierno  
San Salvador, El Salvador  
tel: 011-503-2225-2090  
pazsal@crispaz.org

## Broaden Your Horizons!

### Volunteer in El Salvador

The 2006 Summer Immersion Program will run  
from May 29 through August 13

Visit our website to see program descriptions, read reflections from past SIP interns and download your application and reference forms.

Contact us today -- Early application deadline is January 15.

#### Ready for a longer commitment?

CRISPAZ is also seeking long-term volunteers. Visit our site for more information on volunteer opportunities.

[www.crispaz.org](http://www.crispaz.org) or email us: [volunteer@crispaz.org](mailto:volunteer@crispaz.org)

## ***Innocent Voices* Tells Tragic Tale of Childhood**

Inspired by real-life events from the childhood of screenwriter Oscar Torres, *Innocent Voices* (*Voces Inocentes* in Spanish) tells the moving story of Chava, an 11-year-old boy who in the midst of El Salvador's civil war must become "the man of the house". Meanwhile, he and his friends try to outrun government soldiers and the forced recruitment of twelve-year-old boys by the Salvadoran Army. Torres answers a few questions for CRISPAZ on faith, historical memory and what the making of *Innocent Voices* meant for him personally. CRISPAZ highly recommends *Innocent Voices*, released in select theaters in the U.S. on October 14th.

**What has making *Innocent Voices* meant for you personally?**

*I feel that making Innocent Voices has helped me heal from over 18 years of pain and the inexplicable behavior I lived with. It is a day to day process, but I feel that to remember tough times is essential for the healing of those scars, and through [this process], I have found great inner strength which helps me take on the fight of raising my voice against child abuse, in [whatever] form. It has brought me and my family closer together as we have had to face the past as one and forgive each other for the things we kept blaming ourselves for, when in reality, it wasn't our fault at all, it was the war's.*

**Over the years, there have been a number of films dealing with El Salvador's civil war. What makes *Innocent Voices* different from others? How did you set out on writing a screenplay that would add to the public's understanding of that time period?**

*I didn't set out to write Innocent Voices for anyone to understand what happened in my country during that time. I wrote it in order for me to heal from that and also to let people know that what we went through, as children and adults, is still happening in too many countries around the world. I didn't realize it then, but our experience then is the experience of too many children now. I wanted to keep my memories alive through this, so that I never forget what happened and by sharing it, perhaps in some way, it could help keep it from happening again.*

---

**Every year, 300,000 children in 40 countries are recruited into the military**

---

**What led to the decision to make *Innocent Voices* in Mexico and how did filming location affect the finished product?**

*We explored the possibility of shooting in El Salvador, but we found out fast that there would be no support from the government to make this film, and also, the country does not have the infrastructure to support film making yet. After finding the locations in Veracruz, Mexico, it was only logical to shoot there given that it was the closest to El Salvador we had ever seen. Gabriel Garcia Marquez saw the film last year and his first question was 'How did you manage to shoot in El Salvador?' Of course, our answer was 'We didn't. We shot in Veracruz.' He was gladly surprised. The people in El Salvador thought we had shot there also.*

**There seems to be a deficiency in knowledge and understanding of the civil war period among a significant portion of today's Salvadoran youth, those who were too young to remember or not even born yet—either because the education system does not sufficiently cover it, their parents do not want to discuss painful experiences with them or because their parents were killed in the war. Why is it important for Salvadoran youth to know the stories of Chava, Fito, Chele and Cristina María?**

*There is an organization in El Salvador called CEPAZ committed to keep the memory of the war alive. It was founded by ex-guerrilla members because they feel that in remembering what happened, the price for peace has more value. In not forgetting, we*



Chava, played by Oscar Padilla. Photo: Altavista Productions

appreciate the peace in which we live. And so I feel the same way. The youth in El Salvador carry in their blood a history that must not be repeated and it is through the knowing of such history that they can keep the peace alive.

Through the parish priest and Chava's grandmother, the moral conflict experienced by people of faith caught in the middle of the civil war is an important theme addressed in *Innocent Voices*. For example, at one point, Chava's grandmother tells him: "It is not enough to pray." Did you see the writing of *Innocent Voices* as an act of faith?



Chava's family evacuating their town. Photo: Altavista

Throughout my life, I have believed that it has been faith which has kept me alive. It was the faith that a new day would come without bullets or bombs. It was the faith that at any moment, someone would extend a helping hand and feed us each night when we had nothing left. It has been the faith that my life has been spared for a reason...as if God has a purpose for me and I am not done yet. I heard that phrase from a song the priest would play out of his beat up speakers outside the church for the army and the whole world to hear, and I heard it from his own lips. 'It is not enough to pray'. I believe in prayer with action. I say: pray for peace, but then get up and make it happen...you will be guided.

---

**"I say: pray for peace,  
but then get up and  
make it happen...  
you will be guided."**

---

What do you want North Americans to take away from *Innocent Voices*, particularly North Americans who are already very familiar with El Salvador's recent history?

I feel that whether you know a little of the history of El Salvador or not, *Innocent Voices* relates the story of a family struggling to keep their love, spirit and innocence alive in the middle of a conflict such as a war. But the reason why so many people around the world have connected with the film is that they see their own everyday struggles, moments of doubt, moments of laughter, love, faith, and eventually light reflected on it. It is a story of human experiences and it reminds us of how far love can go when stretched to its limits. ❖

## Bring *Innocent Voices* to Your Community

The release of *Innocent Voices* in El Salvador was a ground-breaking event for many Salvadorans because it was the first feature film about El Salvador in Spanish. In an effort to promote solidarity with El Salvador, we encourage you to organize an event around the release of *Innocent Voices* in the United States. Here are just a few ideas:

- Gather your El Salvador Encounter group for a potluck dinner to watch and discuss *Innocent Voices*, either as a reunion or in preparation of your experience in El Salvador .
- Watch the film with your family to give them a context of your concern for El Salvador.
- Organize a house party and show *Innocent Voices*.
- Ask your Political Science, Latin American Studies or Spanish professors to show the film in their classes and discuss Salvadoran reality.
- Organize a showing at your church, school or university. Invite people involved in peace and justice work as well as the general public. Pass the hat to fundraise for CRISPAZ.

**Let us know about your event. We can send the information out on our listserv and post it to our website.**

**CRISPAZ**

2 Lexington Street  
East Boston, MA 02128

*Return service requested.*

Non-Profit Org.  
U.S. Postage  
**PAID**  
Bellmawr, NJ  
Permit No. 240

**In this issue of *Salvanet*...**

- + Development's Impact on Ecology .....1-3
- + Environmental Martyrs .....3
- + Ecology and Politics .....4-5
- + News Briefs .....6
- + Introduction to New Volunteer .....6
- + Summer Intern Reflections .....7-9
- + Recommended Viewing .....10-11

**Subscribe to *Salvanet*!**

CRISPAZ relies on your generous contributions to produce this publication and continue our accompaniment with the Salvadoran people.

**Our readership continues to grow, and we need your help to cover the increased production costs.**

You're contribution of \$30 a year, as a voluntary subscription, will help cover the costs of producing *Salvanet*.

Please make your tax-deductible contribution by sending a check with "*Salvanet*" in the memo line to:

**CRISPAZ**

2 Lexington Street  
East Boston, MA 02128

If you liked an article that you read in *Salvanet*, we encourage you to share it with others in your publication.

*Please cite CRISPAZ as the source.*

Offering fairly traded products from El Salvador!



- \* Brightly Painted Wood Crafts
- \* Embroidered Items
- \* Beaded Jewelry
- \* Coffee, Cocoa and Chocolate
- \* Greeting Cards, Books and CDs
- \* Handbags and other Woven Goods

**Shop online and save 15%  
Vist [www.crispaz.org](http://www.crispaz.org)**

click on "The People's Market, Shop Online"  
Enter promotional code sal1005