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School of Americas dialog shows disagreement can bring truth

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

I first attended the vigil outside the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Ga. in 1999 when I was a college student in Chicago.

The annual demonstration at the school -- since renamed the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC) -- commemorates the thousands of Latin Americans killed at the hands of graduates of the school. It particularly recognizes the murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter in 1989 at the University of Central America in El Salvador.

This year tens of thousands are expected once again to gather near the military installation for several days of teaching and a final day of demonstrations aimed at closing the school.

Before departing on the bus back in 1999 for the 14 hour drive to Georgia, I fired off a mass e-mail to all my friends and family to let them know what I had learned about this school.

"Our government dollars are going to support the training of Latin American soldiers to kill those who are interfering with U.S. military operations," I wrote.

Perhaps a couple of people sent back well wishes, but most just ignored my email. However, one friend (who would later become the best man at my wedding) responded with concern and a warning.

"Mike," he wrote. "You really have no clue what is going on here. My dad has worked there for over twenty years. You need to get your facts straight."

I had always known that J. had a complicated life story.

His dad was a Yankees fan from New York with a lifetime of Army service who married J.'s mom, a woman from Colombia who he met during his travels. J. came a few years later, born in Panama in 1980. It turns out that he was born on the WHISC base when it was located in Panama -- in the same year graduates of the school murdered Archbishop Oscar Romero as he presided at Mass in San Salvador. J.'s dad was one of the highest ranking officers at WHISC until he retired.

I didn't know many of the layers of J.'s story until after I sent out the email. I had known that he was born in Panama and that his parents were divorced before he got to kindergarten. I also knew he was a fast cross country runner and loved Straight Edge music. He was a true friend of mine through high school and beyond.

Over the next couple of years, more layers of this onion got peeled and diced up. I continued with my annual protesting at Fort Benning, never understanding why J. didn't want to stand up for humankind and go down there with me as he's one of the most compassionate people I know.

I studied in El Salvador in 2001 and did all the things that students from Catholic schools do when they go there. I went to see Oscar Romero's tomb at the cathedral in a city where he is revered; visited the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA) where the six Jesuits lived; and ate a few pupusas along the way.

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My host family held a December birthday party for me while I was

there with a big Tweety Bird piñata and a cake covered with whipped cream that they dunked my face in. A day after my birthday, my host sister and I traveled with my fellow DePaul students to commemorate the anniversary of the massacre in El Mozote, a devastating slaughter that left nearly 800 dead. A single villager survived the attack: Rufina Amaya.

The town had held a funeral procession to remember that fateful day in 1981, twenty years before I arrived on the scene. They were still finding bodies all those years later and having Christian burial services for the deceased (It is suspected that none of the deceased in El Mozote were actually Christian, but that is a topic for another column.)

My host sister worked as a nurse near El Mozote, so when we got there, she sort of nonchalantly told me that she was helping treat Rufina Amaya for diabetes. Moments later, I was getting introduced to Señora Amaya. I will never again look into anyone's eyes and feel so much pain, strength, devastation, and hope all at once. Those eyes had seen more than mine will ever see.

My visit to El Mozote remains one of the heaviest experiences of my life, and I can't imagine much else overtaking it.

When I returned to Chicago, I knew I had to get in touch with J.'s dad. I had so many questions and so much anger at the United States government and military. I was hoping J.'s dad would have some answers. I began an email exchange with his dad, explaining my trip to El Salvador and to El Mozote in particular. I told him there was no denying the death in El Mozote, and there was no denying the story of Rufina Amaya's remarkable survival.

J.'s dad wrote back and said, sure, he knew of what had happened in El Mozote. He had been one of the main trainers for the Atlacatl Battalion, which was named responsible for the massacre there as well as the deaths of the six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter.

He wrote to me that while he had helped train this battalion, he had never commanded them to commit the atrocities at El Mozote. He then went on a political rant about the dangers of the guerilla armies present in El Salvador at the time and how it was prudent for the United States government to be involved financially the way it was.

J.'s dad expressed no responsibility in the email exchange for what had occurred. I realized that it was too emotionally upsetting and I wasn't going to get much further, so we stopped emailing each other.

Since that time J. has found some middle ground between what his Colombian mother and I were telling him, and what his dad was telling him about the school.

J. traveled with a student delegation from Edgewood College, led by the passionate Dominican Sr. Maureen McDonnell. He understands his dad's side of the story in a way that I will never be able to comprehend, but then, aren't all father/son relationships complicated? At least J. also has come to understand the other side of the story.

Some time after our email conversations I met J.'s dad in person. He came to Wisconsin for his grandson's second birthday. We drank beer and ate bratwursts together. I babysat for J.'s kid while he and his dad went to a hockey game. J.'s dad is a pretty normal guy when you're not talking about El Mozote, El Salvador, death squads, and WHISC. He loves his son and showers his grandson with affection.

My differences with J.'s dad are truly irreconcilable. We'll probably take those differences to our respective graves. However, our experience conversing has made me more understanding of just how amazing it is that social change happens.

Someday, I'm sure, the training school at Fort Benning will go through more than a name change. Every year more people become involved in the movement to shut it down -- and more elected officials vote to do so in Congress.

Luckily, my continued association with the community that keeps raising difficult questions about U.S. policy and the School of the Americas helps me realize that eventually the truth will prevail.

[Mike Sweitzer-Beckman recently earned his master of divinity degree from the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, Calif. He lives with his wife in his hometown in Wisconsin and co-founded the blog www.youngadultcatholics-blog.com.]

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