

# UPDATE on the AMERICAS

A bi-monthly publication of the Rochester Committee on Latin America

A Taskforce of Metro Justice

Spring 2010

## May 5 meeting: Ruth Orantes, Salvadoran pastor, feminist and worker for justice

Ruth Rodriguez de Orantes is the pastor of Shekina Baptist Church in Santa Ana, El Salvador. Shekina is a small community that broke away from the larger Baptist church in Santa Ana in the early 1990's because they wanted women in leadership and to be able to focus more on justice issues. After meeting in each other's homes for several years they were able to save money to build a church and hire a pastor, Ruth.

Ruth and her husband Alex are both Baptist pastors. They have a high level of awareness of the political situation in their country, and work for justice for the poor.

Shekina community is feeling a call to reach out to those poorer than they in the neighborhoods around them. This tiny community is trying to build a community center, in which the young will find a safe place to play and learn, the elderly will find companionship, mothers will find support, and teens will be encouraged to grow in leadership.

A class from Colgate Rochester Crozer Divinity School went to El Salvador in December 2005 and met the Orantes during that visit. One of the students, Chava Redonnet, returned the following year to grow in friendship and community with the people of Shekina church, and she has been back twice since then.

Ruth will speak at ROCLA's May 5 meeting at 7 PM at the Downtown Presbyterian Church, 121 N. Fitzhugh Street. Parking is free in the City Hall lot across the street. The church is wheelchair-accessible and looped.



Photo by Chava Redonnet: Ruth Orantes at the memorial to the 70,000 who disappeared or were murdered during the civil war, in Cuscatlán Park in San Salvador. She is pointing to the name of Ignatio Ellacuria, one of the Jesuit priests killed at the UCA on November 16, 1989.

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ROCLA Programs and Actions every  
First Wednesday 7:00 PM Downtown  
Presbyterian Church 121 N. Fitzhugh  
St. Free and open to the public.  
Wheelchair accessible  
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## The Working Poor

—by Chava Redonnet

[Ed. note: Chava's observations provide a lead into ROCLA's May 5 meeting when her friend and Baptist pastor, Ruth Orantes, will be our speaker.]

Each time I travel to El Salvador, I bring home a little ceramic memento of the trip. They are all similar: a piece of fruit, which when lifted reveals little clay figures. The clay mango lifts to reveal a woman making pastilitos, the cacao hides a nativity scene, and the little apple has a woman selling flowers. You can also buy them showing different professions; a doctor, a nurse, a police officer, a teacher. Most have people making traditional crafts or foods. What they have in common is that the people are working.

On earlier trips I was so overwhelmed by the poverty that I didn't notice a whole lot else. El Salvador has a painful history, a lot of martyrs, and an average national income of five dollars a day. This time, however, what I noticed was the work that people were doing. Everyone seems to be working.

The homes of the very poor are made out of found materials: sticks, pieces of cloth and plastic, or corrugated sheet metal on the sturdier ones. It's impossible to keep them clean; invited to sit, the host will first brush off the fine layer of dirt covering the plastic chair (unless, of course, all there is to sit on is a stump). Clean is impossible, but neat is another matter. I am struck by the orderliness as well as the ingenuity with which homes are made out of almost nothing.

We visited a family that had recently lost their home. Fourteen people were living in two dwellings that were essentially tents: stick frames, covered with old sheets and drapes. Not much more substantial than the little houses we might have made out of cardboard boxes and blankets as kids. The family was working, all through the visit. They had a pile of corn to shuck, and taught me how to do it. At home we would throw the husks away, or maybe put them in the compost; here, they are a valuable commodity, needed in the making of tamales. I learned to pile them carefully on my knee. Two girls sat on stumps, shucking the corn. Their brother would take the newly shucked cobs and add them to a pile. Other children, including a little boy no more than two years old, stood or sat quite still, watching them. When there was enough shucked corn, their mother took over, efficiently stripping the corn kernels with a large knife, filling a pot which would later be cooked to make a drink that the family would sell at the side of the road later in the day. They do this every day.

There is a myth that the poor are lazy, and that's why they are poor. Hogwash.

Everywhere in El Salvador, I see people working. A man pushes a wheelbarrow with carefully cut sticks. Women are washing clothes, hanging them on wires strung across their tiny yards. People sell things from their houses, or from the side of the road: pupusas, pastilitos, traditional drinks. Men ride around on bicycles from five in the morning until late at night, honking their horns to announce they have bread to sell. Pickup trucks go by, crowded with twenty or more people standing in the back on their way to work. Buses, too, roaring by the house only feet away; also beginning at four-thirty or five a.m. (After a few days, I hardly noticed). People making things, selling things, cleaning things. It seems never to stop. The day begins before dawn: walking one morning at four thirty I was surprised to find the city already waking up, people setting their pots to boil in front of the houses, preparing to cook whatever they would soon be selling.

*Continued on next page*

## Rice and Beans Review

—by Margaret Matlin

I think that the ROCLA event yesterday is the best one that I can remember!

The two speakers were truly wonderful! Both Lory Ghortner and Malcolm Bell provided such a modest assessment of their own role, and yet both are genuinely admirable people! I could feel tears coming to my eyes as each of them spoke, always a sign that a presentation is emotionally powerful, as well as being intellectually credible.

Also, the dinner itself was the best I can remember, as far as the crowd, the setup for the dinner, and (well, let's be honest— this does influence my judgment) the quality of the desserts!



The organization was also very strong—the program moved along, when it would have been easy to be too leisurely... and lose the attention of the audience!

[Ed. note: Many thanks to all who donated auction items – especially Lory Ghortner, Pilot, whose plane ride over the Finger Lakes was won by Gloria Osborne; and Bob Good, whose weekend retreat at his cottage on Keuka Lake was won by Ron and Ute Hallman.]

## The Working Poor (*Continued*)

I do not understand the complexities of poverty, the budgets of countries, the reasons why people are so poor. I do know that there seem to be two El Salvadors: there is the one that resembles North America culture, that shops at the mall, that buys gas at \$3.50 a gallon. Even that El Salvador is poor: I rode in the car of a doctor -- a doctor, mind -- think of the economic status of a doctor in the States. The lower windshield was a spiderweb of cracks, left from a day five years earlier when the hood of the car had sprung back and smashed it. That car would not have passed inspection in the States. In El Salvador, it's a physician's car. But owning any car at all is far beyond the means of the majority of the people, for whom a gallon of gas would take a day's wages. (That five dollars a day national average, remember, factors in all the people who can shop in the mall, and the rich people, of whom there are not many. All those incomes together pull the national average up to five dollars a day. Five dollars!! -- What it costs to gift-wrap a book on amazon.com).

Even the well off, it should be noted, live with the infrastructure. The plumbing, for example: the pipes in El Salvador cannot handle toilet paper. Every toilet has a wastebasket beside it, to hold the used paper. That's assuming, of course, that there is a toilet, and not a cement circle over a pit, as you commonly find out in the country. The toilets on airplanes are more spacious and comfortable than some of the baños I have used in El Salvador, in the houses of the very poor, or even sometimes in public places like the cathedral....

In El Salvador today there is a new political party in power. I asked one woman, the leader of a community that is very poor, five hundred families in shacks made of sticks and pieces of metal, if things were different. The new regime, for them, is a lot like the Obama administration, for us: things are not moving fast enough to please the progressive left, but there are some signs of hope. "Now," she said, "when we knock on the door, they open the door." The new people acknowledge the poor: that's progress. There is a new law that every child shall have school supplies and a uniform, the lack of which keep children from attending school. Such a law will help in navigating that icy slope: metaphorical cleats so they can at least get a grip.

What's remarkable is that they keep on walking.

## Major Event on the Human Impact of U.S. Immigration Policy

ROCLA is a co-sponsor of a special evening of reading, discussion, and book signing by Margaret Regan, author of the major new book on the human impact of U.S. immigration/border policy, *The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands*. Thursday May 13, 2010, 7 PM, First Unitarian Church, 220 S. Winton Rd

Tucson newspaper reporter Margaret Regan is an engaging and highly informed speaker. Her powerful and important book comes out of her past 10 years of reporting on events along the Arizona-Mexico border, especially on the injuries and deaths of migrants and on their treatment by the US Border Patrol.

Her book could hardly be more timely. Senators Schumer and Graham have proposed a bipartisan bill for immigration reform. This effort is sure to be as controversial as the health insurance issue. What better way to get informed on the issue than by hearing Margaret Regan at her single Rochester appearance?

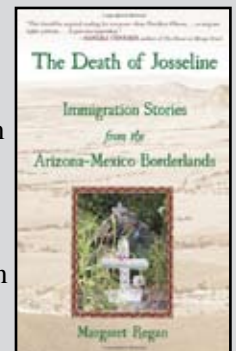
You also can hear her 2/24/10 appearance on NPR's Talk of the Nation - just go to <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=124046778>  
For more information contact George Dardess or Peggy Rosenthal 585-244-4685

## Book Review

—by Peggy Rosenthal

*The Death of Josseline: Immigration Stories from the Arizona-Mexico Borderlands*, by Margaret Regan (Beacon Press, 2010)

This is the most important book I've read in years. Tucson reporter Margaret Regan pulls together her decade's experience of following what happens to Central American migrants who risk their lives to enter the U.S. in search of jobs to support their families back home, where economic opportunities have been ruined by NAFTA and CAFTA as well as by their own countries' inequities and corruption. Regan puts a human face on all who play roles in the current disastrous border dramas: migrants who die in the harsh Arizona desert, their companions who choose deportation in order to save others' lives, Border Patrol agents, people in the Mexican border towns who help migrants who have been deported, and residents along the U.S. side of the border (those who love the incredibly expensive and extensive border wall and those who hate it). This book is indispensable for anyone wanting to understand the human impact of U.S. border policy -- and that should be everyone in the U.S. It should be required reading for every congressperson in Washington as well as Homeland Security chief Janet Napolitano and everyone in her ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) office.





## Women's Work/The Feminization of El Campo

—by Joseph Sorrentino

The ongoing agricultural crisis in Mexico has forced millions of people, mostly young men, off their land to seek work in cities across Mexico or in the US. Although campesinos typically spend several months a year away from their homes to work elsewhere, now they often cannot return because there is no money to be made in el campo [rural area or countryside]. I have been in villages that were almost devoid of men. There were women, children and the elderly and a few men of working age. Part of my trip this year has been to document what is being called the feminization of el campo.

I spent Sunday with Sarafina while she worked in el campo. Sarafina is a single woman (her husband left several years ago) with three small children - girls 6, 7, and 8. After getting them up and ready for school she works 8 to 10 hours in el campo. She works there seven days a week and makes the equivalent of about 8 to 10 dollars - barely enough to feed her family. We walked half an hour to her land - she has half a hectare, or about an acre. First, she spent an hour weeding, which meant whacking at the weeds with a machete. This was followed by hoeing around her tomatoes and beans. When one of her girls complained of being hungry, she put down her hoe and prepared lunch. After lunch, she went right back to work. She picked some dried coffee that she said can be washed and roasted. Then she chopped firewood with a machete and axe. She bundles the firewood and sells it. The bundles weigh around 70 to 90 pounds, and she carries them on her back, walking over 30 minutes - all uphill - to where she sells the load. After five hours of work in the sun (Sundays are half days) she made 20 pesos (less than 2 dollars) for the firewood. I have seen people work hard in el campo but nothing like the way Sarafina worked - constantly and in complete silence. When her daughters complained, she listened and soothed them, never yelling or looking upset. Walking back under a load of firewood...it literally hurt just to watch.

One of the things that is happening here is called the feminization of el campo. With so many men leaving for the cities or the US, more and more women are taking on leadership roles and having to work in el campo. This is in addition to their more traditional roles of taking care of their family. It is double work. I hope to continue documenting this phenomenon in Chiapas. Just spending that one day with a campesina has given me insight into the difficult, difficult life they have.

*[ROCLA companero Joseph Sorrentino is a visual artist, writer and promoter of justice and fair trade, is back in el campo. These are excerpts from his recent e-mail.]*

## Danger, Death, and Increasing Complexities of Immigration: a Trip through the Borderlands

The narrow area of the Arizona-Mexico borderland is “a microcosm of all the complexities of US immigration policy,” said George Dardess, speaker at ROCLA’s April 7 meeting. The large and responsive audience followed George’s story intently as he recounted his experiences in that borderland two months ago. A spirited discussion followed as we grappled with the inhumanity of current policy, the desperation of poor and middle-class refugees from Mexico and Central America, the militarization of “the Wall” and the US Border Patrol, the rising death rate as we force migrants away from border crossings in populated areas and out into the deadly conditions of the desert. This is “a form of genocide,” said Dardess. “You have to see it” to begin to understand. “There at the border, struggling with those young folks from El Salvador (and with those trying to help them), I could feel that whatever the cost (and admittedly the cost to me personally was very little) I was in the right place at the right time.”

*[Ed. note: ROCLA is a member of the Genesee Valley Immigration Coalition which is meeting weekly in its efforts to persuade our legislators to enact a comprehensive immigration policy that is consistent with the following principles:*

- 1. A broad-based legalization of undocumented migrants, which includes a reasonable, efficient and understandable path to citizenship,*
- 2. A worker program which creates avenues for migrants to safely enter the United States and which includes labor protections for both U.S. and foreign workers,*
- 3. Prioritization of family unity in immigration policies, including reduction of waiting times for family reunification and adjustment of per-country caps,*
- 4. Restoration of due process for migrants, which was taken away in 1996 legislation, and*
- 5. Reform of detention and enforcement policies to ensure protection of basic rights.*

*To join this coalition please contact Ami Kadar, at amikadar@yahoo.com.]*

## Two Important Video Resources

***Until the Last Drop: Tales from the Battle for El Salvador's Water.*** 2009.

“El Salvador receives three times the world’s average in rainfall each year, yet 40% of Salvadorans do not enjoy potable water in their homes. “Until the Last Drop” examines opposing visions of water management s they clash in El Salvador. This

30-minute documentary illustrates how regulatory collapse and a legislative stalemate on water reform has real-life impacts for the health and well-being of people who need water to survive.

“One view, shared by the Inter-American Development Bank and others, argues that water access for Sslvadorans can be increased through private sector investment. The Bank claims that to provide the capital necessary to repair a multitude of decaying pipes, pumps, and valves, private companies must be constructed and should be guaranteed a return on their investments.

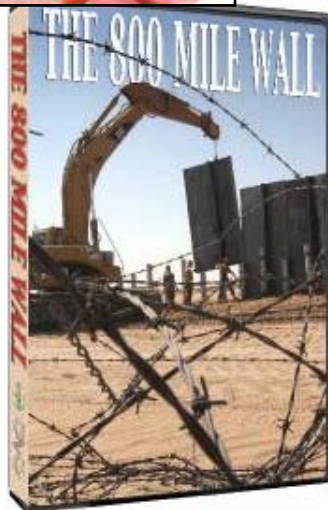
“A powerful coalition of environmentalists, faith-based activists, consumer advocates and unionists disagrees. The coalition has stopped laws from being enacted that would enable companies to profit from water. They argue that private investment in water provision will price water out of reach for the majority of



Salvadoranas, many of whom live on less than \$2 a day. These “water warriors’ maintain that it is immoral for businesses to profit from water while others cannot afford it.”

***The 800 Mile Wall.*** 2009.

“The 800 Mile Wall highlights the construction of the new border walls along the US-Mexico border as well as the effect on migrants trying to cross into the US. This powerful 90 minute film is an unflinching look at a failed US border strategy that many believe violates fundamental human rights.



“Since border fences have been built well over 5,000 migrant bodies have been recovered in the US deserts, mountains and canals. Unofficial reports put the death toll as high as 10,000 men, women and children. As a direct result of US border policy, migrants are forced to cross more treacherous terrain in search of low skilled jobs in the US. The NY Times writes, ‘Current border strategy is serving as a funnel through deadly terrain.’ The 800 Mile Wall illustrates, in great detail, the ineffective and deadly results of a failed border policy and offers some effective strategies to help resolve the current human rights crisis.”

If you would like to borrow either of these videos please call Peter and Gail Mott, 381-5606.

## March 14 Vigil to Remember the 30th Anniversary of Archbishop Oscar Romero’s Assassination by School of the Americas (SOA) Grads

*Harry Murray  
(with sign) and  
John Honeck  
as the Slain  
Arhbishop  
Romero*



*John Honeck,  
Organizer*

## Randal Shea and His Daughter Kristi



Photo by Marilyn Anderson of Randall Shea and his daughter Kristi at Rice and Beans Dinner. Randall was here to raise funds for his schools in Santa María Tzejá, Guatemala.

### ROCHESTER COMMITTEE ON LATIN AMERICA (ROCLA)

*ROCLA for many years has sought to be a bridge between the Rochester community and the people of Latin America. Monthly meetings on the 1st Wednesday of each month at the Downtown United Presbyterian Church provide an opportunity to learn more about what is going on in that part of the world. In addition to providing information, ROCLA is committed to working for systemic justice and supports numerous organizations that are on the front line of this endeavor. School of the Americas Watch, the Mexico Solidarity Network, Rights Action and the Rochester Labor Film Festival are among the many groups that receive assistance and encouragement.*

#### **ROCLA Steering Committee**

Marilyn Anderson, Peg Gefell, Marilyn and Bob Kaiser, John Locke, Arnie Matlin, Sandy Morales, Peter and Gail Mott, Vic Vinkey, Tom Ward.

#### **Update on the Americas Publishing Team**

Editors: Gail and Peter Mott; Designer: John Locke

## Save the date: June 2 “People to People” Video: Civil Disobedience Breaks the US Embargo of Cuba

ROCLA’s June 2 meeting will feature the documentary film, *People to People*, co-produced by the Cuban Film Institute and the Cuban Institute of Friendship with the People. “This engaging film mixes archival footage with video from the 2008 Caravan to Cuba and interviews to tell the story of Pastors for Peace and the Latin American School of Medicine in Havana, Cuba”. For the past 15 years these “Friendshipments” have come through Rochester and then joined the hundreds of courageous women and men from the US and Canada making their way across the Mexican and Canadian borders to Cuba to oppose the US government’s embargo and travel ban and to give support to the Cuban people.

This process is one of the best examples of civil disobedience in the country. The director, Rev. Lucius



Walker says:

*Rev. Lucius Walker*

“We cannot allow the government to license our conscience. Our faith and humanity demand that we provided “a cup of cold water” (Matthew 25:35) to our brothers and sisters in need. We cannot surrender to Caesar the right to decide who are our brothers and sisters. We cannot accept a law that commands us to treat them as “the enemy” when our faith commands us to love them as members of our own family.”

Rochesterians Harry Murray and John Honeck, both peace activists who have gone to jail for their civil disobedience, will comment on how conscience has informed their actions.

Vic Vinkey will give us an update on this year’s 21st IFCO/PfP Caravan which will be coming through Rochester in early July, and he will let us know how we can participate in bringing medical aid and school supplies to the people of Cuba.