

## Peacebuilding *en las Américas* (PLA)

### Frontline Land Rights Defender: Raquel Lopez



**I AM RAQUEL LÓPEZ.**

I am an "Earth Protector." We are defending the land rights struggle in El Progreso in northwestern Honduras, a suburb of San Pedro Sula.

We're carrying forward the process of legalizing our land.

I live in a neighborhood called the Community of Germany named in honor of a German man who died there. He had quietly made it known before he died that the land would be left to the neighborhood's poorest residents. But things didn't go like that. What the mayor of Progreso did instead was have the city's legal representative work behind the community's back so that the city inherited the land.

As a women's group, we decided to organize and look for help, to find someone to help manage our court case. We realized that (the municipal authorities) were making plans to evict the community.

We got around the process by setting up a foundation with a board. We secured the income generated by the community. This turned into a big

conflict for us because the men didn't accept that we women would be ring-leaders of the process.

Then, the harassment started. People hounded us—they beat up a number of women. They tore into my papa with an axe. They killed a woman of 60 and shot other companions. It was a disaster. They threatened me, "We are going to kill you." They said it like, "Hey! How's it going?" They issued orders for my arrest. Persecution, a lot of persecution.

When the harassment was going on, people told me to get out and take my kids with me. I said, "No." An attorney told me to get out. I said, "I'm not going. I'm going to stay and face it."

Next, they called out a police unit to cut off our water and electricity because they said we needed to be taught to be "more polite." This went on for what I'm guessing was about three years.

We couldn't come out of the house openly because they were lying in wait to kill us. So we snuck out, or we'd come out before the sun rose. We couldn't meet up in groups because it was forbidden for us to gather in the community.

Then, we arrived at the Forum of Women for Life in San Pedro Sula. They put us in touch with Mercy

Dream Weavers (a PLA partner), who got us involved with the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). AVP helped us because we first learned to grapple with the problems we face. Since we've had the training, we know it's easier to dialogue. And I'm going to be honest with you: it's always hard to dialogue when someone attacks you.

AVP gave us a boost because the only way we'd ever known to struggle for something was "an eye for an eye." If you get me, it's right back at you. We didn't see any other way. What could we do? But now, after the workshop on nonviolence, we see a new way of working together. We learned, and we began to share our new skills. We gave a workshop to our neighbors.

We women were always on the front lines, with our men behind. Why? Because if the struggle were just between men, they might kill each other. And we determined to stay away from the risk of casualties. So our men had our backs, but it was just us women who were on the front lines.

We women are in a country where we are victimized and criminalized. We have an endless number of legal offenses simply because we aren't keeping our mouths shut. We're defending the right to our lives, property, land, and our physical bodies.

*Participants of the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) join together at Mercy Dream Weavers, San Pedro Sula, Honduras.*





# Rebuilding the Social Fabric in Colombia

## Children of Ex-Combatants Train as Leaders

OVER THE PAST EIGHT YEARS, Franciscan Sisters of Mary Auxiliary have incorporated AVP workshops into areas where they work, believing that AVP is a "project to work for peace." They have offered over 60 workshops since 2006, impacting over 600 people. More than 75 people have been trained as facilitators, approximately 40 of whom are Franciscan Sisters. Alba Arrieta, who was the AVP National Coordinator in Colombia from 2006-2011, was the pillar in the Sis-

ters' training. Hundreds of Franciscan Sisters and their associates have taken at least the Basic Workshop which was incorporated into incoming Sisters' formation. Sisters work in Franciscan schools across the country, reaching teachers and students alike.

Today, the focus of the Franciscan Sisters is working with families of ex-combatants, especially the children and adolescents who live in economically marginalized areas of Colombia plagued by gangs and criminal

networks. Collaborating with other facilitators, Sister Patricia Duque will offer seven Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) workshops in the next six months in three departments (Antioquia, Tolima and Córdoba). The Sisters believe strongly in AVP as an effective grassroots tool to build a culture of peace during this post-peaceaccord stage marked by governmental resistance to the accords and still active guerilla groups.



## Sharing the Alternatives to Violence Project with the Colombia Truth Commission

ACROSS LATIN AMERICA, national peace accords have not resulted in a culture of peace. Much more is needed at the community level to recreate the social fabric for harmonious coexistence. In 2019, PLA offered tools to build a culture of peace which will help to create social transformation.

In July, PLA Coordinator Dr. Mónica Maher gave a presentation on work supported by PLA in Colombia to an audience of non-governmental leaders, graduate students and academics at a seminar on peacebuilding in Colombia at the Latin American Faculty of Social Science - Ecuador. Her talk, "Rebuilding the Social Fabric in Colombia: Experiences of the Alternatives to Violence Project," was part of a Truth and Reconciliation Panel, describing the methodology, content and out-

comes of the work of PLA in former Red Zones of Colombia. .

Present at the session was Colombia Truth Commissioner, Dr. Carlos Martín Beristain, an expert in psycho-social attention to victims of armed conflict; Beristain indicated that the AVP workshops described by Maher are the kinds of community activities that are still very much needed at the grass-roots level today in Colombia. He asked to share the content of her presentation with other Truth Commissioners in Colombia.

The Colombia Truth Commission is now interviewing victims, gathering extensive data and soliciting recommendations to achieve its mandate of historical clarification leading to non-repetition and peaceful co-existence.



Shirley way, second from right, with AVP Honduras Facilitators

# Accompaniment: Supporting Local Leaders Who Make Peace Possible

INTERVIEW WITH SHIRLEY WAY, ITHACA FRIENDS MEETING, NEW YORK YEARLY MEETING

## As a Quaker, why are you passionate about this work of accompanying?

I have traveled to El Salvador or Honduras for three to four weeks each year for five of the past eight years.

In 2017, when I planned a trip to El Salvador, my clearness committee can tell you that in discerning around the trip, I was clearly called to continue the work — I could not not go. I have built relationships with that team and know the power of the work that flows through me and the team.

And I really was not keen on going. There was a fear and a dread that I've not experienced before. It stemmed from witnessing the effects of the gang violence and knowing we were not safe the year before. A newspaper headline in 2016 was, "Only twenty-one killed yesterday in the country."

And I knew I could not not go.

Thankfully, the social climate was much improved. People openly laughed and greeted one another on the street. Gang violence had lessened, we were told, because gang leaders had either been imprisoned or killed.

## What support do you receive for this work?

Farmington-Scipio Regional Meeting and New York Yearly Meeting have funded my travel and work in El Salvador and Honduras. The funding is essential. I could not go without it. And the spiritual accompaniment of Friends, who I know will be holding me and the work, is also essential. I could

not go without it. I always travel with another North American. We serve as companions, security and elders for each other.

## What do you do while there?

Salomon Medina (El Salvador) and Ondina Murillo (Honduras) pack the three to four weeks that we are there with as many Alternatives to Violence Project workshops as they can—usually three to four. In recent years, the second-level Trauma Awareness and Resilience workshop has been the most popular because the need is so great.

We are there to facilitate workshops, but mostly we are there to listen and to uphold the transformative work that is being done. The work of coordinating and facilitating workshops with people who have experienced and are still experiencing severe trauma can be overwhelming and may cause secondary or vicarious trauma.

## Why do you stay involved?

This work is the most meaningful I have ever experienced. Visiting offers real and tangible support in a way that Skype and Whatsapp cannot. And it's that realness that keeps me engaged and coming back for more.

## What can others do who want to be involved?

I invite anyone who is interested in knowing more or getting involved to please contact me: 607-319-1494 or shirleyway61@gmail.com



**Colombia:** Patricia Duque offers peace education to families of ex-combatants in Antioquia.



**Ecuador:** Beatriz Villareal supports leadership development among Kichwa women in the Andean highlands.



**El Salvador:** Salomón Medina trains youth in the art of community co-existence in gang-controlled areas of San Salvador.



**Guatemala:** Lorena Escobar promotes cultures of peace in high-risk urban schools.



**Honduras:** Ondina Murillo encourages ex-gang members in prison to co-facilitate workshops for other men in prison.

1001 Park Avenue St. Louis, MO 63104-3720 USA



"I began to feel that I was someone special in life, that the ugly things that people say about me are not true. . . I felt free, and for the first time, happy." —Teen participant, Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) Guatemala

## Thank you to everyone whose support makes these programs possible!



We invite you to be part of this peacebuilding movement in Latin America. Here are some of our priorities based on requests from our country coordinators:

- ➔ **Train the children of ex-combatants** in Colombia as leaders in non-violence (\$10,000 goal)
- ➔ **Offer workshops in the Kichwa language** to indigenous women in rural Ecuador who face high levels of discrimination and violence (\$6,000 goal)
- ➔ **Support new Salvadoran facilitators** to reach youth at risk for gang recruitment (\$5,000 goal)
- ➔ **Expand non-violence training** with secondary school students in high-risk neighborhoods of Guatemala City (\$5,000 goal)
- ➔ **Begin workshops with highly motivated prison guards** in northern Honduras (\$2,000 goal)

Tax-deductible donations to Friends Peace Teams/PLA, keeps this work alive. View Friends Peace Teams Silver Level charity status at [GuideStar.org](http://GuideStar.org).

*Left: Inside participant takes Trauma Resiliency Workshop in the El Porvenir Prison, Honduras*