

La Clínica del Pueblo: Created to Serve the Salvadoran Community in Washington, D.C.

By Felix Marquez

El Salvador is a Spanish-speaking country with a democratic government. However, that has not always been the case. Inequality can lead to revolution and revolution can lead to a lot of deaths. This is what happened to many living in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua, in Central America, from the 1970s through the 1990s, and no one suffered more than the people of El Salvador who were hostage to 12 years of civil war.

The lack of a democratic government in the 1980s forced a large number of Salvadorans to immigrate all over the world, and during the past 20 to 30 years Salvadorans immigrated in large numbers to the United States. As Juan Gonzalez reported in his book *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, in the article "Central Americans: Intervention Comes Home to Roost," the census reported 701,000 Salvadorans living in the United States in 1990, which was the largest increase of Salvadorans ever seen.¹ One of the largest groups of Salvadorans immigrated to the metropolitan Washington, D.C., and this group needed to find ways to help each other, which it did by establishing a network of self-help organizations.²

A Brief History of Inequality in El Salvador

Salvadorans have suffered greatly since their 1821 independence from Spain. There has been a double-digit poverty rate for more than a century. In 1885, a group of Salvadoran militia fighters, with the support of the Guatemalan government, overthrew Salvadoran President Rafael Zaldivar. Approximately 100 years later, the Salvadoran peasant community showed its discontent with its government by organizing antimilitary groups, which led to a civil war that raged for 12 years before the government and the peasants ended it in 1992.³ In her article "Salvadoran Transformation," Beth Baker-Cristales talks about the creation of the opposition groups that were created in the 1980s as a force to encourage the Salvadoran peasants to fight for their rights, because the people were tired of the military dictatorship and the oppression that had started in 1931.⁴ Political parties from the 1960s and 1970s (Partido Comunista Salvadoreño [PCS], Resistencia Nacional [RN], Fuerzas Populares de Liberación Farabundo Martí [FPL], Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo [ERP] and Partido Revolucionario de los Trabajadores Centroamericanos [PRTC])⁵ created a new party called the FMLN (Frente Farabundo Martí para la Liberación Nacional) Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, that had a specific goal: to coordinate guerrilla activities to fight for equality, democracy and a reform for land distribution. According to Baker-Cristal, the FMLN started organizing schools and communities to demonstrate and strike against government oppression. Baker-Cristal also claims that the FMLN ideal was to recruit members in support of their cause, which was the people's cause. By supporting the FMLN, people showed that they were not happy with their government and brought to the government's attention how poor people, especially the peasants, were being treated. El Salvador, which in the early 1980s had a military dictatorship government, soon erupted into a bloody civil war.⁶

After President Carlos Humberto Romero was overthrown, in 1979, in an effort to stabilize the country, the United States helped to elect José Napoleón Duarte president, who became the country's first civilian president in nearly 50 years. During his presidency, Duarte's government promised land reform. Finally, the Salvadoran people were starting to see the light, but as things started to get better something occurred that took them ten steps backwards; Archbishop Oscar A. Romero was murdered by military forces while saying mass at a church in San Salvador.⁷

Archbishop Romero denounced military oppression and condemned the way the military was treating Salvadoran civilians. His assassination further damaged the already weak credibility of the Salvadoran government and military,⁸ and it angered the people and the guerrilla forces. Making matters worse, the murders of three American

nuns and a lay worker brought unwanted, negative attention to the country. Archbishop Romero's assassination and the murder of the four religious-affiliated individuals lit the fire of war and also weakened the image and authority of the Salvadoran government, which was still being created by its new, civilian president.⁹

The political unrest and fighting between government and communist forces continued to escalate. The military created what were called death squads (*escuadrones de la muerte*) whose function was to dissolve the groups they believed to be associated with the guerrillas. Their main job was disappearing people who, in many cases, turned out to be innocent people.¹⁰ Because of U.S. involvement, Salvadorans fled and immigrated to the United States of America. As Juan Gonzalez explains in his book:

"This sudden exodus did not originate with some newfound collective desire for the material benefits of U.S. society; rather, vicious civil wars and the social chaos those wars engendered forced the region's people to flee, and in each case, the origins and spiraling intensity of those wars were a direct result of military and economic intervention by our own government."¹¹

Because Salvadorans took refuge in large U.S. cities, particularly, Los Angeles, Houston, and Washington, D.C., my main focus will be on Salvadoran refugees, such as Doctor Juan Romagoza, who was the director of La Clínica del Pueblo from 1987-2008.

This new wave of immigrants struggled with many problems. First and foremost, they had mental health and medical needs. But there were no services for this new group of immigrants, especially those that had just arrived in Washington, D.C. So, the Salvadorans who came to Washington, D.C., started something new: They created a clinic for Latino immigrants, especially those who did not have health insurance.

Just as Mexican-American organizations saw the need to organize and fight for the rights of Mexican Americans,¹² the Salvadoran immigrants were also able to overcome the obstacles in their path and make something for themselves and their fellow Salvadorans, so they created organizations such as The Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), a community-based organization that was founded in 1981 to protect the rights of refugees arriving from conflicts in Central America. La Clínica Del Pueblo (La Clínica), another community-based organization, was founded to provide culturally appropriate and free health services to Salvadorans. Each of these organizations was created to help the new wave of immigrants cope with the issues involved with arriving in a new country. A concern for the medical and mental need for those fleeing El Salvador was raised and a clinic—La Clínica—was born. According to La Clínica's case study, "La Clínica del Pueblo was founded in Washington, D.C. in 1983 by a group of Salvadoran activists (the Central American Refugee Center, CARECEN) and self-proclaimed North American hippies living in a group home (Plenty International) who saw the need to provide health services to refugees fleeing the civil war in El Salvador."¹³

"Patrice Perillie, co-founder of CARECEN, recalls this day: "We discussed with the medical personnel of Plenty International the idea of starting a health clinic for refugees from El Salvador living in Washington who had no access to health services.... we had a lot of volunteers with CARECEN,

¹Gonzalez, J. (2000). *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*. New York, NY: Penguin Books Ltd.

²*Ibid.*

³Baker-Cristales, B. (Sep., 2004) *Salvadoran Transformations: Class Consciousness and Ethnic Identity in a Transnational Milieu*. *Latin American Perspective*, Vol. 31, No 5, pp.15-33.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Danner, M., (1994) *The Massacre of El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. A Vintage Original: New York

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸McColm, R. (1982) *El Salvador: Peaceful Revolution or Armed Struggle?*, Freedom House, Inc.; New York

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¹⁰Danner, M., (1994) *The Massacre of El Mozote: A Parable of the Cold War*. A Vintage Original: New York

¹¹Gonzalez, J. (2000). *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*. New York, NY: Penguin Books Ltd.

¹²Gutierrez D. G. (1995). *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican Americans, Mexican Immigrants, and the Politics of Ethnicity*. University of California Press. Berkeley and Los Angeles, California.

¹³Bernbaum, M. (August 30, 2008), *La Clínica del Pueblo: An Immigrant Community Health Center: Of the People For the People*. Retrieved from: http://www.lcdp.org/doc/LCDP_Case_Study_Reference_Document.pdf

individuals who we had assisted to obtain refugee status in the U.S. who had been medical doctors and nurses in El Salvador before coming to the U.S., who were now working at restaurants or as janitors. We thought, Wouldn't it be great if we could find a place where refugees could be treated and where Salvadoran doctors and nurses could work in their capacities as medical personnel?" It turned out that Mitch Snyder ... from the Community for Creative Non-Violence had a storehouse of medical equipment that they were willing to donate to us. We subsequently went to the Mayor's Office of Latino Affairs and said, "We want to do this clinic." They loved the idea.

We went back to one of our offices and cut a deal.¹⁴

Nearly a year later, in March of 1983, what is now fondly known as La Clínica del Pueblo (The People's Clinic) opened its doors as a free health clinic for refugees fleeing from the civil turmoil in Central America¹⁵

From a one-room clinic working one night a week, La Clínica del Pueblo grew to a three-story building with 85 full-time staff members and more than 100 volunteers, according to their case study from 2008.¹⁶ La Clínica also receives donations from the people it serves and the people that it has served. From a clinic that provided free service to Salvadoran immigrants in the 1980s to a major clinic that provides health services to Latinos and all those in need, La Clínica has transformed the nation's capital.

26 years after it started, approximately 7,500 patients visit La Clínica each year.¹⁷ La Clínica's mission is "to provide culturally appropriate health services to persons in the Latino community regardless of their ability to pay. At La Clínica, 50 to 60 patients are seen per day, from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., whereas a German community clinic only sees 8 to 10 patients per day, from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. This contrast shows how in demand La Clínica is in the District of Columbia, especially when the United States does not have free health insurance for all.¹⁸

La Clínica services are no longer just about medicine. La Clínica also offers social services—family, mental health, HIV prevention, outreach, interpreting are among the services that La Clínica provides. It also provides support groups for people with alcohol problems and to people of the gay community who need a safe place to meet. As one of the patients wrote to a local newspaper, *El Tiempo Latino*, in May 2009, he is very thankful for the services that La Clínica provided to him and provides to everyone that comes in: "Un ambiente agradable, un personal con amabilidad extraordinaria, atención rápida... No hay duda que La Clínica del Pueblo reconoce que no hay alegría mas grande que el server a sus hermanos."¹⁹

Expansion into Metro Area: Serving People in the District of Columbia, MD, and VA

La Clínica has done more than serve Salvadorans and refugees of other ethnic origins: it is now a recognized clinic of many types of medical and mental health expertise that works to build bonds between individuals and governments in the greater Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. As an individual that got to know La Clínica very

closely, I am proud of the hard work it has done for the Salvadoran community that had to leave their country. Washington, D.C., Mayor Anthony Williams; Washington D.C. Coun-



cil Member Jim Graham; La Clínica del Pueblo Director Dr. Juan Romagoza; and other city notables take part in ribbon cutting for the new building (2003)

La Clínica del Pueblo's original site, 1983-2003, "where rooms used to be drafty, cold in the winter and hot in the summer."

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¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹⁸Sullivan C. M., (July 4, 2008) Health Clinic Treats Germany's Few Uninsured. Retrieved from: National Public Radio at <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91963961>

¹⁹El Tiempo Latino, (May 15, 2009) Si a La Clínica del Pueblo. http://eltiempo-latino.com/edic_Ant./09/may/3/voces/cartas.html