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Healing and Reconciliation for Survivors of War in North Central Colombia

Between 2009 and 2011, a project was implemented to help survivors of war in a small Colombian community learn how to help each other recover from their trauma. Twenty local residents received extensive training on how to lead peer groups to help survivors come to terms with the past and co-exist peacefully with ex-combatants. The project concluded with the construction of a memory wall to honor victims of armed violence.

by Cameron Macauley [Center for International Stabilization and Recovery]

Since the mid-1960s, Colombia has experienced violent internal conflict in which more than 220,000 people have died.¹ Fighting was restricted to remote areas in the south of the country until the 1990s, when armed insurgent groups moved into the prosperous agricultural communities of Antioquia in the central north, forcing local populations to abandon their land. Guerrillas operating with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* [FARC]) and the National Liberation Army (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional* [ELN]) created a climate of insecurity that drove many communities to form paramilitary defense groups, most of which were self-financed by drug trafficking.²

Although the paramilitary groups claimed that they defended communities from the guerrillas, many abused their position of authority and established a vast system of extortion while engaging in brutal “social cleansing.” The main paramilitary group, the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* [AUC]), took control of much of central Colombia in 1998, perpetrating massacres, assassinations, kidnappings, rape and torture as well as causing hundreds of thousands of Colombians to flee.³

San Francisco, Antioquia

The rural farming community of San Francisco, about 60 miles southeast of Medellín, was one of many affected by these events. By 1999, San Francisco’s population of around

20,000 dwindled to a little more than 6,000, and agriculture was severely hampered by landmines and booby traps laid by FARC and ELN guerrillas as well as by the Colombian military. San Francisco’s population experienced the mass execution of men, women and children in the streets, and the destruction of homes belonging to those accused of supporting the guerrillas. Between 2000 and 2005, the community was captured and recaptured several times, and it became the scene of bloody house-to-house fighting. Injured civilians could not seek medical attention outside the town due to mines and ambushes.

Landmines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) severely affected the community. Between 1990 and 2011, 409 people were killed or injured by landmines in Antioquia—more than any other department in Colombia.⁴ A few strategically placed mines intimidated farmers from plowing fields or planting gardens, and guerrilla-deployed IEDs often contained feces, glass and plastic scrap, which cause infections due to fragments undetectable by X-ray.⁵

By early 2005, peace talks with guerrilla groups were progressing, and steps were taken to demobilize major paramilitary groups. Approximately 44,000 former combatants returned to civilian life, often in the same communities in which they had perpetrated violent crimes. The people of San Francisco faced the challenge of coexisting peacefully with young men who, only a few months earlier, had raped, murdered and tortured with impunity.



Beatriz Montoya provides training for peer groups.
Photo courtesy of Nate McCray.

The Partners and the Project

In 1991, the Colombian nongovernmental organization (NGO) *Cooperación Conciudadanía* (Citizenship Cooperation) was established to provide psychosocial support to victims of war-related violence. Psychologist Beatriz Montoya offered services to female survivors of the conflict in San Francisco, believing that training local residents to provide counseling would promote an intimate, familiar healing process, wherein support and encouragement would come from a person who grew up in the community and personally experienced the anguish of war there. Starting in 2001, *Conciudadanía* began using a unique psychosocial recovery approach called *Pasos y Abrazos* (Steps and Embraces), a series of survivor group meetings intended to cultivate an intellectual understanding of psychological trauma (*pasos*) and to relieve unresolved grief (*abrazos*). This approach was applied to women who lost loved ones, witnessed atrocities, or survived rape and torture. A number of these survivors were taught to lead support groups in their home communities.⁶

In November 2007, *Conciudadanía* was invited to collaborate with a Colombian peacebuilding foundation, *La Fundación para la Reconciliación* (the Foundation for Reconciliation) and with Survivor Corps, an international NGO working with war survivors. The foundation worked for many years in the field of conflict mediation and resolution through its Schools of Forgiveness and Reconciliation (*Las Escuelas de Perdón y Reconciliación*), a systematic

training program that prepares mediators known as Peace Leaders to help opposing sides in any type of conflict reach a state of coexistence without animosity and—at best—forgive each other for past transgressions.⁷

Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network) used peer support to promote psychological recovery. Founded by Jerry White and Ken Rutherford, two landmine survivors who personally experienced the benefit of peer support, Survivor Corps had established peer-support programs for survivors of conflict in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Burundi, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Jordan, Mozambique, Rwanda, Uganda and Vietnam by 2010.

The three organizations collaborated to combine their distinct areas of expertise to foster recovery and reconciliation in a community traumatized by violence. San Francisco was chosen due to Beatriz Montoya's close relationship with its people, and the need for healing and reconciliation expressed by the inhabitants. The United States Institute for Peace (USIP) generously provided funding.⁸

Eight Months of Training

Starting in the fall of 2009, 22 local residents, both men and women, were selected to train as community counselors (*promotores*) who ranged in age from 18 to 54 and included two former paramilitary combatants, survivors of rape and kidnapping, and eyewitnesses of atrocities. All of the participants had lost family members to armed violence.



Cameron Macauley provides peer-support training for the *promotores*.
Photo courtesy of Nate McCray.

Promotores' training occurred over an eight-month period in one-and-a-half day sessions held on alternate weeks to allow time for participants to digest emotionally intense material. The preparation is conceived as a continuum, starting with sessions designed to promote healing and instill confidence, eventually moving on to building skills in counseling and reconciliation. Each *paso* is a combination of discussion, contemplation and learning, in which the participants relive their traumas and listen to the stories of others, accompanied by an *abrazo*, an emotional catharsis and bonding intended to relieve the inner pressure of regrets, fears and anger. The training utilizes art, literature, poetry and music to evoke an atmosphere of introspection and ceremony. Having come to terms with their own feelings, the participants then learn the basics of peer counseling: how to listen actively, probe gently, understand and validate the feelings of others, and build a relationship of trust. Finally, the nature of forgiveness and reconciliation is explored with a focus on opening the survivor's mind to the possibility of reconciling with those who committed acts of violence.⁹

A key part of this training involved teaching the *promotores* to work with survivor groups to elicit discussions of their experiences of violence and abuse. Years of oppression taught survivors to remain silent for fear of drawing unwanted attention

if they expressed anger or grief. These repressed emotions produced depression, insomnia and emotional numbness that led to alcoholism and often suicide. Bringing survivors together in small groups to discuss their experiences and express their feelings was greeted with enthusiasm by the local residents.

As they became more experienced in leading these groups, the *promotores* attempted to bring former paramilitary members together with their victims. This proved difficult and led to accusations and threats in some cases. Participants felt that it was too early to expect progress in this area; however, they will continue to work on promoting reconciliation in the years to come.

Of the 22 participants who started the course in San Francisco, 20 completed it in mid-2010. When the project closed, many of the *promotores* continued working informally as counselors in the community. At least one of the younger *promotores* went on to study at a university and another was elected to the San Francisco City Council.

The Memory Wall

Another important component of this program was the construction of a "memory wall" in the neighboring community of Santa Fé de Antioquia, some 20 miles northwest of Medellín. The wall bears the names of citizens killed or



The Memory Wall.
Photo courtesy of Cameron Macauley.

missing in Colombia's civil conflict between 1990 and 2008. The original wall displayed 133 names, but in June of 2011, the Center for International Stabilization and Recovery donated funds to add space for another 98 names on two flanking wings. The wall was also repainted, and a banner at the top of the wall declares "No mas...Nunca mas... Ni una victima mas!" ("No more...never again...not one victim more!"). The wall stands near a church in a small park where survivors can place wreaths and flowers.¹⁰

Conclusion

Recently many residents started to return to San Francisco after spending years as displaced persons in camps around Medellín. On 7 March 2015, FARC agreed to contribute to demining efforts by removing mines it placed during the conflict (the Colombian Army already removed its mines).¹¹

This project provides a model by which war-affected communities can begin healing and live peacefully with ex-combatants from both sides. Rebuilding communities free of grief and bitterness is a key step toward ending long-running conflicts, as violence is often re-initiated by survivors with unresolved psychological trauma who are unable to live with former adversaries. The participants of this project hope it will be replicated in other post-conflict communities. The full training manual is available free online courtesy of USIP at <http://bit.ly/1SDgh8x>.⁹ ©

See endnotes page 65



Cameron Macauley, MPH, joined CISR in August 2010 as its peer-support and trauma-rehabilitation specialist. He holds a Master of Public Health and degrees in anthropology and psychology. He became a physician assistant in 1983. He has worked in a refugee camp on the Thai-Cambodian border, a district hospital in Sumatra, Indonesia, as a Peace Corps volunteer in Guinea-Bissau, in Mozambique where he taught trauma surgery on landmine injuries, an immunization program in Angola and a malaria-control program in Brazil. Between 2005 and 2010, he taught mental health courses for Survivor Corps in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Colombia, El Salvador, Ethiopia, Jordan and Vietnam.

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