

The Women of Guatemala:

Despair Is Woven into the Fabric of Their Lives

By Emily Morrison

From the dimly lit walls of Jazzberry's Restaurant in the Genesee Co-op, the faces of Guatemalan women gaze back at viewers with a disarming serenity that calls to mind the calm at the eye of a hurricane.

Directly above and below the rows of black-and-white photographs, hand-lettered rosters of names tell the grim story of the *desaparecidas* of this highland country riven by counterinsurgent warfare and repression — women of all ages who have vanished into the countryside without a trace.

The photographs are part of an exhibit that opened May 5 in the former Monroe Avenue firehouse that was for many years the Regular Restaurant. Entitled "Guatemala: Women and Repression," the show was mounted by photographer and weaver Marilyn Anderson of ROCLA, the Peace and Justice Center's Rochester Committee on Latin America. Anderson's photographs and placards will be on display at Jazzberry's, 713 Monroe Avenue, through June 2.

Anderson, who taught art during the 1960s at a Maryknoll elementary school in Jacaltenango in the Guatemalan highlands, first became acquainted with the women of Guatemala through their colorful and highly localized weaving tradition. Weaving was once a burgeoning cottage industry in Guatemala before civil strife drove more than 150,000 refugees into Mexican camps.

"These portraits are of women who shared their lives with me in appreciation of my interest in their work and culture," says Anderson, who traveled throughout Guatemala in the 1970s, researching and documenting weaving traditions and techniques. The opening of her current exhibit featured a slide presentation by Anderson and husband John Garlock, who offered a moving commentary on Anderson's vibrant color slides of textiles and costumes woven by hand on backstrap looms in widely varying patterns.

"Weaving was done until recently in over 100 highland places," Anderson commented. "Each textile pattern is unique to a particular place or indigenous group."

Her slides of brilliantly embroidered hair ribbons, woven ikat fabrics, belts and costumes reflect the Mayan heritage of these proud and independent people who have managed to retain much of their native culture throughout centuries of Spanish domination and numerous military dictatorships.

During her tenure at the Maryknoll school, where she was invited to teach by the sisters of a Maryknoll congregation connected with a large area hospital, Anderson took a series of slides recording children's drawings of pottery and weaving. Other color transparencies depict Guatemalan men weaving ikat fabric on floor looms; women sewing hats of braided palm; and men doing hand casting in bronze, glassblowing, and yet more complicated weaving on draw looms and hand jacquard looms similar to those used to make coverlets in Palmyra and East Bloomfield during the 19th century.

Anderson's photographic documents of the relatively tranquil '60s are in marked contrast to a set of children's drawings made during the 1980s. Her slides of primitive representations of burned-out villages, bombers, and one particularly harrowing sketch of an *asesinado* shot to death at close range by a handgun were used in a recently produced movie, entitled "When the Mountains Tremble," about the civil strife and military repression in Guatemala.

In 1980, John Garlock recalls, a large group of Indians from the Guatemalan department of Quiché marched to the country's capital to present a petition to the government and peacefully occupy the Spanish embassy. The embassy, he claims, was burned to the ground with everyone in it but the ambassador and one Indian who was later dragged out of the hospital and executed by the army.

"That coalesced the people in a way I think there is no turning back from," says Anderson. "Union leaders, priests, students, and teachers were executed by the death squads, yet still, the resistance mounted."

One slide was taken of a local newspaper article about a primary school teacher assassinated in 1980 in front of his students. "Catechists have been a special target of repression," says Anderson. "A very large number have been killed."

In the wake of guerilla warfare and military counterinsurgency, the toll of victims continues to climb, according to Anderson and Garlock, who say that about 1 million Guatemalans have been displaced by the army and are now living in "strategic hamlets" (forced labor camps) or other villages and towns. Anderson's portraits, she says, record images of women who may be among some 36,000 widows of men allegedly killed by the army.

"Still others," she says, "may have disappeared." The Guatemalan Human Rights Commission lists some 35,000



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Photographer and weaver Marilyn Anderson and her husband, John Garlock, a spokesman for ROCLA (Rochester Committee on Latin America), presented a slide show on the Guatemalan civil war at the May 5 opening of Anderson's photography exhibit, "Guatemala: Women and Repression," at Jazzberry's Restaurant. The exhibit runs through June 2.

Guatemalans as having disappeared since 1965. "Such records are incomplete," Anderson adds, "because thousands of disappearances go unreported."

These *desaparecidos* or "disappeared ones" (a term coined in Guatemala and now used throughout Central and South America to describe noncombatants who allegedly have been detained by military or paramilitary personnel) include a large number of women "of all ages and walks of life," says Anderson.

"As a woman myself, and doing the reading I did, I was very impressed by the large number of disappeared women and widows," Anderson explains when questioned about why she singled out women as subjects of her stirring black-and-white photographs. "Rape is also very prevalent, and there's a very high rate of infant mortality. Women in a situation like this have a special kind of suffering."

As for the refugees who have been relocated in Mexican camps, many have finally resumed their weaving, both as a means of earning a living and calling attention to their plight. "The weavings done by refugees don't always follow regional traditions, but are done for sale," says John

Garlock, who shows slides of acrylic textiles with slogans woven directly into the cloth. "Recuerdo de refugias," (souvenir of the refugees) reads one embroidered belt. A picture of a woman with her baby reveals a piece of fabric held up like a banner inscribed with the words "Donde iremos?" (Where will we go?)

Refugees in Motozintla are being assisted by the dioceses of San Cristobal and Tapachula, which have collaborated in sponsoring a project designed to produce knitted goods. "The help provided by the church has been a great moral tool for the people, in addition to providing aid," says Anderson.

The dim restaurant lighting at Jazzberry's perhaps somewhat inhibits clear perception of Anderson's photographic subjects, and some of the photos were printed with a high degree of density their creator felt the subject matter warranted, yet the simple dignity of these peasant women shines through with admirable clarity.

"I'd rather have these photographs here than in any gallery," Anderson concludes, "because I feel that a lot more people will see them."

Arts Festival Opens New Avenues for Handicapped Kids

By Emily Morrison

Call it "street theater," art therapy, or just a very special brand of entertainment. When the Very Special Arts Festival takes to the open street area at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf campus on Tuesday, May 21, handicapped kids from nine counties of the Diocese of Rochester will be on hand to join the passing parade.

The annual festival, sponsored by the New York State Committee on Arts for the Handicapped, is being co-chaired this year by Lorraine Amenda, a teacher for Monroe County BOCES #1, and Julia Magone, a

teacher from St. Joseph's Villa in Greece. Participating students will be sent by public, private, and parochial schools, BOCES classes, developmental and treatment centers, and individual families. Many teachers bring their classes to the festival on field trips, and parents, relatives, and non-participating students are welcome to attend, as well as members of the general public.

"The festival itself provides art experiences by and for handicapped children," explains Magone, who has helped to organize the event since St. Joseph's Villa became involved in it six years ago. "We

send out applications to special education teachers in Rochester and surrounding areas. Those teachers and classes are invited to participate, bring artwork, put on performances, or do workshops and demonstrations."

The arts, she adds, can be used as a teaching tool for any physically or emotionally handicapped child. Normal avenues of self-expression are often closed to children with special educational needs, she explains, and the Very Special Arts Festival was created to stimulate the use of the arts as an educational tool. "The festival is a chance to show what these kids have done all year in the classroom, to bring it all together."

Barb Stauffer, one of the high school classroom teachers at St. Joseph's, taught a unit during the past year on "clownology." Four of Magone's students plan to attend the festival as clowns and give a face-painting workshop led by Stauffer.

Another group led by a human ecology teacher from St. Joseph's will put on a program entitled "Quick Energy Pick-ups," which will include a cooking demonstration developed in the classroom and handouts of recipes for quick energy snacks. A "Peter and the Wolf" puppet show will feature handmade papier-mache puppets, while a group of "roadies" led by teacher's aide Alice Miller will help set up for a performance by her husband's band.

Folk singer Mitzie Collins will be the guest of honor at the festival's opening ceremony, to be held at 10 a.m. Other local artists invited to do performances, workshops, and demonstrations include Gisela Fritsching, a SUNY College at Brockport theater professor who will lead a creative dramatics workshop; the Kids on the Block Theater; a storyteller from the Henrietta Public Library; a local weaver; and "Streetcorner Music," a special festival band that sets up in

NTID's open street area each year to play for the duration of the day-long event.

"Our teachers do workshops with the kids on watercolor, puppetry, 'spin art' — a type of painting that uses paints spun around on a turntable — and thumbprint art," says Mary Ann Virgilio, director of community relations for St. Joseph's Villa, a comprehensive treatment center and school that serves approximately 130 emotionally handicapped and mentally ill children through five distinct programs, five area residential group homes, and a day treatment program for students who are able to live with their families.

"We use art here as a teaching tool," explains Magone, "especially for children who have a hard time visualizing things." Other children who benefit from this special kind of art education include "kids who have perceptual problems, kids who have trouble learning from books, and those who experience difficulty with muscular coordination. It provides a whole other avenue for them to learn by."

The focus of the festival, Magone concludes, is on the moral support such an activity provides for kids who might not otherwise have an outlet for their struggling sense of creativity and self-worth. There is no atmosphere of competition, Magone points out, and activities that stifle creativity — paint-by-number, ditto sheets, loop potholders, and objects assembled from commercially sold kits — are discouraged.

"It really has a lot to do with building self-esteem and confidence," says Magone. "I guess you could say it's the artistic equivalent of the Special Olympics."

Olympians of every artistic stripe are encouraged to come out for this very special event. All activities are free and open to the public.



Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

James H. and Todd B., both 12, put the finishing touches on their puppets that will be used in a performance by the students of St. Joseph's Villa in their part in the Very Special Arts Festival.