



Their homes appear flimsy, but the Salvadorans who have remained in the countryside generally fare better than those forced by the civil war to flee to refugee camps. At shacks like this one, families may manage to cultivate a small garden and keep a few animals.

## Memories of fallen heroes sustain displaced Salvadorans

By Teresa A. Parsons

Two weeks at a Salvadoran refugee camp hardly qualifies as a dream vacation. But for Donna Del Santo, 32, the trip was a chance to test her dream of putting her nursing skills to work in a Third World country.

Del Santo, co-director of the Corpus Christi Health Center in Rochester, traveled to El Salvador June 24 and spent two weeks visiting friends who work at Bethania, a camp about 20 kilometers from the capital city of San Salvador.

"It was the longest two weeks of my life," she said. "I was overwhelmed by the odor, the heat, the experience of seeing kids with swollen bellies full of parasites, never having had the chance to go to school."

Del Santo's visit began on a threatening note. When she arrived at the airport, officials confiscated the medicine she brought with her from Rochester — including antibiotics, maternal vitamins and tuberculin testing kits. After three hour-long trips between archdiocesan offices and the airport, she managed to get the medicine released. But in the meantime, church workers who assisted her received death threats from unidentified sources.

Arriving at the camp, a former retreat center for sisters, Del Santo found it occupied by nearly 1,500 refugees. She estimated that half were children and the rest were women and old men. Most of the young men are either dead or fighting, either for the guerrillas or the army. Those who are left stay out of sight to avoid army patrols searching for new "recruits."

The camp is run by the human rights organization Pro-Vida along with the Archdiocese of San Salvador and El Medicos del Mundo, a French volunteer group. Together, the groups have opened a health clinic and school, staffed by residents of the camp or "campesinos."

Located on a 20-acre site more than a mile from the nearest road, Bethania is without phones or radios. When night falls, the camp is virtually cut off from the rest of the world, Del Santo said.

Drinking water is pumped from a river a mile away, but residents must walk to the river to bathe and wash their clothing. Families are each allotted a single room in the modulas, flimsy structures with corrugated tin roofs, concrete floors and thin wooden walls. Some people sling hammocks for sleeping while others simply lie on straw mats. Although camp workers are constructing outhouses,

many of the children simply squat bare-bottomed in the dirt.

Women typically begin bearing children at the age of 13 or 14, Del Santo said. By 20, they have grown "old," working "like dogs" from dawn till dark, caring for the children, washing at the river, and cooking and baking in their adobe ovens. Corn tortillas, kidney beans and sweetened, condensed milk comprise the camp diet.

Men are prohibited from working outside the camp, so some have established a carpentry shop. Other grow corn on the steep hillsides, raise chickens, or scavenge the fibers from woven nylon sacks from which they weave hammocks.

Most of the campesinos were ordered by the government to abandon their homes in the countryside, where fighting continues between the army and guerrillas. Some have been gone for as long as five years.

Time has not dulled the stories they shared with Del Santo of the violence that brought them to the camp.

Bernarda and Miguel told her they and their eight children fled their war-ravaged village nearly four years ago. Shortly afterward, Bernarda returned to the village. Hiding nearby in tall grass, she watched as soldiers lined 300 of her neighbors up in front of a mass grave and mowed them down with machine guns.

When the soldiers left in search of gasoline to burn the bodies, Bernarda rescued several surviving children from the bottom of the pile. During their journey back to the camp, she and the children were forced to drink their own urine in lieu of food or water.

Yosenia, an 18-year-old who staffs the health clinic, was shot in the leg by soldiers two years ago. "Treated" at a military hospital, the girl was forced to have her leg amputated below the knee. After she developed gangrene, most of the rest of her leg was removed, and the Red Cross evacuated her to a civilian hospital where she recovered.

Mario, a catechist and Pro-Vida worker, fled from his parents' home to the camp after he received several death threats. "It's hard to open yourself up to people, to trust anyone," he told Del Santo. "I've lived my whole life that way."

Conditions have actually improved since



Donna Del Santo

Children of war learn to fend for themselves. Here youngsters prepare to enjoy fish — a rare treat. Usually their diet is limited to corn tortillas and kidney beans.

four North Americans came to live and work in the camp 18 months ago. Each promises to stay for at least six months, serving together as peace keepers to negotiate with the soldiers on behalf of the campesinos.

Before the North Americans arrived, soldiers came to the camp at will, conducting wholesale searches with their automatic rifles ready. "They are really nervous going into the camps because they're afraid of the guerrillas," Del Santo said.

Now the soldiers come less frequently. Nevertheless, Mario and many others believe they are being watched by soldiers, who plant "snakes" or informers, within the camp.

"We have no concept of what it's like (for them), living in constant fear of being observed, picked up, captured or interrogated," Del Santo said. "You really start to get a little

paranoid."

In spite of the tension, the campesinos cling to a deep faith and hope for the future. Pictures and shrines of such Central American martyrs as Archbishop Oscar Arturo Romero abound in their one-room homes. "They say 'The people who've fallen before us have shown us the way,'" she said. "Their faith and their values are integrated very clearly in everyday life."

Del Santo hopes to return to El Salvador, possibly to accompany people returning to their homes and ensure that they arrive safely. But her dream of serving in the Third World has been shaken by reality.

"I think that perhaps I realized the real challenge is to make a difference from here, where you can change things," she said. "I have a real need to keep a linkage there . . . and to share my piece of the truth."

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