CHAPTER THREE

The Broken Heart Experience

The energy and spirit unleashed by the El Salvador experience is at the heart of what eventually transpired with service and volunteerism on campus in the 1990s and beyond. In fact, a strong case could be made that most of the school’s recent service initiatives—including the 30,000 Hours Project, the start of service-learning options in the classroom, Operation Bridgeport, Community Connections, CURTIS Week, the St. Charles/SHU Health and Wellness Center; and the Catholic Social Thought Scholars program—all trace back to the trips to El Salvador, and what came to be known as “the broken heart experience.” Eilene Bertsch, the assistant vice-president for academic affairs, and one of two administrative members of the first delegation, reminiscing about the story of service at the University, said, “The thing that is so important to me about this story is that it has its origins in a place that literally is on the other side of the world. The fact that Sacred Heart University now has what I think of as a love affair with St. Charles Parish and the people of the East Side of Bridgeport, came out of what for many of us was a very transformative experience in El Salvador. It was a gift of the Salvadoran people to us that we’ve come to know our own neighbors right down the block.”

How this happened, and how the “broken heart experience” affected members of the delegations that visited El Salvador is at the core of this chapter.

With Dr. Reid’s rationale for the trip to El Salvador on the table, several pieces of a complicated puzzle had to fit into place
before a trip could become a reality. First, why fund a delegation to a small Central American country by University dollars that, the skeptics and critics would say, could be put to better use on the Park Avenue campus? Secondly, would a group of faculty and administrators be willing to undergo the rigors of such a trip, especially since in the fall of 1991 a civil war still was raging in that country? And even if people were willing to sign on for such an experience, who would set the itinerary? Finally, how would it be possible to ready a delegation when several members most likely would not be fluent in Spanish, knew little of the history and culture of El Salvador beyond what they had read in the press, and felt far from prepared to become “witnesses for peace” in solidarity with the poor and oppressed in a distant third-world country?

Early discussions on the feasibility of a tour, including the roles played by Fr. David Blanchard, a Carmelite priest working in El Salvador, and Minor Sinclair, the director of the Ecumenical Program on Central America and the Caribbean (EPICA), were recalled by Reid in an e-mail: “As I remember it, at the time Dave was serving on the board of EPICA and it was through Dave that we became connected with the EPICA folks, including Minor Sinclair, who was then the director. I arranged a meeting with Dave, Minor, and President Cernera at the University; on that first visit to campus I think they also met with faculty. These meetings were successful and thus began a series of meetings to recruit faculty and organize the first delegation. Much of this occurred during the fall semester prior to the first delegation.”

Bertsch also recalled those early days, and particularly how the President hoped the experience would tie in with the University’s mission. “That fall Dr. Cernera had asked a group of us if we might consider taking a journey with no other objective than ‘to listen and learn from the poor.’” Following three planning sessions held in the fall of 1991, Reid organized monthly seminars during the spring semester on the country’s history and current political realities, and the role of the church and the universities. Then he held planning meetings with Dave Blanchard and Minor Sinclair, among others. At the same time, Dr. Torreira met weekly with the members of the El Salvador group, tutoring them in elementary Spanish.
While the delegation worked to prepare for the trip, the peace accords were signed on February 1, 1992, signaling the end of the bitter conflict in El Salvador and easing the fears of delegation members about traveling to a country engaged in a war. But as our group discovered upon its arrival in El Salvador, though the peace accords were in effect and the country was under martial law with the military presence everywhere, death squads continued to operate with impunity; the statistics for violence and crime were at an all-time high, and a just peace was far from a reality. "We are living in extremely dangerous times," Blanchard told us, speaking of the period directly after the signing of the accords. "All across this country, in town after town, people are disappearing. This period right now is more dangerous than any other time in recent memory. There is the illusion of well-being in the land."  

Meanwhile, Minor Sinclair traveled to El Salvador in late March and early April to begin organizing the trip. In his report to the University, Sinclair wrote that the pedagogical model for the trip was "based on experiential learning through visits to poor communities, dialogue with the poor about their search for solutions, and meetings with representatives of different sectors of society." Then Sinclair suggested these objectives: "During my consultations in El Salvador, a number of individuals recommended that Sacred Heart University address two broad issues as a way of understanding all of the different experiences in the peace process and the search for a popular alternative (the development of policies and institutions that enable and empower the poor). Without exception, people encouraged Sacred Heart to see this delegation as a move towards establishing an ongoing relationship with a counterpart in El Salvador which will serve to contribute to the consolidation of peace." In closing his report, Sinclair wrote, "The educational value of this kind of delegation experience, in terms of globalization of concerns and North-South exchange, will be of immense value to Sacred Heart. It will help the faculty of Sacred Heart understand the mission of the university in society." About the same time, in an article announcing the June trip in the campus paper, Reid said that "this project offers an unprecedented opportunity for Sacred Heart to
reflect on and live out its mission as a Catholic, liberal arts university in service to the broader community.

Objectives for an El Salvador Trip

Several objectives for the trip were recalled by Reid in his introduction to “Notes on El Salvador,” published in the Sacred Heart University Review:

First, the delegation was to be a faculty development activity designed to provide the participants with international experience and opportunities to pursue new or existing research interests. Second, the delegation was to be an opportunity for faculty and staff to learn first-hand about issues related to El Salvador and Latin America and to communicate what they had learned to the rest of the Sacred Heart community through their teaching and other activities. A third objective was to lay the groundwork for an institutional relationship between Sacred Heart University and an appropriate academic partner in El Salvador. It was hoped that such a relationship would eventually include faculty and student exchanges between the partners. A fourth objective was for the University to play a constructive role in fostering a North-South dialogue that would contribute to the peace process in El Salvador. Related to this was a final objective, which was to place Sacred Heart University in community with the poor and oppressed in that country.

Beyond the stated objectives above, the underlying hope was that the trip would be a transforming experience for the members of the delegation, making us more aware of the daily realities of the poor and more apt to become activists for social justice. “Education within Catholic colleges and universities,” wrote Cernera after participating in a trip to El Salvador in 1996, “ought to provide opportunities for members of its communities to have their hearts opened and thus transformed. The opening of our hearts will, more often than not, involve a process of having our
hearts being broken by the pain and suffering of others. For many of us who have been touched by the people of El Salvador through our study tours, our hearts have been broken and transformed. Clearly, the hope was that the experience would forge a core group of University people who would return to campus filled with the spirit of the Salvadoran people and ready to assume responsibility for helping direct the school’s future community outreach initiatives.

Before the start of the journey to the country of the Saviour, most delegation members had only a limited awareness of what they would encounter and the consequences of those experiences, although an inkling of what lay ahead was apparent through meetings with Minor Sinclair, Dave Blanchard, and finally Jennifer Casolo. A native of Thomaston, Connecticut, and a witness for peace employed by Christian Education Seminars when she was jailed in El Salvador, Casolo visited the University in the spring, met with the delegation, and gave a chilling first-hand testimony about the realities of the war in El Salvador. Suspected of being a guerrilla sympathizer involved in the resistance, she told us:

In the jail, I remember being brought into a small cell, and two officers accompanied me. I could hear people screaming in the other cells as they were being tortured. One of my interrogators was rough and angry, the other seemed to be more on my side. They kept asking me these questions, and finally the nicer of the two men told the other one to leave.

When that man went out the door, the other one turned, locked the door, and faced me, and as he turned toward me, I knew at that moment I was facing death. Suddenly a very strange thing happened to me. Beyond his face I could see all the faces of people who had died for the cause of peace and freedom in El Salvador, and at that moment I was filled with the spirit of the martyrs. I was not afraid to die.10

Jennifer's story of terror and torture shocked the members of the delegation and at the same time introduced us to a “presence” that would be encountered time and again in El Salvador, a powerful,
palpable force “filled with the spirit of the martyrs,” as she put it. But it was not a reality that the group was either ready for or necessarily even willing to submit to. After all, we were faculty and administrators accustomed to the lecture hall and the committee meeting, not stories and scenes from hell. “We journeyed to El Salvador,” said Bertsch, “to listen and learn, to foster academic connections where possible; to reflect on how our experiences might influence our work and our relationships at Sacred Heart University. But to grieve, to be transformed, to struggle to find a language to deal with the life of the spirit? I am not sure I willingly would have embraced such a goal.”11

Another member of the original delegation, Robin McAllister, put it this way:

What was Sacred Heart doing sending a delegation of college professors down to El Salvador? Why not Poland, Haiti, or East Main Street in Bridgeport, for that matter? Could this trip, undefined for most of us as we began the trip, be justified in terms of the University’s mission statement? What were we supposed to see and do? . . . So before I went on the trip I had already thought much about the history and situation of professors and teachers in El Salvador. I wondered what the proper role of a university and university professors was in a society in which the army of your own country can mount an armed attack on your campus, kill your rector, occupy your buildings, blow up laboratories and fossil collections, sell not just rare books from the library, but even the glass panes out of the windows. . . . So I came to El Salvador ready to listen to stories.12

The Stories of the People

Members of the first and subsequent delegations soon realized after setting foot on Salvadoran soil, it was one thing to read in the newspapers or to see and hear on television the tragedies of war in a foreign country, but it was quite another experience to be there and view the devastation first-hand; to listen to the stories
of people who suffered the atrocities committed during wartime; and to witness the love and generosity, hope and courage of a people who worked at surviving from day to day while maintaining an enduring sense of the spiritual in their lives as well as an unwavering hope for the future. "They have nothing," said Blanchard about the Salvadorans. "They don’t even know where their next meal will come from. But they will greet you with open arms, and will go without food to prepare feasts for you. They are a warm, loving people, and their spirit will touch you in ways that you can’t imagine."¹³ Prophetic words, indeed.

The first group from Sacred Heart University arrived at San Salvador Airport on June 12, 1992. That evening Mirna Anaya, the widow of the assassinated former president of the nongovernmental Human Rights Commission of El Salvador, welcomed us, and briefed us on the present situation in her country. "It is important for you to be here, and so I would like to welcome you, and thank you for coming," said Mirna. "It is a moment in time when we can find out how much political space we have been given by the peace accords."¹⁴ At the same time, Mirna talked about the spirit of the Salvadoran people. "The situation here is so critical, and of such profound crises, that people do things that under normal circumstances would not be possible. It is an energy that comes from the pueblo. A sense of the people. Maybe that’s what you call mystica. And that is why the people who are dead are not dead. They are still alive. This is something that helps me to understand the mystery of the Resurrection. People who have died ten years ago, or three years ago, are still alive. In fact, they are working harder today."¹⁵ Six months later, on January 3, 1993, Mirna discovered the limits of her own political space. According to a news report, she "was attacked by gunmen while traveling with her family in El Salvador . . . After stopping the Anaya vehicle with a red police-type light, six masked men fired a dozen times, wounding Miguel Ernesto Anaya (age 15) in his right side."¹⁶ Mirna, who was the vice-president and former general coordinator of the Central American Human Rights Commission, miraculously escaped the bullets of the death squad.

In the days to follow, Mirna’s words echoed in our minds as we listened to horrific stories of families divided by the war, of
fathers fighting sons and brothers fighting brothers, of decimated families uprooted and sent scurrying across the mountains into exile in refugee camps in Nicaragua and Honduras, of massacres of entire villages, and of the heroic acts of Salvadorans and international peace activists who “accompanied” them during the bitter struggle. “For ten days we listened and learned,” wrote Bertsch in her essay “Beyond Death and Destruction—Faith and Hope” in the Sacred Heart University Review.

Later, in repatriated communities of Salvadorans who had spent years in exile in Nicaragua and Honduras, we heard of the women’s struggle to survive, to resist the power of guns and helicopters and armed militia to destroy their families and communities. We learned of the steps they had taken to provide a line of defense to protect the lives of their husbands and sons and brothers. We heard of their eventual flight into the hills; of the pain of childbirth under the welcoming protection of a tree; of the loss of a beloved child to measles for lack of medical care; and of the “help of the Sisters” in their exhausting and terrifying journey across the border. And everywhere, we were welcomed and embraced as sisters and brothers.¹⁷

At first, because of the pain caused to those who recounted the stories of their war-torn lives, members of the delegation questioned if it would be better not to invite the people to recall such atrocities. But Sinclair dispelled that notion. “Your job,” he said early in the trip during a visit to a comunidad called Nueva Esperanza, “is to listen to their stories, to observe as much as you can, then construct your own version of what has happened here in El Salvador. When you return to the U.S., your job is to bear witness to the struggles of these people.”¹⁸ The stories had to be told, he said, so the truth would be known, and because—as Minor, Blanchard and others assured the delegation—telling the stories was cathartic and therapeutic for people scarred by the war.

Early in the trip, as we began constructing our own versions of la realidad nacional in El Salvador, searching for ways to
understand the meaning of the stories we heard, we began to
reflect on the larger question: How would this experience inform
our lives when we returned to Fairfield County? For Torreira,
charged by members of the student organization La Hispanidad to
adopt an elementary school, the question of appropriate action
was already a given. “The members of La Hispanidad had told me
that they wanted to do something for the Salvadoran children,
help them somehow to get an education so they could have a
brighter future,” she wrote in her essay “Reflections on
California.” “They all agreed that I should choose the most needy
school, and precisely the first one I saw was the one I finally
picked.”  

Then Torreira explained her rationale for selecting that
particular school:

This school is located on the Hacienda La California. It is
a small wooden building, without divisions, just a very
large room in very bad condition. At first I thought it
was a chicken coop. It had not occurred to me that it
could be a school, but it is. More than 200 children attend
for four hours a day and are taught by two teachers who
try to divide their time among the six grades which they
must instruct. They lack supplies; they have practically
nothing, only the hope that things will get better, as well
as faith and pride in themselves, their capacity to survive,
and their ability to succeed in the midst of the worst
conditions.

For the rest of us without a specific charge to carry out—other
than to listen and observe and be open to what was happening—it
was enough to understand that a series of ongoing, emotionally
and psychologically wrenching events that spoke directly to the
heart were taking place. Our response bordered on incredulity.
“How can there be such goodness and caring and cooperation and
help in a place that was absolutely, totally, utterly—from our
perspective—without any hope whatsoever?” asked Bertsch. “The
one thing that came through was that there was extraordinary
hope, and there was extraordinary life, and there was a spirit that
we didn’t have the ability to even understand. We just kept looking at it, as if it were out there; but where did it come from? What let it be? These people and their situations, I can only say, spoke to our hearts rather than our minds.\textsuperscript{21} In much the same way, talking about the Salvadoran people, Reid wrote, “Throughout our visit to El Salvador, I was time and again impressed by the spirit and power of the Salvadoran people—their generosity amidst great poverty, their optimism in the wake of the most trying and terrifying experiences, their hope to change a society devastated by the fighting and bloodletting of twelve long years of civil war.”\textsuperscript{22}

How was it possible, the members of the delegation wondered, that these people, who suffered so long because of a U.S.-supported war, could welcome the group with open arms? Jean Stokan, who joined the 1996 delegation for a few days, spoke of the extent of the U.S. involvement in the war in her poem “Who Are the Terrorists?”:

But I had just been to El Salvador
and met teachers who were tortured
not by accident, but by design
tens of thousands of them and workers, catechists,
Jesuits, children
killed
by a military to whom we gave over one million
dollars a day
And I stood in a home in Corral de Piedra ten days
after it was bombed
they were still scraping from the walls
parts of children’s brains, embedded deep from
the force
and I saw a tuft of hair on the floor
and in the yard bullet casings made in Illinois
and I ask, who are the terrorists?\textsuperscript{23}

Bertsch, talking to a class about her visit to El Salvador, spoke about the sense of dislocation and disbelief that the group experienced over the role of the U.S. military in the war and the
treatment of the group as it traveled from one community in El Salvador to another:

I think it was the tie to the U.S. military that began to stun us. It became clearer and clearer as we went through and we heard the voices of the people. We listened to the people in the FMLN, we listened to people in our own government, we met with religious, civic, social leaders. And it became clearer and clearer that the United States’ role in arming the military had been a very forceful and a strong one. And it created another sort of difficult time for us because we could not understand—given the fact that so many died and there was so much brutality and the massacres were so impossibly awful—that we would be greeted and accepted and welcomed and loved the way we were. That was the other dislocation for us. Because we were treated with extraordinary warmth and courtesy and love. It’s very hard for me to think about. I went to hear a talk about the nature of forgiveness yesterday, and it’s very hard for me to think of forgiveness in the context in which they were living, in which everything, everything was gone. But we were treated as if somehow we were their brothers and sisters, and there was no question about that.24

But as Sinclair explained to us, the people of El Salvador somehow were able to distinguish between the policies of the U.S. government backing the war and its citizens, some of whom unknowingly went along with the policy of stemming the tide of Communism in Central America, while others acted as witnesses to the peace process by protesting our involvement to elected officials in Washington, or in some cases by physically accompanying the Salvadoran people during their crisis.

*The Universities and the Struggle for Peace*

During that first trip to El Salvador two experiences directly impacted our group’s thinking about service, and both involved
visits to academic institutions: the University of El Salvador (the university of the compesinos in downtown San Salvador), and the University of Central America (the Jesuit-run university catering to wealthy Central Americans). Both institutions were ravaged by the war, and both—each in its own way—persevered in the fight for a just peace.

Situated in the middle of the teeming capital city of San Salvador, the University of El Salvador had been reduced to a rubble—a bullet-ridden, earthquake-shattered monument of tenacity in a world that did everything possible to close it down. Viewed as a hotbed of leftist political activity and a breeding ground for FMLN guerrilla leaders, the University suffered continual assaults, assassinations, and forced closings by government forces during the war. Sinclair wrote:

A group of twelve members of the faculty and administration of Sacred Heart University plus myself ... visited the University of El Salvador (UES) for three days in June 1992. ... A walking tour of the campus revealed the devastation of war and natural disaster: twenty-two buildings (60% of the physical infrastructure) bombed or otherwise destroyed, the pock-marked walls of classrooms, laboratories whose equipment had been stolen by the Army, and everywhere the silent pictures of martyrs of the University. In the past fifteen years, the University has been occupied by the Salvadoran military four times, one rector has been machine-gunned to death, the entire University administration rounded up and jailed and the University itself force into exile.

As we ended our tour, SHU sociology professor Gerald Reid turned to me and said, “Imagine what it would be like to teach here. Can you imagine it?” For those three days we tried to imagine what it would be like to teach at “the University which refuses to die,” a name given to the UES after the military invaded and closed down the University in 1980.25

But in spite of the University’s horrific history during the war, and in spite of shell-scarred walls and earthquake damaged
buildings, not only did it survive, it managed under the most trying of circumstances to carry out a program of student social action with the poor and oppressed that amazed our delegation.

The Social Outreach Program

Sinclair wrote that the UES was "deeply committed to the liberation of the poor... ‘Our finest education takes place in the communities,’ said UES rector Fabio Castillo... describing their social outreach program known as proyeccion social. UES students are required to undertake 500 hours of internships which takes them to innovative dental clinics in poor communities such as Los Olivos, which the Sacred Heart delegation visited, or communities repopulated by returned refugees, or to provisional schools to assist the reintegration of the guerrilla ex-combatants. ‘Field work’ is a major part of their pedagogy.”

The concept clearly impressed our group. Five hundred hours of community service to graduate? If UES students could complete a service requirement under conditions involving great personal risk, why couldn’t our students back home become more involved in community volunteer work? “Why are our grammar, secondary, and university schools not engaging students more in social action curricula?” asked Scott Willison, a delegation member from the Education Department. “How often have our students been asked to make personal sacrifices for the betterment of the community or a particular individual? In principle, El Salvador’s National University requires of its students 500 hours of community service before they are allowed to receive their bachelor’s degree... How many hours of community involvement do our students participate in without expecting money or personal recognition? What examples do our adults and institutions set?”

Similarly, Dr. Thomas Trebon, the academic vice president and provost and a member of the delegation, said simply, “We need to think of ways in which our students could be similarly involved in community volunteer projects.”

Aside from inciting thought about service initiatives on the Fairfield campus, several other projects resulted from the meetings
at the UES. First, Cernera had charged the group to search for ways to form a cooperative agreement between a university in El Salvador and Sacred Heart “to contribute to the mutual benefit to both institutions.” That charge translated into an agreement, drawn up and signed by the presidents of both institutions on February 8, 1993. Article I stated: “Sacred Heart University and the National University of El Salvador agree to collaborate and exchange experiences in teaching and research, with the specific purpose of updating and training the faculty members of both Universities, training Salvadoran North American professionals, sharing experiences and Salvadoran and U.S. faculty, and students as well as the business and law community.” Furthermore, the agreement called for promoting “faculty and student exchanges using all available means.”

To underscore Sacred Heart University’s commitment to the agreement, and to honor the life-work of an outstanding educator, Cernera invited UES Rector Fabio Castillo Figueroa to the Fairfield campus to receive an honorary doctorate on March 8, 1993. Held in Hawley Lounge, the special academic convocation marked an emotional highpoint for the members of the University’s first El Salvador delegation and for many in attendance because the honorary doctorate awarded to the Rector of the besieged National University signaled Sacred Heart University’s affirmation of the work of a respected leader of academicians and our continued willingness to support El Salvador’s struggle for a more meaningful peace. The citation read in Spanish and English at the ceremony opened with these words:

The ravages of war have not been kind to the University of El Salvador (Universidad Nacional de El Salvador), which is referred to affectionately as Alma Mater. Today, students at the 150-year-old University study in classrooms with bullet-ridden walls, linger near the ruins of buildings destroyed by war and the force of a deadly earthquake, pause to respectfully gaze at pictures of University martyrs tacked up or painted on walls, trees and fences around campus. Though physically its resources are despoiled, the spirit of the University lives
through the vision of Dr. Fabio Castillo Figueroa, revered in his country as “The Grandfather of Education.”

At the ceremony, President Cernera praised the work of Dr. Castillo and the Salvadoran people in the language of the heart. “Our staff and faculty came back to us last summer with heartbreaking and heartwarming stories of struggle and transcendence,” Cernera said to the Rector. “They told us stories of a people that, despite catastrophic tragedy, were engaged in a social action agenda that goes far beyond anything most of us in this nation have ever experienced.” Cernera then went on to say, “The awakening of the Salvadorans, their organizing, their overcoming of individual agendas to work as a community, their faith, and sheer goodwill, are a numinous teaching, a lesson in community far more moving and powerful than any textbook. The Salvadoran people have infected us with examples of hope, self-sacrifice and love. Your people, Dr. Castillo, bring us a generous affirmation of our own humanity and connectedness. You introduce us to God.” At the ceremony’s conclusion, Castillo received a rousing, standing ovation.

Another immediate result of the agreement between the two universities was a spring 1993 trip to El Salvador by Professors Louise Spence and Rebecca Abbott of the Media Studies Department to instruct the media faculty at the UES “in the theory and practice of video editing.” Abbott and Spence in a memo to President Cernera seeking University support for the trip, explained that the UES had “a number of years of video collected documenting the University’s struggle during the conflict in El Salvador, which they urgently need to edit into viewable form.”

Other immediate outcomes of the agreement included Torreira’s initiative to transfer a language lab to the UES campus, and the commitment to send books and journals from our library to the National University library which had been decimated during the war.

Still another result of the agreement was for Sacred Heart to co-host, along with two other universities, a delegation of 12 faculty members and administrators from the UES in March of 1994 as part of a U.S. Agency for International Development
training program. “The members of the El Salvador delegation are drawn from health-related disciplines, including medicine, medical technology, and dentistry,” reported an article in the Connecticut Post. “During their five-day stay in Connecticut they will visit classes and health facilities in the region, meet with faculty, and receive training in academic support services, faculty development and strategic planning.” The article concluded by noting “a second delegation of eighteen faculty members from the University of El Salvador will travel to Sacred Heart in late May for the second phase of the training program.”

The Broken Heart Lecture

One more message needed to be driven home in the minds of the delegation, that message delivered by a Jesuit rector from the University of Central America (UCA) who had answered the call to take up the work of the Jesuits assassinated by the military in 1989. Dean Brackley, S.J., who had taught at Fordham University and worked as a community organizer for six years in the South Bronx, was teaching social ethics to graduate students at the UCA and was specially equipped to help us bring together the several strands of the El Salvador experience into a coherent, compelling call——for social action.

Recalling Brackley’s meeting with the group, Bertsch said:

On the one hand, he talked to us about the poor and the role of the university in preparing people to think about their place with respect to issues of social justice. And he lectured us about what he called the “broken heart” experience—that you will never learn, you never understand, and you will never be able to communicate with genuine community until you have had your heart broken. For us, we didn’t need very much of a lecture about that because not only were we emotionally drained at this point, but we had had an experience that wasn’t fully integrated into our way of thinking or doing or being. We might say an “out of body” experience. We knew something extraordinary had happened. Some
people say "transformation." Other people might find other words for it, but we knew that it was not something likely to happen to us again. And he was part of it. He put a name on it. He called it the "broken heart" experience.

Finally he looked at us and said, "You know, coming to El Salvador was a very important thing for you to do, but you do not need to go to El Salvador to find your neighbor. You need to look down the block and find your neighbor in Bridgeport." And we sat there and thought how much easier it had been for us to get on a plane and fly to a war-torn country, and put our trust in people we had never met, whose language we did not share, than it had been for us to think about taking a bus down Park Avenue and going into Bridgeport. And it caused us to come back and to do an enormous amount of soul-searching. Because that phrase couldn't leave our minds.35

Speaking on the same topic to the second group of faculty and administrators to visit El Salvador a year later, Brackley added, "I think this kind of 'broken heart' experience provides the soil on which the data can bear fruit in our educational teaching. So it is extremely important in the course of our university studies that we encounter the poor." Reiterating his message to the previous delegation he said, "It requires, I'm convinced, an experience like El Salvador. Maybe an experience in Bridgeport. In fact, you don't have to come here. You just have to have your heart broken."36

On the implications of the "broken heart" experience for a university curriculum, Brackley said, "It seems to me the fundamental thing you do in freshman year is to ask some serious questions. People are going through multiple identity crises in the university, and we want to get more healthy background or content into those identity crises. So how do we get people asking serious questions? Do a little work in a shelter for homeless people and reflect on it, systematically, academically." Then speaking directly to our group, Brackley said, "I think the university has as its agenda, ruining your lives. And having this
experience of the poor sets your agenda. All I mean to say is that we would hope you would be Christian revolutionaries for the rest of your lives. And that doesn't come unless your heart has been broken.” And finally, Brackley added this perspective: “What we are all becoming aware of, here as well as in the States, is that the necessary revolution—using the language of Paul VI, the ‘radical transformation’—has to take place from the ground up. From Bridgeport up, from the South Bronx up, from the suburbs up. And it's got to be grassroots work.”

In a later memo to Cernera suggesting that the Jesuit be invited to speak on the SHU campus, Reid wrote that Brackley spoke to us about the relationship between university and community (what role ought the university to be playing? what are the goals of the university in its relationship with the wider community? in this respect, what responsibility does the university have with regards to its students? how are these questions to be answered by a Catholic university?) and about the role of faculty as teachers in this relationship. He impressed upon us the need for faculty in their role as teachers to increase students’ awareness of the world around them, and particularly of social injustice and the sources of social injustice, or, as he put it, the need to “break students’ hearts.” It strikes me that his ideas are quite relevant to our own university, especially at this time with our efforts in Global Studies, community service, and other areas.

In meetings in El Salvador, in his Sacred Heart University Review essay, and finally with his lecture on campus, Brackley offered a cohesive educational vision for a Catholic institution, particularly one whose mission statement proclaimed the need to make a difference in the lives of the poor.

A Time for Reflection

On our last day in El Salvador, a meeting was held to reflect on what had been seen and heard: to impose some semblance of
meaning on the experience, and to brainstorm possible action plans for the Fairfield campus. One point was certain. The experience in El Salvador spoke to the participants' hearts, and left us with a desire to get more involved in social action at home. As a measure of that commitment, Reid recalled that we responded with a list of twenty-two ideas and suggestions for El Salvador-related projects (including guest speakers, panel discussions, plans to integrate the El Salvador experience into courses, photo exhibits, a follow up on several initiatives at the UES, interviews with local media, meetings with elected officials, a special issue of the Sacred Heart University Review, and the involvement of students with subsequent delegations).39

When we sat in reflection while a torrential rain fell outside the cafeteria of the Pastoral Retreat House high on the side of San Salvador's volcano and came up with those twenty-two follow-up suggestions, there was no way we could foresee the flowering of social action projects that would eventually take place back at the University as a result of the experiences in the land of "The Saviour." "The reality is that those who come back and who still come back, come back changed," said Bertsch. "How you explain it, and how you define that change . . . they come back changed, and they have had an impact on this University. It would not be exactly the same University it is now if we had not had some of those experiences."40