

CHAPTER EIGHT

A RAVAGED UES CAMPUS

“The real proof and validity of our work was that we had thousands of students thrown into jail. As of this morning, we still have 21 of our students in jail. We have had rectors killed. The rector of 1980 was assassinated.”

The story of the University of El Salvador [UES] at the time of our visit was one of struggle: to stay afloat financially despite 30,000 enrolled students, to rebuild a campus infrastructure decimated by war and the 1986 earthquake, and to reclaim its intellectual place in the hierarchy of Central American institutions of higher learning.

Viewed by many as a breeding ground for FMLN sympathizers and combatants, and dismissed by its detractors as a “flop house for *campesinos*,” the institution, known also as the National University, had more than earned its reputation as “the university that refused to die.”

“In the 1970s the University of El Salvador was the most prestigious public institution in the region,” Sinclair told us as we walked through the rubble-strewn campus. “It had the best library, top academic personnel, and a quality graduate school program. Now the university is in a desperate struggle against the enemies of progress and education who have tried to destroy it. In the past fifteen years the university has been occupied by the Salvadoran military four times, one rector was machine-gunned to death, the

entire administration rounded up and jailed, and the university itself forced into exile.”

Evidence of the war and the earthquake was everywhere. Barbed wire was strung along pathways, bullet holes pock-marked the exterior walls of buildings, and in one instance the Chemistry building – once an imposing four-story structure – was reduced to a concrete framework surrounded by piles of bricks.

“Military governments ruled El Salvador from 1944 until recently,” said Sinclair as we made our way to the Administration Building for a visit with the Rector, Fabio Castillo. “As El Salvador’s guerrilla insurgency gained ground against the government during the 1980s, the university community has been repressed. People have been killed for carrying a student I.D. and professors have been ‘disappeared’ for writing articles against the regime. For months at a time, a military cordon encircled the campus and everyone who entered and left was searched for subversive materials. The best profs are no longer here because of finances. They can’t afford to work here.”

In other words, a once-proud institution of higher learning was staggering against formidable odds. But not without hope. Fabio Castillo, known in El Salvador as “the Grandfather of Education” – a man, Sinclair informed us, highly respected by all factions of the university – was doing his utmost to restore the school to its former academic standing. At one point, Sinclair said, five people were in the running for the position of Rector, but when Castillo, serving as Rector for a university in Costa Rica, declared his candidacy, all of the others, out of respect, pulled out of the race.

“Currently, the Vice Rector, Catalina Machuca, a very capable woman of *campesino* background, basically runs the university,” he told us. “Castillo, because of his experience and high profile, has assumed a role similar to college presidents in the U.S. He attends meetings, gives lectures, solicits support, and generally shoulders the responsibility of bringing the school back to its former prestige. He’s a very active, enthusiastic man. And his conception of academic excellence differs from that of others.”

“There are those who believe,” Castillo had said, “that the goal of education for the masses is to train poor people for menial labor

and to train a few others to supervise. We believe differently. All people should be taught to use their reasoning, to think critically, to build a society in which they believe. That's our purpose here."

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In a spacious room that once served as a cafeteria and was now partitioned into office spaces by filing cabinets and desks, we stood around waiting for our interview with the rector. Signs on the desks announced "*Fiscal General*," "*Secretaria General*," "*Secretaria de Plantification*," "*Generencio*," and "*Vice Rectoria*." Castillo, it was explained to us, had been called off campus and instead we would be meeting today with the Vice Rector.

In her office, Catalina Machuca, a short, stocky woman with curly red hair and dark-rimmed glasses, and dressed in a black shirt and white skirt, sat in a high-backed leather chair behind a large, arc-shaped wooden desk that held a vase of fresh flowers and piles of stacked papers and reports.

"Good morning to everyone here," she said, motioning us to sit on the couch and chairs in a semi-circle in front of her. "I apologize for the wait to see you. This meeting was on the Rector's schedule in the office, but it wasn't on his private schedule, so he apologizes to you. He has an event in Santa Ana, so he has other commitments today. He can't see you this morning, but you could meet with Dr. Castillo at another time."

After introductory formalities, the Vice Rector launched into an overview of the current state of the university.

Testimony of Catalina Rodriguez M. de Merino

At this point, we are the only public university. This university is 151 years old, the oldest in Central America with the exception of the Universities of Guatemala and Nicaragua. There has been a tremendous religious influence within our university, but since the movement for independence, the university has declared itself a secular

institution and began a relationship with the state. The university is open to everyone without discrimination of faith, sex, race, or political opinion.

I think that probably the most important thing about this university is that it has adjusted itself to this moment in the history of El Salvador. Maybe that's the reason we've had our difficulties with different administrations of government. We have been a university of critical thought, accompanying the great majority of those people who have been dispossessed, and many of our alumni have been fighting for the revolution and the people.

Since the peace accords, the university has changed with a new vision academically, a new vision of reconciliation. Right now we are very involved in curricular change. Traditionally, we had eight different departments with three different branch universities, one in Santa Ana, one in San Miguel, and one in San Vicente. The three branch universities have been transformed into universities that are multi-disciplined within themselves and that can respond to the needs of those local areas. The curricular change we are involved in is based primarily on the belief that education should serve the greatest needs of the people.

If we are really to lend the resources we have here at the university for the benefit of the people, we would have to disperse our students and faculty throughout the country for more in-depth research. And that takes place through the Social Projection, our national outreach program.

Through the Office of Social Projection the university comes into contact with the different communities and the people of the country. Students and teachers go out into the countryside and undertake their research, return to the university, process that information, then they return and address some of the specific needs of that community. The methodology is highly participatory. For example, the people of our country have been fooled and tricked so

many times in the past that they don't believe anything. So our program helps them to trust their own intuition.

You may wonder how does a university go about doing this? We have gone to look for support from the greater international community. Throughout the years of the war, the university received tremendous help from sister universities, different associations, and non-governmental institutions which have tried to enable us to continue to progress during these very difficult times. We have support from the European community, from Germany, the Netherlands, Holland, from exchange universities, and from other organizations which help countries in the Third World. Based on that help, we survived as a university, and in some ways we fulfilled our mission.

We also have relationships in North America with several universities, and most recently the agreement with DePaul University. And most of the Mexican universities. We are members of the regional federation of Central American Universities, but we have very little relationship with universities in South America.

Also we work closely with the Lutheran Church, the Episcopal Church, the Baptist Church, as well as the Catholic Church. They have always been very helpful to us. We have a very close relationship with the University of Central America [UCA] and the Lutheran University here. When the situation allows for it, we cooperate with the private universities, and there's somewhere between thirty to forty of them in El Salvador. You know, we're such a big country! We can afford many private universities! The only problem is these private schools have no students because the people can't afford to pay the tuition. This gives you some idea of the kind of relationships we maintain.

In times of curricular change, our university is very much on the cutting edge. We are responding to the needs of the people. Our biggest problem? Human resources and the quality of our teachers. Another issue for us is the

introduction of new books and materials that respond to the present moment and are not obsolete. Then we have real problems with our library and library system. We don't have the trained staff to manage. It needs to be revamped completely. Also we need computers, vehicles, etc. In addition, our financial resources for faculty salaries are very inadequate. For the budget at the university, public funding from the government has not been increased in twelve years despite the fact that our whole student body has changed and practically doubled.

During the war years, the number of students actually declined a little bit. During the war years we had four thousand, six thousand, maybe eight thousand entering students. But since the peace, we've had twelve thousand students enter this year. Which shows you the needs of growth. We need equipment, space, resources. We really can't prioritize our needs because we really need everything. For example, where we are sitting here now is not an adequate space. This building was the cafeteria for the university before the earthquake in '86. In the earthquake of 1986, 70 percent of the buildings were condemned. Not even with the National Reconstruction Plan has the government included any resources for the rebuilding of the National University. And it's not because we haven't made any efforts. We have met with many representatives from the government to ask for our inclusion in the National Reconstruction Plan. They have been given four hundred million dollars to rebuild after the war, and none of that has been directed toward the National University.

So we see our mission as the better training of university faculty. We have fifteen hundred professors here, based on three general levels of teachers. But our best professors left because of the war, and secondly because of the freeze on salaries for the past twelve years. The average professor here earns between two hundred and fifty and three hundred dollars a month. The Rector earns four

hundred dollars a month. Few people have even a Master's Degree. The only departments that have doctorates would be the faculty of medicine and dentistry. All the others have left.

The real proof and validity of our work was that we had thousands of students thrown into jail. As of this morning, we still have twenty-one of our students in jail. We have had rectors killed. The rector of 1980 was assassinated. In 1981 the entire Deans' Council was put in jail. The library, the art collection, and the fossil collection were bombed and destroyed. While military personnel surrounded the university grounds we continued our programs. The university gave attention to the earthquake victims. We continued the services of health care, dental care, and psychological health in all the marginalized communities in the city and in the outer communities. Now we are even at greater strength.

For example, the university has assumed responsibility for programs for the education as well as the healthcare of all the ex-combatants, and this is healthcare in its integrated form. The director of the United Nations agency has signed an agreement with the National University for the university to receive eight hundred and seventy thousand dollars. But the Minister of Planning, as well as the Minister of Education, opposed that and they are doing everything they can to boycott our programs. So we have to work without any outside funding, and not a penny from the government.

The government says we don't have the skills to be able to provide the programs with any continuity. The Minister of Education said the university doesn't have the strength. We have agreed to a meeting with the Minister of Education, but so far that meeting has not been confirmed. Right now, the government is in an adversarial relationship with the university because of our identification with the needs of the majority of the people. And they're scared that

we will mount an excellent program in education as well as in healthcare.

One of the curricular changes being introduced is starting with the Social Projection Program at an earlier stage when the students come here. In the first stage, the students go out to the community, and they can see the real needs that the people have. And that can help focus their studies at the university.

Before the peace accords, we were stopped and asked for identification at the roadblocks. Now there is free access to any community you want to go to. But there are still some hard-headed military people who don't want us to have access to the people.

In conclusion, we need to raise the academic training of faculty in general, helping them develop their research methods, and we also need to improve incentives for people so that they don't leave the university in a year or two.

After the meeting she led us outside behind the Administration Building for a group picture, then explained that an intern from her office would accompany us on a tour of the campus.

While we assembled for the photo, I couldn't help thinking that this woman, a shrewd administrator, must have been wondering how our small New England Catholic university could possibly be of assistance to her institution now close to destitution. And at the same time, in the back of all our minds was the charge given to us by our own president to attempt to lay the groundwork for a plan of cooperation with a Salvadoran university.

As it turned out, after returning to our campus, and following a series of communications, a collaborative agreement was drawn up and signed by the presidents of both institutions which in time translated into two delegations of faculty from UES participating in a U.S. Agency for International Development [USAID] training program hosted on the Sacred Heart campus. But the possibility of setting up a program of ongoing faculty and student exchanges between the two universities never materialized.

It was after eleven o'clock by the time we started the campus tour. Our first stop was the art department where a student show hung on the walls, then we walked past a building with a large banner hanging from the third floor with the words *La Construcion de la Sociedad Salvadorana* [The Construction of the Salvadoran Society]. The two top floors had been ripped apart by either shelling or more probably the earthquake.

Everywhere on campus, large murals, painted in bold colors, covered the sides of walls, shouting out slogans or depicting Goya-like images of whitened bodies, fires, darkened figures executing people with machine guns, and always the white doves hovering over the scene. In front of one building, Sinclair pointed out a statue riddled with bullet holes in the head.

"A reminder," he said, "of the government's military offensive on this campus, and of the university's resolve to honor and memorialize its stance for freedom during the Civil War."

In an open-air canteen across from the university library, casually dressed students sat at tables shaded by trees, talking, reading, and eating hot dogs, tortillas, and drinking sodas. The scene could have been taking place on any campus in the world. Yet, a few years back, this was a campus under siege.

At a nearby table a male student and his coed friend were hunched over a paper, checking what turned out to be a prof's handwritten notes.

"Do you mind if I look at your paper?" I asked. "This is what I do in the States. I'm a writing teacher."

They understood, and the young man handed over the paper. In the margins I read several neatly written comments in English.

"You have a good instructor," I said, handing the paper back. "He's asking you to add more examples. It will make your paper better."

The student nodded, and I left the two of them bent over the paper again.

Over the entrance to the building next on our tour a sign read "*Cuando el justicia el dercho entran el conflicto sera siempre la justica*" ["When justice and right enter into conflict, justice will always prevail"]. Students, on break between classes, lounged in a large lecture hall on rows of wooden seats angling down to a center stage. The walls were covered with murals, a red FMLN banner hung from the ceiling over the stage, and behind the stage was a large painting of two figures surrounded by names of the fallen. To the left was a 10 foot square mural of Herbert Anaya Sanabria, the husband of Mirna, and next to him a painting of a young boy, hands clasped in prayer. Other murals portrayed Romero, Dr. Ernesto Guevara Serna, Che Guevara, and the sprawled figures of the slain Jesuits with the words of Ignacio Ellecuria, "*El problema radical de los derechos humanos es el de la lucha de la vida en contra de la muerte*" ["The fundamental problem of human rights is the struggle between life and death"].

Later, we visited the university media center, where an instructor explained about the journalism, photography, and TV programs, and an impressive list of lower-level and advanced courses. The student enrollment topped five hundred, the instructor said.

The student newspaper, *Primera Plana* [Front Page], turned out to be an eight-page paper produced by the Journalism Department, concentrating almost exclusively on current issues. Only one feature article in the May 27 issue, a story on a band, was devoted to a topic other than the political scene, and even in that story the lead singer Felipe was quoted as saying his band focused on issues of the war and its aftermath.

Meanwhile the instructor mentioned the years of video footage shot during the war. "We need someone with technical expertise to help us make sense of all the footage we have."

"Maybe Becky Abbott would be interested in doing something like that," said Spence.

Abbott was an experimental filmmaker in our media department. Partly in response to the faculty exchange idea outlined

later in the two universities' collaborative agreement, and because they could fill a specific need, Abbott and Spence traveled back to El Salvador in the spring of 1993 to assist with the project.

Before leaving the campus, we assembled in a group to take a picture in front of a huge wall mural titled, "*Después de 500 años la Resistencia Continúa*" ["After 500 Years of Continued Resistance"]. To the left of the mural were the words:

*Estas son las voces
del silencio que rompen cadenas!
Voces que surgen de la muerte.
! para dar vida!
Voces lentas, calladas,
que transportan la verdad.
Palabras libertarias! No Gritadas!
sino, dichas quedadamente,
con voces de razón, amor y revolución.*

[These are the voices of silence that break chains!
Voices that rise out of death to give life!
Silent voices that carry the truth.
Liberating words! Not shouted,
but spoken quietly, with voices of reason, love,
and revolution.]

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Accompanied by an administrator of the National University, we stopped for lunch at a buffet-style restaurant in the city, then drove out to visit two communities where UES students donated hours of required community service. The Social Projection program that required community service for graduation intrigued us. It worked here, it seemed, but would it be feasible back home? El Salvador had just gone through a war, and the need for involving students in service projects was acute. It was true that back home parts of Bridgeport looked like a Third World country, and issues of

poverty, homelessness, and unequal educational opportunities called out for action, and our school had from its beginnings stressed volunteer efforts on the part of our students. But “requiring” service was something we had to think about.

“How often have our students been asked to make personal sacrifices for the betterment of the community or a particular individual?” asked Willison.

Not enough, we agreed.

“How many hours of community involvement do our students participate in without expecting money or personal recognition?”

Good question.

“What examples do our adults and institutions set?”

Again, the answer was not impressive.

Before we left to visit the first project, Torriera came up with an idea. After listening to the Vice Rector explain the extraordinary needs of the UES, she stayed behind to meet with Dr. Rolando Labrador, the head of the English Department. On our campus we were building a new state of the art language lab. So why, she asked, couldn't we donate the old lab, still in good working condition, to the National University? After seeking Trebon's input, Torriera made the offer which was promptly accepted. The details of packing the lab and sending the boxes to UES would be worked out over the summer.

The first stop for the afternoon was a dental and health clinic in the colony of Los Olivos, a community of 30,000 people crammed into eighteen hundred cinderblock row houses built on the side of a hill across the Rio Acelhuate in the Northwest outskirts of San Salvador. We arrived to find houses facing one another across narrow walkways and toddlers peering at us shyly from behind their mothers' skirts.

“One young boy in particular caught my eye,” Trebon said later. “He was ten, I would guess, with a most striking and beautiful face. He sat on his haunches and watched us, moving away only when one of the group wanted to take his picture. He held a tin can wrapped in string with a kite attached. I had seen kites up against the hillside, and here was one of the flyers.”

The facility, a one-story clinic staffed mostly by women, was run by a doctor, a heavyset man in a hospital coat, who ushered us into the dental care area, a well-lighted, spacious room where patients in green hospital gowns lay on raised cushioned platforms next to trays of dental instruments. Two-person teams of technicians wearing plastic gloves and surgical masks worked on the patients, talking in muted voices, their instruments clicking against teeth.

In an adjacent room, the diagnosis area, we met the chief health care provider, a male nurse, who talked about his upward battle with communicable diseases. “As you would expect,” he said, “there is a high incidence of disease in the community.”

Backed by the National University, the medical center served as a functioning healthcare facility, modest in scope when viewed against the overwhelming needs of the residents of Los Olivos, but vastly superior to anything we saw at Nueva Esperanza or Sister Elena’s.

Outside the clinic we came upon a class of youngsters under the watchful eyes of older children and their teacher. Books and papers lay scattered over desks as they wrote vowels on their pads, then pronounced them out loud.

Kempton immediately fell into her role as teacher.

“Say your vowels,” she said.

“A, E, I, O, U!” the children shouted back, happy to show off their learning.

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The next community consisted of rows of one-story cinderblock houses sprawled over the foothills of a mountain. Built by the government after the 1986 earthquake, this was home, we were told, for war refugees, ex-combatants, as well as a number of death squad members.

“Students come here to canvas the population,” our UES guide explained. “They fill out questionnaires, trying to assess the needs of the people, then they return to the university where they collate the information and then decide what actions to take.”

But problems had surfaced.

"The activities of the death squads are a cause for great concern," she said. "There are instances of killings. And many ex-military personnel, traumatized by the war, are not receiving the services they need."

As we piled out of our parked van, a dozen youngsters clambered up a small hill next to the sidewalk and sat watching us. In a nearby field we saw a large blue and orange canvas tent with a sign *Circo Barnun Bross*. Small flags attached to ropes from the top of the tent hung listlessly in the afternoon sun.

Two young girls stood on the wooden ramp that led to an arched doorway into the tent. Behind the girls, panels announced the main attractions: "El Ninja," a black garbed figure; "He Man," decked out in red knee-high boots, yellow trunks, and straps crossing his muscular chest; "Skeletor" in a blue body suit, with a dark blue hood and cape; and "Coco Rico," an "*El Especial de Poison*" in a yellow coat covered with red and green patches. Off to the right, a trailer sported a large clown face and two ticket windows. The girls on the wooden ramp threw up their arms as if celebrating the arrival of the circus. Meanwhile, near us on the hill by the sidewalk, several older boys joined the youngsters.

"There's a large mix of people thrown together here," the guide said. "There's been several murders. We tell our students to be on guard when visiting the area. Too many people are living in a confined place, with some of them enemies from the war."

With that reminder of where we were, we walked up the road for a closer look at the village. Row upon row of one-story concrete buildings, each with a door and one window, faced across narrow walkways that dipped in the center forming latrines. Electrical wires ran from a pole to several buildings and occasionally a TV antenna sprouted on a roof.

At one point two children ran toward us, and one of them, a little boy not more than four years old, dressed in a T-shirt and shorts, wrapped his arms around Gradie. His little sister in a blue jumper, her ponytail held by a red tie, stood next to him waiting her turn. Gradie hugged the small boy, then motioned to the sister to join them, which she did, smiling from ear to ear.

As we walked back toward the van, a raggedly dressed fellow in his twenties started talking to Ventura. Suddenly the young man began shouting and waving his arms. Dressed in business suit and tie, Ventura tried to remain calm, and continued walking toward the van, the young man trailing alongside.

“I don’t like the looks of this,” Sacco commented. “See that other guy,” he added, pointing toward another fellow standing nearby. “This could be a ploy. I don’t trust the way that guy looks. He is in cahoots with the guy talking to Jose. We should get out of here before something happens.”

The wild-eyed fellow continued to shout at Ventura as they approached the van, becoming more and more agitated. Ventura quickly crossed the road and boarded the van.

“That could have been a set-up there,” Sacco said to him as he sat down. “I didn’t like the looks of those guys.”

“He wasn’t making a lot of sense,” Ventura said.

“What was he shouting about?”

“He kept yelling, ‘Why don’t you get out of here. You don’t belong here.’”

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Driving back toward San Salvador to drop off our UES guide, we thought about the Social Projection Program and how it was working in settlements on the outskirts of the city. It made perfect sense, filling a specific need, and the students, committed to the cause because of the fervor for social action on campus, were performing a useful service while at the same time gaining a feeling of accomplishment, a real sense of partnering in the effort to mend the ravaged Salvadoran world.

The question remained: could such a program requiring community service work on our campus? The need was there. Our city newspaper was full of stories about the open warfare fueled by the drug culture between rival gangs on the streets of Bridgeport. In the early '90s entire sections of the city were fire zones, with residents afraid to leave the protection of their residences after dark.

The result was that people from the surrounding suburbs refused to enter the city.

But what could we or our students do? At the moment, this was a question without an answer.

As we approached closer to the city, tin-roofed shacks and hard scrabble farms morphed into produce stands and shops. On the concrete steps in front of one store a man lay sprawled on his back.

“Did you see that?” I asked Reid.

“Yes.”

“That looked like blood on his chest.”

“It did.”

McAllister had just finished relating a story he heard earlier that morning from a UES instructor. A couple had been found tied to a pole at an intersection in the center of the city. Both were nude and decapitated. The head of the woman was placed in the crotch of the man with his penis in her mouth.

I looked at Reid. “Maybe that wasn’t blood we saw, and the man was just drunk.”

“For his sake, I hope so.”