

Soldiers of Solidarity:

The Boston Committee for Health Rights in Central America

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Seated in her office at the nursing home she owns and manages, septuagenarian Teresa Chopoorian with her grandmotherly air hardly seemed the type to be investigated for subversive communist activities. However, she recounted the several phone calls she received from the US military in the 1980s regarding her work in Central America. “The calls were quite frightening,” she told me, and in fact she still seemed nervous about them.¹ The question was stark in my mind: Why did the US military feel threatened by a nurse who wanted to send small-scale medical aid to war-torn Central American villages?

The Boston Committee for Health Rights in Central America (hereafter referred to as the BCHR or the Committee) coalesced in 1980. It drew its small yet passionate membership from the Boston area medical community, including nurses like Teresa and young doctors such as Alan Meyers, another interviewee. In 1984, at a time of peak activity, they had thirty-one “endorsers” who were considered members.² The nonhierarchical structure of the group meant that members took on informal leadership positions for projects that they felt particularly inclined towards, from fundraising to bring an injured Salvadoran child to Boston for treatment to designing a poster to publicize the BCHR.

For over a decade, the BCHR led a two-pronged crusade for solidarity with the impoverished and persecuted in Nicaragua and El Salvador. They worked to educate and supply the local medical professionals with materials and skills, but foremost was their devotion to raising awareness within the US of the horrors their tax dollars were funding. According to Dr. Meyers, the BCHR was a solidarity

¹ Teresa Chopoorian, conversation with author, November 6, 2013.

² Gordon Hall and Grace Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda

group that just happened to focus on medicine. This was a group of social activists with a skill set in the medical field. This paper will address the BCHR's tactics for raising awareness and funding in Reagan-era Boston and the conditions that propelled them to do so. While the health interventions they effected in Central America are important, I will focus on the factors that motivated BCHR members to devote significant amounts of time to support people with whom they did not share any tie.

My analysis will begin with a brief context of the Nicaraguan and Salvadoran political situations and an introduction to the BCHR's US efforts. The second section will explore what galvanized the members of this little-known group to challenge the US military's support of Nicaraguan and Salvadoran dictators. I will draw conclusions about what social and biographical factors impelled the BCHR's members to oppose US military efforts in Central America with such passion; all members shared experiences with Vietnam War protests and a commitment to social justice. Third, I will discuss their limits to effecting change, with a focus on President Reagan's media-supported anti-communist rhetoric. The fourth section will look at Chopoorian's, Meyers's and my own reflections on their success. The fifth and last section will examine the BCHR's ongoing legacy. Ultimately I aim to describe the history of the BCHR as a group of people motivated by humanitarian goals that dared to challenge imperialist US policy in Nicaragua and El Salvador.

Section 1:

The work of the BCHR and an introduction to its Latin American context

The BCHR was a small organization that existed to raise awareness of and effect change in how the United States spent money in Central America, as well as to deal with the medical fallout of US spending. To understand the BCHR's motives, it is first necessary to have a general understanding of

the conditions in El Salvador and Nicaragua.

In El Salvador in the 1970s, after over a decade of social repression and economic disparity under the dictatorship of the right-wing National Conciliation Party, a civil war began between the authoritarian government and leftist guerrilla units known as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). The United States economically and militarily supported the dictatorship, despite its countless human rights violations. The FMLN allied itself with the political reform party, the Frente Democrático Revolucionario (FDR), and together they formed the popular opposition movement.³

In Nicaragua, West Point-educated Anastasio Somoza Debayle headed a ruthless dictatorship from 1967 until he was ousted in 1979 by the leftist Sandinistas. In the two years following, the Sandinista government made momentous reforms, including the almost unbelievable statistic of cutting illiteracy rates from 50% to 13%.⁴ The Sandinistas were applauded internationally by almost all nations other than the United States. When Reagan took office in 1981, he immediately cut aid to the Sandinistas and switched funding to the Contras, the loosely organized opposition force. Though the Sandinistas prevailed in the democratic elections of 1984, the United States spent millions trying to bring them down through military support of the Contras and a full economic blockade of food and medicine.⁵

In both countries, policies under the Reagan administration resulted in prolonged and exacerbated civil war, causing tens of thousands of military and civilian deaths. However, people in the United States were, for the most part, entirely unaware due to the classified nature of the military operation and its funding.⁶ According to Alan Meyers, a BCHR founder, “It was a question of getting

³ Christopher M White, *The History of El Salvador* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2009), 91-120.

⁴ Ulrike Hanemann, "Nicaragua's Literacy Campaign," UNESCO, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001460/146007e.pdf> (accessed 24 December 2013). However, the study discusses a 37% rate of illiteracy (not able to read or write a simple sentence) among those registered as literate in a follow-up study ten years later.

⁵ Thomas W Walker, *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle*. (Boulder: Westview, 2011).

⁶ *ibid*

the word out there. If people knew where their tax dollars were going, they would bang on their congressman's door and say, 'You've gotta stop this.'"⁷

To "[get] the word out there," the BCHR put on publicity campaigns. They brought Salvadorans and Nicaraguans to Boston to speak about their experiences, held talks by experts on the subject, and put out brochures around Boston. They had petitions in their workplace cafeterias and organized demonstrations. "We'll tell you about it if you just let us," was their approach, as remembered by Meyers.⁸

The BCHR funded several medical aid trips to Central America with bake sales and small donations. They never raised more than a few thousand dollars per year.⁹ This was a small-scale operation, and they were trying to change the workings of the mega-machine of the US military. They operated under the optimistic principle that it only takes a spark to start a fire.

They hoped that if they could educate enough people about their cause, and those people passed it along and so on, eventually the fire of public outrage would burn through Reagan's plans.¹⁰ With this goal in mind, the BCHR worked with an artist to capture the Committee's support for the Salvadoran people and their resistance movement. The details of the poster's imagery give further insight into the BCHR's opinions on gender roles, the role of the Church, and violence as a means of protest.

"In Solidarity" Poster by David Fichter, c. 1980.

⁷ Alan Meyers, phone interview with author, November 17, 2013.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ Teresa Chopoorian, interview with author, November 6, 2013.

¹⁰ There was in fact a nation-wide network of health solidarity groups. The Los Angeles-based group, CHRICA, was very active, as well as the New York group. However, there was no formal association between the groups other than to occasionally collaborate on trips to Central America.

Commissioned by the Boston Committee for Medical Aid to El Salvador

Vibrant in its coloring and striking in its message, this poster was distributed by the “Medical Aid to El Salvador” branch of the BCHR. It takes an unequivocal stance on the Salvadoran civil war in favor of the leftist resistance movement. It encourages fellow Bostonians to donate, and the small white letters at the bottom of the poster give a P.O. Box address detailing where to send contributions.

David Fichter, who currently works as a public muralist out of Cambridge, did not know the specifics of the Committee’s activities and goals when he was making the poster, but neither was he a stranger to Boston-Central American solidarity groups. He had founded “Arts for Nicaragua,” an offshoot of “Artists Call Against US Intervention in Central America,” a national group of artists who believed that, “If, as artists, we can silently witness the destruction of other cultures, we forfeit the right to make art of our own.”¹¹ Fichter, who graduated in 1973 from Harvard, had traveled to Central America, including El Salvador, to further his studies of murals as a form of social commentary. He views his art “as a way to push change in society without shoving it down people’s throats.”¹²

One of the pushes for change furthered by “In Solidarity” was the reversal of gender roles. Though not the main message of the poster, both Fichter and Dr. Meyers, who worked with Fichter to develop the schema, found the idea of the woman as the protector and the man as the caretaker appealing. The woman carries a baby as well as a gun to convey that she is a defender, and not an aggressor. Since much of the BCHR was composed of young professionals who had gone to college during the height of the Women’s Liberation movement, their consciousness about social inequalities between the campesinos and the wealthy extended to gender inequality. According to both Meyers and

¹¹ Lucy Lippard, “ARTIST CALL - Against US Intervention,” North American Congress on Latin America, January 24, 1984 (accessed November 9, 2013).

¹² Julia Hanna, “Cornucopias in Paint,” *Harvard Magazine*, Montage, September 2011 (accessed November 9, 2013).

Fichter, this was a deliberate statement countering the “traditional patterns.”¹³

The Committee desired the woman to be armed to make it clear that the poster supported the FMLN in its capacity as an armed resistance movement. They also wanted to have someone giving medical care as a reference to both the FMLN’s efforts towards popular health care and the Committee’s efforts to support them in that regard. Though members debated depicting a doctor using a stethoscope, they ultimately decided that rather than a diagnostic tool, the bandaging of a wound would be more immediate and active. The church in the background is a tribute to the contribution of many Catholics and Jesuits in supporting the resistance. Through this poster, the Committee tried to convey a sense of the strength of the FMLN and its brave citizens, but also the urgency of the situation in which innocent children are casualties.

The boldly scripted message of “Solidarity” in bright red letters and the vibrance of the poster as a whole combine to make an eye-catching and emotionally affecting appeal to Bostonians for support of the Committee’s cause. This simple, yet vivid poster is an entreaty to the pathos and the ethos of the 1980s. Once people knew about what was happening, they generally opposed US aid to the Salvadoran junta.¹⁴ This poster reflects that opinion and the Committee calls the viewers to act upon their convictions.

Another medium for fundraising included the distribution of pamphlets about the BCHR's work and what was happening in Central America. Members thoroughly papered the hospitals and universities where they worked. One brochure produced by the BCHR for fundraising efforts was a newspaper article chronicling the stories of children forced to live in caves during military bombings

¹³ Alan Meyers, email message with the author, November 9, 2013.

¹⁴ Victoria Nunez, "Why Aid El Salvador?" *The Washington Post (1974-Current File)*, Aug 10, 1982. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/147428652?accountid=9758>.

(including the use of napalm and white phosphorous incendiaries) in El Salvador in 1984.¹⁵ At the bottom of the article was the BCHR seal and a plea of “You Can Help!”¹⁶

While the more passive approaches like the brochures garnered some support, other larger-scale projects attracted the press. One of the highest-profile efforts of the BCHR was to bring people from El Salvador and Nicaragua to Boston for medical treatment and to share their stories. This served the double purpose of drastically improving these individuals' health, but also drawing press and donor attention to the BCHR, conditions in Central America, and how the US government funding was resulting in these atrocities.

With limited funds, the BCHR needed to choose their patients carefully. The story needed to be compelling, and one that would inspire Boston's citizens to open their hearts and wallets. One of the patients whom the BCHR flew into Boston in 1987 was eleven-year-old Dolores America, though “America” was a pseudonym to protect her identity once she returned to El Salvador. When she was six, she was hit by shrapnel from Salvadoran government bombs, resulting in chronic headaches due to the fragment lodged in her brain. Her mother, Rosario, who accompanied her, had lost a hand to government bombs.

Dolores's false surname served as an appeal to the brotherhood Bostonians might have felt for their neighbors to the South. Reminding them that she and her fellow Central Americans were American also might have served to pull on their heartstrings, in addition to the appeal of her innocence as a young girl victimized by military brutality. Like the Hiroshima Maidens, the twenty-five atomic bomb victims brought to New York for pro-bono surgery in 1955, gender and age were important considerations for

¹⁵ Chris Hedges, “Salvador Charged with Dropping Incendiary Bombs,” *The Christian Science Monitor* (1908-Current File), April 27, 1984.

¹⁶ Gordon Hall and Grace Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda, “Boston Committee for Health Rights in Central America,” Ms.76, Box 36-2, Brown University Library.

the BCHR's publicity project. The BCHR handpicked Dolores and Rosario because no one could say that these non-militant, non-threatening young females deserved their hardship.¹⁷

A *Boston Globe* article¹⁸ described how the Salvadoran government destroyed Rosario and Dolores's village, then pursued the fleeing homeless with helicopters and bombed the villagers as they took refuge under a tree. Apparently the *Boston Herald* also retold the story in their article "War is Hell for El Sal Gal." The articles ultimately concluded that pro-bono medical services cured Dolores of her headaches and redesigned Rosario's wrist stump, and the press adored the story's happy ending.¹⁹ It was through projects such as these, from the sensational story of Dolores and Rosario to the smaller projects like calling their congressional representatives, that the BCHR gained name recognition amongst the local government, the medical community, and the public.

Section II:

Motivations and founding of the BCHR

To understand what motivated the members of the BCHR to dedicate their time, ranging from simply attending meetings every couple of weeks to essentially devoting their lives, it is critical to look at members' biographies and the social factors that affected them individually and collectively. Why they might have joined (or founded the group in the case of Chopoorian and Meyers) and who they were gives further insight into the BCHR's DNA.

For Alan Meyers, coming of age in the sixties had an "enormous impact."²⁰ Meyers was imbued

¹⁷ Rodney Barker, *The Hiroshima Maidens: A Story of Courage, Compassion, and Survival*. (New York: Penguin, 1986).

¹⁸ Gloria Negri, "Victims of violence finding free treatment third world patients come to Boston," *Boston Globe* (Pre-1997 Fulltext), Nov 29, 1987 (accessed 27 October 2013).

¹⁹ Gloria Negri, "Victims of violence finding free treatment third world patients come to Boston," *Boston Globe* (Pre-1997 Fulltext), Nov 29, 1987 (accessed 27 October 2013).

²⁰ Alan Meyers, phone conversation with author, November 17, 2013.

with that era's mentality of activism and progressiveness, and political activism became a part of his life. When he was an undergraduate at Brown University in 1970, the school gave students the option to take a couple weeks off to work for political candidates. He took that opportunity to do antiwar work, and as a medical student at the University of Pennsylvania he continued in this vein of activism with a group that provided medical aid in Indochina. Meyers's involvement in the Indochina medical aid group laid the groundwork for the BCHR, but at this point Meyers still was not aware of what was happening in Central America. It was not until he visited friends in San Diego in 1978 and saw a headline about twelve hundred hostages held in Managua, Nicaragua that he knew anything about Nicaragua's civil war.

Back in Boston, and compelled by the Sandinista situation, Meyers decided to join a local Nicaraguan solidarity committee. After participating in that group for several months, he proposed to start a medical aid solidarity network, similar to those inspired by the Vietnam War. They would print a brochure and raise money for medicine and medical aid trips, especially through the medical networks. After meeting Chopoorian and Nancy Greenleaf, who had a solidarity group for El Salvador already in progress, they decided to unite forces. It was 1980, and the BCHR was born.

Of the thirty-one members listed on a letter written to Grace Hoag (co-founder of the Hall-Hoag collection) in 1984, almost all were R.N.'s, M.D.'s or Ph.D.'s. This was a highly educated group held in high esteem, and therefore they held influence greater than would be normally proportional to their size and grassroots status. While almost all were doctors, nurses and medical experts, there were four exceptions: theologian Harvey Cox²¹, anthropologist Martin Diskin²², neurobiologist George

²¹ Harvey Cox is a renowned theologian who was a professor at the Harvard Divinity School until he retired in 2009. He researched the evolution of Christianity, including liberation theology in Latin America. It is his belief that the church should be driving social change and "stepping into God's permanent revolution in history." Many have seen his views as a product of the sixties social revolution.

Harvey Cox, *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* (New York: Collier

Wald²³ and linguist Noam Chomsky.²⁴

If not for their universal commitment to human rights, this group would seem somewhat disparate, from theologians to nurses to anthropologists. What united them, however, was a dedication to social activism, and the recognition that the US government and military had proven fallible in upholding basic human rights in the past, in instances like Vietnam and Cambodia, and then in Central America. The BCHR's members had all taken part or been affected by Vietnam War protests and the movements for civil rights and women's rights in the sixties and seventies. They were hardly strangers to the mentality of activism, and when they started learning about Reagan's Central American policies, the civilian deaths and anti-Communist rhetoric was too reminiscent of the Vietnam disaster to ignore. As activists, they entered into yet another battle with the recidivist US military.

What motivated BCHR's members to keep protesting, holding bake sales, and writing editorials lies at the core of their humanitarian and anti-imperialist goals. While the BCHR wanted to improve conditions in El Salvador and Nicaragua, the members were not only driven to resolve those specific

Books, 1990).

²² The late Martin Diskin was an anthropology professor at MIT. He studied the inequity and impoverishment endemic to Central America's agrarian economies. Throughout his life, he passionately advocated for change in this region, and was arrested while protesting Reagan's Nicaraguan policies during his time in the BCHR. He believed that academia wasn't as involved as it should be in actively working to improve the world, and joined the BCHR and committed himself to activism to counter that trend.

Matt Herper, "Professor of Anthropology Martin Diskin Dead," *MIT Observer*, August, 1997 (accessed December 18, 2013).

²³ George Wald was a Harvard professor and neurobiologist who won the 1967 Nobel Prize for his research of the human retina. A child of Jewish immigrants, he was an outspoken political and social activist. His fame from the Nobel Prize called attention to his views on opposing the Vietnam War and the nuclear arms race, and in 1980 he was on the negotiation delegation to Iran during the Hostage Crisis. Despite the Nobel Prize, his son describes Wald as more of an activist than a scientist.

Elijah Wald, "George Wald - Biologist from Brooklyn," elijahwald.com, (accessed December 18, 2013).

²⁴ The most widely known of the BCHR members is Noam Chomsky, voted the "world's top public intellectual" in a 2005 poll. At 85, he is still working at MIT as a linguist, and is an expert in many fields. Chomsky has been a harsh critic of US foreign policy for decades, speaking out especially on topics of US Empire. As an anarcho-syndicalist, he contends that state authority is "inherently illegitimate." Chomsky's outspoken opposition to the US state and his association with the BCHR could help explain Gordon Hall's categorization of this seemingly benign group as extremist.

Noam Chomsky, "The New War Against Terror," chomsky.info, speech at MIT on October 18, 2001 (accessed December 18, 2013) ; Wikipedia. "Noam Chomsky"

conflicts. Ultimately they desired to change a part of US policy and ideology that Greg Grandin in his *Empire's Workshop* argues has been an integral part of foreign policy since Thomas Jefferson's time: imperialism. Grandin describes how US-Latin American relations over the centuries are evidence of US imperial intentions and have resulted in disaster for Latin America's people. The BCHR's members' opinions reflect Grandin's; their core ideology was anti-imperialist and pro-human rights.

Section III:

Limitations to effecting change

A few weeks before he was assassinated, Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero had sent a letter to President Carter pleading him to stop funding the junta in his country. Romero said the money was being used to “sharpen injustice and repression against the people's organizations [which were] struggling for respect for their most basic human rights.” When the Archbishop was killed in March of 1980, by state agents, the *New York Times* published no editorial on his assassination and no editorial or news report on the commemoration ten years later, which was attended by thousands.²⁵ US media failure, in cases like Romero's, was one of the BCHR's greatest obstacles to effecting change.

The Contras and Salvadoran military were implementing a military strategy known as “low-intensity conflict,” which essentially entailed indiscriminate mass killings of civilians including women, children, and the elderly.²⁶ These massacres often went unnoticed in the global press, but one of the most outrageous instances was the Rio Sumpul massacre, during which three hundred to six hundred Salvadoran refugees were killed crossing the Sumpul into Honduras by helicopter gunmen. A priest from Brooklyn named Earl Gallagher was a witness to this May, 1980 massacre. The story did

²⁵ Noam Chomsky, "1970-1990: The war of counter-insurgency in El Salvador," libcom.org, September 8, 2006 (accessed December 18, 2013); Wikipedia “Óscar Romero”

²⁶ Michael Klare, *Low Intensity Warfare* (New York City: Pantheon, 1987).

not appear until nine months later in London's *Sunday Times*.²⁷

When stories were printed, many had large holes where the US's role in Central American conditions was entirely avoided. In the *Boston Globe* story about the surgery patient, Dolores, the reporter described how “government bombs fell” on her. There was no mention of US funding of the government bombers. The article spun the United States as the savior for the poor Salvadoran children whose backwards country was bombing its own civilians.²⁸

However, these “omissions” seem quite innocuous when compared to the “news” coming out of President Reagan's office. One specific example of a falsehood Reagan told to the Organization of American States was described in a 1987 editorial by Dr. Meyers, published in the *New York Times*. Reagan claimed that “individuals who displease the Sandinistas are punished by withholding the ration cards that allow them to buy food and other necessities.” Dr. Meyers and his research team went to the Contra-supporting town of Acoyapa and found that, of fifty randomly selected households, all but one had a ration card. The one family, who had just recently arrived in town, was still receiving rations while waiting for their ration card to be processed. In other words, Reagan's accusations were patently false; the Sandinistas had not withheld ration cards from townspeople supporting their enemies.²⁹

Another quote of President Reagan's was about how the United States might have to fight the Sandinistas in Texas. According to Reagan, the Sandinistas were “just two days' driving time from Harlingen, Texas.”³⁰ There was absolutely no evidence that the Sandinistas had any intention of leaving Nicaragua, but it certainly piqued the US American public's attention. Furthermore, Reagan famously

²⁷ David Blundy, “Victims of the massacre,” *Sunday Times*, February 22, 1981.

²⁸ Gloria Negri, “Victims of violence finding free treatment third world patients come to Boston,” *Boston Globe* (Pre-1997 Fulltext), Nov 29, 1987 (accessed 27 October 2013).

²⁹ Alan Meyers, “Ration-Card Tactic in Nicaragua Doubted,” *New York Times*, October 20, 1987.

³⁰ Eleanor Clift, “With Rebel Leaders at His Side, Reagan Presses for Contra Aid,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 4, 1986 (accessed December 18, 2013).

described the Contras as the equivalents of our founding fathers, and he called them “freedom fighters, lovers of freedom and democracy.”³¹ Dr. Meyers said, “Our group and everyone like us was flying into that headwind trying to establish the reality of what was happening. Reality was of course the exact opposite of what the Reagan Administration was saying.”³²

Reagan also found an enemy in *New York Times* reporter Raymond Bonner, who was in El Salvador during the time Reagan was asking congress for aid packages to the Salvadoran junta. Bonner's January, 1982 spread in the *New York Times* was one of the few descriptions of the junta's carnage to be published in the United States in a timely, unedited manner. His description of the El Mozote massacre, in which over seven hundred women, children, and elderly were killed, was one of several articles Bonner wrote exposing human rights abuses by the US-supported government. Bonner was criticized, called a communist propagandist, and ultimately pulled from El Salvador. Though the *Times* justified Bonner's removal because of his “inexperience,” executive branch pressure was apparent. The press felt the chill of government oversight; Robert Parry of the AP said, “The message was quite clearly made apparent to those of us working on this topic that when you tried to tell the American people what was happening, you put your career at risk.”³³

For the BCHR, which was also working to expose Reagan's rhetoric about the Contras, this was a dark omen. People who worked against the Administration were in danger. That Teresa Chopoorian had received calls from the military following one editorial was not a laughing matter. The Reagan Administration knew the truth about the Contras and Salvadoran junta's brutality records, and was not keen that the American public had access to that information, too.

³¹ *ibid*

³² Alan Meyers, phone conversation with the author, November 17, 2013.

³³ John F Kirch, “Raymond Bonner and the Salvadoran Civil War 1980 to 1983,” *Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication*, August, 2004.

Not only was the military interested in the BCHR, but so too was Gordon Hall, a collector of “extremist printed propaganda.” An interesting morsel from Brown's Hall-Hoag Collection was that Gordon Hall used a pseudonym when communicating with the BCHR. He adopted the name “Norman Garcia” both to protect himself from radical groups and to keep the groups in the dark about his true purposes. The fact that Hall considered the circumstances of the BCHR to necessitate his transformation into “Garcia” is indicative of the potency of the fear of communism in the Cold War eighties. Furthermore, by taking a Latino name he would be seen as more likely to sympathize with Central American activist groups such as the BCHR.³⁴

In addition to the problems with the media, the fear of a communist takeover as described by Reagan, and public misconceptions about human rights issues and policies in Central America, the BCHR also had to deal with funding shortages. Instead of donating money, many doctors or medical companies wanted to give them free samples of experimental drugs or second-tier quality medicines. Despite access to the wealthier strata of Boston, the BCHR was severely limited in what they could do because of their small budget. Though the IRS does not have their financial records, Chopoorian remembered the annual budget as “not more than a few thousand dollars per year.”³⁵

Section IV:

Successes in effecting change

While there is really no measurable way to index the BCHR's impact on US American opinion or health in Central America, it is still possible to have a qualitative discussion about what positive

³⁴ Gordon Hall and Grace Hoag Collection of Dissenting and Extremist Printed Propaganda, “Boston Committee for Health Rights in Central America,” Ms.76, Box 36-2, Brown University Library.

³⁵ Teresa Chopoorian, in conversation with the author, Central Falls, RI. November 6, 2013.

change they did bring about. Summarizing their success, Dr. Meyers asserted, “We reached some proportion of people, we helped inform our legislative representatives to the amount we could, and we supported our amalagos.”³⁶ For the BCHR it was critical to look at the “little victories” and celebrate those. When people are working to achieve large-scale change, it takes many small pushes before the change is achieved. While the United States is still imperialistic, and hasn't relinquished its economic and political stranglehold over Latin America, every editorial the BCHR wrote was a push towards changing that norm. Even if only a dozen people took the editorial to heart, the BCHR could view that as a valuable step.

One of the successes of the BCHR was to simply persevere in the face of the enormous task of turning US foreign policy inside out. Throughout history, when there has been a publicly recognized problem in US American policy, opinion, or status quo, the overwhelming majority of people are discouraged from trying to influence these issues based on their sheer immensities. That the members of any small group take initiative to fight against the system upon which they depend is a success of our republic.

Looking back on their success, Drs. Chopoorian and Meyers were not deluded about the BCHR's projects as world-changing, but neither did they write off their work as insignificant. Dr. Meyers said, “Personally, I visualize this as we're all part of a broad front and however you can contribute is worth doing.”³⁷ Whether or not they had a measurable impact on the opinions of Bostonians about funding for the Contras and Salvadoran junta is hard to say, and whether they had an impact on the health of the civilians in those countries might be just as hard to judge. Although the field of health and medicine focuses on numbers, the qualitative things that can not be measured can be just

³⁶ Amalagos refers to their Latin American colleagues and fellow medical professionals

³⁷ Alan Meyers, phone conversation with the author, November 17, 2013.

as significant in achieving long-term change.

Sometimes the impact of volunteers' actions are direct, immediate and rewarding. A specific instance of the impact volunteers had on Central American policy during this time is the story of Tip O'Neill and the Maryknoll Sisters. As Speaker of the House during the Reagan years, antiwar forces in Central America saw him as a key player with the ability to contextualize US-Latin American policy in human rights. However, O'Neill knew nothing about what was happening with the Contras and Salvadoran junta until the Catholic order of the Maryknolls occupied his office and refused to leave. One of his aunts was a Maryknoll, so he decided to talk to them. He was quickly convinced of their honesty and believed their position on the balefulness of the Contras. Speaker O'Neill became the most powerful opponent of US-Contra aid thanks to a small group of determined nuns. This example not only illustrates the concrete results of activism, but also the import of access to powerful individuals for activist groups.³⁸

There are many other instances in the power of well-meaning citizens to effect change, and the American belief in that power. Dr. Meyers described Nixon's decision not to use the nuclear bomb against North Vietnam. As the story goes, Nixon was in the White House trying to ignore two or three thousand people protesting at the National Mall. Eventually, he turned and commented to an advisor, "I guess I can't drop nukes on Vietnam because we won't be able to control this at home." While it is hard to determine whether this specific story is true, years later Nixon did resentfully explain his restraint as a matter of public opinion; "The resulting domestic and international uproar would have damaged out foreign policy on all fronts." The resolute belief that activism can make a substantial difference in our lives at home in the United States and that we can also affect people's lives globally is why the BCHR

³⁸ Ben Wattenberg, "Tip O'Neill: Bad Memories Bad Advice," *Gadsden Times*, editorial, March 28, 1986.

and similar activist groups kept protesting. If they didn't think it could be effective, they wouldn't have bothered.³⁹

Looking back now at how things turned out in Central America, it is impossible to say what these countries would look like today if not for US military “aid.” Regardless, the hot wars in both countries have subsided and the political climates in both are relatively peaceful. In 1987, Costa Rican President Oscar Arias devised a peace treaty signed by five Central American presidents. It stipulated an end to foreign military aid and started to resolve the Nicaraguan, Salvadoran, and Guatemalan civil wars. By 1993, Central America was at peace for the first time in decades, and Arias was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Since 2007, the Sandinistas have held the presidential office, although President Ortega is considered by some as power-hungry and unstable. Conversely, in El Salvador, the right-wing candidates have won the past two presidential elections. The Salvadoran government and people are currently focusing on an anti-gang plan.⁴⁰

Section V:

Ongoing legacy of the BCHR

While the BCHR itself dissolved with the formal end of the Salvadoran war and the end of US military aid in 1992, many of its members continue working for health rights to this day. One active member of the BCHR was Brinton Lykes, a doctor of social psychology and currently a professor at Boston College. Dr. Lykes founded the Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund for Mental Health and Human Rights, whose initiatives and members originally derived from the Mental Health Committee of the BCHR and broke off in 1989.

³⁹ Lawrence S. Wittner, “The Power of Protest,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, July-August, 2004.

⁴⁰ Lonely Planet, “El Salvador History,” 2013 (accessed December 9, 2013); Lonely Planet, “Nicaragua History,” 2013 (accessed December 9, 2013).

The Martín-Baró Fund was formed in honor of Ignacio Martín-Baró, one of six Jesuits murdered at the Central American University in San Salvador in 1989. Brinton Lykes, as a friend and colleague of “Father Nacho” as he was known, has honored and sustained Martín-Baró's mission to heal the “individual and collective scars of war and oppression” and develop an “international network...to work on problems of human rights and mental health” through the Fund's grant program.⁴¹ The Fund has also maintained the BCHR's mission of developing social consciousness in the United States and critiquing the country's part in international violence. The Fund has given almost a million dollars through grants to over a hundred projects, about half of which are conducted in Central America.⁴²

The BCHR's legacy endures in the continuing work of its members, who have soldiered on in various health rights efforts in Central America, the United States, and globally. From Brinton Lykes's founding of the Martín-Baró Fund to Alan Meyers's current research of pediatric AIDS, BCHR's members are unflinchingly dedicated to helping people to heal, especially victims of structural violence and inequality. Their efforts over the past decades serve as a reminder that, as stated by one Boston doctor who treated Dolores, medicine is “part of society, part of a framework, both ours and others, a reflection, hopefully, of our most noble thoughts.”⁴³ It is with these noble thoughts in mind that the BCHR tried to build a framework of healing for the past and hope for posterity.

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⁴¹ The Ignacio Martín-Baró Fund, "History of the Martín-Baró Fund." <http://martinbarofund.org/about/history.html> (accessed December 16, 2013).

⁴² M. Brinton Lykes, "One Legacy Among Many," *Journal of Peace Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2012), 88-95.

⁴³ Gloria Negri, “Victims of violence finding free treatment third world patients come to Boston.” *Boston Globe* (Pre-1997 Fulltext), Nov 29, 1987 (accessed 27 October 2013).

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