



Becoming Better Neighbors

Tales from Organizing for a Just U.S. Policy towards Latin America

EDITED BY WINIFRED TATE

Interviews by Winifred Tate, Jeanne Lemkau,
Carolyn Gallaher, and Adriana Beltrán

LATIN AMERICA WORKING GROUP/LATIN AMERICA WORKING GROUP EDUCATION FUND

CONTENTS

Bringing People Together for Change	2
---	---

OUR CAMPAIGNS

Interesting Times: The Central American Wars.....	18
---	----

Central America: After the Wars.....	28
--------------------------------------	----

Cuba Policy: Moving an Unmovable Object.....	30
--	----

Just the Facts: Shedding Light on Military Aid and Training	34
---	----

Colombia: Standing by the Victims.....	36
--	----

Mexico: Humane Borders	40
------------------------------	----

© 2009 by Latin America Working Group and
Latin America Working Group Education Fund

LATIN AMERICA WORKING GROUP

424 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002

www.lawg.org • lawg@lawg.org

April 2009

Cover image: Colombian peace activists from Ruta Pacífica de las Mujeres

For more than 25 years, the Latin America Working Group (LAWG) has been a central force working to change U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America to promote human rights and social justice. LAWG brings together a broad spectrum of human rights groups, faith-based organizations, humanitarian agencies and grassroots groups—believing that our efforts have greater power when we work together.

LAWG mobilizes individual citizens and organizations to call for just U.S. policies, educates the public about the impact of U.S. policy, and conducts direct advocacy with Congress and the administration. We work with Latin American civil society partners to make sure their voices are heard in policy debates that take place in distant Washington but can often shape their lives.

Much of this work takes place out of the limelight, behind the scenes, mediating and strategizing with coalitions of like-minded organizations. As we reflect on and celebrate 25 years of activism, we believe it is important to map the contributions made by LAWG, better understand the roads we have traveled, and celebrate the journey we have made together.

In 1983, seeking to respond to the humanitarian crisis in Central America and to U.S. policies that backed armies that brutally slaughtered civilians, U.S. churches, grassroots and policy groups sought a coordinated way to respond. Working out of borrowed office space, with only one or two paid staff, the Central America Working Group, as it was then called, served to organize, educate, and inspire generations of activists advocating peace and justice in Central America. CAWG developed allies in Congress, the media and the public to end military assistance to the Salvadoran and Guatemalan governments and the Nicaraguan Contras. After the wars ended, CAWG coordinated efforts to encourage implementation of historic peace agreements and support the search for truth by helping to spur the declassification of thousands of U.S. documents for Central American truth commissions.

In the early 1990s, the groups participating in CAWG coalition decided, rather than to disband, to expand their issues, becoming the Latin America Working Group. The LAWG has worked since then to call for generous disaster relief and development aid to the region, successfully lift the embargo on the sale of food and medicine to Cuba, lift the restrictions on Cuban-American travel and advocate for an end to the full travel ban, cut military aid and increase humanitarian aid to Colombia, support the struggle for fair elections in Mexico, and advocate for just border policies that recognize the human rights of migrants and border communities. LAWG is organized as a 501 (c) 4 nonprofit, which carries out advocacy, while its affiliated organization, the Latin America Working Group Education Fund, a 501 (c) 3 nonprofit, carries out educational activities.

As the Working Group passed the quarter century milestone, the LAWGEF and LAWG boards asked activists, partner organizations, and former and current Working Group staff to recount some of the stories about the struggle for just U.S. policies towards Latin America. Through the memories and reflections of staff and U.S. and Latin American activists, we hope to show the way the Working Group brought us all together to make change.

[Here are their words.](#) 

BRINGING PEOPLE TOGETHER FOR CHANGE

LAWG, and the CAWG before it, brings people together from different organizations to work for common policy goals. A central part of this effort is helping grassroots organizations around the country be effective in their advocacy by connecting grassroots activists to policy. LAWG works to make democracy real by helping citizens have a voice in the policy process, not based on their money or connections but on their principles and beliefs. We look for allies within a range of governmental institutions willing to promote principled policies, strategizing with allied congressional aides and other policymakers. LAWG has also developed close relationships with Latin American partners, through information sharing visits to the region and bringing Latin American activists to Washington.

Working in coalition with different organizations can be both a joy and challenge, as these groups share common goals but may have different ideas about the best ways to achieve them. LAWG has played a critical role mediating conflict, producing consensus positions and flexible joint strategizes to pull in the widest spectrum of groups with the greatest possible policy impact. Having the institutional memory and policy expertise from years of this work has also allowed LAWG to play an important role building community and mentoring new activists.



Connecting grassroots activists to policy

GARY COZETTE, *Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America, and LAWG Board Member*

In the mid-1980s, while serving as a Presbyterian lay mission worker in El Salvador doing human rights work, I visited Washington, DC. A vote was scheduled on war funding for El Salvador. A colleague invited me to meet people at CAWG, who secured a lobbying pass for me to be present in the Capitol Building lobbying zone by the elevators as senators were making their way to the floor to vote. I had written Illinois members of Congress on many occasions. I had visited staffers. But I had never met face-to-face with a senator. Sure enough, then-Senator Alan Dixon, a military aid proponent, came by on his way to vote. I called out: “Senator Dixon! I’m Gary Cozette, a Presbyterian human rights worker in El Salvador from Chicago, Illinois! Please vote NO on military aid to El Salvador!”

He looked at me, stopped, and then stepped into the elevator. He voted “yes” to military aid, changing it to “no” only after the six Jesuit priests were killed in El Salvador. That was my first contact with CAWG, now LAWG. But that seed emerged into a 20-year grassroots partnership of education and advocacy.

In 1989, CISPES and the Chicago Metro Sanctuary Alliance organized what would become the Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America (CRLN), a network of opinion leaders in the religious community speaking out more assertively against U.S. military aid in Central America, a position which their denominations had already made public in bishops’ statements or denominational assembly resolutions. I learned of CAWG’s then bi-weekly meetings with its member organizations to hear updates from the region and plan strategies to make U.S. policy more just. Throughout the 1990s, I would plan my periodic trips to meet with Illinois congressional staffers in Washington, DC to coincide with one of these LAWG meetings, which provided an up-to-date briefing just prior to my House and Senate visits.

While we relate to numerous groups, none is as strategic to fulfilling our mission as LAWG. LAWG provides our Chicago-based network with useful and timely policy updates and action alerts in America’s heartland, as it does for other local groups across the country. CRLN shares this information with its 600 members, doing so for many years with monthly mailings, and now through email updates and action alerts. Our members, in turn, share LAWG information, framed by their own personal experience in Latin

I called out: “Senator Dixon! I’m Gary Cozette, a Presbyterian human rights worker in El Salvador from Chicago, Illinois! Please vote NO on military aid to El Salvador!”

— GARY COZETTE



Chicago Religious Leadership Network on Latin America goes to Washington.

America, with their members of Congress, as well as with other organizations to which they belong. Each spring, our CRLN Chicago network would organize a delegation of 15-30 members to travel to Washington, DC to meet with members of Congress from Illinois, or more likely, their foreign policy staffers. Prior to our visits, LAWG staff and key issue experts from LAWG organizations have always provided a morning briefing to our group. These briefings motivate and empower our members immensely.

One year, Lisa reminded our group that the Pentagon, ambassadors, and the arms manufacturers are roaming the halls of Congress every day. Our visits are bringing another side of the story, offering vital information and personal testimonies that these staffers and members would otherwise not hear. I now share Lisa's reminder with each new group that we organize to meet with congressional offices.

GAIL PHARES, founder of the Carolina Interfaith Taskforce on Central America and one of the founders of Witness for Peace

Over the years, I always relied on the LAWG to get trusted information on public policy in the region. When I want to know what to say to Congress, I depend on being able to call the staff at LAWG and being able to refer to their analysis that I know I can trust and who always treat grassroots organizers with respect.

MARTY HOOPER, International Team Member for Witness for Peace from 2003 to 2006, primarily in Cuba

LAWG connected us to Washington; whether we were on the ground in Latin America or in small town USA, we could count on LAWG to respond to our calls. I remember a time when I called Mavis Anderson on her cell phone, not knowing that she was on the Hill. I was a bit apologetic when I found out where she was, but she assured me that my questions were important and gave me detailed answers to my questions and strategic advice on how to organize a certain congressional district. I was very impressed because it showed that although LAWG connected to the Washington power brokers, they were truly linked to the grassroots too.

SILVIA WILHELM, founder of Puentes Cubanos

Throughout the years, LAWG has been my companion every step of the way. LAWG is an organization that truly cares about justice and human rights in Latin America, and I cannot think of an event, a written product, or a congressional visit where they were not in partnership with us or at least an important source of information.

We rely on the knowledge and counsel of LAWG to increase our impact on members of Congress.

During my 13 years of close association with LAWG, we have shared hard work, many tears and great laughs. I hope LAWG remains a part of my close circle of allies for many years to come, even if we accomplish our goal of a major shift in U.S. policy towards Cuba.

ON WORKING WITH CONGRESS:

SEAN GARCIA, LAWG Senior Associate, now at Refugees International

We're very upfront at the LAWG about what we offer to policymakers. If you want to do the right thing from the human rights perspective, we can tell you what to do, we can tell you how to do it. If you want to be guided we can help you. For those members who don't want to be, well, that's not where we have our influence, but we've carved out a unique niche. There are many people on the Hill who ask from this perspective and we really give them something that somebody else can't. It doesn't matter about the dinners we can't offer, they know we're never going to steer them wrong. Our agenda really is based on human rights. We're not representing any interests, we're not in for anything for ourselves and so that really does go a long way.

If you want to do the right thing from the human rights perspective we can tell you what to do, we can tell you how to do it. If you want to be guided we can help you.

— SEAN GARCIA



CAWG celebrates Central America vote victory.



LAWG gives award to Representative Nancy Pelosi.

LISA HAUGAARD, current LAWG Executive Director

I don't have a cynical view of Congress after my fifteen years of working with Capitol Hill. Because the many members who don't care simply fade into the background for me, and the dedicated people stand out. There are many members who care deeply about doing the right thing on human rights, about helping reduce poverty, members like Nancy Pelosi, Patrick Leahy, Nita Lowey, Esteban Torres, Jose Serrano, Connie Morella, Tom Lantos, John Porter, Jan Schakowsky, Russell Feingold. The list should go on. But the ones I know best... Senator Paul Wellstone, whose office was like a sanctuary, a safe place in a largely indifferent Senate (except, always, for Leahy and his brilliant aide Tim Rieser, who are the heart and soul of human rights in the Senate) when we were first trying to jumpstart a Colombia debate. We could hardly ever get any member of Congress to see the same Colombia we saw, because they would travel on U.S.-embassy sponsored trips to safe places to see dog-and-pony shows. I would get frustrated with the aides who kept calling asking for tips on how to see more and then their bosses would be afraid even to cross town in Bogotá to visit a human rights group's office and would insist on seeing the activists at an embassy cocktail party, never the best setting for truth. Then Charlotte, Senator Wellstone's aide, called me. "Lisa," she said, "Where is the most dangerous place in Colombia Paul can get to, and still get back in time for votes on Tuesday?" Well, we had a trip to suggest for him, to Barrancabermeja, where community activists survived surrounded by active paramilitaries in the middle of the city. He went with Minnesota activists and gave the besieged community groups hope. It was one of the saddest days of my life when he died.





LAWG Director Lisa Haugaard and her daughter Ella congratulate Senator Paul Wellstone.

And Representative Jim McGovern. Always there to fight for human rights and against hunger and poverty. There could be countless stories about Jim, but what is a constant is the ability to bring human rights activists to his office and sit down with him, have him listen with complete attention and respect and then discuss in his wonderful plain-talk Massachusetts accent what the next steps would be. And he would always be there to take those steps with them. Always. You can't ask for more than that.

ADAM ISACSON, *Director of Programs, Center for International Policy*

A few years back, the coalition worked for weeks on a set of recommendations for the foreign operations bill, putting together a 4-page document to present to the Hill. We got a meeting with an important Democratic congressional aide, which we strategized for beforehand. He took a quick look at the memo and went berserk. "You expect me to deal with 4 pages?!" "Don't you realize we're in the minority here?" "How many years have you all been working here?!" We couldn't believe we were sitting on his couch getting screamed at. Of course a couple of months later, a lot of what was in that 4-page memo ended up in the bill and committee report.

ON WORKING WITH LATIN AMERICAN PARTNERS:

LISA HAUGAARD, *current LAWG Executive Director*

I can remember travelling to Honduras with Joy Olson and being picked up at the airport by the nation's human rights ombudsman, Leo Valladares, who had just authored a historic report on Honduras's disappeared, *The Facts Speak for Themselves*. He drove us through a winding mountain road near Tegucigalpa, and pointed

I don't have a cynical view of Congress after my fifteen years of working with Capitol Hill. Because the many members who don't care simply fade into the background for me, and the dedicated people stand out.

— LISA HAUGAARD



out where the mass graves were—then took us to a beautiful hillside village. For our gracious host, both parts of that tour were important.

My most wrenching trip was when I participated in an international mission to help expose killings of civilians by the Colombian army. Colombian human rights groups, organizing this most dangerous work in an incredibly coordinated fashion, brought witnesses and relatives of victims from all over the country to testify to us. In an ordinary conference room in Bogotá, along with my Spanish lawyer team members, we listened to case after case of campesino men and women telling us of their loved ones who had been captured and then killed by the army. Men were crying and shaking with fear. A woman told me how soldiers had taken her husband. Blockaded her and her children in her small house. And then tortured her husband through the night, so that she and her children could hear his screams, in the soccer field next to the house. And then the next morning, borrowed a broom to clean up the blood. I don't know why, but the point I broke down and had to hide for a moment in the restroom was the story of a family whose father had been taken and their travels all over the province to find his body. These four young peoples' account of the days of searching, being turned away and labeled guerrillas by authorities, and digging up their father's grave by themselves in the middle of the night, got to me. I was and continue to be astounded by the indefatigable bravery of the victims' families and the extraordinary, coordinated work of these human rights activists.

I remember — Bringing with Development GAP a Costa Rican economist to talk to the IMF and World Bank about how Nicaragua's structural adjustment plan was crippling the rural economy. He was brilliant, and even seemed to move the unmovable experts. I asked him why he cared so much about this, and he took my hands in his so that I could feel his palms. They were completely calloused. "I'm a farmer," he said. His name was Ottón Solís, and years later, he narrowly missed being elected president of Costa Rica.

There are the activists who with their pursuit of a single case could bring down walls of impunity in their country. Helen Mack, sister of murdered Guatemalan anthropologist Myrna Mack. She never stopped, never slowed, she was implacable. I remember bringing her round the Congress with WOLA's Rachel Garst, and Helen sprained her ankle. We somehow found a wheelchair in a Senate nurses' room, and wheeled her round the Senate. Iván Cepeda, leader of the victims' movement in Colombia and son of a murdered senator, is another such person, and it has been a privilege to arrange some of his visits.

Then there was the time when Betsy Marsh of the Amazon Alliance organized a visit by a group of indigenous people affected by the U.S.-funded aerial spraying campaign in Colombia, and we helped arrange visits to U.S. agencies. We went to the EPA, and

the indigenous people had brought with them as proof a poster with photos that looked like a child's science fair project. "This is our corn that you sprayed," they said. "This is our yucca. This is our medicinal herbs which you sprayed. And this — this — is our sacred plant." Science fair project or not, they were compelling. The EPA folks at least had the decency to look pained, although they did very little to regulate the program. But the people at INL, the State Department's narcotics bureau, were emotionless and unmovable as rock. Sometimes you just have to get on record with the impact of U.S. policies no matter what the reception.

Whenever I brought a human rights activist to the State Department and arrived early, I'd always take them to the statue of Albert Einstein that is right nearby. I'm the child and grandchild of scientists, and I find Einstein gives me comfort in a difficult political world. He sits there so childlike and wondering, with his book with the famous formula. But he was also an activist for peace and truth, as the quotes at the base of the statue show. Einstein helped gear up my courage before going in to present views once more to State.

IVÁN CEPEDA, founder, Colombian Movement of Victims of State Crimes

The first time I came to the United States was the end of 2005, which is when the victims' movement [bringing together victims of paramilitary and military violence] first emerged. Lisa visited



LAWG really helped us open doors, and to positively position the movement... It established the merit of the movement, because we had been insisting that these crimes committed by state agents existed, while the government had always denied them.

— IVÁN CEPEDA

Colombia Victims of Violence tour members visit the United Nations.



Colombia, and I told her how we wanted the victims' movement to have a higher profile. That is when the Justice and Peace law [a controversial law governing the demobilization of the paramilitaries] was first being discussed. Lisa made me a very interesting proposal, that we do a joint tour, victims of state crimes together with the victims of guerrilla kidnapping. That had never been done before. Within the victims' movement we had already had discussions about developing a relationship with the association of family members of kidnapped police and soldiers, Asfamipaz. Marleny Orjuela, the head of Asfamipaz, had a very critical vision about the mistreatment of police and soldiers within the security forces themselves, of stratification and discrimination within the armed forces. On our side, we already had a position criticizing kidnapping. We had been in public events with Marleny, and we thought that the tour would be very useful. We shared positions on many issues. We were in favor of a humanitarian accord. Marleny was in favor of demands for truth, justice and reparations. We were all against the justification of crimes whoever committed them. We all agreed that the government needed to change. We each valued the families of the victims.

So the participants in the tour were our victims' movement, the association of the families of the disappeared (Asfaddes), and Asfamipaz, as well as the Sinaltrainal union. It was an important experience for us to get to know each other. We opposed kidnapping, of course, but this position is deepened when you have the opportunity to know the depths of what happens during a kidnapping, what happens to the family. To know what life is like in captivity, the suffering that people must withstand. Hearing this testimony had a big impact on us, and it also affected Marleny to hear our testimony. What it means to have loved ones disappeared. What it means for Colombia, for the family, what the wiping out of an entire political party, the Unión Patriótica, means. Even without talking about the political effects of the tour, the tour had a profound effect in terms of the experience of our groups working together. With Marleny, we agreed to coordinate our messages. That we, from the Victims' Movement, would condemn kidnapping and request a humanitarian agreement, and Marleny would ask for truth, justice and reparation for victims of the paramilitaries.

Work in Washington really raised our national profile in Colombia. The hearing with the human rights caucus, meetings with the State Department. We had a long interview with the Washington Post, we also appeared in universities, had a workshop with the Center Transitional Justice in New York, and a presentation at the United Nations. Lisa explained to us how to carry out lobbying here in the United States, she prepared us for all the meetings.

LAWG really helped us open doors, and to positively position the movement. By coming to the United States, this meant an

important level of recognition for the movement, and the possibility of protection. It established the merit of the movement, because we had been insisting that these crimes committed by state agents existed, while the government had always denied them.

We got a lot more recognition after that, with international prizes including the Human Rights First award. A good deal of the doors were opened for us because of our contact with the U.S. Congress, media, and well-known people in the United States. And this is all thanks to the first step that Lisa gave us. So we really appreciate her commitment with victims in Colombia. The threats throughout this process have been very serious. And so the high profile of the movement here in the U.S. is one of the factors that allows us to be able to stay in Colombia and continue working. Knowing that she is following my particular case, and the situation of the victims in general, Lisa and others in Washington, is very important for our work.

On the joys and struggles of coalition work:

JOY OLSON, former director of CAWG/LAWG, current director of Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA)

LAWG is an amazing place, one of the best functioning coalitions I have ever seen. The reasons are intangible, people have been working together for a long time, during politically difficult times. Not everyone is on the same page automatically, but it is a space where people could fight things out.

Our strategy was to get everyone on the same page, and it was not a cakewalk. I remember there was one meeting with activists to talk about a legislative proposal. I remember I had gotten a babysitter,

**Not everyone is
on the same page
automatically, but it is a
space where people could
fight things out.**

— JOY OLSON



LAWG holiday party.



LAWG board members Walt Owensby of Presbyterian Church (USA) and Marie Dennis of Maryknoll Office for Global Concerns.

because my husband Eric was out of town and I was thinking that I would go out to dinner with them after the meeting. But after the meeting they were all mad at me, they rushed out. So I took myself out alone for a drink at Union Station, I felt pretty bad. Initially they said it was backsliding, a mealy-mouth position. But six months later they were all on board. And a year later we won our legislative goals.

The reason that LAWG has lasted beyond any specific policy goal, is because it is run by staff that is independent of any particular organization. Most coalitions have staff who have to share responsibility for work within an organization. The strength and weakness of LAWG are the unwritten rules: we didn't compete with any member organizations for donors, and we don't work for any organization in particular. We can mediate among organizations from that space. Not competing for donors made fundraising hard. But being independent is the reason that LAWG could last for so long.

SEAN GARCIA, LAWG Senior Associate, now at Refugees International

When I came in, the groups that were working on border issues were mainly faith-based groups. They focused on solidarity and community building, things I am not always good at. It's not my professional comfort zone. At first I didn't know that many actors in the coalition and they didn't bother inviting me to their Christmas "posadas," a traditional Mexican ceremony where you go door to door and reenact the journey to Egypt. They had re-written the posadas to focus on the border, creating parallels with immigrants coming into the U.S. to the flight into Egypt. They had the posadas here in Washington where they decided to go to the Supreme Court. The next day, what do you know, I show up and it's only about 20 degrees outside and they look at me and say, "We don't have any men, you need to be Joseph." So they give me this script and I'm supposed to go around, in costume, on Capitol Hill being seen by people I'm trying to lobby reciting these lines. That to me was an "Oh my God what have I gotten myself into" moment....

This was stuff that I just wasn't used to. Both Lisa and I do not come from backgrounds of faith but we do recognize the value of having that core that tells you why you should be doing something. What Lisa and I do out of intellectual belief they do out of faith. We recognize that that it is important to use their language, but learning the nuances of how to do that is a challenge. There were never any clashes that came over the religious factor which I thought was very impressive from the coalition.

Faith-based ideas never clashed in the coalition, it was policy ideas that clashed. During a summer where we had had over 500 deaths in the desert, we wanted to raise awareness on Capitol Hill. We took the labels off thousands of water bottles and put on our

own labels: “Juan Rodriguez didn’t have this water bottle when he died in the Arizona desert. Border policies force people to die in the desert, vote yes on X bill.” We did this on a hot, hot September day and we timed it during votes when the congressmen were walking from their offices to the Capitol. We handed out some 2,000 bottles of water, including to maybe 200 congress members. It was a great campaign. It made the connection real and increased awareness. Shortly after that some of the members of the coalition came up to us and said we can’t be members of this campaign anymore. We oppose the privatization of water and believe that water should be a free commodity. That this was affecting the poor in places like Central America where they are privatizing water. As much as I understood where they were coming from, at what point does sensitivity to every issue prevent you from doing a campaign. In the end we did stop the campaign. That was one of those times where you have to accommodate a variety of perspectives, including ones that you don’t agree with yourself...

These problems are constantly coming up in the work that LAWG does and you do have to manage these things on a regular basis... You can’t work at this coalition unless you are willing to find that compromise ground. Sometimes you have to talk to all parties involved and it can be exhausting but you have to be willing to be the peace maker. There’s constant work going on, “So what do you think, how do you make this work, how do we find common ground?”

KATE DOYLE, Analyst, National Security Archives

All these organizations with an interest in this issue that we were working on yet, at the same time there were a lot of egos and lots of institutional interests lying around, and LAWG served the role of uniter and convener. It was LAWG that helped us find a forum for meeting together, for sitting around at a table together for the first time. It was LAWG that helped us find a common voice together around this issue, and it was LAWG that provided the leadership we needed to be able to transform into a coalition which is what we became for a couple of years.

MARTIN SHUPACK, Associate Director for Public Policy for Church World Service

One of my first memories of the LAWG was attending its bi-weekly meetings in 1995 as a “newbie” in Washington. Although I had just come back from several years in Guatemala and Mexico, I felt out of my depth among the many acronyms and experts in Washington. It was LAWG meetings and publications that enabled me to get up to speed as a policy advocate for Latin America/Caribbean issues.

You can’t work at this coalition unless you are willing to find that compromise ground. Sometimes you have to talk to all parties involved and it can be exhausting but you have to be willing to be the peace maker.

— SEAN GARCIA



In recent years, I have especially appreciated the help LAWG has provided Church World Service and several of its member denominations to engage Congress and the State Department in our efforts to remove restrictions on religious travel to Cuba. I've been truly blessed by the generous amount of expertise LAWG has shared with us in pursuing this concern.

Mentoring and building community:

BILL SPENCER, CAWG Executive Director 1987-1990

I found it enjoyable, and an honor to work with this community of people, in Washington and with local groups, with talented and dedicated and extraordinary people. Those times we were outnumbered and outspent, but there were also times when members of Congress would stand up because they were following their conscience and doing what was right. It was a pleasure in and of itself to work with these people, and that kept me going, the value of what we were doing and working with these extraordinary people.

ALISON GIFFEN, former director of the U.S. Office on Colombia

Two words sum it up... patience and integrity. I was 22 years old running an organization (albeit small), dealing with a conflict that forced me to quickly abandon my idealism about governments, institutions and people. On day one, I walked into an office with a phone jack, a desk, an electricity outlet and little experience in DC or the world. I can't count the numerous things Lisa taught me, crises she prevented on a daily basis (along with Barbara Gerlach of the Colombia Human Rights Committee and Winifred Tate of the Washington Office on Latin America and others). Lisa taught me how to facilitate a coalition meeting and mobilize people to action, write an effective sign-on letter, draft congressional resolutions, conduct myself in lobby meetings and insecure environments, fundraise and later, give funds. And, embarrassingly, occasionally, she patiently told me to stop crying in front of the U.S. embassy in Bogotá or to change my shirt before a meeting with a Colombian general. But beyond the hours of direct mentoring, she served as an incredible example. She taught me that you can lead effectively and influence people without ego and with few words, that you can be strategic without turning your back on your beliefs or your colleagues, that you can deal patiently and gracefully with difficult people in order to achieve objectives and that dedicate your life to doing good work in tough environments (that includes Latin America and DC) and still be a great friend, mom, wife, colleague and mentor.



Colombian humanitarian crisis tour.

LAEL PARISH, former director of Network in Solidarity with the Guatemala People (NISGUA), Program Officer, The Moriah Fund

The LAWG is a coalition of organizations that care about U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America and that come together to promote policy that focuses on social justice and human rights. The LAWG has a dual existence—as a coalition of organizations and as an organization in its own right that has people in the office who help provide leadership to the work that is being done by participating organizations on legislative issues.

The LAWG should be recognized because it works behind the scenes and doesn't want to take a lot of credit for its work. It leaves that opportunity for its member organizations. Yet, without the LAWG's expertise on Congress and its work providing a space for groups to come together, there would have been much less success on the issues that we care about on human rights and social justice in Latin America.

MARTY JORDAN, former co-Executive Director of the Guatemala Human Rights Commission

My first memory of the LAWG was the plenary meeting I attended in December, two days after I had joined GHRC. I felt a bit intimidated when I arrived because the room was full of experts. I remember asking lots of questions and feeling really annoying but everyone was extremely patient and nice. To me, LAWG bring together a remarkable group of people, who are truly committed to Latin America; people who don't just talk the talk but walk the walk.

The LAWG works behind the scenes and doesn't want to take a lot of credit ... Yet, without the LAWG's expertise on Congress and its work providing a space for groups to come together, there would have been much less success on the issues that we care about on human rights and social justice in Latin America.

— LAEL PARISH



GHRC did not have much policy experience and we were preparing for a speaking tour on violence against women in Guatemala. I knew that I wanted participants to advocate in Congress on behalf of a House Resolution condemning violence against women in Guatemala that we had been working on, but had no idea how best to go about it. I called LAWG and they not only gave me a list of allies and swing voters to target but also gave me useful tips on how to work Congress.

The LAWG has always played a vital role in our collective advocacy efforts concerning Guatemala. Latin America suffered a tumultuous period in the 80s. In the 90s, people in the international community lost interest but Latin America needs our attention and the LAWG has been instrumental in putting the region back on people's hearts and minds.

Small but Mighty

DANIEL GARCIA PEÑA, Colombian scholar and peace activist

It was amazing, the first time I went to the LAWG Colombia Steering Committee meeting. In Colombia, you think that they have a huge infrastructure and staff, and then you go and it is a few people meeting in a basement. But in terms of influencing the Colombian government, they are more powerful than some governments.

LISA HAUGAARD, current LAWG Executive Director

What would trip us up, as a tiny organization always making it up as we go along, would be the small office stuff — our mailing lists getting messed up, a computer breaking down, the little stuff that's so important. We'd have so many mishaps that a great Lutheran volunteer staffer gave us a new tagline: LAWG: One Crisis at a Time. Chanting this tagline proved mysteriously calming.

SEAN GARCIA, LAWG Senior Associate, now at Refugees International

There is so much to be said for a small organization that gets so much done with such few resources and that really has this special atmosphere with its staff that you are a team and you are all colleagues. I've never worked in an office before where there was no tension or no drama. The board is supportive. It was a great atmosphere to be in and you don't want to lose that. I always think that if LAWG were to expand and do this on a larger scale, the results you would get out of it would just be tremendous but then you would lose what makes it special.

I think that since budgets are so tight, we place a premium on relationships. We don't have budgets to wine and dine in Congress, we don't have budgets to fly people around the world, and we don't have the money to do what many advocacy groups do. What we rely on is absolutely accurate information. Information that often times isn't coming from anywhere else.

It was amazing, the first time I went to the Colombia Steering Committee meeting. In Colombia, you think that they have a huge infrastructure and staff, and then you go and it is a few people meeting in a basement. But in terms of influencing the Colombian government, they are more powerful than some governments.

— DANIEL GARCIA PEÑA

OUR CAMPAIGNS: What People Can Do When They Work Together

INTERESTING TIMES: The Central American Wars

During the 1980s, U.S. concern about Communist expansion during the Cold War made Central America insurgencies a primary focus. The U.S. government spent billions of dollars supporting the abusive Salvadoran military in their counterinsurgency efforts against the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, and the Nicaraguan Contras against the Sandinista government. The United States also supported the Guatemalan military in their scorched-earth counterinsurgency campaigns. Hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed and millions forced to flee their homes, living within their countries as internally displaced persons, in refugee camps in neighboring countries, or as undocumented immigrants in the United States. Hundreds of thousands of people throughout the United States mobilized to oppose these policies, and to support Central Americans' efforts for peace and justice. The Central America Working Group served to coordinate these advocacy efforts, a pioneering effort connecting grassroots activists with the policy process.



“It was an extraordinary time, a wonderful and horrible time.”

BILL SPENCER, CAWG Executive Director 1987-1990

I came to DC in the fall of 1987, for the Days of Decision and Countdown 87, the last of the big fights over military aid to the Contras. This was the same time that the Iran/Contra scandal was breaking, so the religious community, the human rights community, decided to put resources into a national coalition to work together. Of course the right did a lot of advocacy to pass the aid. The debate was bigger than Central America, it was emblematic of the political fights at the time, of the Democratic Congress against the Reagan Administration. I came to be staff for the Days of Decision, which was run out of the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy. The Central America lobby group had started, by the mid-1980s it was known as the Central America Working Group. I had worked there for about six months at this point, and then I was hired as field coordinator. At that point, the Coalition was working on South Africa, arms control and Central America. People on the board of CAWG decided they wanted to keep it going if at all possible, and they asked me to keep it going. So it was me and two interns who started the Central America Working Group as a separate organization, not under the umbrella of the coalition. The Central America Working Group was the successor of the Central America Lobbying Group, as of 1988 it was a separate organization.

The big thing that strikes me was the remarkable way that organizations in a broad community, with very different constituencies and mandates, would come to together when they saw a common need to be more effective. People would set aside their differences, their different needs and even their different institutional interests to work together; it was remarkable. Even in simple things — the Washington offices of the churches and the Center for International Policy (CIP) lent staff support. Bill Goodfellow, CIP director, played a very important role in keeping this thing going. They said, we will help you build, to create a new board, a new organizational structure. The fiscal sponsor was the Church of the Brethren DC office. There was an empty desk at CIP one summer, so when the Coalition closed I moved there with the two interns, and when CIP moved to the Massachusetts Avenue office we moved with them.

After about six months, we had enough money from contributing organizations and a few funders to get back into our own office, with the National Agenda for Peace in El Salvador as a tenant. Bill Goodfellow got pneumonia helping us move, carrying the boxes in the middle of winter, and we used a colleague's convertible.

Cindy Buhl pioneered the techniques and strategies that human rights lobbyists used for the next decades, the hill drop, the

The thing that strikes me was the remarkable way that organizations in a broad community, with very different constituencies and mandates, would come to together when they saw a common need to be more effective.

— BILL SPENCER

legislative alerts, the editorial board mailings, the ways to lobby, things that everyone relied on later were really developed in the human rights lobby group.

At the end of the Contra aid debate, there was the humanitarian aid issue, which allowed the Contras to stay in the border camps until the elections. We were very involved in the first return of the Guatemala refugees, and especially were involved in El Salvador. We pulled people together from the human rights and the religious communities. Rep. Ron Dellums had been offering amendments to cut military aid to El Salvador, we had our first meeting in 1988 with Representative Matt McHugh, who was a leading liberal, who offered the first stand-alone amendment with leadership backing tying U.S. assistance to UN participation in the peace negotiations, and that got about 185 votes. We got some provisions in appropriations bills, and that put El Salvador back on the map, for the first time since the Kissinger Report. That showed that the El Salvador issue had legs in Congress, that people were willing to be cutting back, changing U.S. policy towards El Salvador.

Later in 1989, there were a lot of terrible moments that we all shared. In the fall of 1989, the focus was on the El Salvador negotiations, and getting the UN actively involved. CAWG played a central role in that. It was an extraordinary time, a wonderful and horrible time. There were religious offices that had staff working day and night, to try to protect the church workers they knew when there were reports of abductions. We were all working in total emergency mode. During the offensive, for a couple of days it was not at all clear what was going to happen, if the country was going to overrun by the guerrillas, it was extraordinary. We were helping get information on people who were missing, trying to get people out of the country, trying to get people in the U.S. government to urge restraint on the part of the Salvadoran government, while the bombings and fighting were going on. It was an amazing time. We heard that the government was not letting the Red Cross in to evacuate the wounded, that they were bombing civilian neighborhoods. There was a lot of hesitancy within Congress to step in, because an ally was under attack, but the pressure was building.

I remember the night, Moakley had decided to do a letter to the FMLN leadership and to President Duarte, urging restraint and that they let the Red Cross evacuate the wounded, that they not attack civilians. Getting both sides to step back from the brink. It was a risky thing, because they didn't know if people were going to stand behind them. We did all the background work for the letter, and prepared the hill drop asking people to sign on. It was the morning of November 16, I had stayed up all night getting ready to send out the letter, making the assignments to the different groups, which office they should call. I went into Cheryl Morden's office, she was working for Church World Service, and she was on the phone, writing down a list. It was a list of

all the Jesuits who had been killed. She was on the phone with people in El Salvador, and they were telling her about the murder of the Jesuits. She told me, I told Cindy, we were trying to figure out what to do. Moakley had already decided to step into the middle with his letter, and he and his aide Jim McGovern went crazy with the letter, they got 100 people to sign on and sent it later that day. That catapulted the Democrats into the issue. Later Speaker Foley made Moakley the chair of the Special Task Force on the Killing of the Jesuits, which established the role of the Salvadoran military in the killings.

It was the most extraordinary week of my life.

It was a reminder of how horrible things could be — the Jesuits had been up to Washington a couple of weeks earlier.

It was an example of what people can do when they are under attack, what people can do when they work together.

The things we set in motion that week led to three years of work, legislative work, media work, for the investigation of the Jesuits murder and holding those responsible, and promoting UN participation in the negotiated end of the conflict. Bush was against the UN playing a real role, so we worked on that for a couple of years.

And there were things that we were winning. The Moakley-Murtha amendment in the House, the Leahy Amendment in the Senate, to cut aid and reorient aid. Those cuts made a huge difference in the direction of the U.S. role, it made the U.S. really step back.

Moakley had really played an extraordinary role, he did the work to bring the hard line, pro-security Democrats on board, people

It was the most extraordinary week of my life.... It was an example of what people can do when they are under attack, what people can do when they work together.

— BILL SPENCER



Bill Spencer and Ann Butwell in the CAWG Methodist Building office.



like Murtha, he worked on them, took them on trips. So Murtha, a big military supporter, came back and said, this is not the kind of military I know, we shouldn't give them money.

Ron Dellums after the vote, said, I can't believe, it, we won! Did I miss something?

When the Dodd-Leahy amendment won, everyone was stunned. I remember Tim Rieser came out, and Donna Mendel, she worked for the National Agenda for Peace in El Salvador, she was very expressive and emotional, she tears across the lobby and gives him a big hug. Tim just stood there, looking stiff and exhausted and probably wondering why this woman was hugging him.

These were long-overdue victories born of the horrors of what the Salvadoran military had done, but those horrors would not have translated into change in U.S. policy without the work of the religious groups, the solidarity community, the human rights groups, all working to make that happen.

GEOFF THALE, then director of National Agenda for Peace in El Salvador, now Program Director, Washington Office on Latin America

Before the Salvadoran offensive, most of the focus was on the human rights conditions in legislation and the human rights situation in the country. People brought human rights cases to the CAWG meetings



CAWG Director Bill Spencer shows his diagram on how to lobby.

and discussed who was coming up from El Salvador. The offensive changed the dynamics. Immediately after the offensive, the CAWG played a key role talking to Bonior, Moakley and others in Congress who were concerned. They did a tremendous amount of work to get the first discussions on the Hill about suspending military aid to El Salvador after the Jesuits were killed; an effort that eventually led to what became the Moakley Task Force. It was the Task Force that ultimately led to the initiative to suspend military aid to El Salvador. The CAWG was actively involved in getting information from El Salvador to members in the Task Force. When the peace process started in the early 90s, the CAWG was involved in monitoring the process and sponsoring Mott House briefing after briefing to keep people informed. Bill Spencer and other members of the CAWG were involved in discussions with Dodd and Moakley which eventually led to Dodd making the first proposal to suspend half the military aid and conditioning it on progress in the negotiations.

There is a picture on LAWG's office wall of the celebration when the House version of the Dodd proposal passed. The CAWG had done all this work — swing list, vote count, calls — and the last hurdle was a Republican from Michigan (Representative Bloomfield) who proposed an amendment that would have gutted the proposal. The fear was that we would lose the support of a bunch of Republicans and some Democrats. At the last minute, CAWG printed out buttons and T-shirts that said “No to the Bloomfield amendment.” That night, when it was clear that the Bloomfield amendment was going to lose, members of Congress began to switch their vote all of a sudden. There was this huge victory party on the Hill.

**CINDY BUHL, former CAWG Legislative Coordinator, now
Legislative Director for Representative James P. McGovern (D-MA)**

We started with the Coalition for a New Military and Foreign Policy in 1976. There were more groups participating in the human rights committee than were member organizations, every solidarity group would come to the meetings. CAWG became a separate group because the Coalition had the human rights committee which would meet one a month and the meetings were an hour and half, and that was it. So people who were not working on Central America could never get on the agenda, it was all focused on Central America. When the Coalition dissolved in 1983, the member organizations decided that the key program part that they needed to maintain was the Central America work. The CAWG started when people realized that they needed to train up a new generation of people, that only people who had been working with NGOs knew how to lobby and try to affect policymaking.

I worked on message strategy, with editorial boards, with writers, with the press, with syndicated writers. I had real relationships

The CAWG started when people realized that they needed to train up a new generation of people, that only people who had been working with NGOs knew how to lobby and try to affect policymaking.

— CINDY BUHL



with the editorial writers, they relied on us, before writing editorials they would call us up, the editorialists, not the columnists but the names you never know, when every word counts. Karl E. Meyer from the New York Times was one of the most beautiful editorial writers I've ever encountered. It was a joy just to have conversations with him, and then to read these gorgeous editorials, brief, beautiful, every word counted, no excess language. It was an entire tutorial in how to write really well. To think that he valued the insights Bill and I provided was magical and humbling. I never, ever wanted to give him a piece of information that I wasn't 100% sure of. Nowadays, everyone wants to give "spin" to editorial writers, when all the best ones need are the facts and your knowledge of the policy debate.

I helped put together the strategic legislative memos that everyone signs off on, that we would then get on our knees to present to [Dodd aide] Janice O'Connell, [Leahy aide] Tim Rieser, [Obey aide] Mark Murray. The memo I remember best was a comprehensive memo covering of all of Central America, laying out what needed to be done legislatively. It was only four pages long, and it was the first time we really defined what to do for the entire region in one legislative proposal. I remember Tim Rieser and his boss — at that time Tim was number two — telling Bill and I it was the best thing they had ever read. Our jaws dropped. It was one of the times that you recognize that you've come of age. Now, LAWG and groups like WOLA take for granted that the Committee staff expect these memos every year, and they do it as a regular thing. But that was the breakthrough memo.

Bill and I worked closely with Jim and Joe Moakley on the Jesuit investigation, the first couple of years after the peace accords, trying to implement a new El Salvador policy.

The worst thing in the office for me was Bill's eating regime. He ran the Marine Corps marathon, he was a really, really good runner. So he was constantly eating, he would never stop eating. In the office while we were working, he would eat a banana, then twenty minutes later a bagel, then twenty minutes later something else, it was a nightmare.

This was the pre-electronic age, we thought the greatest piece of machinery we had was the fax machine, one of the kinds with the special paper that curled up. And it was great, because it meant that people in El Salvador could fax us immediately what was going on. My favorite was when we had to get newsletters out, we had to run them off, then we got a contract with Kinkos to run them off, but then we had to fold and stuff them, and take them to the mail. People nowadays have no idea! We had an account at Trovers book store, we bought all the major U.S. newspapers, the Post, the Times, the Wall Street Journal, Boston Globe, LA Times, the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Christian Science Monitor, and we would

sit and read all the papers every single day. We would pick them up every morning, and then look through them for things related to Central America or policy. There was nothing on line then, you actually had to have the paper. We also looked for weird stories to send [humor columnist] Dave Barry, for his column. I think Bill actually got a story in there once, on radioactive sheep in Nevada.

GEOFF THALE, then director of National Agenda for Peace in El Salvador, now Program Director, WOLA

The CAWG was the place to go if you wanted to influence anybody else's position or if you wanted help creating a consensus position. During the first two years I went to CAWG meetings, the main issue was Nicaragua and the Contras. Every meeting consisted of these heated discussions between those whose position was no compromise under any circumstances and those who felt that if you could reduce Contra aid or put pressure on the Contras or the first Bush Administration you could make a big difference. These two sides fought it out and it was Bill Spencer (then director of CAWG) who would try and thread the CAWG between these positions and ending meetings with people, even if not agreeing, not hating each other, and with him having the authority to do something.

The CAWG was the place to go if you wanted to influence anybody else's position or if you wanted help creating a consensus position.

— GEOFF THALE



CAWG Legislative Coordinator Cindy Buhl hard at work.



GAIL PHARES, founder of the Carolina Interfaith Taskforce on Central America and one of the founders of Witness for Peace:

When I started CITCA (Carolina Interfaith Taskforce on Central America) in 1982, I invited Cindy Buhl from what was then the Coalition for a New Military and Foreign Policy to come to our first retreat. She was immensely helpful to us in helping us focus our public policy efforts to stop U.S. aid to the Contras. She helped us strategize — she had us brainstorm ways to influence a member of Congress, thinking about what churches they attend and other things we hadn't thought of before. And then we practiced how to talk to our members of Congress. I know that because of her help, we were able to change the positions on Contra aid of at least all of the Democratic members of Congress in our area.

ANN BUTWELL, former CAWG organizer, now with the Center for Global Education

In 1991, when I was hired, there were 3 of us total in the office — all on 6-month contracts because CAWG didn't have the funding to promise longer-term commitments than that.

I was a treasured employee because David Holiday of WOLA had trained me on this funny new thing called the internet that was not user-friendly and hardly anybody knew how to use. Downloading PROCESO's analysis from the UCA in San Salvador became one of my weekly rituals.

In those days, the office was a good 20-minute walk from the Methodist building where our meetings were held, and the same distance from the Capitol. We were often in a hurry to get to both. I had my 1972 Beetle then, and the bottom had rusted through so much that the front passenger seat was missing—just like a Mexican taxicab (except they do it on purpose there for easy entry and exit). Because it was small and easy to park, Bill and Cindy liked taking my car to the Hill. I would drive up and drop them off in true taxicab manner, then find a space to park that only a VW could manage.

Bill was famous for his piles of paper. You'd ask him for something, and he'd reach into this impossibly high stack of papers and magically pull out exactly the thing you were looking for.

Cindy was legendary for her quick wit and "proverbs." One time we came up with an argument for a policy we were promoting, and we all agreed it was a great line. "Plus," she commented wryly, "it has the added virtue of being the truth!"

And those Legislative Hotline updates! Bill thought it would be nice to have a woman's voice announce the latest news, so he'd type up a page that could fit on the limited tape time we had—if I would only talk fast enough! Sometimes it took me five tries before

I could speed-read through the page in its entirety without the beep cutting me off.

Shortly after I left CAWG to go work with the Center for Global Education in El Salvador, I was run over by a car. After initial surgeries there, I was air-ambulated to DC where I remained hospitalized for 7 more weeks. I think every member of CAWG came to visit me! Some of their visits were very memorable, like the time Dawn came dressed in scrubs to “help me make a quick escape” or the day Cindy presented me with a giant ask-me-about-my-lobotomy pin or when Bonnie Tenneriello of WOLA left me a “prescription” (on real doctor’s stationery) for 2 chocolate chip cookies a day—complete with the “medicine”! Margie and Lee of the Religious Task Force on Central America were faithful visitors, stopping by every single day after work. Once I was out of the hospital, CAWG folks put on a fundraiser for me. Joe Eldridge was auctioneer!

Expanding the Mission: Becoming the LAWG

JOY OLSON, former director of CAWG/LAWG, current director of WOLA

The year after I came back from Mexico in 1993, we started expanding the mandate. Some people, including some on the board, thought that they had hired me to close down the organization, and it was clear that it was necessary to change or become irrelevant. So we started discussing broadening the scope. It was also clear that broadening the scope was something that people wanted. There was a day-long planning meeting, trying to decide, should CAWG close down, disband, expand or stay the same. The church offices, with an interest in broader issues, pushed for expanding the agenda, and CAWG was rechristened LAWG.

Jim Matlack of the American Friends Service Committee said, we are used to working in coalition now, if it goes out of existence we will just have to create it again.

**I was a treasured
employee because
David Holiday of WOLA
had trained me on this
funny new thing called
the internet that was
not user-friendly and
hardly anybody knew
how to use.**

— ANN BUTWELL

CENTRAL AMERICA: *After the Wars*

By the early 1990s, the wars in Central America were ending, through peace accords and electoral transitions. While deciding to expand our mission and begin work throughout the continent, the Latin America Working Group did not abandon our long-standing commitments to the people of Central America. LAWG worked to build international support for negotiated settlements to the civil wars, to promote the economic and democratic reforms promised in the peace accords, and to strengthen democratization and civilian control over military forces. LAWG was a central player in pushing the U.S. government to declassify documents so that U.S. and Latin American citizens could more fully understand the U.S. role in the previous violence. LAWG worked with allies to ensure assistance following natural disasters, most notably after the devastating 1998 Hurricane Mitch.

LISA HAUGAARD, current LAWG Executive Director

In the early to mid-90s, the LAWG still focused on Central America, on the aftermath of peace process. There was pressure from certain conservative members of Congress to undo the Nicaraguan land reform, and we worked to oppose that. We also worked to try to change AID's programs. Our idea was the AID should fund peasant groups and NGOs assisting the poor, not just conservative groups, and that it should no longer tie aid to structural adjustment, because in those days AID programs were linked to IMF-style adjustment programs. And they did change. It helped when Clinton came in, there was greater openness within AID. We worked on declassification of documents related to the peace processes, for Guatemala, Salvador, Honduras. And then Hurricane Mitch devastated Central America, with thousands killed and countless left homeless. I really learned from working with Joy as we advocated for hurricane relief. She said—let's not settle for a small number. Let's set the bar high—and we ended up with \$750 million. By just saying the large numbers like a mantra, and then organizing everyone and their grandmother, working with Oxfam America and Catholic Relief Services, creating new alliances such as with National Council of La Raza, we got what we wanted.

JOY OLSON, former director of CAWG/LAWG, current director of WOLA

I went to Salvador with Geoff Thale with a delegation that he organized after Hurricane Mitch. It was one of those moments that you can get people to focus on the need for long-term development, not just aid as charity. WOLA and LAWG were instrumental in getting the levels of funding that came from Congress, which was much more than had ever been given before.

© Witness for Peace

KATE DOYLE, Analyst, National Security Archive

The time in which we collaborated very intimately with LAWG stands more out for me. That was when there was a movement afoot to support the Guatemalan Truth Commission's request for information from the U.S. government. The Archive wanted to help, and we also wanted to bring the human rights community into this issue of the right to information. At that same time, growing directly out of the truth commission request and scandal over U.S. intelligence operations in Guatemala, came a much broader initiative to draft and get congressional support for a human rights information act which would mandate the disclosure of information that related to crimes against humanity or grave human rights violations. And what I most remember about LAWG was that there was a very strong interest on the part of a bunch of organizations to work on this human rights information act but they were institutions that were not necessarily used to working together such as human rights institutions, membership based organizations, and organizations devoted to civil liberties and those devoted to openness. It was really important because it was for the first time that the human rights community and the openness movement (those organizations committed to challenging secrecy and fighting for government transparency) sat down and found common ground, and LAWG was instrumental in making that happen. Both because the institution was willing to serve this patient mediating role between all the different institutional interests and because Lisa and Joy had the sense of humor and patience it took to bring us together. That is what I think is very emblematic to what the LAWG is.

LAEL PARISH, former director of NISGUA, Program Officer, The Moriah Fund

What I remember the most about my work with the LAWG are the many battles to stop military aid to Guatemala. Always being able to rely on the folks at the LAWG to put the information together and help prepare the legislative strategy so that those of us who worked more at the grassroots level could mobilize our forces to join the campaign. This is something that I recollect as being (and continues to be) fundamental; that role of keeping an eye on the legislative work and what needs to be done so that others groups that are less focused on legislative work can still plug-in in an important and meaningful way.

Of the many memories that I have of working with the LAWG, one that will stay with me my entire life, was the first LAWG meeting I attended after coming back from maternity leave. I was sitting there with all of the groups that worked on Guatemala the day we found out that Bishop Gerardi had been brutally assassinated. It stands out because when we found out the horrendous news, I was actually with many of the organizations that cared about the issue and would want to do something about it.

It was really important because it was for the first time that the human rights community and the openness movement sat down and found common ground, and LAWG was instrumental in making that happen.

— KATE DOYLE

CUBA POLICY: Moving an Unmovable Object

Since 1960, the United States has maintained a trade embargo on Cuba under which U.S. citizens are prohibited from open commerce and exchange with Cuba, including a ban on general travel. LAWG has worked with U.S.-based activists and Cuban allies to raise awareness of the harmful impact of U.S. policy towards Cuba. Through the work of LAWG and other allies, in 2000, Congress legalized the sale of U.S. food and medicine to Cuba. LAWG has worked directly with Cuban Americans organizing to improve the relationship between the two countries, and to reunite families separated by this destructive policy.

GEOFF THALE, Program Director, WOLA

In the mid-90s, WOLA and LAWG organized the first Cuba Consultation Day as it looked like U.S.-Cuba relations might be able to change. We invited all these people to come to Washington to plan together how to move forward change on U.S.-Cuban relations. Between the time that we sent the invitations and when the meeting happened, there was an astounding utter total turn around on the situation—the Cuban government shot down two U.S. planes, the Clinton Administration suspended travel to the island, Helms-Burton which had been stalled in Congress passed swiftly. I remember that at first we felt we should cancel the meeting, but Joy built a case that if we were going to keep the movement to change U.S. policy alive, we needed to go through with the meeting.

The next year, the American Friends Service Committee's Dick Erstad invited a half-dozen organizations and the Ford Foundation to an off-the-record discussion about Cuba policy. Joy and I had been invited to talk about the legislative piece. It was on the train to Philadelphia that we decided that the issue to pitch was the idea of ending the embargo on food and medicine. I don't think we convinced anybody else but ourselves. We laid out an entire strategy from there. We spent weeks trying to convince other groups and five or six months trying to sell the idea to all of the members of the House interested in Cuba. But, we got it! We convinced Representative Esteban Torres to



Nestor, Sr., "When I die, who will take my ashes to Cuba?"
© Nestor Hernández, Jr.

introduce legislation, and everyone in the House who had ever pushed on Cuba to co-sponsor the legislation and show up at the press conference, except for Representative Charles Rangel. Rangel wanted to do his own thing. Joy had a meeting with Rangel's staff where they told her that she shouldn't think she was the one elected to Congress—that he was. On the day of the press conference, Rangel walked in, put his arm around Torres and endorsed the legislation. Two to three years later, that idea became law. The campaign is a great example of having a strategic conception based on an understanding of what will work for your member organizations and what will work on the Hill. It truly reflects the LAWG's real strengths.

JOY OLSON, former director of CAWG/LAWG, current director of WOLA

Early in the Clinton Administration, for Cuba it seemed like there was political opportunity approaching, for the loosening of the embargo. That was before the Cubans shot down the Brothers to the Rescue planes. Overnight everything changed. The administration signed the Helms-Burton Act, to codify parts of the embargo. There was significant opposition to the embargo until the Brothers to the Rescue were shot down.

At that time I got to take some time off, because my daughter Hope was born, I was out of the office. I remember coming back, I was invited to the AFSC meeting in Philadelphia, their working group of humanitarian aid agencies on Cuba, and they wanted Geoff and me to talk about what was on the horizon in the U.S. in terms of Cuba policy. I remember thinking on the train to Philly, there is nothing, there is no political space to even talk.

That is when we came up with the strategy focused on changing the restrictions on food and medicine. Focusing on humanitarian issues was the only space to talk to people, and the only thing we could address with credibility, because of all the humanitarian and religious organizations that were part of the Working Group.

We decided the place we could make some headway was the sale of food and medicine. For years and years it had been the same in Congress, there would be bills introduced and they would get three cosponsors. The tricky part was to get everyone to agree to work on one bill. We wanted to introduce the bill with an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, and we always had more Democrats, so we had to delay some of them from signing on. It worked. Our role had not been super public, so a few years later, when the legislation passed, everyone thought that the farm lobby had done it. And they did a lot, but they came in a year later when we had already gotten well over 100 cosponsors on the bill, when it became politically safe.



Maria, prevented from visiting her “adoptive” children and grandchildren in Cuba. © Nestor Hernández, Jr.

That is when we came up the with strategy focused on changing the restrictions on food and medicine. It was the only space left to talk to people, and the only thing we could address with credibility, because of all the humanitarian and religious organizations in the Working Group.

— Joy Olson



DELVIS FERNÁNDEZ LEVY, President of the Cuban American Alliance Education Fund

LAWG has offered Cuban Americans, now suffering as a result of the current state of enmity between the U.S. and Cuba, a forthright vehicle for dialogue with U.S. legislators, government officials, and the American public at large. Thanks to LAWG's assistance, we have held photo exhibits, educational forums, and press conferences, that have educated the public and fostered reassessment of U.S.-Cuban relations by our government. The publications of the LAWG Education Fund consistently convey a voice of hope to Cuban Americans silenced by intimidation and the neglect of the mainstream press.

MAVIS ANDERSON, Senior Associate, Latin America Working Group

One of LAWG's most unusual efforts in recent years has been our joint project with WOLA, the photo exhibit titled *Love, Loss, and Longing: The Impact of U.S. Travel Policy on Cuban-American Families*. It began in 2005 when an academic and clinical psychologist from Ohio, Dr. Jeanne Lemkau, and Dr. David Strug, a professor and psychotherapist from New York, met with me about a project they were beginning. Their goal was to publish an article highlighting the voices of angry and traumatized Cuban Americans who had been separated from their families because of the tightened 2004 travel regulations imposed by the United States. In our discussion, I suggested that photographs of these victims combined with their stories would make a great exhibit for the public. Little did I know what I was getting into! In no time, they collabo-

© JAY_B/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

rated with two gifted Cuban-American photographers, and together we created an exhibit of twenty huge, framed black-and-white photographs with written testimonials.

Once we had the exhibit, we had to figure out what to do with it! This was new territory for us, our first foray into the arts. We had to figure out how to crate and ship two copies of the exhibit to venues all over the country. We had to find sponsors, develop publicity materials, arrange to be present at openings, and develop strategies to use the exhibit as a tool to educate Americans about the failed and cruel U.S. policy toward Cuba.

We opened the tour in the House of Representatives Rayburn House Office Building with a rousing reception and a “send-off” talk by Congressman Bill Delahunt (D-MA). Over the next year-and-a-half, the exhibit was shown at more than 20 locations nationwide: an art center in Jackson Hole, Wyoming; a Cuban restaurant in Minneapolis, Minnesota; a coffeehouse in Yellow Springs, Ohio; a gallery on Calle 8 in Little Havana, Miami, Florida; City Hall in Oakland, California; an art gallery in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania; and myriad places in between.

Fun? Yes! But there were times when I wanted to tear out my hair! Like when one of our venues went out of business a week before the exhibit was to open. And once, a sponsor threw away the custom-crafted shipping carton for the exhibit. Threw it away! We had to send staff people to the venue, purchase and re-build a new shipping carton, and drive the exhibit in a rush to the next venue. After nearly two years of such adventures, we decided to publish the exhibit in book form. It continues to be a great educational tool and is much easier to ship! And the exhibit itself remains available for special showings.

Sadly, we also had a tragedy associated with the exhibit. The first photographer to work on the project, Nestor Hernández, Jr., died unexpectedly the day after the DC opening. We dedicated both the tour and the book to his memory. We like to think that Nestor knows how valuable his photographs have been.

SILVIA WILHELM, founder of Puentes Cubanos

I first heard about LAWG in 1995 at a meeting in Washington, when I was then Executive Director of the Cuban Committee for Democracy and the organization was part of a Cuba working group. It was clear to me from that first meeting that they understood better than most other Washington NGOs the complexity and nuances involved in working the “Cuba issue.” They respected then, as they continue to respect now, the complex but vital role the non-monolithic Cuban-American community has played and will continue to play in the issue.

**I suggested that
photographs of these
victims combined with
their stories would make
a great exhibit for the
public. Little did I know
what I was getting into!**

— MAVIS ANDERSON

JUST THE FACTS: Shedding Light on Military Aid and Training

Started in 1998, Just the Facts is a comprehensive guide to U.S. defense and security assistance to Latin America and the Caribbean, a joint project of LAWGEF, the Center for International Policy, and the Washington Office on Latin America. This project has also helped congressional committees conduct oversight of U.S. military activities and has helped to promote transparency and civilian control over military programs. While the project began as a yearly publication, it is now a constantly updated webpage, www.justf.org, widely recognized by activists, journalists and policymakers as the authoritative source for information on U.S. military programs in the region.

JOY OLSON, former director of CAWG/LAWG, current director of WOLA

Just the Facts is one of the things that I am proudest of. It was the bedrock of our credibility on security issues. It started 11 years ago, we began the research in 1996. I went to the Ford Foundation, I was trying to get funding, and our grant officer Cristina Eguizábal said, what needs to be done that isn't being done. And I went home to think about that. There was the School of the Americas debate, but we did not have a lot of expertise on the security issue. We needed to develop our capacity for analysis. The beauty of the proposal was how simple it was — to get publicly available documents and put them together. I had one conversation with Adam Isacson at Center for International Policy and said, I can't do it on my own. Two days later he had written a really good proposal, and we worked on it together since then.

These books and then the website became the main reference document on U.S. military programs in Latin America. It gave us a lot of credibility with the U.S. military, with SouthCom, because they might not like our conclusions, but they could not argue with the facts. It meant that we could carry on serious conversations about defense policy.

In my first big trip for Just the Facts, we went to Peru, Chile, Argentina. While we were in Chile, Pinochet was detained in London, and there we were asking people about military issues. The odd thing was that nobody talked about Pinochet, it was the elephant in the room. After our last meeting, we went to an internet café, and Adam was messing around on the internet, they didn't have the kind of software that he wanted so he was downloading software onto the computer, and I thought it was taking too long so I went back to the hotel. When I came out for

dinner, I ran into Adam on the street on the edge of a protest. Adam said that when he had come out of the internet café he had walked right into a protest, and he went with them. He ended up getting shot by a water cannon, he had to jump over a wall in front of the defense ministry in order not to get hit by this water. The protest had ended up by the hotel. On most scales it was not very dramatic, but people were burning things in trash cans and the police started coming at the protesters. So we all ran down this sidewalk, and Adam and I ducked into a hamburger place, and just as we got in they slammed down the rejas. So we figured since we were stuck in there, we might as well get dinner. This was the first protest we saw, up until then the only protest had been Pinochet supporters, women in Chanel suits in front of the British embassy, but this was young kids, not people who had lived through the repression.

Adam Isacson: Joy and I traveled to Chile on what coincidentally turned out to be the day after Pinochet was arrested in London. In downtown Santiago the demonstrations started. Hundreds of students took to the streets, the Carabineros went after them with tear gas and water cannons, the shopkeepers closed their metal gates while the pedestrians all hid inside. It was pretty dramatic, and I even caught some water cannon spray....

Joy Olson: I remember the day we released the book someone we had interviewed from the Pentagon called, and I thought I was going to get yelled at, so I took a minute before I answered the phone to get myself mentally prepared, saying to myself, I really believe in this project. When I picked up the phone, he said that he really liked the book and wanted to order 40 copies because they didn't have that information compiled in any one place. He had one complaint, so I looked up the footnote, but I told him we had taken that directly from SouthCom documents so if he had a complaint he was going to have to take it up with them.

Right after that Representative Pelosi's staff called, on the issue of military training in Indonesia. Congress had prohibited IMET spending in Indonesia but the DOD used Special Forces money to keep doing it, and it was still legal because of the account jurisdiction. So they wanted to address the problem of DOD doing what they thought Congress had banned. And they said they remembered we were complaining that we couldn't get information about military training. So with me on the phone, they wrote the language that became the requirement for the foreign military training report, so that the State and Defense Departments must send a report to Congress on who they are training. This language is still the law.

I remember one of the assistant secretaries of defense for Latin America called me from the Pentagon, and I thought I was going to get yelled at... When I picked up the phone, he said that he really liked the book and wanted to order 40 copies because they didn't have that information compiled in any one place.

— JOY OLSON

COLOMBIA: Standing by the Victims

Colombia suffers from the longest running guerrilla war in the hemisphere, rightwing insurgent groups known as paramilitaries, organized crime and drug trafficking, and severe income inequality. U.S. activism only began to focus on the situation in Colombia in the late 1990s, as awareness rose about the most severe humanitarian crisis in the hemisphere. As in the case of Central America's civil wars, Colombia's insurgency is rooted in decades of inequality and political exclusion; but the guerrilla movements that developed are more violent and intransigent. Several hundred thousand people are forced to flee their homes from political violence each year. Drug trafficking, organized crime and escalating cultivation of illicit drug crops have all contributed to Colombia's violence, exacerbated by U.S. counternarcotics policies that have strengthened abusive militaries and financed massive spraying of toxic chemicals on crops while failing to provide economic alternatives for small farmers.

Beginning in 2000, the United States made assistance to Colombia a priority with a series of massive aid packages, heavily weighted towards the Colombian military. The Working Group successfully advocated for increased social aid to Colombia, including aid for displaced people, development aid to help farmers switch to legal crops, and assistance for judicial reforms, as well as calling for expanded drug treatment programs in the United States. LAWG has opposed military aid and the aerial fumigation program, and provided information to Congress on human rights abuses resulting in more than \$100 million in military aid being placed on hold. LAWG also works to provide international attention to assist Colombian human rights defenders, trade unionists and others who have been targets of threats, attacks and assassinations.



Farmer shows food crops destroyed by U.S.-sponsored spraying campaign. © Witness for Peace

LISA HAUGAARD, current LAWG Executive Director

When we started working on Colombia, it wasn't staff who initiated it, it was grassroots groups. Cristina Espinel and Barbara Gerlach of the Colombia Human Rights Committee pushed it. Cecilia Zarate and others from the Colombia Support Committee also came to tell us, we had to work on this. I was daunted, but once we started, no other issue has ever gripped my heart so hard. The first issue was the humanitarian crisis, the million displaced persons and refugees, but very quickly Plan Colombia, a major U.S. aid package and policy, emerged and it was obvious that we had to work on it.

In 1998 we helped bring a group of about a dozen coalition members on our first trip to Colombia, and went to Guaviare, a remote town carved out from the Amazon jungle where the United States' controversial aerial spraying counternarcotics strategy was being pioneered. The paramilitaries were just beginning to expand their operations and were scarcely present in San José de Guaviare. As we arrived at the airport, the local military chief yelled at our host, local community organizer (and later congressman and mayor) Pedro Arenas, "Why did you bring them here?" The situation was so tense that our host ensured that we had the governor's protection,

and we were ferried from one side of the town square to another in the governor's cars. We listened to hundreds of farmers and indigenous people affected by the U.S.-funded spraying campaign as they vented their anger and frustration. It was a crazy place to visit at this moment, but it gave us all an advance view of the human rights problems and U.S. counternarcotics policies that would frame our advocacy work for years. I have always valued so much the people who shared their stories with us on these trips and took real risks for the small off-chance that these unknown U.S. citizens could help their quest for justice.

When I think about those days I keep flashing on the meetings we (me, Robin Kirk and José Miguel Vivanco of Human Rights Watch, Carlos Salinas from Amnesty, Barbara Gerlach from the Colombia Human Rights Committee, Winifred Tate from WOLA, Adam Isacson from CIP, and others) had with the State Department and NSC officials begging them not to start this program, to listen to us. And we were right to be worried. In some senses it was Central America all over again. I was really motivated by that, that history was repeating itself, it was very disturbing. The Clinton Administration officials told us, don't worry, we're going to prevent displacement by installing what turned out to be an ineffective "early warning system" which assumed it was just technical glitches that kept the army from protecting the local population rather than army collusion with the paramilitaries who were doing the killing; don't worry, the military is going to improve its human rights record because we'll be training them. But ten years later, while you can say the guerrillas have been put on the defensive, countless massacres and targeted assassinations have taken place, two million more people have fled their homes from violence, and we're dealing with a military that increasingly is killing civilians. And that's not even mentioning the administration officials who promised that in five years the production of coca crops would be cut in half—laughable today, but it was never about drugs.

We were in a really difficult position with the Clinton Administration because they thought this policy was the best thing since sliced bread. Our first task was to explain the consequences of these policies, and had to start with convincing liberal Democrats. It was a terrible place to start.

I remember once going to a consultant, some high-priced consultant who was going to help us if we could find the money, and he said, tell me what are the four swing districts and we will do a media campaign. And I said, we don't have four swing districts, we don't have anyone. We don't even have the liberals in the Black Caucus, because this is Clinton's program.

First we had to convince Jim McGovern that this was the next major human rights crisis in Latin America and that U.S. policy must



When we started working on Colombia, it wasn't staff who initiated it, it was grassroots groups. I was daunted, but once we started, no other issue has ever gripped my heart so hard.

— LISA HAUGAARD



Child's drawing about war, Colombia.
© Elanor Starmer

be changed. Once he was on board, things started moving. Then we started with McGovern's amendments cutting Colombian military aid and replacing it with anything good, HIV/AIDS funding or aid to refugees. Churches, humanitarian groups, Witness for Peace, of course WOLA and CIP all got behind this and organized, year after year, as we lost votes, but respectably, and as one key aide told us, "Our side always won the debates." The Colombian visitors were strategic; many of the groups in the coalition organized countless visits of Afro-Colombians, human rights activists, indigenous leaders, church leaders, union leaders, to tell the stories that otherwise would be as if they never existed.

One of the most dramatic moments when things began to turn around was bringing the four governors of southern Colombia to Washington. While their national government called for the aerial spraying campaign and war, they called for an end to spraying and development aid for poor farmers in their districts. We brought them to a packed room in the Capitol sponsored by then-minority leader Pelosi, to the Drug Czar's office, to the International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Bureau of State. It was hard for the U.S. government bureaucrats to contradict these four eloquent, elected officials who knew what they were talking about.

The Colombia blueprint we put out with WOLA, CIP and US Office on Colombia in 2005, that was important, because it was a chance to say, this is where we want the policy to go. We could move the policy because we had a plan to propose, so we could take people one step in the right direction. When the Democrats took control of the House, we were able to lay out a practical plan for how to change the aid package, working with Human Rights Watch, the International Crisis Group, Human Rights First, Refugees International and Amnesty, among others. And we succeeded in a first step of reorienting aid. This was actually a painful moment, because as we succeeded a couple of our partners were angered because we laid out an achievable part-way solution rather than focusing on calling for a complete end to military aid.

We thought at one moment there might be a large grassroots movement, but this was not Central America, there was not going to be this huge movement. So you have to work with what you've got, and what we had was the churches and the unions. Things like the Presbyterian Peace Program, Witness for Peace, that cycled people though Colombia were important, because the people who went came back motivated.

Just recently, we brought Colombian activist Augustín Jimenez around Washington, with a group of other activists. As we strategized, we were hitting what seemed to be an insurmountable obstacle, and Augustín said to his fellow Colombians, "Well, we'd better buy our canes now, friends. We're going to be fighting this



Colombian Association of the Disappeared leader Milleret Moncada before a photo of her disappeared father.

fight when we're senior citizens." The plain ornery stick-to-it-tiveness of our Colombian partners has kept us going despite all obstacles.

ALISON GIFFEN, former director of the U.S. Office on Colombia

The highlight of the Colombia work the first years: The energy and urgency of the work. I remember co-facilitating Colombia working group meetings with LAWG in rooms where there were barely enough chairs for the number of people. We would come up with actions and people would actually divide the labor and execute them, with minimal egos and turf battles (that rarely happens in coalition work and is a testament to the way LAWG works). Further, there was a commitment to and focus on ensuring Colombian voices were in the debate and in the room whenever possible, whether that was in a conference in NY or Chicago or a debate over compromises on legislation in Congress. We didn't always win the battles, but there were very few days in retrospect when I felt like we had compromised too much or done too little.

We didn't always win the battles, but there were very few days in retrospect when I felt like we had compromised too much or done too little.

— ALISON GIFFEN

MEXICO: Humane Borders

LAWG began working to promote democratization and electoral reform in Mexico in the 1990s, in the final years of the “perfect dictatorship,” one-party rule by the PRI. In 2000, Mexico entered the era of modern democracy with the election of President Vicente Fox of the National Action Party. Despite promised reforms, Mexico’s political transition is far from over. Mexican police forces and military continue to commit human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, torture, and extra-judicial execution. Mexico’s judicial system continues to accept confessions signed under torture as evidence, and often fails to properly investigate or prosecute human rights crimes. Many of these problems are illustrated in the case of Ciudad Juarez, where over 300 women have been killed in the past ten years, and escalating violence associated with drug trafficking in many regions.

Mexican immigrants in the United States, and border communities along the Rio Grande have suffered from harsh counterterrorism policies instituted following the September 11, 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. Along the U.S.- Mexico border, LAWG is working to educate policymakers and the public about how U.S. border control strategies affect local communities and contribute to the deaths of migrants. We also work to exert public pressure from U.S. policymakers on the Mexican government to insist on proper investigations into the Ciudad Juarez murders. And we denounce human rights violations committed by Mexican authorities, and provide help to showcase the efforts of our Mexican human rights partners.



© ERICFOLTZ/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

JOY OLSON, former director of CAWG/LAWG, current director of WOLA

The big focus for a few years was working on Leahy Law implementation [which bans U.S. aid to units of foreign security forces that violate human rights with impunity]. We hired Laurie Freeman, who went down to Mexico to work with Mexican human rights groups, to look into and track military accused of human rights abuses. We would take the cases to the Embassy, we brought them a big list, but they had hardly anyone in their database. But we worked closely with Tim Rieser, we would go to the embassy, and take the information to him too, and he would prepare a response from Leahy. There were not a lot of examples of places where groups were really pressuring for implementation of the Leahy Law.

SEAN GARCIA, LAWG Senior Associate, now at Refugees International

Before I started at LAWG, the Mexico focus had been on fair elections. Once Fox came into office and the PRI’s lockhold on elections was broken it was a time to say that one of our main goals had been at least partly achieved. So where do we transition this program to right now? One of the things I really appreciated was that flexibility

to go ahead and see where we can make an impact. There were important issues like abuses by the military in Guerrero but at that time U.S. influence over a lot of that stuff was very minimal. So, looking at this from an advocacy organization it was hard to say that this is where we should place our time and energy. One of the best things I learned from Lisa, was when looking at advocacy don't focus all your energies on these big picture things when you can't affect them. It's a small organization, so focus on the smaller achievements that can be made and as long as you're making progress on these small achievements then they will add up and move you towards a larger goal. You know, "peace in the world" is not an achievable goal, so focus on what's core and make targeted changes.

The first thing I was most curious was about the U.S.-Mexico border because it was a time where the immigration debate was starting to heat up, when the U.S. was just beginning to experiment with big-stick border defense policies, and it was just at the time where we started seeing border deaths skyrocketing in terms of the number of people dying in the desert. It was only Latin Americans that were targeted by this policy, overwhelmingly Mexicans, it was a discriminatory practice. It was a brutal policy that resulted in tremendous numbers of abuses, not just indirectly by forcing people into the desert, but directly by border control agents abusing their position. We didn't have connections along the border, we didn't really know the actors. We had to start by reaching out first to groups in Arizona in the Tucson area where a lot of the action was based. I went down to make a presentation for a coalition meeting "against the wall" because there was a proposal to build new fencing in Arizona. It took us about a year to get the idea solidified.

But once we got that program building I think it was an interesting model. What we were able to bring to this relationship is you bring the voice, you bring the grassroots, you bring the stories about how this is a burden on your communities and we will show you how to work Washington. This was a very slow build because they were very skeptical of us. They had other groups come down to the border and do these kinds of "let us represent you" things and they were understandably concerned about being taken over by Washington groups and so we did have to build a bit of trust. We didn't have any interest in changing their message, just to help them translate it into a DC context.

The other thing we did was try to focus on solutions. We did have to stress the point that just saying no doesn't get you anywhere. You'll never change policy unless you present a better one. If you could do border security in a way that was providing security but in a community friendly kind of way that reduced abuses, that reduced deaths, what would that be? They held community forums and worked with their local policymakers, the sheriffs, the mayors and the town councils. One of the things they came up with is that

What we were able to bring to this relationship is you bring the voice, you bring the grassroots, you bring the stories about how this is a burden on your communities and we will show you how to work Washington.

— SEAN GARCIA



© MIKADX/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

there was no oversight of what's going on in their communities. When the border patrol commits an abuse, it's investigated by the border patrol attorney general but no case was ever prosecuted. What they needed is the implementation at a federal level of an oversight board, to take in complaints and act as a check on their authority. There was a focus on implementing community policing models rather on enforcement-only tactics. School children on their way home would be picked up by the border patrol just because they are Latino and people being deported when they were citizens or legal residents because they didn't have their ID with them and just a whole set of situations which could be resolved through friendlier community policing. There was also concern about the heavy technology that was creating this kind of police state. These fences go through entire communities and these stadium lights sometimes light up 2 or 3 miles around. We did want to see a removal of infrastructure but it was difficult to pose solutions and on that front we're not really there yet. The solution that was put forward was immigration reform, recognizing that things will only change when we increase the number of people allowed into the country legally, reducing the number entering without documents and the need for heavy-handed enforcement.

I was driving from Arizona to Texas and I stopped in this little town on the U.S. side of the border, very Mexican, and I stop at this restaurant and order in Spanish because the entire restaurant is speaking Spanish and all of the sudden you see these big, white burly men who are clearly minute men, they're kind of putting on a show. They were talking about these dirty Mexicans and how they have to kick them out of the country and then their food comes and they sit down and have a plate of enchiladas, burritos and tacos and they're raving about how good the food is, making no connection that they're sitting in a Mexican restaurant eating Mexican food being served by Mexican people. "Ah, these God damn Mexicans, we've got to get them out! Oh, by the way how's your taco, aren't they great?"

The hardest thing about this work was how politicized the border had become in the context of national security discussions because we started this work right around the time of the Iraq war. We learned to frame our arguments from a national security standpoint. When we did meet with congressional staff we got a lot of, yea we see your point, we were able to get members of Congress down to the border to see what was going on. But then there would be amendments to expand the fence on the floor of the Congress, and I'd think, "Oh, God this is not a logical debate." A terrible border fencing proposal came up for a vote, we had a sense that we were going to lose but we wanted at least a good showing and I started calling offices that had been supportive of us. I was told by numerous offices, that afternoon, well you know that we're on your side

but there's no way in hell we're voting against this thing. We'd be murdered by our constituency if we voted against it. They see it as, border fence equals national security, no border fence equals weak on terrorism. At that point you go, well, how do we win when the office knows they're voting for the wrong thing? We lost that vote, I think, 96 to 2? It was at that point that we said there needs to be a change in the debate and the way things are happening.

The first thing we did was go back to the immigration reform coalition and we said, you can't really sell out the border community agenda to get a few or no concessions on immigration reform. There needs to be a unified stance and you can't sell out border communities because in the end it's all linked. That was really difficult but we said, what happened here? You asked us for our support on all of your issues and it's not that we disagree with your agenda but there needs to be some reciprocity. You are talking about doing this for Latino communities and then you say it's ok to turn their neighborhoods into war zones? The debate is still hard but this, at least with the immigration reform community, was a turning point.

Laurie Freeman, former WOLA associate

My favorite memory is seeing members of Congress dancing with LAWG staff during a delegation to Juarez to call for justice in cases of violence against women. It was after a very ROUGH co-del where everyone—the Mexican officials, the U.S. Embassy, some of the participating members of Congress—kept trying to change our agenda. And that was the least of the rough parts. It was emotionally exhausting listening to the families' stories of how they lost their daughters and then were treated like dirt by the authorities. And it was physically exhausting because it was three days of constant interviews—we didn't let anyone have a moment's rest. So after the last day, in the bar of the hotel we were staying in just across the border in El Paso. The bar has a gorgeous stained-glass domed ceiling, there was a band and a LAWG staff member and a member of Congress were dancing, to get rid of the stress and the creepy vibes from being in Juarez, and to celebrate being mostly done with the delegation, and to celebrate having pulled it off after months of preparation and almost constant setbacks.



My favorite memory is seeing members of Congress dancing with LAWG staff during a delegation to Juarez to call for justice in cases of violence against women.

— LAURIE FREEMAN

We hope you enjoyed some of the many tales from our coalition's campaigns. This story has no ending, since the challenges of building a just U.S. foreign policy to Latin America and the efforts of the Latin America Working Group and many partners continue today. For more information, see www.lawg.org .