

Democracy -- dramatic and humble

By Beth Soltzberg

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This July, three Arlington residents, Elizabeth Dray, Kim Holt and myself, spent a week in Teosinte, El Salvador, a tiny village that has been Arlington's sister city for 20 years. There we saw democracy at its most dramatic and its most humble. We listened to heartrending stories of lives lost and villages destroyed during El Salvador's civil war, and we witnessed the daily work of a group now trying to make community decisions in a fair and inclusive way.

Humberto Palma Calles, Teosinte's town council president, and a crowd of children and teens met our van as we first bumped into town. After several cheers of "Hooray for Arlington, hooray for international solidarity!" and a delicious meal of tortillas stuffed with cheese and a Salvadoran flower called loroco, we sat down to our first meeting. That's where the everyday work of democracy became visible.

It's important to stop here and provide some context. Teosinte was decimated during El Salvador's civil war, which lasted from 1980 to 1992. The United States supported El Salvador's oligarchy by arming, funding and training the Salvadoran military, essentially waging a proxy war against the Soviet Union. Tragically, the U.S.-supported forces were responsible for 90% of the war's human rights atrocities, according to the report of the United Nations Truth Commission.

Most of the people who now live in Teosinte met at a refugee camp in Honduras during the war, and agreed to return to El Salvador together, despite the ongoing danger. A drawing sent to Arlington in 1990 shows school children playing soccer while a helicopter begins to shell the village.

Don Humberto, as we called him, had not spent the war in the refugee camp. At age twenty, he had joined the guerrillas. "I was always a religious person, and I got involved through my church," he told us. "It was a matter of conscience. We carried a great hope that someday we'd have constitutional rights, freedom of expression; that we'd be allowed to vote for whom we wanted."

Don Humberto was a fighter, and then a guerrilla commander, for 18 years. He came to Teosinte after the army and guerillas were demobilized through the 1992 peace accords. "Many people here knew of me as a leader through their experiences in the war, and thus they trusted me." Don Humberto was elected a year ago to lead the town council.

Back to the meeting. Like all meetings in Teosinte, as we would come to learn, this one began about 40 minutes late. And like each of the many meetings we would attend that week — with the women’s council, the men’s council, the students’ council, the education committee, and so on — it began with a round of introductions. Elderly farmers with furrowed skin and missing teeth, campesina women with fatigue in their eyes and a child on their laps, teenagers, who were dressed just like teenagers here but who face adult challenges much younger, told us their names and warmly thanked us for traveling to be with them. And then, Don Humberto read the packed itinerary the town council had put together for our visit and heartily invited everyone to join in every activity.

Don Humberto and the other seven town council members are elected volunteers. Like almost every man and boy in town, Humberto rises at five every morning, grabs his machete to clear weeds and walks to his “milpa,” a small patch of corn and beans. He harvests loroco while his wife feeds the chickens, and spends the day either in the fields or in the carpentry workshop.

On Fridays, the town council meets from 4 to 8 p.m. “My wife has to do a lot of extra work to enable me to do this,” he acknowledges. “But it’s great to be helpful to the community, to do something good for others. I don’t think of it as losing a day’s work.”

Teosinte’s democracy is not all rosy. Families struggle to scratch a year’s food out of their milpas, and the food security committee is one of the recent additions to their long list of town committees.

And there is the trauma of the war. “You have wounds in your mind that don’t heal,” Humberto tells us. “It’s hard for veterans to talk about the war, because it makes us feel like we’re there again.” For families who have lost so much, the challenge of accepting different approaches to town problems can be that much harder. Humberto has tears in his eyes when he tells us, “Maybe our hopes were too high.”

But, imperfect as it is, democracy is alive in Teosinte. “Democracy is disorderly,” Humberto acknowledges with a smile. It’s fragile. It’s a lot of work. It’s tedious. But, as no one knows better than this man, who for eighteen years put his life at stake and who now does the humble hard work of democracy every day, it’s worth it.

Editor’s note: this is the first installment of a series focused around the Arlington-Teosinte Sister City Project’s recent visit to El Salvador.