



SOCIAL WORK *for* SOCIAL justice

by Holley Locher, together with
Michele Braley '96 MSW and
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author Thomas Friedman coined the phrase, "the world is flat," to describe the process by which society has become global and interdependent. In this context, social workers are obligated to address social injustices at every level and be culturally competent and responsive to people from all corners of the world.

Two Minneapolis social workers have traveled many miles to do this. In 1996, after graduating from Augsburgs Master of Social Work program, husband and wife Nils Dybvig and Michele Braley quit their jobs, moved to the State of Washington, and decided they would quit their jobs again in 10 years. So, in September 2006 they took a year's leave from their jobs and left for Barrancabermeja, Colombia, in the Magdalena Medio region of oil production, mining, and agriculture.

They are volunteers with Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), an organization that devotes the same amount of discipline and self-sacrifice to nonviolent peacemaking as armies devote to war. CPT places violence-reduction teams in crisis situations and militarized areas around the world. To date, Braley and Dybvig have been working primarily in rural areas with Colombians who have been threatened with violence and feel more comfortable with an international presence. And violence is definitely something that Colombians have lived with every day—for at least 40 years.

In the early 1960s, amidst a climate of great social and economic inequality, two left-wing guerrilla groups (the FARC and the ELN) formed, partly in response to the struggle for access to land rights on behalf of poor farmers. In the 1980s, large landowners and drug traffickers privately funded paramilitary groups (still in existence) that oppose the guerrilla groups. While these paramilitary groups often work in concert with the Colombian military, they are not officially affiliated with the government and are, therefore, able to use aggressive—often horrifically cruel and violent—tactics. The paramilitaries are responsible for 70% of the human rights violations against civilians.

It is sad to note that many of the casualties in Colombia's war are not members of any armed group, but civilians. Guerrilla groups accuse civilians of collaborating with the Colombian military and paramilitaries and vice versa. It is a vicious cycle that claims the lives of nearly 3,000 Colombians each year. In the last 20 years, over 3.6 million people have been forcibly displaced by violence or the threat of it—more than in any other country of the world except Sudan.

The United Nations now calls the situation in Colombia the worst humanitarian catastrophe in our hemisphere. Through Plan Colombia the U.S. has sent \$4.7 billion to Colombia since 2000, 80% of that as military aid. CPT works to educate others about

the role of U.S. tax dollars in Colombia and works through Congress to convert this funding into social and economic development funding. In June the U.S. House of Representatives passed a revision to Plan Colombia that reduces military aid and increases development aid; similar actions occurred in the Senate.

Braley and Dybvig spend their days attending meetings and visiting with people in rural areas. For instance, Braley tells of one weekend that she and her husband spent in a small community on the Opón River.

"This is a community that was violently forced off their land several years ago," she says. "CPT was invited to Colombia to assist this community in returning. Currently, a team from CPT takes the two-hour canoe ride to the community every week to spend time with the people. Most of the time is spent in people's homes, but we also stop to talk to any armed groups in the area to let them know who we are, and to ask them to respect the rights of the local people."

The goal for a visit Dybvig made to an indigenous community was "to make them [the people] more visible by publicizing their struggles in an area that has a strong presence of both the FARC and the paramilitaries."

On an 11-day trip in April, Braley and Dybvig traveled to Mina Caribe, a rural mining village to bring an international presence to a five-day leadership training school, followed by a general assembly of more than 100 miners and farmers. Dybvig wrote, "we took a bus for three hours, then a taxi, then traveled an hour by boat, then another taxi, then two hours by four-wheel-drive truck, and finally three more hours by mule."

When Army soldiers showed up as the assembly was to start, tension increased. The local residents had already been victims to harassment and detentions; and a mining federation leader had



Courtesy photos



Much of Braley's time is spent getting to know community members and attending their meetings, which often focus on health and economic issues.

Michele Braley and Nils Dybvig apply their social work and peacemaking skills to support rural communities in Colombia threatened by the military presence and illegal armed groups.

been killed earlier by the same battalion. Several hours of discussions that CPT and other organizations had with the Army sergeant, plus calls from the government's human rights ombudswoman to the battalion's commanding officer, finally resulted in orders for the Army to leave town.

many death threats that the government was forced to drive her around in an armored vehicle for her protection, as a human rights issue.

Braley and Dybvig have noted many similarities between the work they do in Colombia and social work in the U.S. They assert that while the violence in Colombia is motivated by different reasons and while community organizers risk their lives nearly every day to bring about change in their communities, some of the outcomes and struggles are analogous to those in Minneapolis. In one instance, after speaking with several young men engaged in illegal fishing, Braley says "... these men reminded me so much of the men dealing drugs in Minneapolis. [They have] limited education, attraction to easy money, and the idea that their life could end by violence at any time. So why bother to play by the rules?"

Braley believes they are immersed in "what I think is some valuable social justice work where we are definitely challenged to use our social work skills. ... We are lucky to partner with great Colombian organizations, and it is interesting to learn how they provide social services to a rural population plagued by violence and the legacy of 40 years of an armed conflict in this country."

"The work of CPT is very much in line with our social work values; we work in communities where we are invited, and our presence allows others to make changes in their lives." Braley says. "We don't come in with answers. And, we work to change policies in our own country that are impacting the situation here."

They also see similar practices among women's organizations in both Colombia and the U.S. that move people from poverty to self-sufficiency. According to Braley, "To walk into their offices or talk with their staff, you could not tell the difference from one of our programs in the U.S., if it weren't for the language." That is, until she says that the director of the organization received so

Dybvig and Braley were back in Minnesota for two months during the summer, but decided to spend one more year with CPT and returned to Colombia in early September.

To follow their work, go to www.nilsandmichele.blogspot.com.

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