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## A People's History of War

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## A People's History of War

### Cover Page Footnote

This article is from an earlier iteration of *Diálogo* which had the subtitle "A Bilingual Journal." The publication is now titled "Diálogo: An Interdisciplinary Studies Journal."

# A PEOPLE'S HISTORY

# Of War

Sarah Gelsomino and her dear friend, Nina María Umanya. Celebrated Nina María's 67th birthday. Copapayo, El Salvador, 2003.



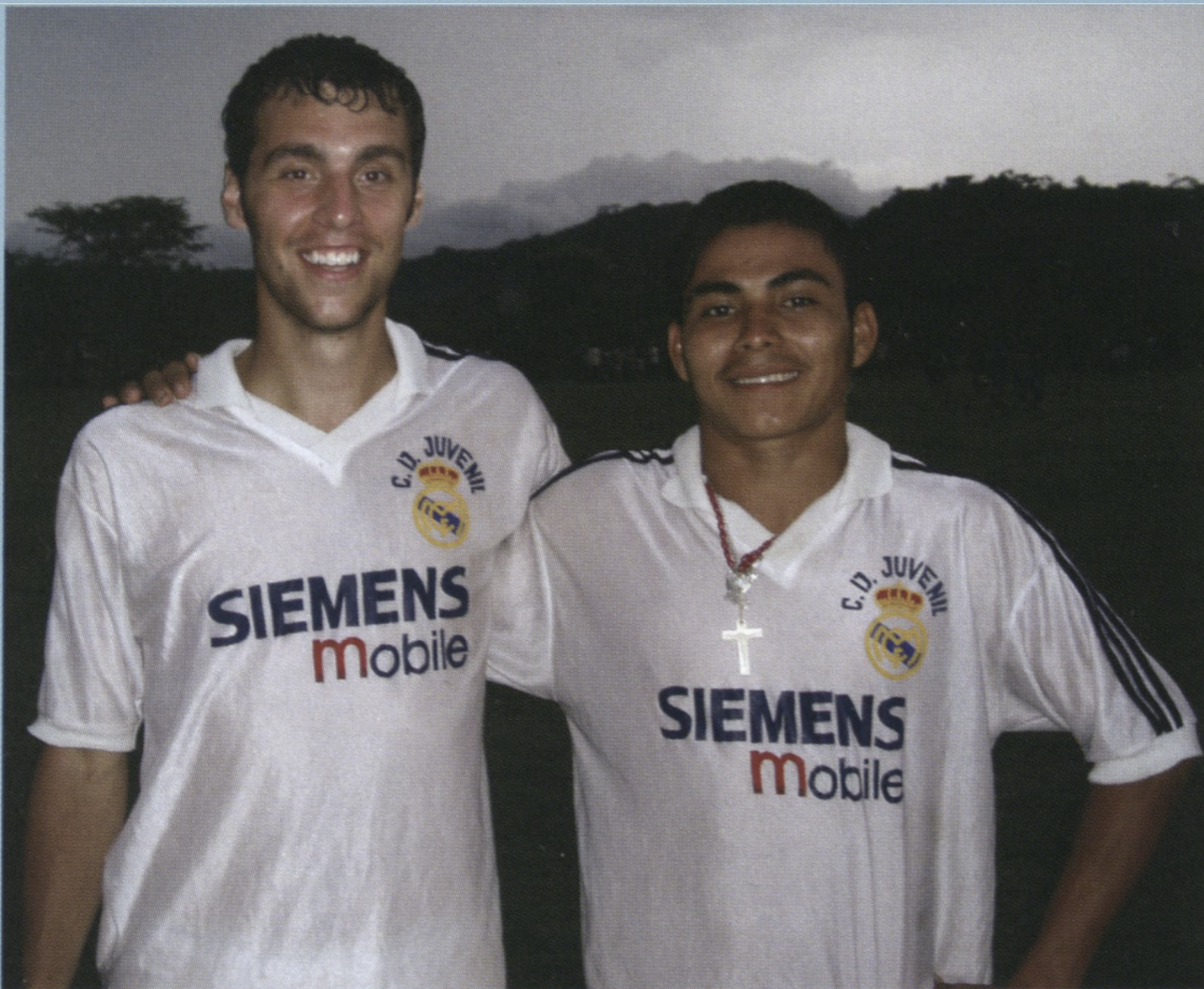
Sarah Gelsomino and Samuel Pearson Chicago, Illinois

It is not often that two undergraduate juniors receive about \$13,000 in grant money to conduct an oral history project in a foreign country. Thanks to the Vincentian Endowment Fund and the DePaul Liberal Arts and Science Summer Undergraduate Research Grant, we were able to respond to a request from the rural community of Copapayo, El Salvador. We recorded their memories of the war that ripped their country apart from 1980-1992, and violently displaced them from their homes. The community has wanted to record their memories and their history for several years now but have lacked the resources to do so. With the help of numerous people at DePaul University, the support of our families and friends, and countless others helping us along the way in El Salvador, we were able to record eighty-seven testimonies during the six months (June-December 2003) we lived among the people of Copapayo.

The fact that this project originated from the community of Copapayo itself helped us to keep the people of the community, their memories, and their designs for the project at the center of what we did. As much as possible we want this project to belong to the community itself. The desires they expressed to us were: (1) to share the tragedies and pain they endured with as many people as possible around the world in the hopes that wars and suffering like this might never happen again and (2) to record their memories for the younger generations now being born and growing up, so they too can know the history of their relatives and their community. We feel it is important to share with as many people as possible, in any way possible, the history and story of the people of Copapayo. Eventually, all of the audio recordings of the testimonies and the corresponding transcripts in Spanish and English will be placed in the DePaul University's John T.

Richardson Library Special Collections and Archives. It is also our hope that this oral history project will be an ongoing work in collaboration with other interested groups at DePaul University, as well as the community of Copapayo.

The combatants in the civil war that was fought in El Salvador were overwhelmingly Salvadoran. The *campesinos* had suffered decades of poor wages and landlessness, because of the consolidation of the highest quality cultivatable land in the country by the wealthy landowners, who used the land and the *campesinos* to grow crops (mainly sugar, coffee, and cotton) for export. In response to this and the constant violent persecution at the hands of the wealthy landowners and the government, the *campesinos* organized themselves in the spirit of the liberation theology movement that was spread throughout Latin America by parts of the Catholic clergy. In 1980



Samuel Pearson and his best Salvadorean buddy, Dimas Murillo. The Copapayo soccer team won a tournament in a nearby community. Copapayo, El Salvador. 2003

The Rivera family, Sarah Gelsomino and Samuel Pearson lived within Copapayo. Nina Angelita, Don Santos and their daughters Marta, Mirna with son Javier, Jasmine and Estella in the chair. Copapayo, El Salvador. 2003

several political, worker, student/professor, and military groups united in a guerilla coalition known as the FMLN (Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front). For twelve years the FMLN fought the United States trained and supplied Salvadoran army to a military draw. The army used a strategy they described as catching the fish (the guerillas) by draining the ocean (the *campesinos*). As a result of this strategy hundreds of thousands of innocent *campesinos* were forced to flee from their homes as refugees while tens of thousands of others were killed, caught in the crossfire or in deliberate massacres.

The United Nations sponsored refugee camps, for those who chose to flee the country, these were terribly overcrowded and lacked the basic freedom of movement into and out of the camp. The people of Copapayo expressed their appreciation for these refugee camps and for the protection they provided them during a violent and frightening time, but told us they could not stand to live outside their own country in a place where they could not work the land and did not have the right to move. As a result, in 1987, a group of 4,000 refugees got together and decided they would pressure the UN, Salvadoran government, and Honduran government to give them their right to return to their homes, despite the fact that the war still raged. Through their own hard work and with the help of accompanying internationals (for safety) the refugees established five communities in El Salvador after nearly nine months of negotiations.

Their story is incredible. They were uprooted from their homes, endured walking through the mountains with no food or water, constantly under the threat of attack from the military, and crossing the border into a country that did not want them. In Honduras they lived in Mesa Grande, an overcrowded UN refugee camp. Against the best efforts of the Salvadoran government and military, and with little help from the UN or anyone else, the people of Copapayo (and the four other communities established at the same time) were able to safely return to their own country.

It is important that their testimonies are documented, because they add a human element to history. Usually history is written by the powerful and the poor are forgotten, lost behind the military strategy, economic and political negotiations, and lives of the ruling class. The people of Copapayo want everyone to know the real stories of war, because telling them is a crucial element of the healing process that continues today in the lives and communities throughout El Salvador. Talking about what happened and sharing their story with the rest of the world helps the healing process move forward.

As this article is sent to the press, all of the testimonies have been transcribed and we are in the process of editing and organizing them. In accord with the wishes of the people of Copapayo, we plan to send each person who gave a testimony a copy of their testimony,

both on CD and in written form. Additionally, all of the complete testimonies will be put in the Copapayo library. The community would also like a book that is a compilation of the history of the community, using pieces of every person's testimony to tell their story collectively. We are exploring funding options to make it possible to translate this compilation into English so these important testimonies can be more widely read in the United States. Copies of all of the transcribed interviews in Spanish and, hopefully, the compilation in English will be available in DePaul's Library. The work for this project will continue throughout the upcoming year.

**Sarah Gelsomino and Samuel Pearson are currently seniors at DePaul University. They will graduate in June, Sam with a degree in Geography and a minor in Biology, Sarah with a degree in Political Science and minor in Spanish. Sam is from Kalamazoo, Michigan and Sarah is from Cleveland, Ohio, but we both plan to stick around Chicago for a while longer. Sam plans to pursue a Masters in Education and has hopes to teach elementary school. Sarah would like to study Law and Social Work, possibly at DePaul! Contact Sarah at [sgelsomi@depaul.edu](mailto:sgelsomi@depaul.edu)**