

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

KAC-1

Paseo de la Reforma 157 - 503
Col. Cuauhtémoc, México 5, D. F.
México

A Visit to San Juan Bosco. August 11, 1981.

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755

Dear Peter:

Recently I made my second visit to San Juan Bosco, a small rural community in Southern Honduras. Between spring 1976 and fall 1978, I spent the bulk of my days in this impoverished village. At the time, I was working for the Save the Children Federation (SCF). When I joined their staff, I had only planned to conduct the feasibility study for a fruit canning cooperative. But pleased with the study, SCF asked me to stay on to coordinate the construction, organization, and initial operation of the cannery. At first, I had some second thoughts. Somehow my Latin American undergraduate studies major just didn't seem sufficient preparation. But these fears were soon quelled by that audacity common amongst American youths (I was 21 at the time), an audacity resulting from an over confidence in one's capabilities, a lot of enthusiasm, and an even greater quantity of naïveté. I accepted the job.

San Juan Bosco, as a potential site for the cannery, had two attributes: an abundance of fruit and an enthusiastic populace with strong leadership. It had almost everything else to disrecommend it: a perilous dirt road hewn by hand into the region's precipitous mountains; a nearly illiterate and poorly nourished population; and, neither potable water nor electricity. The members of the group, which had informally organized itself for the project, were all married, all female, and all older than I. Together we worked ten-to twelve-hour days for two years to get that small industry underway. Today, it still operates, which is a near-miracle given the history of small-scale rural industries throughout Latin America. Further, it has expanded its product line from one (mango puree) to three items (mango puree, mango jam, and mango candies), and has established a cooperative store.

Forgive the digression, but some antecedents seem in order. This visit was distinct from my previous one in 1979

Kimberley Conroy is a fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs. She is a generalist, interested in current political, social and economic issues in Mexico, and Central America.

in that my parents had also come along. The villagers had heard a great deal about my parents throughout the years, as had my parents about the villagers. Given the supreme value Latin Americans place on the family, I had looked forward to the visit with even greater anticipation.

May 10th arrived. By 8:30 a.m. my parents, friends from Save The Children, and I were all tightly packed into a decaying Landrover to make the trip from Tegucigalpa to San Juan Bosco. As we pounded down the Inter-American highway, one of the only two-lane paved highways in Honduras, "yellathons" were conducted in a futile attempt to converse above the car's incessant rattling. The situation improved somewhat when we slowed down for the dirt road covering the final 14 kilometers. As we neared the village, I commented to my parents, "you'll notice that most of the children here don't wear shoes". My mother replied, "they probably don't like to". Some conversations die a natural death.

The people that lived on the outskirts of the community came to their doorways to wave us a welcome. I pointed out the village's church, which was under construction as it had been since the day I had first arrived. As we turned the corner and climbed the last stretch of the country road, the crowd came into sight; at least half of San Juan Bosco's population of six hundred stood outside the factory. I quickly scanned the group for Teresa Torres, the cooperative's president. This was not a difficult search since she was easily a head taller than any of the other women. As I spotted her, she raised a 38 handgun high, triggering a five-gunshot salute. Her lack of experience resulted in the separation of several tiles from the factory's roof. Embarrassed by her error, she immediately began making jocular remarks. That was both her style and one of her widely recognized traits as the community's most respected leader; her ability to encourage, console, or scold with a witty expression and a mischeivous smile.

As we disembarked from the Jeep, the local country band, accompanied by the cooperative members untrained voices, intoned the following song:

God chose amongst North Americans
One named Kim
And he sent her to our village
To form a cooperative.

She as her white race is supreme in kindness
And left her comfortable life in New York
To make this trip to Honduras
To visit us in friendship's name.

There are few associates as pleased
As those of this group formed by Kim
And never will we forget
Today's visit she makes with her kin.

Welcome dear friends
Blessed God sent people
We are 18 associates who have awaited you
With joy in one hearts.

Kim is our dear friend
The most beautiful which heaven has sent
For her we would give our blood, our lives
The same that brave Lempira* gave.

There are few associates as pleased
As those of this group formed by Kim
And never will we forget
Today's visit she makes with her kin.

Overwhelmed by the entire scene, I found it difficult to carry out simultaneous translation for my parents. The cooperative members, their families and their friends were all present, all dressed in their very best \$ 10 dresses, \$ 5 pants and \$ 2 shirts. Nine children per family is the norm in the community; less than U.S. \$ 200 is the average per-capita income.

The final chorus ended and the formal introductions began. While my parents received cordial handshakes from the elders of the community, I was given affectionate abrazos (hugs) by each of my work companions. In this, as in other economically impoverished communities, friends and family are one's wealth. Together we celebrated our affluence.

Slowly, my parents and I were ushered inside the factory. Neither they nor I knew exactly what to expect from one moment to the next; we followed the lead of these gentle country folk as trustfully as kindergarten children follow their teacher.

Once inside, my father and I were asked to inaugurate the town dance. Although we tried to be gracious about it, neither he nor I knew the first thing about Honduran folk dancing. Our lack of experience was painfully evident. Fortunately, so was our enthusiasm, and swiftly we won the public's approval. Not only did our friends join in, but they also began an elaborate process of partner-swapping. Within less than an hour, my father had danced with all 18 members of the San Juan Bosco cooperative, as well as with sundry other women. This was no easy feat given the 90°-plus heat, accompanied by an equally high degree of humidity. If it had not been for the announcement of the luncheon, who knows what limb-related ailments my father would still be suffering.

* Lempira, an indian, was an important Honduran hero. The national currency bears his name.

The table was set for more than 30. Soup, followed by overbrimming platters of various chicken dishes, rice, salad, tortillas, sauces, and a regional dessert filled the table. Mango fruit drink, a specialty of the house, (and of the cooperative), was also served in generous portions.

It was amusing to watch my mother, and authority on Amy Vanderbilt etiquette, look to me for guidance in peasant eating customs. Several generous toasts were made in our honor. We did our best to reciprocate. When the meal ended, my parents were invited to Teresa's house to rest. But rest was never really in the cards, for Teresa has three adorable children: Johnny, 10 years old; Erika, 7; and Mirabel, 4. We had brought toys especially for them. My mother shaped Playdough rabbits with Mirabel while my father practiced baseball with the others. For the first time in my life, I felt guilty for not having provided my parents with grandchildren. Not guilty enough to do anything about it, but guilty nonetheless. Soon whisky with ice was served. In all my days, I had never seen an ounce of hard liquor in that community. Ice had to be imported from the town at the other end of the 14-kilometer dirt road; whisky, from Tegucigalpa.

As the afternoon wore on, Teresa suggested that we return to the factory since the cooperative members wanted to present my parents with a gift. Sadly, my parents bade farewell to Teresa's children.

We arrived to find the dishes washed and the members waiting. After once again singing the song written in our honor, Teresa, in the name of the cooperative, presented my parents with a finely-carved cheese board. Father, pleading forgiveness for not speaking the local language, asked me to translate words that went something like this:

"When our daughter Kim told us that she was going to live in Honduras, we were both sad and proud. Sad that she was leaving us, but proud because we knew she was going somewhere that she believed she could be of assistance. I now understand not only why she did what she did, but also why she has continued to hold her love for San Juan Bosco. Further, I want to sincerely thank you: thank you not only for the love you have shown Kim but also for that which you have shown her mother and myself today. This is our first visit to San Juan Bosco. It will not be our last. Again, I thank you."

His voice was choked, as was my translation. While I appreciated the respect the villagers accorded my parents and me, I was also aware that it wasn't Kim Conroy who was so special; rather, it was that a youth had dedicated two years to their village, to help in what she could. Noone, neither national nor

foreigner, neither of the public nor of the private sector, had made such a commitment to San Juan Bosco. That alone is what made me special. Shortly after my father's toast, my parents boarded the Landrover for Tegucigalpa, with New York as their final destination.

Teresa and I spent the next two days visiting the various cooperative members in their homes. With the party over, the families had gone back to their repeatedly patched clothing. When Teresa and I arrived, chickens and piglets would be chased from the parlor and hammocks would be cordially swung down from the rafters. In each house, we talked at length of the problems confronted by the cooperative members, both as associates and as mothers.

New metal pressing plates were needed for the food mills at the factory, as were a less expensive substitute for pectin, and a machine to make the candy cones that the coop was currently buying to fill with mango paste. But what was most needed was a means to make the cooperative members work together in spite of their president's periodic absences. Because of family problems, Teresa has not been able to go to work on a daily basis in recent months. Although the other members of the cooperative generally get along, they trust only Teresa to ensure a just distribution of tasks in the factory. Further, when Teresa is on hand with her brash peasant humor, the work day resembles a social event. Without her leadership, the cooperative has not been able to work at full capacity.

One of the family problems repeatedly mentioned by the coop members was that of the children's education. The village school has six grades and four classrooms. Many would like to send their children on for further schooling outside of the community; however, tuition, and room and board in a vocational school cost about US \$ 1,000 annually. This is way beyond the means of any of the cooperative members.

As we walked from one adobe home to the next, Teresa and I would discuss the problems that had been raised and their possible solutions. These discussions were continued by candlelight after her children had been put to bed, and each morning as we prepared the many pounds of tortillas necessary for the family's daily sustenance. The affection I felt for the other cooperative members was strong, but Teresa had always been my closest friend in the community. It is difficult to explain the very deep roots of that friendship. Part of it is mutual admiration. She knew of the comfortable existence I had left in Manhattan, and I of the multiple scholarships and work opportunities offered her both in Tegucigalpa and in Mexico City. In spite of these opportunities, both of us had dedicated ourselves

to the establishment of a cooperative in hopes of benefitting San Juan Bosco. Ours had always been a team effort; she provided the leadership; I, the technical assistance and moral support. Although I have tried to continue to meet my responsibilities in that partnership, distance and poor correspondence habits have made it difficult. This has also caused my visits to be bitter sweet experiences. I arrive to listen to the problems being confronted, and to voice my concern over others that have yet to be discussed. I make numerous suggestions and offer to try to resolve some of the more technical difficulties. But the overwhelming majority of the problems, the more complex ones, are left to Teresa; a difficult load under the best of circumstances, but more so since the person who had been her principal source of moral support is now rarely present.

My previous visit to San Juan Bosco had been in August 1979, one month after the National Sandino Liberation Front (FSLN) overthrew Somoza in Nicaragua. At that time, all the members of the cooperative supported the FSLN victory. Since their community was but a couple of hours from the Nicaragua-Honduras border, they had met many of the refugee families in the market place, and there listened to their tales of terror. They could also tune into the FSLN's underground radio station. Until that time, I had been their only direct contact with the United States; they found it difficult to fathom that any institution with which I was related even as indirectly as I am with the United States government, could support a dictator the likes of Somoza, or provide his regime with planes to bomb innocent people. The Pentagon Papers have yet to reach San Juan Bosco.

This time I inquired about both Nicaragua, and El Salvador. The consensus was that the FSLN had deceived the people:

"We thought they were going to be a good and just government.

But instead they're communists."

"And El Salvador?"

"Unfortunately, the insurgent forces there are also communist."

"And what's a communist?"

"Someone who is friends with the Cubans and the Russians.

"And why are the Cubans and Russians so distasteful?"

"They don't allow their people to have freedom."

The villagers' impressions had been formed by the radio programs broadcast by their right-wing military government. The morning I tuned in, the commentator was lauding the U.S. \$ 10 million loan for military equipment just given to Honduras by Reagan's special ambassador at large, General Vernon Walters. The news commentator went on to say that General Walters was a man who really understood the need of the nations, in fact, so much better than those at A.I.D., the U.S. government's development agency.

Dawn, May 13th - my visit was nearing its end. We had all agreed to meet at the factory at 11 a.m. Once assembled, Teresa and I proposed that the cooperative establish an educational fund so that at least one child per family could receive several years of vocational training outside of the community. Our scheme included tri-part financing: 10% of the costs would be covered by the family; 20 to 25% by the cooperative, and the rest by external sources for which I'm presently looking. The idea was enthusiastically approved. Teresa announced that there were internal working matters still pending; however, with my departure imminent, it would be better to treat such details later in the afternoon. These would be the issues she and I had been thrashing out in our private conversations. The Landrover arrived. Each friend came forward to give me a final hug; that is, all but one. Teresa had slipped away. For her, farewells were too painful.

All my best,

Received in Hanover 11/5/81