

THE STANFORD DAILY

Salvadorian refugee shares story

BY [NANCY WANG](#)

Friday, March 5, 2004

Students gathered in Bechtel International Center last night to commemorate women's struggles in the name of International Women's Day, which is March 8. The event featured three keynote speakers who spoke about their shared pursuit of justice for torture and human rights abuses against Salvadorean civilians.

The evening's focus was on the story of torture survivor Neris Gonzales and her involvement in a civil case against Salvadorean Generals Jose Guillermo Garcia and Eugenio Vides Casanova. Along with Gonzales, University Prof. Terry Karl and international human rights attorney Shawn Roberts also spoke of their involvement in the case.

Gonzales grew up in the countryside of El Salvador, a country with the longest history of dictatorship in Latin America. At the age of 17, Gonzales initiated a literacy and health program with the help of a local priest to prevent peasants from being cheated of their earnings. As a result of this initiative, she was captured by a death squad and tortured for two months.

Gonzales was supposedly killed but found barely alive in a body dump and taken to a secret clinic for recovery.

"It's painful to share this with you, but I think it's important for you to know what happened during those years," she said.

Gonzales then described the decade of war in El Salvador, financed by President George H.W. Bush, when sophisticated and damaging weapons such as artillery and napalm were used against the Salvadorean citizens.

Gonzales came to the United States for trauma treatment in 1997 and then filed for political asylum.

In Chicago, Gonzales met Roberts, the former legal director of the Center for Justice and Accountability. With two other plaintiffs who suffered similar abuses, Gonzales filed a lawsuit against Generals Garcia and Casanova, who both happened to be in exile in Florida.

Though the two generals were not found guilty in a case filed simultaneously on behalf of four American nuns murdered in El Salvador, the jury ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in Gonzales's case.

"It was so beautiful when the jury was able to understand what we were saying," she said.

Karl, who is the former director of the Latin American Studies Program, introduced Gonzales and spoke of her experience testifying as an expert in the trial.

“When so many people died, those of us who know who is responsible are compelled to pursue justice,” Karl said.

Gonzales stressed, however, that she is still recovering from the trauma she experienced. She emphasized that the most horrific part of her experiences was witnessing massacres of innocent children by government soldiers.

Today, Gonzales works with an organization she founded that uses gardens as therapy for herself and urban youth. She hopes to make a difference in her Chicago community plagued by gangs, drug addictions and homelessness.

“I find that I’m in a place that’s very similar to my home,” she said.

Roberts said that Gonzales serves as a role model for being a strong woman with an interminable spirit.

“Neris shows us that there are ways that everyone can get involved — you can make a difference,” Roberts said. “She had a spirit that could not be extinguished, and we shared a vision to expose the horror she and many others experienced and to do something about it.”

After an emotional recount of her tale, Gonzales, Karl and Roberts were questioned by the audience. When asked as to the current state of affairs in El Salvador, all three agreed that though conditions have not improved, there is hope.

“The effects of globalization have been horrific,” Roberts said. “There are McDonalds and Pizza Huts at every corner, and there is no way for people to make a living.”

The panelists described how basic economic problems that faced the country at the beginning of the war have actually worsened and how children are now dying of preventable causes.

Karl noted that the postwar situation in El Salvador is no different from postwar situations elsewhere.

“There is no good postwar period,” she said. “The South took many years to recuperate from the Civil War. This will be the same case in Iraq. All wars lead to a backwards progression for at least 40 to 50 years.”

However, the hope, the speakers said, lies in the upcoming Salvadorian presidential elections on March 21. The guerrilla party, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), has a high chance of winning, according to Roberts. Since the current dictatorship has never been effectively challenged before, the panelists noted that death threats and violence are once again increasing. The panelists also directly addressed the audience and asked them to spread awareness so that the elections will not be robbed.

Sophomore Allison Whippel left the event feeling moved and inspired to act.

“The most striking thing was to be able to hear someone who actually experienced the things I’ve studied in classrooms,” she said. “It makes it so much more real, and it makes me so much more angry.”

The evening was sponsored by Unidas, a Latina women’s organization that offers personal and academic support for its members.

Organizers of the event expressed satisfaction afterward with how the evening proceeded.

“Hearing from individuals who have overcome unbelievable challenges and continue to stand up for values of peace and justice is incredibly energizing and inspiring,” said organizer Crystal Lopez. “I hope that people came away with a feeling of hope and determination to continue fighting for what they believe.”

Article URL: http://www.stanforddaily.com/tempo?page=content&repository=0001_article&id=13456