

## Transcript of Columbus-Copapayo Sister City Podcast

The Sister-Cities International program dates back to the Eisenhower-era. It began in 1955 with the aim of promoting peace through people-to-people exchange. Columbus's first official pairing was with Genoa, Italy. Since then, Ohio's capital has continuously expanded its Sistering and is now linked with nine other cities world-wide. There's one name, however, that's no longer on the list. In fact, it was hardly a city, hardly even a village: Copapayo, El Salvador.

Why did Columbus sister with Copapayo? How did Ohio citizens use their own traditions of democracy to help the Copapayans resist the repression of their own government and military? What can be learned from those earlier experiences that might be useful to current peace and justice struggles? These are the questions we'd like to explore. But first, why Copapayo?

It began back in 1980. El Salvador was engulfed in a civil war that pitted a small wealthy class against the poor majority, who wanted a fairer system. The government was targeting peace activists who had sided with the poor. Among those activists were four North American religious women who were brutally raped and murdered and Archbishop Oscar Romero who was assassinated in the San Salvador Cathedral while saying mass. At the time U.S. foreign policy was aligned with the repressive government against the local grassroots reform movements.

John Florian, then an employee of the Ohio Department of Development, recalls the period:

“We would run into a lot of Sisters and Priests coming back from El Salvador and Nicaragua during that time in the early 1980s, and they were telling us that what we were reading in the

press wasn't the full story, that there was a lot more going on." [Florian, Stock, Chambers – 2:54-3:08]

What was going on included widespread and officially sanctioned violence, much of the time against unarmed civilians. In 1983, the Salvadoran military destroyed the village of Copapayo as part of a campaign to remove grassroots support for the guerrillas. Over one hundred residents were killed. Survivors fled across the border to a refugee camp in Honduras. But they weren't happy in the camps, and in 1987 a Pastors for Peace delegation helped them get back to their village. Ron Meyers, then an employee of the Ohio EPA, explained:

“The Salvadoran army met the group at the border, who had organized themselves into a large caravan of people to come over all together because they felt safer doing it that way, and the army wouldn't massacre them again as they crossed the border.” [Meyers – 6:06-6:45]

Once the refugees were settled, they looked to the international community for support, as John Florian explains:

“We were contacted by the national organization asking us whether we wanted to become a sister city. We then approached Councilman John Malone back in March of 1988, and it was that month that the City Council passed a resolution making Columbus a Sister City with Copapayo.” [Florian, Chambers, Barndt – 3:40-4:15]

That resolution noted that “a number of organizations and churches in Columbus have expressed deep concern for the people of El Salvador in general and of Copapayo specifically, and have participated, or wish to participate, in projects of humanitarian aid and cultural exchange with people and churches in Copapayo.”

It was that focus on cultural exchange which allowed Copapayo to pass as a typical sister city despite its very atypical size and situation. But it wasn't just culture that was exchanged and it wasn't just the Salvadorans who benefitted. Bill Barnt was a Pastor at Columbus United Church of Christ who had participated in the Pastors for Peace accompaniment. In a 1989 radio interview with WOSU's Fred Anderle, he described Copapayo as an exemplar for community organizing. In doing so, he challenged the prevalent notion that Northern humanitarians "developed" their less able Southern partners:

"It's a real privilege we feel for Columbus to have this—Copapayo as a sister-city. It's really a model, in terms of their accomplishment, in terms of their determination, in terms of their goals, in terms of the way they govern themselves. --- The directiva is made up of representatives of the various sectors, so the agricultural workers, the teachers, the people taking care of the boats. And people who are in charge of working with 8 or 10 families. So that group got their training when they were still back in Honduras. So the health workers and the teachers got training and they were ready to get, y'know, when they got back to really move forward very rapidly, which they did. [Florian, Chambers, Barndt - ???-???]

After the Sister relationship was formalized, Columbus citizens organized twice yearly delegations to Copapayo, that were supported by the larger community, as Ron Meyers recalls:

"We would generate letters of support for the delegations and the humanitarian aid that we were bringing them and the human rights work that we were doing, and we would get letters of support, so we gradually got them from City Council and the Mayor and then we started in the Ohio Legislature. I think we got 21, I don't know if there are 23 senators in Ohio, I forget the numbers now, but we got almost the entire congressional delegation to sign up which was remarkable. I believe Kasich might have even supported it then." [Meyers – 14:56-15:32]

Suzanne Patzer was a Columbus video journalist who visited Copapayo as part of the sister-city delegations:

“We were greeted there by a lot of people there, very excited, little children running around, y’know, picture a 3<sup>rd</sup> world village where people live in very small, little huts. Some of them made out of tin. And where there are not toilets, not running water, not electricity. And they’re just very joyous, fixing us all kinds of huge meals, y’know, slaughtering the old pig for us, and giving us some fish that are fried up in a little pan that actually still have their fins and their scales, and eyes, and their tails on them. Very interesting cuisine and very nice people. Of course, every time we talked to them, it had to be translated, so it took a long time to hear their stories. But they had signs made, they had pictures drawn for us, they sang songs for us, so they had been anticipating our arrival.” [Suzanne Patzer – 13:01-14:10]

But doing humanitarian work during a civil war had its risks. In one incident, Ron Meyers and his colleagues were held at a military checkpoint and had to think on their feet.

We had made an arrangement with the governor’s office that John (Florian) [DOES HE SAY THE SURNAME, IF NOT ADD A LINE LIKE “HE’S TALKING ABOUT JOHN FLORIAN” BECAUSE THERE ARE A COUPLE OF JOHNS MENTIONED IN THE PIECE ]could impersonate the governor on our behalf if we had gotten into any jam where we thought things were really risky for us and we needed help. So it was starting to get towards dusk and we were in this prison which was this notorious place of torture and death, we decided we had to play the card, so we asked to talk to the senior person at the camp, and I negotiated with him to be allowed to make one call back to the US, and I immediately called John, and I said, “John, this is the time. I need you to call down and pretend to be the governor and ask how we’re doing and tell these people to let us go.” And John did. And they did.” [Meyers 43:35]

But the main aim of the activists was to protect Copapayans from their government and military. In 1989, when the conflict was still ongoing, John Florian described how they managed this:

“There have been people from Copapayo who’ve been arrested when they’ve tried to travel from the community to the capital of San Salvador, 30 miles away, after those arrests have happened, that is the type of event that we would initiate the Telex network for. Sent both to the US embassy here in Washington, but also to the Embassy in San Salvador, to the military officials in San Salvador, basically complaining of that human rights violation. And we’ve seen a number of times when those Telexes have had a positive impact and people have been released.”

[Florian, Chambers, Barndt – 8:36-9:26]

The Columbus activists effectively became Ohio’s “eyes on the ground” and would report back to their own government representatives about what they had witnessed, which often conflicted with reports from more official sources. Ron Meyers again:

“Eventually we got Senator Glen and Senator Metzenbaum to support us at the federal level. And Glen was a key person because he was chair of the armed services committee for the government. And once we had his ear, and he assigned a staff member to be our liaison, and that was Dale Buckland, we were extremely careful in documenting what we were doing, and it came to the point where the Senator no longer believed in the US Embassy, in what they were saying, because we would bring evidence that would contradict what they were saying, and it was remarkable to have happen over time.” [Meyers – 15:50-16:32]

[I THINK WE NEED AN EXAMPLE HERE OF WHAT WAS NOT BEING REPORTED BUT WHAT THEY WERE SEEING]

In order to maintain broad support at home, the Columbus activists characterized Copapayans as innocents caught between warring parties. However, in reality, the situation was considerably more complicated according to Suzanne Patzer:

“As a result of all the repression, there was an opposition group called the Farabundo Martí Liberation Front, which in Spanish translated into the FMLN. And it turns out Copapayo was one of the headquarters of the FMLN. I found that out later – I did not know that. I didn’t really know what I was getting into, but we were actually in what was considered one of the most dangerous, conflicted zones in the whole country.” [Patzer – 16:14-16:39]

Still, despite the many on the ground challenges, the Columbus activists continued to push for peace and justice even in extraordinary circumstances. [Ron Meyers]:

“One of the commandantes from the rebel army came to meet with me. Um I was just incredibly surprised, and people from Copapayo were surprised. And he just wanted to understand better what we were doing politically. And it was a great opportunity for me to follow through on what we had been saying all along which was that we’re not supporting the rebel army. We’re just protecting people in the communities and that we were opposed to human rights abuses on both sides.” [Ron Meyers – 58:20-59:00].

Janice de la Puente, another Columbus activist, went on a delegation to Copapayo in the early 90s and stayed on to help for almost 25 years. Fluent in Spanish, she has a different perspective:

“They were guerillas. There was no doubt about who they were, so somebody either wasn’t paying attention, or somebody wasn’t interpreting for them. But just because you knew that doesn’t mean that you really understood all the dynamics.” [Janice – 16:30-17:12]

Another task the Columbus activists set themselves was to raise money for its Sister-City, hoping that the funds would be used to rebuild the community. However, keeping track of the money once it reached El Salvador wasn’t easy. During one trip, Janice de la Puente tried to find out what had happened to a \$7000 donation that had gone missing. She went to the Salvadoran Sister-City coordinating council to make inquiries:

I said, ‘Excuse me, but we worked our behinds off to raise funds for these people who we’ve come to be very fond of through the years,’ you know, people who had been going for years, like Mark and Ron and people you’ve talked to. You know, it was a love affair. People felt heart-to-heart, shoulder-to-shoulder with these people. And so did I. And they said, ‘Well, Janice, it’s time I had a little more serious talk with you about all of this because you seem to be digging into the depths of all of this.’ She said, ‘Actually, we had to use a lot of that money for a group in Chalatenango, and the other part of it we had to send off to the guerillas. You know, we do that sometimes.’ She was very gentle with me in the beginning. ‘We do that when there’s a great need, we use some of those monies.’” [Janice – 18:23-20:23]

Nevertheless, Sister-city activists were far from being dupes of the FMLN, as Reagan had sometimes claimed. Many were moved by the bravery of Copapayans, who had sacrificed everything to push for much needed social change. Columbus activist Tim Wagner explains

“We didn’t think of the FMLN as a political party. At that time it was not. It was – seemed more grassroots, revolution kind of feel. It was only after the peace treaty that they could take their focus away from military action and start thinking about political solutions.” [Tim Tape 2 4:56-6:03]

With the signing of Peace Accords in 1992 between the Salvadoran government and the FMLN the war came to an end. For the first time in years, Copapayo was no longer facing constant existential threat. That had an impact on its relationship with Columbus, as did events taking place elsewhere in the world. Columbus labor activist Mark Stansbury explains:

“Once the war ended we knew that our work wasn’t going to meet their need. Their vision was larger than what we were ever going to be able to support. So, politically we decided to end the relationship as a Sister City not so much that the relationship is ended but the ongoing exchange stopped – probably 93-94. Probably because a lot of the um movement energy went from Latin America to the Middle East. Because of what was going on at that point.” [24:57-25:53]

In spite of the deep personal bonds that had formed between Copapayans and Columbus delegates, from a North American activist perspective, it was time to focus on new issues. Duane Jaeger, for instance, moved to the west coast and immersed himself in anti-poverty and environmental campaigns. He explains:

“I just think activism and issues just go in waves. It’s not really sad to me, I just saddle up to the next issue. They’re all – whatever you can – whatever that chink in the armor is, that’s where you got to hit it. What horrible thing is most in your face right now. [[Jaeger](#) 30:28-31-15]

In 1996, a brief attempt to reactivate the Sister City relationship fizzled out. Nevertheless, for many years, letters continued to arrive in Columbus from Copapayo, describing projects, outlining obstacles and reporting on the local situation. Rebuilding the Copapayo community was hard work, and its residents continued to draw strength from their connection with sympathetic outsiders.

Today, violence in El Salvador has reappeared in the news. Now it’s the failure of an FMLN-headed state to effectively control criminal violence and drug trafficking that is the problem. Social and



economic justice continue to elude grassroots Salvadorans, but the questions of how to help, what side to take, where to intervene or resist intervention have no clear answers. If there's one thing we can learn from the Columbus-Copapayo Sister City experiment, it's that realpolitics is a messy business. At the same time, Sister-Cities activists didn't let the complexity of the issues stop them from reaching out to their progressive brothers and sisters in Copapayo in ways that had real benefits for both parties. Perhaps it's time for Columbus to turn its attention to Central America once again, and to once again welcome those who are fleeing the violence and injustice—in Mexico, Honduras, and Guatemala as well as El Salvador--and to ask how we can together work to make our governments accountable the people and build a more peaceful future.