A Colombian Conversation: Daira Quiñones Talks with Melissa Cox

Daira Quiñones is an Afro-Colombian human rights defender; Melissa Cox, a former member of WFP’s Colombia Team, now serves on our national board.

MC: I’m speaking with Daira Quiñones, an Afro-Colombian woman who was displaced from Tumaco, Colombia—thank you so much for being here! She does tremendous human rights work for communities, women, children, and all those displaced to Bogotá, including through the organizations FUNDARTECP and AMDAE. I’ll begin by asking how the Colombian peace process is going.

DQ: First of all, I’d like to send a solidarity hug to Witness for Peace (WFP) for its invaluable work toward peace in Colombia.

To answer your question, we see some successes in the peace process, but also many mistakes. One success is that the Colombian government even decided to negotiate with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). But there are many things about which we’re wary, especially in the approach to and completion of the proposals from the conflict’s various victims. It’s very important for human rights and social movements to encourage direct participation from these victims. There’s also the problem of territory. We’re still not clear whether our territories will be returned to us. Even if we do return, we don’t know if we’ll be able to use the land because it’s been so heavily impacted. We’re fighting for “complete reparations” through FUNDARTECP. This includes knowing the truth behind crimes committed, and achieving justice within communities to ensure there’s no repetition of past violations. We’re currently not seeing those types of guarantees in the negotiations.

We’re also concerned that the national government’s plans aren’t taking into account housing, healthcare, and culture. In Bogotá, where many of us [the displaced] now live, we’re constructing a better approach. We have a space there for victims to discuss basic projects, and to develop plans closer to the goals of Afro-Colombian, campesino, and Indigenous communities. But our proposals are still up in the air because the government hasn’t considered them.

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Message from Board Chair

In this space you’d typically find a message from Witness for Peace’s Executive Director, but our most recent ED left the organization in June. WFP has taken this as an opportunity to discern, as an organization, how to most effectively and sustainably carry out our mission. As you see from the features in this newsletter, our work continues, highlighting the roots of migration, supporting rights defenders, and striving for justice in the Americas. At this critical time for our movement, please stay engaged with WFP, and support us with a donation today!

David Golemboski
Chair, WFP Board of Directors

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

Grassroots Action
In late October, the Mid-Atlantic Region will have a speaker tour featuring Érika Patricia Guerra Escalante, who has worked with Jesuit Migrant Service in her native Honduras. As unaccompanied Central American minors (a majority of them Honduran) continue to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border, Érika will shed light on the situation of violence and poverty from which these children are fleeing, and will share about how U.S. policy in Honduras contributes to these factors. She will speak in Washington, DC, New York City, and Long Island, the last week and a half of October. Please contact walker@witnesforpeace.org or call 202-547-6112 for more information or to learn more about scheduling an event in one of those places.

Witness for Peace New England is hard at work on its fall speaker tour: please stay tuned for that. Thanksgiving week, WFPNE will have a delegation to Cuba led by Aldo Garcia Guevara, PhD, the Coordinator for the Center for the Study of Human Rights at Worcester State University. The delegation will be an exploration of Cuban society.

Witness for Peace Southeast will host Julia Vallejos on a speaker tour this October. Julia is a Nicaraguan fair trade advocate and a founding member of Masilí, a free trade zone factory. She will give her perspectives on how free trade policies and U.S. corporate practices have affected her community, and choices we as consumers can make to support alternative trade models like Masilí. Julia will be in Kentucky from October 5th to the 9th; in Nashville, Tennessee on October 10th; in Asheville, North Carolina from October 12th-14th; in the Triad on October 15th; in the North Carolina Triangle October 16th-20th; and in Virginia October 21st -25th. Visit www.wfpse.org for more information.

Witness for Peace – Upper Midwest is finalizing its fall speaking tour, focused on the flower-growing industry in Colombia, with events confirmed in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Missouri, and Kansas. The region is also accepting applications for fall and winter delegations to Cuba, Honduras, and Colombia.

Check out our website and Facebook page for further updates. To get in touch with your regional organizer or to learn more about upcoming events and delegations, please visit witnessforpeace.org/grassroots.

DELEGATIONS

Colombia
Learning from Afro-Colombian and Indigenous Struggles for Economic Justice and Land Rights
November 19-29, 2014
Delegation Coordinator
Elise Roberts, 920-421-2269
wfputmw@witnesforpeace.org

Cuba
Race, Gender, and Social Movements
October 5-15, 2014
Delegation Coordinator
Amy Truax, 206-787-0657
amymarietruax@gmail.com

Complex Beauty: An Exploration of Cuban Society
November 22-30, 2014
Delegation Coordinator
Dr. Aldo Guevara, 508-929-8585
aguevara@worcester.edu

The Fabric of Cuban Society
December 8-18, 2014
Delegation Coordinator
Leni Reeves, 559-855-4511
lenireeves@gmail.com

Education Delegation
January 5-15, 2015
Delegation Coordinator
Dixie Olmstead, 651-271-6558
dixie_olmstead@yahoo.com

Built to Last: An Exploration of Sustainability in Cuba
January 23-February 2, 2015
Delegation Coordinator
Susan Letendre, 401-268-9810
wfpne@witnesforpeace.org

The Good Food Revolution: Strengthening Community Through Sustainable Agriculture
February 13-23, 2015
Delegation Coordinator
Kristin Stuchis, 218-340-8079
kstuchis@gmail.com

Whole-istic Cuba
May 23-June 3, 2015
Delegation Coordinator
Dawn Diamond, 973-746-6191
njchlnew@gmail.com

Honduras
Honduran Families and Communities Under Threat: Learning from Indigenous Groups, Campesinos, and Human Rights Defenders
January 9-19, 2015
Delegation Coordinator
Elise Roberts, 920-421-2269
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The peace discussions are driven by [the peace process’s] negotiators in Havana, and there is often more participation from people who are considered perpetrators than from the war’s victims.

MC: Is there anything else you’d like to mention about victims’ rights or about the peace process generally? Are communities organizing to preserve their rights and create their own peace process?

DQ: FUNDARTECP and AMDAE are currently fighting for territory, and creating a life plan to present to the government that’s in accordance with our cultural and ancestral practices. It’s important to keep focusing on food security and healthcare for victims. When displaced people come to a city like Bogotá, they may not even encounter the minimal conditions for survival. In Bogotá, we have to travel to find a clinic, and sometimes they’ll still not attend to us. Because of this, a group of six women asked the Ministry of Health for collective reparations that would benefit communities through ancestral medicinal knowledge, and the Ministry approved this project.

However, the first phase of this project has seen a series of difficulties. Although the project is well written, it needs better implementation to ensure that it reaches communities. One of the greatest challenges we’ve seen up to this point is that, year after year, communities propose projects, but results never reach them.

Our requests for a guarantee of food have been hindered by national politics, because the local governments cannot mandate this. But we continue working with government ministries to secure fundamental aspects of our goals. We’ve written and made our requests visible, so we just hope that our requests are recognized not only in Colombia, but internationally.

MC: Can you speak about the Afro-Colombian communities on the coast, or wherever you consider most pertinent to the situation of Afro-Colombians?

DQ: This is complicated, but I’ll mention the situation of La Guajira, the communities of the Pacific, Buenaventura, and Tumaco, where human rights violations continue to occur. In these places, families are massacred, women are murdered, and children are sent to war. This leads to organizational weakness, which causes loss of cultural identity. We believe cultural identity can develop anywhere Afro-Colombians are, and that it’s important to allow communities to advance by developing their organizational and political capacities.

MC: Thanks for your time. We’ll close by asking your thoughts about WFP—which projects you think are most important for communities, and how your experience has been working with us.

DQ: It’s been indescribable working with WFP because of its commitment to peace, and its help in publicizing our work inside and outside of Colombia. For example, the [Solidarity Passover Seder] that we’ve been working on for two years has created solidarity, faith, and helped us recover ancestral values that we’ve been losing. With WFP’s support, we’ve succeeded in creating a [seder] that reflects Colombian reality, and helps communities that might otherwise feel isolated begin to work together. We’re doing this now in Bogotá, but want to spread it to other areas of the country.

Another thing we’d like to emphasize is the support of interpreting and accompaniment when we travel. If we didn’t have this, we wouldn’t have the current relationship with so many organizations. Additionally, it’s helped us have better national visibility. We’re very grateful for all this.

MC: Thank you so much, and for all your amazing work for human rights. It’s been a great experience working with you and your organizations. I’ll always remember what you said to me: “As long as I have life, I’ll continue struggling.” I know this is true, and while you’re struggling, I hope you know that we’ll continue to stand in solidarity with you.
The group of teenagers from the U.S. stood in two lines, facing away from one another. They followed instructions from our speaker: “Change three things about your physical appearance. You can tuck in your shirt, untie a shoe, whatever you want.” Then, the lines turned to face one another. Each person had to identify the changes made by the person facing them. The group finished the activity and sat down. “I have a question for you,” announced the speaker, a Nicaraguan biologist and environmentalist who has studied the impact of pesticides and other environmental problems in Nicaragua.

“After you all sat down,” the biologist continued, “you changed back. You untucked your shirts again, re-tied your shoes. Why did you change back?” The group gave a few answers – “We’re more comfortable this way.” “It’s how things were before.” The speaker listened to the group’s responses. “Each one of you is here in Nicaragua for a reason,” he told them. “When you go back home, it will be easy for you to change back, to return to your normal routine, to leave aside what you learned here. I have a proposal for you all: don’t change back.”

The group reflected on his words; many of the teenagers would refer to his proposal later in the delegation. This speaker was one of the highlights of the annual teen delegation to Nicaragua, sponsored by Witness for Peace Southeast. Each year in July, 15-20 teenagers from different parts of the U.S. come to Nicaragua to learn about the day-to-day reality of Nicaraguans, and how the U.S. government and U.S. corporations have impacted Nicaragua over time. The majority of the participants in this year’s group were from Pennsylvania; in all, five states were represented.

We discussed many topics that these high school students may never hear about in their classrooms. We heard from members of an agricultural cooperative in northern Nicaragua, who spoke about how their community was displaced because of violence during the U.S. government-funded Contra War in the 1980s, and has subsequently struggled to maintain sovereignty over its land.

We heard from an inspiring community organizer in a working-class Managua neighborhood about how the privatization of schools, health care, and other sectors in the 1990s contributed to the growth of gangs and violence in her neighborhood, as young people found fewer options for recreation, education, and employment. These privatizations were required as conditions of loans to Nicaragua from international financial institutions in which the U.S. government is a key actor.

We heard from a mother of six who works in a free trade zone, making clothing that is sold abroad, often in the U.S. The number of free trade zones in Nicaragua has increased substantially since the signing of DR-CAFTA, a free trade agreement between the U.S., five Central American countries, and the Dominican Republic. This worker spoke of unfairly low wages, long hours without overtime pay, pressure from supervisors to work quickly, and, between her work schedule and her responsibilities at home, having no time in her life to simply relax.

These and many other Nicaraguans shared their stories with the group of teenagers. Often, the teens asked – “What can we do to help?” “How can we be in solidarity with you?” Many speakers had the same response: take these stories back to the U.S. with you, and share them.

In the wrap-up and action planning sessions, the teens brainstormed ways of doing just that: in their schools, in their churches, in local newspapers, and in meetings with their Congress members. The teens came up with many thoughtful ideas about what to do once they returned. This was the first step in taking to heart the lesson they’d learned from the biologist’s activity – of not changing back, and instead using what they’d learned to make changes in their own communities and to our own government’s policies.