Mariela Obregón Chavarria had hoped to return to her native country of Nicaragua one day, but she never imagined that she would arrive in handcuffs and be escorted by U.S. security.

Mariela had been living and working in the United States for seven years. A mother of three, she and her partner worked to support her family in Nicaragua and her three-year-old son, a U.S. citizen with her in the U.S. Mariela was deported because she lived in a county that participates in the controversial “Secure Communities” program. Secure Communities facilitates information transfers between local police departments and Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE). Its stated goal is to apprehend and remove undocumented, dangerous criminals. However, mothers like Mariela are much more commonly the targets.

Mariela’s life changed when her partner’s sister violated a restraining order and appeared at the house where Mariela was living. The two got into an argument and the police were called. After the ICE database revealed that Mariela had failed to report to an immigration hearing almost six years prior, Mariela was strip-searched and locked up to await deportation.

When Augusto Obregon, Mariela’s uncle, heard about her detention, his first thought was to call Witness for Peace’s team in Managua. Witness for Peace has a 12-year history of bringing delegates to speak with Augusto, a community leader from El Regadio and WFP ally who has traveled to the U.S. with Witness for Peace on speakers’ tours. When Witness for Peace alerted people from Mariela’s U.S. community about her case, hundreds of supporters took action on her behalf. Grassroots activists throughout New England contacted their government representatives and the ICE office, asking for a hold on Mariela’s deportation order or for her release from the detention center to be reunited with her son.

Mariela spoke softly when describing how she had been moved between detention centers—four in total—in the middle of the night and without warning. Up to 60 women were held in the same room, the food was terrible, and she had no access to information about where she was being moved or for how long she would remain in detention. It was difficult to stay in contact with family or legal representation.

“It’s unjust to treat people that haven’t committed any crime like that,” she said firmly. One woman she met in detention had been living and working in the United States for three full decades. Another woman worried about her young child who’d been taken into state custody since his mother’s detention.

“Can you imagine?” Mariela said. “The hardest thing is that people are losing their children. In my case, if my husband and my aunt weren’t there, I would have lost my son. Thank God that I had somebody, but for others,”

(Continued on back page)
Message From Sharon

I have no doubt that WFP delegates are capable of changing the face of U.S. policy towards Latin America. When delegates hear inspiring testimonies from our allies on the ground in Latin America and see for themselves the impact of detrimental policies they are motivated to advocate for policy changes. However, it’s not every day that you see direct evidence of the power of our delegations.

This fall I was thrilled to have the opportunity to accompany WFP’s first two people-to-people licensed delegations to Cuba. As many of you know, over the summer Witness for Peace was granted a license that enabled us to expand our Cuba delegations program to all applicants, regardless of profession.

Since then, WFP delegations to Cuba have been highlighted in USA Today, the Miami Herald, and Travel Weekly. Hundreds of people from across the country have already applied to join our delegations.

In November, our delegations focused on contemporary law and sustainable agriculture, both useful lenses through which to explore the impact of the U.S. embargo and travel ban on life in Cuba. For example, the sustainable agriculture delegation worked in the fields and spoke to Cuban farmers about how the embargo impacts food production. WFP delegates also met with Cuban groups excited to share organic agriculture techniques, show off their fish farms, and demonstrate the proliferation of urban, roof top gardens.

"Overall it was one of the best experiences of my life," said one delegate. “I had tears in my eyes when I left.”

Obviously, feedback like that is very touching to those of us who organize and run WFP delegations. However, seeing these recent delegates spring to action in the name of justice is the reason I’ve been with WFP for over 25 years.

Just days after we left Cuba, House Republicans moved to pass a bill that would significantly roll back the clock when it comes to Cuba travel rights. The language would have limited remittances and prevented Cuban Americans from visiting their relatives more than once every three years. Within the bat of an eye, hundreds of former delegates and other grassroots activists had called President Obama to petition against the punitive bill.

I’m happy to report that we were victorious! Together, we held our President accountable to his promise to veto legislation that imposed limits on Cuban-Americans’ right to travel to visit their families.

Clearly, there’s still a lot of work left to do. However, with our delegations program as a strong training ground and a source of inspiration to thousands of activists, we know we’re on the right track.

In solidarity,

Sharon Hostetler
Executive Director
Grassroots Action

Witness for Peace New England is building on a successful speaker’s tour, working with college and university groups to set up a permanent WFP campus presence.

Witness for Peace Mid Atlantic thanks everyone who helped organize and/or participated in our speaker’s tour. Speaker Uriel Carazo addressed the root causes of migration in Nicaragua, describing the impacts of privatization on basic services.

Witness for Peace Northwest has been named the region for national integration. We are working with National WFP to hire a Northwest Field Organizer by February.

Witness for Peace Southeast is aided by a new Deputy Director, Eric Burnette, and Associate Director, Emily Zuchino. We have initiated a new program of foreign/domestic delegations, each with its own policy theme: Mexico/Alabama (immigration), Nicaragua/North Carolina (free trade), Honduras/Fl. Benning, Georgia (militarization and human rights), Colombia/Kentucky (drug policy), and Cuba/Florida (trade embargo).

Witness for Peace Southwest has a new 2012 Calendar of Events which can be found at www.witnessforpeace.org/southwest, by email at wpwsw@witnessforpeace.org, or by phone (805-421-9708).

Witness for Peace Upper Midwest is finalizing plans for upcoming delegations to Nicaragua and Colombia. The region just finished a successful first year with Elise as Regional Organizer and is looking forward to her return after a two-month leave of absence.

To get in touch with your regional organizer or to learn more about upcoming events and delegations, please visit witnessforpeace.org/grassroots.

Fall Speaker Tours Sweep the Nation

This fall WFP international staff accompanied six allies from Latin America to 152 speaker tour events, reaching 6,082 people in audiences across the country. The opportunity for WFP grassroots to hear directly from Latin Americans about the impact of U.S. policies on their lives and communities has been an important part of WFP’s educational efforts since the beginning of the organization.

Advocate and former migrant Jaqueline Garcia traveled throughout the Great Lakes and Long Island. In New England, biodiversity specialist Julio Sanchez connected U.S. policies to the environment, human rights, and immigration. In the Mid Atlantic, Uriel Carazo addressed the links between free trade, poverty, and migration from Nicaragua.

Center for the Orientation of Migrants’ Nancy Garcia’s itinerary included 10 high school classes during her tour of 30 locations in the Midwest. In the Southeast region, Colombian activist John Henry González spoke about civil war, militarization, environmental exploitation, and free trade. He appeared on CNN Español and in Louisville’s Al Día. Through Eleazar Garcia’s presentation on food sovereignty and the roots of migration, the Northwest region recruited over 100 new activists and contacted three congressional staff.

Many of the events featured WFP original documentaries on the roots, realities, and risks of migration. Thank you to all who made these speaker tours a success. To host a WFP event in your community next year, please contact your regional organizer.

Save the Date: National Days of Action for Colombia

This April thousands of people will participate in educational events, show solidarity with Colombian communities facing violence and displacement, and advocate for just U.S. policies in Colombia. With over 5,000,000 people displaced, Colombia has the world’s second worst internal displacement crisis. Meanwhile, Washington continues sending hundreds of millions of dollars in military aid, helping the victimizers more than the victims. And to add salt to the wound, Congress recently passed a dangerous NAFTA-style free trade agreement with Colombia.

With your support, the seventh annual National Days of Action for Colombia will be even bigger and our voices even louder in calling for peace, justice and humanitarian aid for Colombia. Whether you are part of a faith community, a college or university, a union or just a concerned individual, please join us from April 13-16 to be part of the largest nationwide call for peace in Colombia. For information on how to get involved, please visit witnessforpeace.org.

Witness for Peace Leads Workshops, Remembers SOA Victims

In November more than 5000 people gathered at the School of the Americas to demand that the “School of Assassins” be closed. WFP organized a teach-in featuring Jani Silva, campesina leader of the Colombian Association of Holistic Sustainable Development, and Sanho Tree, renowned drug policy analyst and WFP board member.

Jani Silva also spoke from the main stage to address the reality of U.S. foreign policy in Colombia, which has sent more than 10,000 soldiers to be trained at the SOA.

More than 100 attended the WFP-sponsored workshop on life inside a for-profit detention center. The workshop featured Pedro Guzmán, who was detained for 19 months, and his U.S.-born wife Emily.

On Sunday morning thousands gathered in front of the main stage to solemnly remember those murdered by the graduates of the SOA. As victims’ names were recited the crowd of thousands responded "PRESENTE!"

Theresa Cusimano crossed the line onto the base for the second time following Sunday morning’s solemn procession. She was arrested by military police and faces up to six months in prison.

For full program updates and travel schedule details, visit www.witnessforpeace.org.
she paused, shaking her head, “it’s very, very hard.”

These stories are not unusual. Up to 88,000 immigrants deported since 2008 have spouses or children that are U.S. citizens. Within the first six months of 2011, the federal government deported parents of U.S. citizens, leaving over 5,100 children in foster care.

Furthermore, the Warren Institute on Law and Social Policy at the University of California—Berkeley found that over half the people deported through the Secure Communities program have either no criminal convictions or exclusively minor offenses, like traffic infractions.

Because the U.S. government does not consider deportation to be a criminal proceeding, detainees are not provided with free legal counsel. They must seek out information to defend their case on their own—a difficult task when one takes into account the expense of phone calls from detention, language barriers, and center transfers between states.

Even with these disturbing realities, Secure Communities continues to expand with support from the Obama administration. As of September 2011, there were 1,595 jurisdictions in 44 states and territories participating in Secure Communities. By 2013, ICE hopes to have Secure Communities operating in each state and local jail across the country.

Mariela’s story demonstrates how Secure Communities is a threat to the fabric of immigrant families. However, by fostering fear about contacting law enforcement, the program also endangers the broader community. Each time an undocumented immigrant reports a crime or dangerous activity, they put themselves at risk for deportation.

Like millions of others, Mariela had come to the United States in order to support her family.

“When you leave [for the United States], you’re not thinking about doing anything bad—you’re thinking about working to support your family,” she sighed. “But [immigration policy] doesn’t give you… a chance.”

Mariela’s decision to leave her hometown and the challenges she faces upon returning speak to the consequences of neoliberal trade policy in towns like El Regadio. These policies make it difficult for rural communities like hers to compete with U.S. subsidized agricultural exports. Many farmers leave their land to work in factory jobs. Although neoliberal trade policies encourage this work, the labor conditions can be poor and the salaries are low. Within the last few years, several tobacco factories have opened near El Regadio, employing many people, but also the industry causes health problems due to the exposure to hazardous chemicals. Realities like these leave many Central Americans with no choice but to migrate north looking for work.

For now, Mariela’s partner will remain in the United States, working with the company he has been employed by for the past eight years.

“He has to work even harder to support us now that I’m not able to work there anymore,” Mariela said.

Sitting in a rocking chair at her mother’s house, Mariela reflected on her bittersweet return to Nicaragua. Her excitement to see her two children, who had grown so much in the last seven years, was evident. But she longs for her son, who is still in the U.S.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she said. “I’m waiting for my baby to come here. For now, that’s what I’m waiting for.”

Almost 300,000 people have been deported under Secure Communities, representing many families torn apart, livelihoods lost, months spent languishing in detention, and hopes shattered.

Comprehensive immigration reform, including the repeal of the Secure Communities program, is essential for a strong, sustainable economy. Through grassroots mobilization, educational events, and our unique delegations program, Witness for Peace puts immigrants and their families at the center of the debate on policy solutions.