

# FOCUS

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## A TIME OF TRANSITION; TWENTY-SEVEN YEARS OF OFFICE OF THE AMERICAS AND COUNTING!

### Message from Blase

We placed ourselves in your hands over 27 years ago and you have sustained us. The efforts of many volunteers and a legacy of justice and peace programs have followed.

None of this could have been done without your constant help.

And now I would like to use my time even more effectively. At a recent board meeting of the Office of the Americas we considered various possibilities and came up with the following:

Personally I will continue the Pacifica Radio Program WORLD FOCUS, speaking engagements, writing requests from publishers and other media (for example, as a source for Accuracy in Media at the Press Club in Washington, D.C.). I will also continue my international email correspondence with the movement for justice and peace by way of [ooa@igc.org](mailto:ooa@igc.org) and [www.officeoftheamericas.org](http://www.officeoftheamericas.org).

This means we will retain the Office of the Americas as a non-profit educational corporation and retain the current board of directors.

### SOME CHANGES

Starting on July 1, 2010 we will count on volunteers rather than paid employees.

To accomplish this we will discontinue our printed newsletter (FOCUS) and the Peace Calendar.

Sustainers and Office of the Americas members will be invited to continue their support which will be used for expenses.

In the days ahead, along with my present work on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle-East which is critical, I will also direct my attention to Latin America as the vanguard of international structural change. The theme of the international social forum is, "Another World is Possible."

It seems to me that Latin America and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) have the formula for world structural change. This is exactly the kind of democratic socialism spoken of by our recently deceased board member, Howard Zinn. It is not rigid ideology but rather a firm focus on the felt needs of the vast majority of citizens.

Members of ALBA like Cuba, Venezuela, Nicaragua, the Caribbean States, Bolivia and pending members such as Ecuador, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil and the rest of Latin America are completely free to develop the plan in accord with their own cultures and history. Banking, currencies and trade agreements are being integrated.

Actually I think this model is exactly what is needed in the United States as well.

When I was expelled from Guatemala in 1967 I accepted the role of translating the goals of the Central American Revolution to a U.S. audience. Now, an even greater movement of realignment and restructuring is underway throughout the hemisphere. I would like to take this opportunity to translate this movement into understandable concepts for the United States and elsewhere.

I HAVE GIVEN THIS A GREAT DEAL OF REFLECTION AND BELIEVE THAT THIS DIRECTION IS BEST FOR THE OFFICE OF THE AMERICAS AND THE BEST USE OF MY TIME AND ENERGY.

IN VIEW OF THIS CHANGE THE OFFICE OF THE AMERICAS WILL CONTINUE TO NEED YOUR SUPPORT.

Contributions will still be tax deductible and we hope you will continue to sustain us. Since this is the 27<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Office of the Americas and a time of transition, we will have a celebration of gratitude for whatever we have accomplished with your support. A flyer is enclosed. We hope you will join us for this special event.

### TO SUM UP

You can reach us at the same address and phone number.

We will place more of our reports on our website [www.officeoftheamericas.org](http://www.officeoftheamericas.org)

We will acknowledge all contributions by mail but will not do mailing of FOCUS and our monthly sustainer letters.

We believe that this plan will make it possible to survive during a financial crisis and to possibly expand our outreach.

Theresa and I will continue to work for peace and justice by way of the Office of the Americas. We thank you again for keeping OOA flourishing during these twenty-seven years and we look forward to your continued participation during this time of transition.

With love and gratitude,

Blase and Theresa Bonpane

### **SPECIAL THANKS**

Since her "retirement" the founding director of the Office of the Americas, THERESA has volunteered her time on a regular basis for all issues requiring her exceptional administrative and organizational skills. The OOA simply would have no possibility of existence without her keen and expert guidance over these twenty-seven years.

And we have been extremely fortunate for the past three years to have the talents of our Associate Director, SHAE POPOVICH who has given her expertise to many projects of the Office of the Americas as well as serving on critically important delegations to Gaza and Cairo. As the Office of the Americas goes into this transitional stage we will continue our friendship with Shae as she pursues her work as an actor and activist.

Many observers consider ELAINE BUDIN to be part of a full time staff at OOA. She is actually our most active volunteer. Elaine has multiplied our effectiveness by her world class ability in the supervision of contributions and mailings. It would take a village to compete with her competence.

Our VOLUNTEERS AND SUSTAINERS have made the Office of the Americas a reality and we are counting on them for the effectiveness of our future plans.



Shae Popovich, Laura Durkay, Dara Wells-Hajjar

### **Gaza Freedom March - My Report from Cairo, December 2009-January, 2010**

I boarded the midnight flight to Cairo, Egypt on December 25, 2009 to meet up with 1,362 other delegates from 42 countries to take part in the Gaza Freedom March. We never made it to Gaza. But, if we couldn't go to Gaza, then we would bring Gaza to Egypt.

I traveled to Gaza in May 2009 with the peace group Codepink. We focused on the children of Gaza. We delivered medical aid, toys, and supplies and built some playgrounds. I stayed with a Palestinian family during my stay. They have since become my "family in Gaza". My reason for joining the December delegation as part of the Gaza Freedom March was to help bring awareness to the international community about the devastating destruction that "Operation Cast Lead" (a name coined by the Israeli military) had inflicted upon the people of the Gaza Strip during the December 27, 2008-January 17, 2009 siege. We were there to help bring much needed humanitarian aid to the 1.5 million people, to help break the siege, and to march in solidarity with the people of Gaza and with peace groups in Israel.

When word came from the Egyptian foreign ministry that we would not be granted access to Gaza, we began a historical week of non-violent actions that culminated with our own Gaza Freedom March in the "Times Square" of Cairo. Why? Why were 1,362 peace delegates, armed with only humanitarian aid and goodwill, turned away from a war-torn state at the Egyptian border? The reasons were clear to us before we landed in Cairo. Egypt is a country with a devastated economy. It receives approximately 3 billion dollars a year in aid from the U.S. The President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, is bowing to pressure from both Israel and the U.S. He along with the U.S. corps of engineers is on the payroll to build a 60 foot steel wall that will extend from the Mediterranean Sea and will serve to block off the tunnels (Gaza's main lifeline) and further strangle the people of Gaza. Money and power talk. The Egyptian government claims that this is strictly for security reasons and to stop the flow of arms smuggled into the territory controlled by Hamas. Egypt is helping to close off the world to 1.5 million people. The border doesn't need a barrier.

### **U.S. Embassy in Cairo**

Our delegation was not prepared to leave Cairo without a fight...or at least a struggle. So we made our voices heard for more than a week. One such struggle happened at our own U.S. Embassy. A group of US delegates in a show of support had

accompanied Codepink co-founder Medea Benjamin and Gael Murphy to the embassy to discuss the possibility of U.S. aid and support in our quest to enter Gaza. The only support that was shown that day was the Egyptian riot and secret police joining forces and detaining 30 U.S. nationals in the courtyard of the U.S. embassy and 8 women (including myself) on the sidewalk of the embassy. My two roommates and I were slightly more fortunate in our detainment. We happened to be with a very experienced non-violent trainer and activist. As we entered the U.S. embassy grounds, Egyptian Security Forces wasted no time in attempting to throw us into the “pen” with the others. The reason for this was to keep us out of public view as much as possible. The Egyptian government was fearful that the media and citizenry would be sympathetic towards our situation. By this time, however, we had already amassed a fairly large and supportive following, and we were determined to keep the momentum going. The 8 of us held our space on the sidewalk for 3 ½ hours. We sang, we chanted, we waved the peace sign. We did all that we could to garner attention to our situation. In the meantime, the talks with our U.S. embassy officials upstairs had produced no results. Yes, our U.S. embassy. How comforting to know that in a foreign country we would be treated in this manner. After numerous negotiations Egyptian Security Forces finally let us go, but only one at a time and in intervals of 5 minutes. This was just the beginning of several non-violent demonstrations we held in Cairo, the first the country had witnessed in their entire history.

### **Gaza Freedom March Delegates Joined By Egyptian Activists**

Several delegates on The Gaza Freedom March started a hunger strike to focus attention on the plight of the people of Gaza. Hedy Epstein was one of them. Hedy, an 85-year-old holocaust survivor and activist, is known for her work with the International Solidarity Movement and for her support of the Palestinian cause. One of our many activities was to join local organizations at the Journalist Syndicate in Cairo to protest the visit of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to President Mubarak. Egypt is a police state. Egyptian citizens who protested with us on the steps of the Syndicate risked being detained, tortured and possibly killed. They wanted to make their voices heard, however, so they stood with us and even out-numbered us at times. As long as we were there to stand in solidarity with the Egyptian activists, the secret and riot police would not attempt to arrest them. For hours, as the police barricades went up and 3 lines of reinforcements came in, the Egyptian citizens made their voices heard. As I stood there amidst my fellow activists from 42 countries and those from Egypt who risked detainment, I felt a rush of adrenaline and a lump in my throat. I didn’t know whether to rejoice or to cry. Here was a cacophony of voices from 42 countries including our friends from Egypt chanting, “Free, Free Gaza”. What a beautiful and amazing show of courage and solidarity.

Our international delegation took part in actions and strategy meetings all week. One such action was at the Israeli Consulate, a tall non-descript structure that resembled that of a high-rise apartment building. Our only clue that it was indeed the consulate was the Israeli flag that waved from the top of the building. Close to 500 of us began a two-hour vigil. Our actions were loud but civil. The demand was for Netanyahu to be arrested for war crimes and that the siege be lifted. Once again we were met by rows of riot and secret police, but our message was delivered and passersby showed support by waving the peace sign and honking their horns.

### **“Free Gaza Square”**

1,362 international delegates were supposed to march in Gaza on December 31, 2009. Only 80 did after some negotiations and a phone call between Codepink co-founder Jodie Evans and Egypt’s first lady, Suzanne Mubarak. The Egyptian Foreign Ministry tried to skew the story and told the media that those that went to Gaza were chosen because they were the “peaceful ones” and that the rest of us were “hooligans”. This was simply not true. So we decided that we would march through the streets of Cairo and head towards Gaza on December 31<sup>st</sup> as planned. If we got stopped along the way we would claim the street. On the morning of December 31<sup>st</sup>, despite the attempts of the Egyptian secret and riot police to barricade all of us in our hotels (in one hotel several of our organizers were held for several hours), we left in 2s and 3s dressed in civilian clothes and made our way toward the Egyptian museum. (Anything larger than 6 is considered an illegal demonstration in Egypt.) Small groups waited for a secret signal. Then we swarmed together creating a flash mob situation for 15 minutes before the secret and riot police moved in on us. They proceeded to drag, grab, and in some instances, hurt some of the delegates as they shoved us off the street and onto the sidewalk. They tried to intimidate us with 3 rows of reinforcements but we stood our ground. “Free Gaza Square” became the name we gave to the space we held for over 7 hours. We hung banners, we gave speeches, we sang, we chanted, we danced, we hugged. Egyptian civilians passed us food and water through the police lines. We vowed to keep the struggle going. We had achieved some of our goals: to alert the world to the situation in Gaza and our pledge to help break the siege and to stand up to the Egyptian government. Several hours later we gathered for an emotional New Year’s Eve candlelight tribute to those who had lost their lives in the siege.

### **Cairo Delegation and Culmination of Events**

On January 1<sup>st</sup> we gathered in the later hours of the evening in Tahrir Square to discuss the week’s events and the plans ahead. Although most of us did not get into Gaza, we felt that the non-violent actions that we had participated in in one week throughout Cairo were more than we could have imagined. Various representatives from the different countries spoke, culminating with the South African representative who outlined what is now known as The Cairo Declaration, [www.cairodeclaration.org](http://www.cairodeclaration.org), which identifies practical steps which global civil society can utilize to pressure Israel to abide by international law and respect Palestinian human rights.

On my previous trip in May/June 2009 I was able to get into Gaza and to stay with a family that I now call “my family”. This time I wasn’t so fortunate but with the help of some I was able to get them some supplies, a much needed blood pressure monitor and some trinkets for the children. “My family” is doing well. They are one of the luckier ones. But there are thousands of others who

still live in refugee camps, who still cannot feed their families, who still need safe drinking water, who still need to rebuild their homes. The list goes on.

1,362 Gaza Freedom Marchers brought Gaza to Egypt on December 31<sup>st</sup> 2009. Now, let us bring Gaza to the world.

Shae Popovich, Associate Director, Office of the Americas

It is with a heavy heart that I say farewell to Office of the Americas. Because of the new direction the office has taken my tenure as Associate Director will unfortunately be up on July 2nd. For the past 3 years I have met and worked with the most inspiring activists in the city. I had the incredible opportunity to travel to the Gaza Strip and to Cairo on peace delegations, and upon my return I have been fortunate enough to share these experiences in my photo/speaking presentations. I want to thank Blase and Theresa Bonpane for their support and love and for making me a more passionate social activist. I couldn't have accomplished half of my work had it not been for volunteer Elaine Budin. She and I have worked closely together for 3 years and I will truly miss her and our weekly lunches. Thanks also to Betty Norton, Lois Davis, Jim Lafferty, Aris Anagnos, Paul Haggis, Alice Powell, Nancy Hollander and all of the wonderful OOA volunteers and Board Members. A special thanks to Bobby Burns who introduced me to OOA.

My hope is to continue working for social justice causes and to return to the world of performing.

Finally, thank you to all of OOA's members, supporters and friends. It has been an honor.

In Solidarity,  
Shae Popovich

### **Veterans Group Calls on Soldiers to Refuse Deployment Orders by Dahr Jamail**

In response to President Barack Obama's announcement on December 1 to deploy 30,000 additional troops to the occupation of Afghanistan, the organization [March Forward!](#), comprising both veterans and active-duty members of the US military, has called on all soldiers to refuse their orders to deploy.

"March Forward! calls on all service members to refuse orders to deploy to Afghanistan and Iraq," reads a press release from the group from December 3. "We offer our unconditional support and solidarity. Join us in the fight to ensure that no more soldiers or civilians lose their lives in these criminal wars."

Michael Prysner, a former corporal in the Army who served from 2001-2005 and a veteran of the occupation of Iraq, co-founded the group with another Iraq war veteran, James Circello.

For the full article see: <[www.dahrjamail.com](http://www.dahrjamail.com)>

### **I wish to continue to be an Office of the Americas Sustainer or Member**

All contributions are tax-deductible.

I wish to continue to be a sustainer.     I wish to become a sustainer:

Sustainers: I pledge: \$\_\_\_\_\_ each     month     quarter     year     other\_\_\_\_\_ for OOA's work.

Enclosed is my membership contribution:

Founder \$1,000     Patron \$500     Sponsor \$250     Donor \$200     Friend \$100     Family \$35     Individual \$25     Limited income \$10

Please charge my first pledge/contribution of \$\_\_\_\_\_ to my    Visa    Mastercard    AMEX    (select one)

Number \_\_\_\_\_ Expiration Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

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