

STRUGGLES IN A WAR-TORN WORLD

Activists from around the world take great risks in standing up for the rights of queers everywhere

by Risa Krivé



Juan Pablo Ordoñez

Despite the far right organizing its existence around denying ours, we continue to grow stronger in our ability to live, love and triumph. "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is not an "American" dream—it is every person's dream. The Queer Nation spans every continent, every remote island and lonely mountain top, every portion of the earth where people dwell.

The Stonewall 25 celebration in New York in June was organized to demand human rights for sexual minorities throughout the world. It was the site of the first annual International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission presentation of the Felipa de Souza awards. Named for a Brazilian lesbian tortured by the Portuguese Inquisition in 1591, this award honors individuals and organizations who have fought at great personal risk for the freedom of sexual minorities throughout the world.

Hundreds of international activists gathered to honor Juan Pablo Ordoñez, a Colombian attorney who exposes the murder of sexual minorities in his country; Lepa Mladjenovic, a Serbian lesbian feminist activist who co-founded the first Serbian lesbian and gay rights organization; and ABIGALE, a gay, lesbian and bisexual rights organization that worked in coalition in Cape Town, South Africa, to gain legal protection for lesbians and gay men in the new, post-apartheid, South African constitution.

I interviewed the recipients of this award via trans-continental phone calls. I was struck by the force of personality of each individual—Juan Pablo's buoyant, giggly charm; Lepa's passionate honesty; and ABIGALE's Theresa Raizenberg's uncompromising integrity and contagious laughter. Each one maintains lighthearted good humor and rock-solid strength in his or her daily work for human rights.

Juan Pablo Ordoñez is 30 years old. He served as a government criminal prosecutor in his native Colombia, where he investigated the organized murder of so-called "disposables"—street children, homeless people, prostitutes, transvestites and gay men.

This extermination, known as "social cleansing," is carried out mostly by agents of the national police or with their complicity. Death squads consist of young men from wealthy families and police officers backed by far right extremists. They are sometimes paid by business, civic and industrial groups. Skinheads also attack gay men and foreigners. The corpses of gay men are frequently found with signs of torture and mutilation.

The extermination of gay men is rampant throughout Central and South America. Dozens of gay men have been murdered during each of the last three years in Mexico. Eight gay men were killed in a residential/commercial area of Quito, Ecuador. The local press stated that the police had advance knowledge of threats by residents to "clean up" the tourist sector of Quito by killing gay men and prostitutes. A hospital in Lima, Peru, dumped living AIDS patients into a garbage dumpster. Death squads in Brazil are killing thousands of gay men, prostitutes and homeless children on the tourist beaches of Rio de Janeiro.

Juan Pablo investigated the murders of the so-called "disposable people" until threats on his life prompted him to move to the United States. I spoke with him on the eve of his return to Colombia, where he plans to organize human rights work on behalf of "disposables."

"They are absolutely powerless, they have no political or economic power, and no one to speak for them. That is what I plan to do. Our emphasis will be on the male prostitutes and transvestites," he told me.

"Colombia is a formal democratic country, and I mean formal because over 70 percent of the people don't even vote. There is a lot of corruption in the election process, a lot of buying of votes.

"We have one of the most democratic constitutions in the whole world. It is very democratic in terms of the rights of minorities, the right to pri-

vacy and against discrimination—but it's all in writing.

"The Supreme Court decided a few months ago that the military cannot ban homosexuals from the armed forces. The truth is that if anybody is found to be gay, they would very likely get rid of them by killing them, and then say that it was a suicide.

"There is impunity for over 99 percent of all the crimes in the country. The impunity among the armed forces is almost absolute—one thousandth of a percent of any people who commit any kind of human rights abuses are ever charged or punished.

"Colombia is a very violent country. We have had deep violence for the last 500 years, but especially the last 50 years. The two major parties made a deal that they would share the power without letting any other group participate.

"Colombia is in a 'special state of emergency,' which means that the president has all the power, even over the laws. He can cut off the rights of the people.

"The judicial system has secret courts. They were meant to be for the drug dealers problem, which is the only thing people really talk about. But the drug dealers are imprisoned in something like a castle, with swimming pools and everything, and sometimes they get out after just a year—at the most, six years. This is after killing hundreds of people and dealing a lot of drugs.

"The secret courts are actually used against human rights activists and community leaders charged with trumped-up charges. A secret judge, called a 'judge without a face,' rules. For 'security'

reasons, they hide evidence from the defense and there is no cross examination of witnesses. Many, many human rights activists have been sentenced by those courts.

"The truth is that less than 2 percent of all the killings in Colombia are by drug traffickers, despite the whole media obsession. More than 70 percent have to do with armed forces or paramilitary groups. Last year they killed close to 40,000 people.

"The military and paramilitary groups do not need a coup. They have the power they want. If they make a coup they have to be responsible for the human rights violations, but it is now a formal democracy, so they are not responsible.

"Before the whole world, they present themselves as a very democratic country. The president obeys orders from different armed forces. The media is manipulated. There is constitutional freedom of speech, but

if you see who owns the media, it's the ministers in the government, or the secretary of the economy, or the embassies or consulates. The families of the owners of the

different big newspapers and TV and radio stations could say whatever they want, but they're just not going to do it.

"People don't vote because they don't have any hope any more.

"As prosecutor, I was just following what the law says. I was supposed to prosecute any kind of crime. What I really did was to prosecute corruption and human rights abuses within the govern-

ment and within the armed forces. Then they beat me up. They threatened to kill me. They started calling and sending telegrams and letters to my family about what's going to happen to me and inviting my mom to my funeral.

"There are some very good people within the government. The major problem I had was that I was young and gay. Many of the people I was prosecuting could take some investigation against them. What they couldn't take [laughing] was a young faggot doing it. People are killed by the secret courts for being out and outspoken. I didn't have to say anything. It was obvious."

I asked Juan Pablo, "Did it make it hard for you to get your position to begin with—being so young, and obviously gay?"

"Oh, no, because it was obvious after I got the job."

I asked him, "Why do you think they are having a war against gay people and prostitutes—people who don't seem to have any power there anyway—what is the big threat?"

He answered, "I think it has to do with a lot of people who are in conflict with their own sexual identity, a lot of closeted people, and also with historic violence and class struggle. That is why."

The murders in Colombia are covert. In the former Yugoslavia, it is simply war. I spoke with Lepa Mladjenovic, longtime international activist and a founder of Yugoslavia's feminist movement in the 1980s. In 1990 Lepa gathered with some lesbians and gay men in Belgrade to create a group they named Arkadia, the promised land of pleasure and joy in the old Greek stories.

But on the very day they had their first public discussion on queer visibility, the war began. Their vision of the promised land was transformed into a real land of unimaginable horror. Gay men and lesbians are specific targets of violence. Serbian soldiers are taught that the war is justified because Bosnian men are gay and therefore deserve to die torturous deaths. The women are perceived as worse than gay. They are treated accordingly. Lepa described the escalation of the war to me:

"The country I live in is Belgrade—Serbia. The official government policy is that Serbia is not in the war. The fact is that they started the war in Croatia and in Bosnia. In Croatia, people who are Serbs by origin have been living there. They have been supported and initiated from the Serbs from Serbia to rebel against the Croats. In Bosnia there live people who are Serbs, Croats and Muslims. The Serbian government initiated Serbs in Bosnia to fight against these people because the idea is to have a big Serbia as one country so that Serbia will be throughout all of these territories.

"My country was Yugoslavia before the split into five nation-states. It's like New York splitting up into five smaller places. Nobody thought the war was going to happen. There was lots of propaganda, and hatred, hatred, hatred, in the media. Before that, people lived together in peace. One fifth of the country was mixed marriages.

"In Rwanda, it's the same thing. People lived together for ages. With lesbians and gays it's different, because when you are not out there is no war against you, but once you start being out there is a whole new wave of hatred in the public."

Lepa is the only out lesbian in Belgrade. There are two out gay men. Lepa said there is an underground cruising network of hundreds of gay men in Belgrade, whereas she knows 30 lesbians.

Arkadia met in members' homes until the war forced most to leave the country. Lepa co-founded the Women's Studies Center, where she arranged meeting space for Arkadia to resume, and the Center for Women Victims of War Violence, where she works full time. The center is supported by an international network of feminist groups.

"We have this policy of being nonnationalist and working with all women. Women were raped on all different sides. Muslim women were raped more than others, but all the other women were

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