



Jerry Kearns "Talking Heads" shows the personal anguish of a couple haunted by decapitated victims of a Salvadoran death squad

HOPE OF OUR COUNTRY

BY SUE SKINNER

Chani Geigle is an Oregonian and an American citizen who is incarcerated at Dublin Federal Penitentiary in California as a political prisoner of the United States.

Chani began serving a 6-month sentence for nonviolent trespass on September 10, 2002 after she was arrested the previous November for participating in the annual nonviolent demonstration to demand closure of the U.S. Army taxpayer funded terrorist training school, the School of the Americas — now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute of Security Cooperation. Soldiers from all over Latin America are invited to the SOA/WHISC where they are trained in "counterinsurgency" techniques for suppression and murder of individuals and groups who resist the entrenched U.S. and corporate supported plutocracies in the Caribbean and Latin America.

Though Chani says that six months in prison is the least she can do to help stop the killing of hundreds of thousands of innocent people at the hands of SOA/WHISC graduates, six months is still a long time for a young woman who will celebrate her 20th birthday at Dublin Prison on February 15. But she isn't complaining. She is using her time in prison to learn about her sister inmates and to witness for the victims of a flawed and destructive United States foreign policy who cannot speak out.

Chani Geigle has dedicated herself to the pursuit of peace and justice and embodies the hope of our country.

Three of us from Oregon traveled down to the gates of the Dublin Prison compound to honor Chani on Veterans Day, a day we felt was appropriate because she is in prison for speaking truth to power. She has committed herself to the cause of justice and freedom that we have been taught that the United States of America supports, and for which so many of our war veterans died. Charles Liteky, a recipient of the Congressional Medal of Honor in 1968 for bravery in Vietnam, met us at Dublin prison for the vigil. Charlie, now 71 years old, a former Catholic priest and U.S. Army chaplain, renounced his Medal of Honor and left it at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1986 in protest of U.S. foreign policy and the School of the Americas, which he says is "a terrorist training school in our own backyard." He is one of only two Medal of Honor recipients known to renounce the medal and its pension. We felt honored to be in such company on Veterans Day.

Because of prison rules we were not able to visit Chani, and because the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) unexpectedly malfunctioned one hour prior to our vigil time, ours was a small group which would have been much larger. We continue to spread the word that Chani and her hundreds of compatriots are filling us with the hope that democracy remains possible because there are people who are willing to work at it. The world according to Chani has not totally sunk into a pit of cynical despair and cruel indifference.

SHORT HISTORY OF THE SCHOOL OF THE AMERICAS & SOA WATCH

Hundreds of thousands of people have been killed, tortured and raped by graduates of the SOA/WHISC. One of the more well known victims of the SOA was Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, shot in the back while saying mass in 1980. Among the most notorious of the 60,000+ graduates are Manuel Noriega of Panama, Leopoldo Galtieri of Argentina and Bolivia's former president Hugo Banzer.

The School of the Americas opened in Panama in 1946 and was eventually ousted by the Panamanian government, then reopened in Fort Benning, Georgia in 1984. After years of bad publicity and threats of closure by Congress, the school changed its name for the third time in 2001 to the 'Western Hemisphere Institute of Security Cooperation.' The U.S. government says that more "human rights" courses are offered at the school now, but the goals of the program remain the same. The soldiers learn "counterinsurgency" techniques from the U.S. Army, including methods of torture, murder, interrogation and "psychological operations" to wage war against civilians. They return to their home countries armed with these tactics of terror and use them against the poor and those who work with the poor: human rights and social workers, labor union organizers and church workers.

Just as the British Empire once dominated and exploited the land and people of India and South Africa, so the USA now subjugates the Caribbean and Latin America. The SOA/WHISC soldiers help the U.S. government and the mega-corporations that control it snuff out developing democratic movements in Latin America, thereby keeping the people in servitude to the corporations with the assistance of the U.S. military, and help maintain the supply of bananas, oil, cheap clothing and cocaine to the USA.

Every November for the past 13 years, on the anniversary of the murders in El Salvador of six priests, their housekeeper and her 15 year old daughter by SOA graduates, people from all over the world gather at Fort Benning for a weekend of learning, praying and picketing designed to bring attention to the school (long known as the "School of the Assassins"). Chani Geigle is one of the thousands who joined in this yearly protest to demand that the United States close its own terrorist school, and she was arrested along with hundreds of other protesters for trespassing at the gates of Fort Benning during a solemn procession honoring those who have been murdered by graduates of the SOA/WHISC.

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

The offense of nonviolent trespass is a misdemeanor, but protesters are sentenced to long prison terms which they serve in penitentiaries all over the country. Although the punishment is grossly disproportionate to the "crime" (they are guilty of telling the truth), they are able to spread the word about the SOA/WHISC terrorist training school through their prison work and to help in efforts to reform prisons while on "the inside." Among those doing "hard time" right now for their nonviolent witness are nuns, priests, teachers, college students, veterans, mothers, fathers and grandparents. No one whines or complains about mistreatment or injustice as they carry on their work year around inside the prisons.

While on the "outside," The School of the Americas Watch lobbies Congress to close the SOA/WHISC and to develop programs which will foster peace and democracy in the Americas. In 2000, the last time the SOA was voted on, Congress was only 10 votes short of the goal of shutting down SOA.

"The School of the Americas is part of a corporate-highjacked foreign policy that's making us a lot of enemies," says Father Roy Bourgeois, Maryknoll priest and former Naval officer and Purple Heart recipient who is the founder of School of the Americas Watch. "If we want lasting peace and security we need we need a foreign policy that reflects our values of justice, democracy and dignity."

The struggle continues. The U.S. government is plotting "regime change" in Venezuela, working hard to oust President Hugo Chavez from office though he has been democratically elected by the Venezuelan people twice — 86 people were arrested and held for two nights in the unheated Columbus Stockade after their nonviolent protest at the SOA/WHISC in November. They will all likely be sentenced to 6-month prison terms after their bench trial in January.

So let us honor the hardworking people of El Salvador, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Argentina and Colombia who continue to pursue the promise of democracy despite so many years of torture, rape and "disappearance" at the hands of the U.S. trained counterinsurgency forces. And let us be humbled by the sacrifice of 19 year old Chani Geigle and other American patriots who love their country enough to sacrifice their bodies for it, and who have the courage to say, "NO MAS" to terrorism, "NO MAS" to injustice, "NO MAS" to oppression.

Thank you Chani!
Chani's address until March 10, 2003:
Chantilly Geigle 90968-020, Federal Prison Camp
Dublin, 5675 8th St. Camp Park, Dublin, California 94568

Sue Skinner is a registered nurse and lives in Astoria.
The internet address of SOA is www.soaw.org

AN EXTREME BUT TYPICAL STORY

BY VICTORIA STOPPIELLO

The October 25, 2002, front-page section of *The Oregonian* was almost totally devoted to articles about the capture of two suspects in the Washington, D.C. area sniper attacks. At the very back, on the next to last page, a headline read, "Sniper suspect might have face chemical weapons in Iraq." The opening paragraph said the 41 year old suspect is a Gulf War veteran and may be suffering from "Gulf War Syndrome, an illness which experts said can result in unexplained bouts of intense violence." When I heard that a nursing student who killed several people and then himself was also a Gulf War veteran, it only added to my concern.

My mind went back to the stereotype that emerged about Vietnam vets: edgy, drugged up, and quick to inappropriate violent responses. For a lot of us, that stereotype had its ultimate portrayal in the 1976 film, *Taxi Driver*, where Robert DeNiro plays a New York City cab driver who takes revenge on a pimp played by Harvey Keitel, after failing to execute his first target, a political candidate. Some viewers probably thought the DeNiro character was just plain crazy and the killing at the climax of the film a senseless event. I had mixed feelings, but the one that stayed with me was "What do we expect?" We train men to kill under specified circumstances without using much introspection or judgment. The Vietnam conflict was basically a guerrilla war, and if soldiers didn't use a slightly paranoid approach to battlefield conditions, they wouldn't last very long. It would be hard to leave those reactions behind.

Unfortunately, we may have a new stereotype in the making, this time of Gulf War veterans. What I noticed about the recent news article was a few facts: "Out of the roughly 540,000 U.S. troops who served in 'Desert Storm', 175,000 are thought to have some form of the neurological and neuro-immune illnesses that have been documented so far." That is slightly over 32%. There are more people involved than I realized.

More light was shed on the problem by Dr. William Baumzweiger, a neurologist and psychiatrist who specializes in treating Gulf War Syndrome patients: "Once it came out that he (referring to the suspect of the D.C. killings) had a military background, I said this must be a Gulf War veteran... This kind of bizarre story, where he is on the one hand killing people and on the other hand writing notes to the government basically pleading for help, that's a typical story you see in Gulf War veterans."

While the headline stated chemical weapons might be the problem, the article mentions that Oregon researchers just published a study saying there is no link between exposure to chemical weapons and Gulf War syndrome: "Soldiers exposed to chemical weapons are no sicker than other veterans of the war." Some other factor could be involved. More study is needed.

It took a long time for Agent Orange to be implicated in Vietnam veterans' health problems. Agent Orange, a 50/50 mix of 2,4,D and 2,4,5,T, was one of many herbicides used by U.S. forces. However, it was dioxin that contaminated the herbicide which caused the health problems. Because soldiers cannot legally sue the government for injuries caused during their service, they sued the herbicide manufacturers (Dow, Monsanto and several other chemical companies) and won out of court settlements.*

We older civilians know a little about the Vietnam War because it was televised; it was headline news complete with photos. The Gulf War, by comparison, had the news coverage and immediacy of a video game. As a society, we know very little about battlefield conditions during Desert Storm, what we did to Iraqi soldiers and civilians or what our troops experienced.

The Oregonian article says:

"For five years following the Gulf War, the Pentagon refused to acknowledge that some troops might have been suffering medical problems... Under increasingly severe pressure from Congress and the public, the Pentagon finally admitted it knew of some chemical contamination and acknowledged the veterans really were sick."

While our administration once again considers going to war, it is important to remember the people who have already served and face up to our responsibility as a society to assist them. Unfortunately, too often veterans and their service related problems are brushed aside. Too bad it takes an extreme example, headline news and so many deaths to bring the Gulf War Syndrome to the average person's attention.

Victoria Stoppello is a freelance writer from Ilwaco.

*Vietnam vets involved in the suit rather sarcastically claim the settlement amounted to \$5 per vet.

1287 COMMERCIAL ST.
ASTORIA 325-5221