

Witness for the revolution

Photojournalist Ken Hawkins reflects on San Salvador massacre, Jonestown and his new work to use photography to combat poverty



Above, El Salvador federal soldiers crouch in the foreground as demonstrators climb over bodies of the dead and dying to take refuge inside the San Salvador Metropolitan Cathedral from the hail of gunfire. Ken Hawkins, the photographer, was on those steps only seconds before the shooting began.

At left, the dead, shot by the federal soldiers, are laid out on the sanctuary floor of the San Salvador Metropolitan Cathedral, the church of Archbishop Oscar Romero, currently being considered for sainthood. The dead and dying were dragged inside the sanctuary from the steps of the church where they were shot.

Photos by Ken Hawkins



Ken Hawkins created EverySecondChild.org to highlight the work photojournalists are doing in the area of child poverty. Hawkins says he created the collection of photos after covering so many stories around the world that negatively affected children. The project's name comes from a 2005 UNICEF report that of the 2.2 billion children in the world, 1 billion live in poverty; in other words, every second child.

BY STACY BROWNHILL
STAFF WRITER

In today's media landscape, writers can get away with reporting battles from afar. But conflict zone photojournalists have no such luxury. Action is their shop floor. Armed with cameras, these men and women don't just capture scenes of bullets and bloodshed, they live them. Last year, more than 100 journalists were killed on the job, according to the International Press Institute; two renowned photojournalists, Tim Hetherington and Chris Hondros, were killed last month in Misrata, Libya.

Portland's Ken Hawkins was a conflict zone journalist. At 61, Hawkins is quiet and still as he unravels his memories amidst a swarm of black and white negatives. Through his camera lenses, Hawkins captured the Vietnam War in 1970, the Jonestown mass suicide in 1978, the Sandinista Insurrection in Nicaragua from 1977 to 1979, the massacre at Metropolitan Cathedral in El Salvador in 1979, and other historically explosive events. He has worked for TIME, Newsweek and Wired, and has been a member of prestigious agencies such as SYGMA and the American Society of Media Photographers. In the calm of his Lake Oswego home, it's hard to imagine Hawkins running through gunfire; but he did, and he photographed it.

Hawkins returns this week to the site of one of his grisliest photo-shoots: Metropolitan Cathedral in San Salvador, El Salvador. Thirty-two years ago, Hawkins was on special assignment in San Salvador for Paris Match, covering the hostage taking of a French ambassador who was being held by the People's Revolutionary Bloc (BPR), a left-wing guerilla group. Unexpectedly, he ended up witnessing a massacre when

police opened fire on a peaceful BPR demonstration outside Metropolitan Cathedral on May 9, 1979. Twenty-four people were killed on the Cathedral steps, many were wounded, and Hawkins himself barely escaped.

Six months before the San Salvador massacre, Hawkins had descended upon Jonestown to cover the mass suicide of more than 900 people for Newsweek. The Cincinnati-born, Atlanta-grown, Portland migrant (and Street Roots volunteer and board member) describes the San Salvador massacre and Jonestown suicides with remarkable candidness. He also discusses the similarities he sees in the recent Arab Spring, disheartening trends in journalism and his online gallery projects — 52Selects.com and EverySecondChild.org.

Stacy Brownhill: Describe the massacre in San Salvador at Metropolitan Cathedral.

Ken Hawkins: I was 29 years old. Paris Match had hired me, because of my experience with long lenses, to cover the hostage taking of Michel Dondenne at the French Embassy in San Salvador. No one was sure if Dondenne was even alive, but I got a picture of him through a window. After that, Paris Match wanted sidebars on BPR (the guerrilla group holding Dondenne). BPR was holding a demonstration at Metropolitan Cathedral, so I decided to cover it.

It was a beautiful day. Vendors were selling tamales in the square by the Cathedral, government workers were eating lunch in the park and protestors — mostly youth — were reciting speeches to the crowd. Yellow balloons were everywhere, in support of the demonstration. I was there

with two other reporters from Associated Press and United Press International. It was high noon.

I saw two groups of soldiers in riot gear coming around either side of the Cathedral, sealing it off. I felt all the hairs rise on my back and I knew something was wrong. My antennas were still up from reporting in Nicaragua. I grabbed the other two reporters — one of them was reluctant — and said, 'we have to go.' We were halfway across the square when I heard shooting and the soldiers opened fire. We kept dashing away, in between cars, shooting film as we went. There was no time to be scared.

I remember blood coming down the steps. A pregnant woman got hit. A number were wounded. There were people crawling over dead bodies to get inside the Cathedral for protection. The soldiers sealed off the area for 24 hours, and the smell in that confined space was tremendous. It was a violent, inhumane message to the people and BPR saying "you are not going to unseat our government."

There were conflicting reports afterwards. I was one of the few neutral observers. I heard the command to fire, but the government's version was that soldiers

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