PHOTOS COURTESY THE RACHEL CORRIE FOUNDATION FOR PEACE AND JUSTICE

Rachel Corrie (far right) with the Nasrallah family in Rafah, Gaza in 2003. This is the family who lived in the house that Rachel was killed defending. The photo was taken inside the garden wall of their home.

Defending Rachel Corrie

Craig and Cindy Corrie are fighting in Israeli court and continuing their daughter's legacy of peace

BY JAKE THOMAS
STAFF WRITER

Olympia, Wash. is an "All-American City," according to the sign that greets visitors. It's also the hometown of Rachel Corrie, who has had a street named after her in Iran's capital, a play produced about her life staged on almost every continent, and whose death continues to be a source controversy.

In 2003, Corrie, a 23-year-old student at Olympia's Evergreen State College and peace activist, was crushed to death while trying to prevent an Israeli bulldozer from demolishing a Palestinian home in southern Gaza. Following her death, Corrie's parents, Craig and Cindy Corrie, became embroiled in a heated international issue that they had only given passing attention to in the past. The continue today to find answers to why their daughter was slain while trying to gain some sort of accountability from Israel.

In August, an Israeli judge handed down a ruling on the civil lawsuit brought by the Corries against Israel and its Ministry of Defense. The judge absolved Israel of any responsibility for Corrie's death, ruling that the state couldn't be held at fault for civilian deaths that occur in conflict areas. The ruling was panned by human rights advocates, who said that it enforced a culture of impunity in the Israeli military while also setting a dangerous precedent that could affect the safety of activists and journalists operating in conflict areas in Israel-Palestine.

Despite the judge's ruling, questions concerning why and exactly how Rachel Corrie died remain unsettled. Although the court found her death to be an accident, others dispute that finding, arguing that she was intentionally run over. Additionally, the military investigation into Corrie's death has been widely criticized, even by the State Department under President George Bush, a staunch ally of Israel.

Following the court ruling, the Guardian newspaper called Corrie a "memory that refuses to die." A play based on her writings, "My Name is Rachel Corrie," continues to be produced, and her parents hope to carry on her work through the Rachel Corrie Foundation for Peace and Justice.

Street Roots spoke with the Corries about their experience seeking truth about their daughter's death, their plans to appeal the court decision and what it's like having their daughter become an international symbol.

Jake Thomas: *You're preparing to appeal your case to the Israeli Supreme Court. What are you hoping the outcome will be?*

Craig Corrie: Well, I think for one thing, the general opinion of the judge was that Rachel was killed as an act of war, and Israel is not responsible for anything it does as an act of war. I think that flies in the face of a whole lot of international law. I think it flies in the face, as a solider in Vietnam; what I was taught our responsibilities were. I think it flies in the face of common decency. I think it makes it particularly problematic for any civilian in a war or conflict area. I think it makes it difficult for journalists, and certainly for Rachel as a human rights observer. So that overarching finding needs to be challenged, and that's far bigger than Rachel. I think that when you look at what the judge wrote, I think he ignored most of what our attorney did. For instance, he found that the investigation done by the Israeli military police was, I believe, "faultless" when translated into English.

The day after Rachel was killed, President Bush was promised a thorough, credible and transparent investigation by Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and it's still the position of our government that that never happened.

When people came to the witness stand, particularly the person who conducted the investigation, it became amazingly obvious that the investigation was lacking. They found out that there was a camera on the border that was taking video, and they failed to produce all of that video that was available for the day. They claim that it started right as Rachel was killed, and there was no more video. He said that the copy of that video was first given to the officers in charge of the higher echelons of the chain of command, and I think it was one week later that he got a copy of it. Well, other video from that time has been on Israeli TV, it's been on different documentaries, our government has seen it, we've seen it. This guy is testifying that there is no other video, but we don't have the chain of custody of that video to produce it in court, so that was a particularly appalling piece of it.

Cindy Corrie: I would just add that the lead investigator testified in court that they believed they were at war with everyone in Gaza including the peace activists, which was startling. This is someone you would hope would be impartial. It seems hard for me to believe that he could be impartial with that attitude.

There was a military log that was written the day Rachel was killed. The last entry that day was from the deputy high commander, who was in charge, who wrote about a shoot-to-kill order on the border that was always expanding because they were taking down rows and rows of houses, and he commented that that order needed to remain and was important.

Two other internationals were killed after Rachel. A peace activist was shot in the head within a two-mile stretch of where Rachel was killed within seven weeks. A photojournalist who was doing a film on home demolitions was killed. So three internationals and many Gazan civilians were killed during that period, and yet the lead investigator never questioned the military about the shoot-to-kill order and what was going on there at the time.

J.T.: *So what would like to see come out of the courts?*

Cindy: All along our purpose has been to find truth, to have accountability, to have justice for Rachel, but also to bring attention to a situation that has harmed a great many people, and we believe is harmful to Israel, as well as its military. And it's not just Craig and me and our family that have articulated this, there are Israeli organizations who have provided legal assistance to Palestinians and so fourth, and their position is that the courts and their system of investigation and accountability has been really very faulty.

So you know it's unusual for a case like this to go to this length in Israel. Either people are not able to bring a lawsuit or something happened early on and they are halted. Ours was actually slowed down for a while because the Knesset [Israeli parliament] had passed a law saying you couldn't bring suit against the Israeli military in a conflict area. That law, to some extent, still applies, but it was overturned by the Supreme Court. But there are many Palestinians who never have the opportunity to pursue justice. You know the case has forced the Israeli military to come to court to testify and at least be accountable to that degree in their own country.

Craig: We went into it really with two goals: to get some idea of truth with Rachel and some accountability. There is a lot of truth that did not come out. But in terms of accountability, I would like to have the high court look at the investigation and say, no this is not credible and transparent.

We brought witnesses and they had a very different account of what happened that day than the soldiers, and they agreed with each other and it was consistent with what they told to the media and the Israeli lawyers right after Rachel was killed. So there is a consistent side of this we heard from the witnesses on Rachel's side. We'd like to see that recognized by the court, we'd like to see all the inconsistencies of the Israeli military looked at by the court, and at the end of the day some sort of accountability for the actions of this military.

I was squad leader in Vietnam, and, strangely enough, part of my duties were to be in charge of bulldozer operations in the jungle. You are responsible for what's in front of that blade, and as a squad leader, you're in charge of the behavior of 10 men. Part of that is war crimes don't occur, and they come back whole, not just physically, but mentally and morally, and that's a really hard job that needs to happen before these incidents occur.

Everything I've been able to figure out about the Israeli Defense Forces is that they're really behind on that sort of thing. There is no accountability. There was a girl killed on the border that they recorded the radio conversation of that confirmed the kill of this little girl, and you know the solider didn't even get convicted largely because of a botched investigation that was carried out by the same person who investigated Rachel's case. That's horrific.

So that's a lot to ask out of one appeal. The court is coming in saying that they recognize no civilian in the whole of Gaza. That's something we could perhaps have a positive impact on.

J.T.: *I read in one media account that quoted your lawyer saying you've been fighting an uphill battle. How optimistic are you about this appeal?*

Cindy: Well, we're realistic and have been throughout. The Israeli Supreme Court, in some matters, has a good reputation and has taken some stands that have gone against the government. It will be a panel of judges. We were reliant on one judge. So we just have to wait and see, but the point that Craig made is that in some ways we felt like we have no choice but to appeal because the decision was such a bad one, such a damaging one to basic human rights.

Craig: I think you have to demand justice no matter what your expectations are. We can't let the opportunity for justice to die because we didn't try. You have to go after it, or I think it's a real problem for our society as a whole

Cindy: We would never want to prejudge what the Israeli Supreme Court will do. I remained optimistic about the judge we had in Haifa District Court up until the moment my friend started to translate to me what he had to say, and I will be optimistic about the Israeli Supreme Court. There are possibilities beyond that. There are international venues, but one cannot pursue justice through those until you've exhausted all the possibilities in a country's legal system. So we're just taking the next important step that we need to take.

J.T.: *I've read that going to court for you was an absolutely last resort. What had you done previously?*

Cindy: We worked with our congressman, Brian Baird, who said we could call for an investigation into Rachel's case, and he introduced a bill to do that. He, knowing the landscape in the U.S. Congress, thought we would get 30 supporters. After about two years, that resolution died in committee. It never came out of the committee controlled by a congresswoman from Florida who is very supportive of Israel, but there were 78 members of Congress who signed on in support. Our extended family visited every congressional office calling for support of that resolution. We worked with the State

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