

Finding hope in the youth of El Salvador

José Gomez's vision of a better world

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José Gomez was a teenager when the bloody Salvadoran civil war started in 1979 — a war that would last for 13 years, perpetuated by funds and weapons supplied by the U.S. government. Next month, Gomez will share his own experiences to Portland where he will speak on immigration, politics and solidarity with El Salvador.

Gomez was part of the Christian Base Community movement before the war started. Through this movement, he and other youths learned about the reality of poverty and oppression in El Salvador, a reality he had lived since his birth. During the war, Gomez temporarily set aside his involvement in the Christian Base Communities to focus his energies on a clandestine political movement — a branch of the guerrillas — that resisted the repressive acts of the government against its people.

Eight years after the war's official end, Gomez became involved with FUNDAHMER, a nonprofit, non-governmental organization in El Salvador that continues to resist oppression and works towards transformation through education, community development and solidarity. Before his departure for the U.S., Gomez agreed to speak by phone with Street Roots about El Salvador's future, his work, and why it should matter to U.S. Americans.

Sarah Hansell:
How much is the political unrest from the 1980s responsible for what you see in El Salvador now?

José Gomez: It affects everything because this period of the '80s, when the war happened, it wasn't permitted that society worked together on development as one effort. Rather it disintegrated society. It divided us into two bands. In these years, we still see those two very separate groups, where the rightist political groups don't have anything to do with the leftist political groups. And for that reason, (regarding) the development policies that need to be implemented, there are always obstacles that don't permit for these policies to be put into place.

After the Peace Accords, there wasn't good attention paid to respond to all of the problems that had given rise to the war and the conflict.

The causes that originated the war are the same problems at this moment: marginalization, exploitation. There are young people and workers that have a salary for starvation here. The peasant farmworker does not have the necessary tools to develop a kind of agriculture that allows him or her to not only to sustain his family or her family, but improvement for their family and

their community. So we keep having these same causes that at that time gave rise to the conflict. What has changed is political openness, but many of the causes continue to exist.

S.H.: *You've seen the country go through some pretty extreme political changes. How would you describe the political climate of El Salvador now, and what are your hopes and fears for El Salvador's political future?*

J.G.: There have been big changes in the political arena, in terms of having access and being heard, the many different political opinions that are in the country. But the most difficult is changing the political way of thinking of the right, especially business owners who have a very short view about development here in the country. They are business people who only see their own interests and not the interests of the population. This is one of the much bigger problems that we have that keeps us within

conditions of poverty still. Organized crime is inserted within these institutions, the businesses and the rightist political movements. The hope is that the leftist governments can keep opening the political scene and can maintain some changes that can give us a lot more hope for improving our conditions.

This is our hope even though the reality is pretty complex and pretty complicated. More so than anything because in many institutions

narco trafficking is already there, gangs are already there.

But our hope is that with the new changes in the government, we can have the opportunity to have better kinds of development. Not just infrastructure development, which is what we've always had from the rightist governments, but rather human development.

S.H.: *What's it like for youths growing up in El Salvador today?*

J.G.: For youths, there continue to be many deficiencies in terms of access to education more than anything, because we only have one national public university, which every year maybe between 25,000 and 30,000 young people apply to enter. But the university only has capacity to receive 10,000 students. The rest, the 20,000 students — they are the big worry. How can we involve them in activities that can be more productive?



PHOTO COURTESY OF AMANDA AGUILAR SHANK

José Gomez, shown above in El Salvador, will be speaking in Portland on Oct. 7 about his work to fight poverty in his country.

Given this situation, there are many students that work in the informal sector. There are not very many opportunities for work or education, which means that a lot of young people are dragged into gang activity, and that's what occupies a great majority of the population — these young people who don't have opportunities to keep studying.

I also think that young people these days have a lot of energy. They're exploited by big businesses here in El Salvador with salaries that are very low, that aren't enough to be able to survive in this country. This also allows many youth to think of the famous "American Dream," and that's why we have also this phenomenon of immigration. But we have hope that these efforts that we're working on, even though they're small, can give fruit in the future.

S.H.: *You talked about immigration of Salvadorans to the U.S. What impact does that have on El Salvador?*

J.G.: The impact is that immigration generates more families that are disintegrated. This is a phenomenon that is still latent because many families that left as refugees during the time of the war now bring their kids or their grandkids to the U.S., and they again leave their family in pieces. So families begin to live more at a distance from each other. It doesn't generate new values in the nuclear family, but rather it disintegrates. More than an economic impact on the Salvadoran family, it's more an issue of family disintegration.

S.H.: *Why should Americans care about what's going on in El Salvador?*

J.G.: The military-government-state part of the American people has had a presence in our country for a long time from before the war. And we believe that the United States government has also been responsible for all of the atrocities that have happened in our country. Yeah, we believe that after the war, the U.S. government continues to be present in the internal decisions that are made in El Salvador. ... We would like to ask the Salvadoran government that they allow El Salvador to have their own decisions, because with that opportunity, we realize as Salvadorans that we can move forward. This is at a governmental level as it has to do with the U.S.

The people of the United States have always been in solidarity with us, with our struggles. And at these times, when the situation is really difficult — like right now when it's still very difficult for peasants and workers — solidarity is what allows us to have this more permanent relation with the North American people.

In El Salvador there are many people who have a lot of hope in being able to fix their own internal situation, and in El Salvador, there are communities and there are people who wish to continue these relationships of solidarity, not only with people of the United States but with peoples of the world, with the struggles and the fights that we have here. We hope that we don't continue to be invaded, that our resources don't continue to be robbed, and we have hope that there might be a day that we can live in a different kind of a world. That, we believe, is possible, with more justice, with more equality.



Dignity



Poverty