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The Death of Ben Linder

by Norman Solomon

Ben Linder has been laid to rest in far-off Nicaragua. Here in his home town, mourners are struggling with intense grief and seething anger.

Media coverage has described how Benjamin Ernest Linder, 27, was working as a mechanical engineer at a rural hydroelectric project when he died April 28 at the hands of Contra guerrillas fighting against the Sandinista government.

But as the glare of publicity fades, those of us with personal memories of Ben Linder are left to ponder the meaning of his death. The night before he was buried in the Nicaraguan countryside northeast of Managua, we were among a thousand Oregon residents who gathered to light candles at dusk in front of the Federal Building in downtown Portland. Together we listened to speeches, we sang, and we cried.

I met Ben in 1977, when he participated in protests against the Trojan nuclear power plant. At age 17, he conveyed gentleness and quiet determination that remained with him. When our paths crossed again in the early 1980s, he said he'd become very concerned about the situation in Central America.

For people who knew Ben even slightly, the media accounts inevitably seem pale. For one thing, no news reports can communicate the sincerity and warmth that were to be found in his eyes. For another, no narrative can dispel the painful noncomprehension of his death.

Why would anyone want to kill Ben for working to provide electricity to a small village in an impoverished country? In a personal context, it makes no sense. At a political level, however, it is part of a grim reality: That's the kind of war that President Reagan's "freedom fighters" are waging.

Unable to gain much of a foothold, the Contra forces—termed "the moral equal of our Founding Fathers" by Reagan—have increasingly turned to terror tactics and disruption of the already-destitute Nicaraguan economy. Contras purposely target health-care workers, teachers, clergy and engineers laboring in the provinces to help peasants learn how to make progress against grinding poverty.

With a degree in civil engineering, Ben Linder went to Nicaragua in 1983 to begin working on small-scale electrical projects. His salary amounted to \$13 a month. "He brought electricity to clinics to keep vaccines cold, to light schoolhouses and to light farmhouses," recalled a friend who had visited him.

Ben's technical skills were sorely needed there. Of course he knew that he was in a war zone. And he knew that the area had become a war zone because of U.S. government policies. He became the first American volunteer to share the fates of many thousands of Nicaraguan civilians murdered by the Contras.

Such carnage is likely to increase during the next several months. Early this year, Contra leaders say, their troops were down to a few bullets per week. But a new infusion of U.S. aid has brought a wealth of ammo and much else. Now the blood will flow again in torrents.

Ben Linder caught some of the first shrapnel of the resupplied Contra army. We may never know whether the fusillade that killed him was financed by profits from the U.S. arms sales to Iran, or one of the private funding sources from North America, or a CIA conduit developed by Lt. Col. Oliver L. North when he was running amok in the White House basement.

Nearly six months into the Iran-Contra arms scandal, it's all too easy to



Over 1,000 people gathered at Terry Shrank Plaza for a candlelight memorial to remember the life and work of Benjamin Linder. Linder, a 27-yr-old Portlander, was killed in Nicaragua when Contra

forget that — far away from Washington — real people are suffering and dying now because of White House policies in Central America. Upcoming congressional hearings promise to be exciting and suitably dramatic. But while past malfeasance undergoes scrutiny, large quantities of weapons and ammunition are moving from the U.S. into Contra base camps.

Those who still support aid to the Contras may not have given much thought to John Linder's words: "The U.S. government killed my brother. The Contras killed my brother. Ronald Reagan says he is a Contra. My brother's death was not an accident. His death was policy."

Yet Contra boosters may find it more disquieting to consider the state-

attacked the site he was investigating as a location for a hydroelectric plant.

Photo by Richard J. Brown

ment issued by former Contra leader Edgar Chamorro in the wake of Ben Linder's death.

"The Central Intelligence Agency is very much in control of the Contras," Chamorro said. "The CIA is sending a message to those in the international community who provide political support for Nicaragua that they are no longer safe there. The CIA and the Contras are killing the best, the people who want the best for Nicaragua."

Ben was one of those people. That's why he's dead.

Norman Solomon is a writer living in Portland. He is co-author of "Killing Our Own: The Disaster of American's Experience With Atomic Radiation" (Dell).

NECDC, PIC, Program Sign Joint Agreement

by Leon Harris and Jerry Garner

An agreement to provide apprenticeship carpentry training for up to 8 pre-apprenticeship carpenter trainees was announced by the Mayor's office on Monday, May 4th.

The agreement, executed between the Northeast Community Development Corporation, the Oregon Competency Based Carpenters Join Apprenticeship and Training Committee, and the Private Industry Council, marks the first formal agreement between an apprenticeship program (carpenters) and PIC.

This significant development will lead to jobs and career development based upon important skills and will enhance the opportunities of minorities in entering the trade professions.

The average starting wage of apprentices is \$7 per hour.

The Committee will also be charged with finding employment for the trainees with training agents certified by the Committee once the six-month training program is completed.

Signing the agreement were Ron Herndon, Vice Chairman of the NECDC; Cliff Hamlow, Resource Manager of R&H Construction; and James E. Watts, Vice President, Portland Private Industry Council.

"This agreement is an important step in addressing the employment needs of our minorities. The transition into state apprenticeship programs will provide careers for those who are involved in this project. The Private Industry Council will work with the carpenters apprenticeship committee to ensure that the requirements are met," according to Mayor J.E. "Bud" Clark.

Clark said this is a great step, and he hopes other trades will follow the lead of the carpenters and become involved in the program. He gave his support for the efforts of those involved, and said that he was sure that the agreement will be maintained for years to come.

Also in attendance was Mary Wendy Roberts, State of Oregon, Bureau of Labor and Industries.

Carpenters Apprenticeship



Ron Herndon (R), representing Community Development Corporation, signs an agreement to promote minority participation in apprenticeship programs at a press conference Monday morning.

May 4th. On hand were (L-R) Mary Wendy Roberts, James Watts, Cliff Hamlow, Bud Clark and Herndon.

Photo by Richard J. Brown