

A FOREIGN AFFAIR

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Almost 40 years ago, Art Kubick traveled to Mexico on a service trip. A part of him has never left.



In the summer of 1965, Art Kubick visited Mexico to work in poor communities in the mountains. A graduate student at Catholic University of America, he was part of a service trip organized in response to Pope John XXIII's call to U.S. dioceses to send missionaries to Latin America. Kubick met his wife in Mexico: Beth was part of the same service group. "That has maintained a connection for both of us over the years," he says.

Rivier's chair of the religious studies department and director of the Center for Peace and Social Justice, Kubick has returned to Latin America many times. He has traveled in El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Cuba. He works with numerous groups that serve the poor and refugees who have been displaced by the region's many civil wars.

Last semester, Kubick took a sabbatical to develop a better understanding of the role of volunteers in Latin America and the concept of "accompaniment". He explains that the term was developed by Oscar Romero, archbishop of San Salvador in the late 1970's. "It was applied to North Americans coming to work in Latin America developing a sense that their role was not to convert communities, but to listen and learn from the communities in which they were present," Kubick says. He also wanted to learn what spirituality nourished people who provide accompaniment.

While the tradition began with Americans and Canadians working with Guatemalan refugees, the term has developed a broad continuum of meaning. Kubick says that today it includes people living with poor communities. "There are poor accompanying other poor, those who are marginalized or excluded from society—AIDS sufferers, people with disabilities, gays and lesbians, families living in extreme poverty."



In Mexico, Kubick met a couple from Vermont who started an organization called VAMOS that works with poor communities. VAMOS founders Bill and Patty Coleman told Kubick that they learned to respond to the projects and needs the poor communities developed themselves. Other organizations, such as Witness for Peace, Peace Brigades International, and the Network In Solidarity With the People of Nicaragua (NISGUA), train people to physically walk alongside human rights workers and political leaders who have received death threats. “They provide an international presence to protect lives,” Kubick says.

Kubick has been a part of that international presence. In March 2004, he served as an election observer with the Share Foundation for El Salvador’s presidential election. The community requested observers to help ensure that the election was fair and honest. Kubick witnessed voting in the Department of Santa Ana. While the election itself seemed fair, there were accusations of a dirty campaign.

Kubick says the United States interjected itself into the campaign. U.S. government officials stated that if the FMLN party won, the U.S. would reconsider the immigration status of El Salvadorans who had come to the United States after Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the earthquakes in early 2001. Kubick says, “They had a special status that allowed them to live and work here; if FMLN won, they would have to go back. The money they send home is a huge source of income for El Salvador.” While the new U.S. Ambassador retracted the statement about immigration status, foreign factories and landowners also threatened to leave if the FMLN won and the U.S. threatened economic and trade sanctions.

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Volunteers developed an understanding that their role was not to convert communities, but to listen and learn from the communities in which they were present. (Courtesy Photograph).

Sixty percent of the eligible population voted. “The people have a very strong commitment to the importance of the election and voting,” says Kubick. The ARENA party, which has held power since 1989, won the election. Though the out- come of the election was not what many of the organized poor had worked for, they remained hopeful.

After the election results were announced, Kubick attended several Christian community meetings where people connected scripture with the reality of their lives. “In the midst of talking about the five hard years that were coming, they talked about hope,” he says. “The martyrs and Oscar Romero are very strongly present for these poor; their presence inspires hope.”

Kubick’s experiences in Latin America shape his teaching; liberation theology is a clear focus. In June he participated in a seminar in Cuernavaca, Mexico, on education for global citizenship. He hopes to incorporate this into the first-year and junior seminars and the honors courses he teaches.

In February 2001, Kubick and his wife visited Cuba with a group of Rivier faculty and students. “My wife has fallen in love with the Cuban people, so she’s been back there five or six times with Witness for Peace,” he says. Now that their four sons are grown, Kubick says that he and Beth have been able to travel more. Kubick visited Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador several times during his sabbatical, exploring and expanding his ties to the region he fell in love with almost 40 years ago. ■

* **JENNIFER LISKOW** earned a master’s in writing and literature from Rivier College in 2002; she has worked in Rivier’s Development Office for the last seven years. Jennifer spends her free time preparing food in her vintage 1950’s-style kitchen, practicing yoga, and listening to live music in Boston.