

Audio File ID: II2014_09

Interviewee: Norma Stoltz Chinchilla

Interviewer: Regina Mills

Interview Date: 2014-02-22

Duration: 01:17:42

TRANSCRIPT BEGIN

Regina Mills: This is Regina Mills, age 26. On February 22nd, 2014. We're in Norma [inaudible 00:00:07] hotel room. I'm interviewing her about her time with the solidarity movement with Central America.

Norma: I'm Norma Stoltz [inaudible 00:00:17] You want my age? (laughter)

Regina Mills: You don't have to.

Norma: I'm currently a professor at California State University, Long Beach. I've been an activist in the solidarity movement since the 1970s.

Regina Mills: The first question I have then is, how did you become part of the Central American solidarity movement?

Norma: When I first went to Guatemala, I had an opportunity to go to Guatemala in 1965 when I graduated with my BA degree, there was a great program at that time that gave Fulbright Fellowships to BA graduates who weren't necessarily serious researchers. But the idea was to attend a university and mingle with university students in Latin America. Supposedly as a result of that, they would become more favorable to the US and the US way of life. There were just certain countries that had those scholarships and one of them happened to be Guatemala. There were actually 10 fellowships to Guatemala, and almost nobody wanted to go to Guatemala because it was not one of the high-status countries at the time. Argentina, Chile, Brazil, those sorts of countries were the big choices. But I wanted to go to Guatemala and I have a hard time explaining exactly why I was so convinced that that was where I wanted to go. Except that I did have a high school teacher who was very radical and I'm pretty sure that he must have said something about the US being involved in a coup to overthrow the democratically elected governments in 1944-'54. I think also in college at the University of Pacific, there was a professor who had been there during the Arbenz period. Although my college was a cluster college within the larger college, I must have had contact with him and maybe even taken a course from him. So I used to sit in the library and read everything about Guatemala. My idea was, first of all, I wanted to find out what it was like to be in a majority indigenous country and also whether or not the indigenous people had been involved in the revolution of '44-'54. The other thing was, I just wanted to see if anything was left of that revolution.

So that's why I went to Guatemala, and it changed my life as these kinds of things often do. By the way, I should say, that Fulbright Program was terminated two or three years later. I think the problem was that instead of us converting the Latin American university students, we came back and we were pretty strong critics of US foreign policy. So at some point, the Congress voted to terminate it. But I think, my view would be that we did a public service and many of us have lifelong remnants of that experience. So in my case, when the Central Americans started coming to Los Angeles in large numbers, unprecedented numbers -- there had just been a tiny Guatemalan community in Los Angeles and an even smaller Salvadoran community over the years -- all of a sudden, the big influx at the end of the 1970s meant

that there were people, many of whom came with just the shirt on their back, tremendous need for support, but very few institutions that could accommodate them. The traditional Mexican American community wasn't in a situation to receive them because these were different from the traditional economic migrants. There was some stigma attached to them in some ways. Even if they had long-existing relatives and families, the families were also worried, why are these people fleeing? What are their politics? Are they going to make me look less American? So there was a tremendous need for support and there were very few people who were potential supporters really.

It came down to the people who had either been ministers or missionaries or priests or nuns in Central America or Peace Corps volunteers or people like me who'd had a Fulbright and ended up marrying a Guatemalan too. We were integrated into a Guatemalan family, even though we lived in LA. Many of us were approached individually by activists, especially Salvadoran activists, and asked to get involved, which we did. My first involvement was with the Sandinista Committee actually. Then after the victory of the revolution, my ex-husband and I decided to start the Guatemalan Information Center because the Salvadorans were already starting their groups and their committees. But nobody was filling in that gap for the Guatemalans. We started the Guatemalan Information Center. I think it was in, I have been trying to find out the exact date, so the date remains to be confirmed, but I think it was at least 1981. It might have been as early as 1980. Our first office was at the First Unitarian Church on Eighth Street and Vermont in Los Angeles. Then later we had our office near McArthur Park on Alvarado and Seventh Street, which is a place where all the rest of them, the Salvadorans, [inaudible 00:06:28], all the groups were there in the same building. The park was the central focus place for people who wanted to organize, but also people who were just coming. In the early days, we'd be out there at night with candles and banners and soliciting donations in a tin cup and singing songs and that sort of thing.

I should say also though, that the Central American Solidarity Movement in Los Angeles built on previous political experiences that certain people had. For instance, there were people who had been activists in the Farm Workers' Movement in California that Cesar Chavez had worked with Chavez. Some of those were also Anglos, but some of them were Chicanos. Then, others of us had been involved in other Latin American solidarity activities, like in my case, Chile. I did my dissertation on Chile and when the coup came, just a few months after I finished my dissertation, a lot of people were being detained or killed that I'd had contact with, so I very much threw myself into trying to lobby against the dictatorship and so forth. We had that background and some of those folks became involved and many of them became involved in support for El Salvador. But in my case, because of my experience in Guatemala, that was my place. We organized this group and our vision was to have a group that included North Americans and Central Americans and others. We ended up having actually people from countries that you wouldn't expect like Iran and we had some disaffected Mexicans who didn't want to work with the Mexican groups. We tried to model and because Jorge and I were from two different countries, we tried to model this multinational solidarity model. We also tried not to have it aligned with any particular group in Guatemala. Our rule was that you could individually be affiliated with a group or sympathetic to a group. But we tried to keep GIC as a non-aligned group, which was different from many of the Salvadoran groups who often had separate groups for the Salvadorans and the North Americans, although there was contact, but that was our vision.

It was an incredible experience because it meant that we became family, we became very close and our children had childcare together and we spent enormous amounts of our waking hours in these activities. But they were all-encompassing, they were our intellectual life, our political life, our cultural life, our religious life, or spiritual life if you want to call it that and our family life all in one. I always lived in Long Beach during this time period, and we always met in downtown LA or another part of Los Angeles. It

meant a lot of commuting, and nevertheless, it's like every waking hour we were in LA. Today it's more difficult because the traffic is worse, and so it really only took us about 35 minutes to get from Long Beach to downtown LA under good conditions. We went all over LA everywhere, every neighborhood. We were part of the sanctuary movement also, and so I remember going to temples and churches in San Fernando Valley, quite a ways away and debating the INS commissioner who actually would almost threaten church members who might have worked in the defense industry with possible revocation of their security clearance if their church voted in favor of sanctuaries. He was a really tough guy. What was his name? It just flashed through my mind. It sounds odd to think of it, but everybody knew the INS Commissioner, he was famous and pretty belligerent, pretty strong guy and not above threatening people in that way. But many, many churches and temples did declare sanctuary, so that created another whole part to the movement, and like with James [inaudible 00:11:27] we were involved in the Southern California Interfaith Task Force.

Some of my closest friends were the nuns and missionaries who had been in Central America. All of them understood what was happening there, and all of us trying valiantly to explain to a North American public why this wasn't a communist, anti-communist battle. But why it was really a social justice issue that anybody should be able to identify with. But it was tough. It was very tough because the media really didn't want to cover Guatemala. It didn't really want to cover Central America in general. But then, at a certain point, there were openings, and they did start to explain things in terms of the Nicaraguan revolution, and the number of Salvadorians was growing so fast. There were about two to one Salvadorians versus Guatemalans in LA throughout much of that period, so the sheer numbers opened up the coverage for El Salvador to some degree, as well as the US State Department agenda. But Guatemala, wow, it was like you knew one reality and people reading the newspaper or watching TV know another reality, and it was such a challenge to figure out how to make them come together. One example, I guess of that is Rigoberta Menchú's choose first trip to the United States. She came to LA, and I was asked to be her translator, and we had to beg people to come and hear her. We had to almost bribe people to come and say, this is a really important person. She has an important message, you've never had a chance to hear something directly from an indigenous person before, let alone an indigenous woman. Nobody knew her. Nobody thought -- Even at the Salvadorian political people were the worst problem. Because they said, "Well, is she a high level official of the revolutionary, the guerillas? If she's not, why should we go listen to her?" I'm like, oh my God, we have a problem here. Even the few that did come to hear her among these very political Salvadorians, they said, well, she didn't really say anything. I suppose in a way she didn't compared to what they were used to, she didn't come down and lay down the line.

She talked about her life and her experiences and the experiences of other people, and I remember translating for her. People would ask questions. Usually, often we were in small settings, which was really nice actually because a very intimate relationship would develop between her and the people listening to her. At one point, there were mostly women who are mothers listening to her and she talked about her mother and her mother's death and it was just electric. Nobody wanted to move and tears flowed and then one time she was talking to some labor activists. As a translator, I kept thinking I wanted to correct her and make her story more linear and make her answers more direct. I kept thinking, do I have the right to embellish and improve, and I say improve in quotes because obviously now I realized, who was I to think that I would be improving on it. That's a completely Western idea. But nobody has explained that to me at that time, so I'm thinking, how much liberty can I take? I know a clearer way to answer that question using what she's saying. I tried to restrain myself. I hope I restrained myself. But what I finally realized by the end of the session each time was that, in the end, it all worked out. She explained what she wanted to explain. It's just, it was in a more circular fashion. Later on I had a

workshop one time as a faculty member on different modes of student thinking and writing depending on the culture they come from and I'm like, that's what it was. I get it now. That was an incredible experience. Then later on, a couple of times she came back. But of course, her status was totally different by that time. I'm trying to think of some other highlights of those early...

Regina Mills: I can also ask you a question.

Norma: Yeah, go ahead.

Regina Mills: One thing I was thinking about is thinking about maybe who your biggest influence or inspiration within the movement was.

Norma: Well, I'll confess. I read "Sandino's Daughters" one night and fell absolutely in love with Dora María Téllez. I just thought I wanted it to be her or be near her or something. She was the first example ever of a woman combatant and I just couldn't help -- I'm sure I totally romanticized it, and then there were other stories in that book that moved me as well. Because basically it was a man's world, politics was a man's world and academia was a man's world and here I was somebody who aspired to both. Who was there to show me, especially an example of courage or being the first or, it's pretty hard being the first. Those were inspirations and I'd say the Sandinistas in general at the moment, where I got to go to a conference a year after the victory where we talked about women and gender issues. I met some women who were working in Nicaragua. They were not Nicaraguan, but they were a Basque feminist and other feminists from Latin America were there. They became my role models too, of how to integrate feminism and revolutionary perspectives, Marxist perspectives. Also how to translate practically this into an agenda and how to struggle politically to get the male compañeros to accept that these things were not contradictory.

And in my own university at that time, well, actually just before that, I was at University of California, Irvine from 1974 to '82. I had my own battles with male Marxists, Maoists in particular. I was so naive, I just kept thinking, well, if we just read one more document together, they'll understand. Or if I just am more patient or if just can explain it better. Or maybe I can find one more biography of some socialist woman from the past like Clara Zetkin or somebody and then they'll understand and it'll be okay, I can be both a Marxist and a feminist. I just didn't understand that they were fundamentally threatened by this attempted unity I was trying to create and also, of course, they had their theoretical reasons. But really in retrospect, the theoretical reasons were just masking their male privilege. They kept saying, "You solve gender conflicts after the revolution is over." And I kept thinking, "Why?" I mean, they were actually more willing to accept that race might be a contradiction that you had to overcome in the course of organizing workers, for example. But feminism was bourgeois. So, I had a terrible, terrible time, but I didn't understand what a battle I was in until I lost my battle for tenure and they were a big part of it.

By the time I was involved in this new political work, I decided that was going to be my job, to write about the intersection of feminism and Marxism. When the Sandinista Revolution happened, and there were actually these women working in, I was just like in heaven. I learned from them and they, in turn, would sometimes use me as their front person because they wouldn't get into trouble if it was a foreigner talking to the comandantes or giving a seminar, or something like that. I was like, "Why me? I'm not really the expert." They were like, "It's better that way Norma, just do it." I played that role willingly and then in our solidarity group, we tried to do that too. We tried to raise people's consciousness about sexism and we also did homophobia and gay lesbian issues because we had a

couple of people come to the group wanting to work with us, the Latino who had HIV and that was a shock for the Guatemalans in our group, but we did it and we did it successfully.

Who else were my heroes, my role models? You know, I can't really think of many. Once in '88 when some of the women decided to return to Guatemala, who had been in exile, and actually work on women's issues, they also became my role models in a way, but we were working together by that time. So, I guess we were really more like partners. During the Guatemalan Revolution, I had a chance to meet a lot of people who sought refuge in Mexico and I was really amazed at their stories. I began to be worried that so many people were being killed, that their stories were going to be lost, so I asked if it might be possible to tape-record some oral histories and just put them away in an archive. There was absolutely no plan to do anything with them because I was terrified that these women would be invisible in they would be lost, and to me, they seem like true heroines. I was given permission and then some women who were activists found out that I was there in Mexico and come and ask me to record their story. It was amazing what they told me and even sometimes after the tape recorder was off, sometimes on the tape recorder. I kept wondering what is my role is as a foreign woman, as a white woman, is this really appropriate for me to be doing?

But I became convinced that we all have a niche, and I asked the women themselves I said, "Have you ever told this to the other women in your group?" And they said no. And I'd say, "Why not?" And they say, "Well, it's hard to trust on that level because we're in this kind of life and death struggle and things have to be compartmentalized and you don't tell people who you are, where you came from, or what your real innermost feelings are." That was really amazing because that meant they wanted me to know, and they trusted me to keep it safe. But talking about your personal lives and talking about yourself was not something that was encouraged. For reasons that we understand. That assured me that it was okay for me to do this and then eventually I did publish those in Spanish in a book called "Nuestras Utopias". I don't think there are any copies left at this point, but I'm hoping maybe eventually I can republish it because those stories inspired me incredibly and also I've found that younger women, especially women from Guatemalan background in LA, high school students, college students, they love the stories in that book.

I actually went on to get some interviews from women who were even active in the 1944-'54 period. There was one woman in LA who was in her late seventies when I first met her, who was just amazing. She wasn't really even political at that point, in '44-'54. She was married to a student activist who was. But after '54, she had trouble as a teacher. She became blacklisted because of who she had been associated with and came to LA and had a whole life in LA and then got politicized through the Central American Solidarity Movement. I had her interview there, had some other ones from the past, and then these amazing women. I think the indigenous women I became close to were the ones that were most inspiring to me and taught me the most because I'd never been able to have a window in that world. When I went to Guatemala it was really liked Apartheid like South Africa. No mixing across Latino-Indian lines. People talking in front of Indian maids as though they weren't there. No traje in public from anybody who was a professional or a teacher or anything like that. All of these changes came about because of the revolutionary movement. Then the revolutionary movement people were *compañeros* and *compañeras*, so you could talk and you could share experiences.

I was telling Pablo Certo the other day at this conference about a story that when I was in Mexico, a woman named Manuela was there. She had been from one of the villages where there was a lot of massacres and so we were together one afternoon and she said, "Norma, have you ever been to the opera?" I said, "Well, actually I've never been to the opera, Manuela." She said, "Well, they gave me a

list of things I should do while I'm here in Mexico to improve myself and expose myself to the world. I'm supposed to go to the anthropology museum and I already did that and I'm supposed to go to an opera in Bellas Artes." I'm like, "Oh, well." she said, "But I thought maybe you'd go with me?" I said, "We could go, it's in Italian, neither of us will understand it, but I guess that puts us on an equal footing." So there we are up in the balcony of Bellas Artes, Manuela with her traje, a whole couple feet taller and we had a ball and we laughed and laughed about that afterward. We were two foreigners enjoying the opera in their language. So I had those experiences and I just think, how could you be so lucky as to be able to cross those boundaries and share that deep humanity. I think that's just over and over again what kept us going.

As somebody in the conference yesterday, one of the reporters, said that never had he felt so close to humanity and the human condition. I think that's how we felt. Like that human connection, it's very difficult to reproduce in daily life. Except in a social movement where you're really swept up in the movement. I guess I'm having a hard time picking out particular people but the people I met in the movement influenced me so much. What I am today, even in the university, is so different because of my participation in the movement. One time, even the dean said to me, "Norma, how can we get people like you?" I said, "What do you mean people like me?" and she said, "Well, people with your values, with the way you care about things and the way you know how to cut through the bureaucracy," and I said "Well, you have to find people who've been activists." Because you don't learn that in graduate school, you learn that, cutting through the crap, it's what you do in a social movement when you don't have access to the media and you want to get access to the media, when you want to get access to the Archbishop of Los Angeles. You want to convert him to your cause. It's what you do and you try to go to a Hollywood community and raise money and awareness for support. That's what you learn, so yeah.

Regina Mills: Then maybe you can talk a little bit more than about how do you feel that being part of the solidarity movement changed you? How did it change you?

Norma: Well, I think it made me feel that if you can get enough people together of like mind, who can work together, you can always change things some way. You may not be able to change them the way you want to exactly, but you don't have to live life as a victim. Maybe I'm naturally optimistic, but I think one of the ways I have avoided depression, of course depression is a very -- you can't always just avoid it, even through activism. But I just feel like you always try to think of a way to break through it and it's with other people. Definitely whatever tendency I might have had to be sort of an individualist has been transformed by this feeling of collectivity. That doesn't mean you don't have horrible battles and you end up trying to work with horrible people. We have to be real. You go through some horrible splits and controversies and conflicts. One of the things you encounter is people try to pass off as political differences what are really are psychological issues that they have, traumas or scars or whatever, and those days we didn't have a language for that and we didn't have a place for that, so that happened a lot. At least today, maybe somebody would recognize and say hey, maybe you need to tend to your wound and not bring it into every meeting. We didn't know much about conflict resolution or these techniques that they teach folks today.

But still, I think that feeling and a feeling of profound respect for human beings and their capacities. Because I saw people who were from groups that never spoke or never had a place become leaders. I saw that you can do that in a short period of time with the right setting and the right environment. You can take people who have been oppressed and create them as leaders by exposing them to the right things and giving them the right support. Well, how did it transform me? I always did believe in some public life, I never was a really private person. My grandfather was an elected legislator in the state of

Washington for 26 years, but he only had a third grade education and he was from a very poor German immigrant family that got free land in North Dakota. Of course they didn't know that the land was frozen most of the year before they came but he was a self-made man. And when I was young, he used to take me to Democratic party picnics and introduced me to people. I remember being six years old and he took me to visit pensioners, old folks who told me that they would be in poverty if my grandfather hadn't gotten their railroad pension.

I remember early on having this vision of the world that you could, through public activity, through politics, help people. So it wasn't that that it changed. But it gave me a political vision of the world and showed me, partly the depths of despair and the depths of horror. But in the middle of that, how the heights of hope and the heights of love and a lot of academics never get to experience that. I mean, they never, ever experience those two ends of the spectrum. They write about things, they research things, they talk to people, but they don't really feel it and I think they've missed out on a lot of life. I mean, I don't know maybe they prefer it that way. For example, I'm involved in the immigrant rights movement now and for many years I went back to LA, tried to go back to LA and be part of the LA movement and then another person I knew in the '80s, a Colombian who used to work with the Salvadorans and I decided to start something in Long Beach, so we started the Long Beach Immigrant Rights Coalition and I loved that work because that brings me into contact with immigrants and families and we have a lot of immigrant students at Cal State Long Beach where I teach. We probably have the largest number of undocumented students of any state university in the US. Because of my prior experience, it just fits right in there.

I don't take up everything; I've learned to focus my activities. Whereas when you're in these movements that you're in 24 hours a day, you feel like you have to be a 24 hour a day cadre. That was the model actually, we used to celebrate people who didn't sleep, who didn't eat right. But later on, when the women's movement started in Guatemala, they said, "This is crazy Norma, this is not something to celebrate. These create sick people," and I'm like, "Oh yeah, you're right." They said, "We think it's the influence of the church that created this model." Like, people used to quote Che, there's some famous quote where Che says, it's okay to take a vacation if you're a revolutionary, but you're not a real revolutionary basically, unless you never take a vacation. Like, really? But we believed that. So I mean, I have a more balanced view of things now and I don't try to do everything and I do try to make time for my friends and for my family and try to live a more balanced life. But I guess the lasting influence is that part of every day is spent on staying informed or doing something and trying to create a younger generation to follow because what's the point if you all die off? You all have this intense cohort experience, but what's the point if you don't transmit it?

For me, it's helped to have the immigrant rights movement because it's just an automatic transmittal there of lessons and techniques and stuff like that and they've come up with their own so they don't need us either in some ways. But so how does it transform me? I mean, all of my writing, I can't bear to write about things that aren't meaningful. Of course, part of that is because I'm also at a state university where the type of scholarship we value tends to be not as obscure, at least in the sociology department, let's say. Maybe if I were at a more elite research university, maybe I would be writing about more obscure things, but for me, my time is valuable, so I try to write about things that intersect with some question that I think is important. It helped me to think strategically and tactically, which I don't think I learned growing up at all. I never knew what those words meant, let alone in practice, how to plan ahead, but I think I've learned that a lot. What other ways might it --

Regina Mills: We can go to another question here.

Norma: I guess I should say, when I went to graduate school, I really didn't know what sociology was. I didn't know what field to choose because I had gone to an interdisciplinary undergraduate experience, so we just focused on what the question was and then we pulled in whatever disciplines. Then I went a year to Guatemala and I had already been, actually a summer, I'd gone to Mexico to a summer session when I was in high school, where I was exposed to some really radical professors. There I have read C. Wright Mills' book "Listen, Yankee" about Cuba, and I thought, oh, wow, he's a sociologist. He really writes about stuff like Cuba. That's cool. I think I'll be a sociologist. When I got to the University of Wisconsin, I was really shocked, I thought, oh, they want me to take three years of statistics, and advanced factor analysis? Everything is empirical. What do you mean? What about C. Wright Mills? Well, I was stuck. A lot of the students felt like I did. They were pretty radical, they had more experience than I did. They came from families that were political in New York and New Jersey. I didn't come from that kind of family. But I had to endure graduate school, which was basically really strong emphasis on empirical stuff.

Well, you can't really study some of the questions I want to study or I think are important with those means, at least big surveys and stuff. It was a tremendous conflict. It helped me at Cal State University in Long Beach because there are more people like me there. There's more encouragement for the time. Also the field has changed, so it's more accepting of qualitative work and oral histories or interviews, things that they didn't accept before. It's had a major impact on my scholarship, but I also went to graduate school with the idea that the only reason to get a PhD was to help change the world. It's just that in graduate school, they didn't agree with me about that. It took a long time for that to come back together. We did also start a journal called Latin American Perspectives, which is pretty well-established today, but when we started it, man, we were the outliers. We translated a lot of the Latin American material and introduced the debates into the US academy really. That really helped also bring this dream to a reality of combining scholarship and activism.

Regina Mills: One thing I was just thinking about then, is there anything that you regret as part of the movement, or regret about either something that you did during the movement or just the movement itself that you feel like something that you regret or could've changed?

Norma: I think my biggest mistake and regret is not to have understood the importance of democracy. I wasn't swayed by the argument that you had to delay attending to gender until after the revolution. I was at the beginning, but as time went on, I became convinced that these things were unnecessary to address in the moment. But I was persuaded more than I would ever like to admit by the idea that it was more important to accomplish something for the masses on behalf of the masses, and it didn't really matter if they were shortcuts, and democracy was compromised. That's still a debate today in many movements. We heard that in this conference about the Sandinistas. We heard that, as long as you deliver social programs, it doesn't really matter and that was a mistake. The reason I was vulnerable to that argument was that they would always tell me that that was a very middle-class point of view to emphasize democracy. That it didn't really matter if you had elections or you had competing priorities, you had competing candidates. What mattered was the ideology that the person in charge represented in.

Wow, until the Sandinistas lost the elections, and then there was all these new critique and new reexamination by people I really respected, most of whom split off from the Sandinistas at that point. Did I realize how big a mistake that is and I learned also afterwards of many negative things that happened in the Guatemalan movement, the Salvador movement that I didn't know about and more

democracy could have helped curb those mistakes. When you're in the middle of any war, truth is often the casualty. You end up defending things or even promulgating things. Like one massacre in Guatemala, it turned out to have been committed by the guerillas that we publicized as being a government massacre. I'm not sure that we did receive questions about it right away but at some point, we did receive some questions and we didn't do anything about those. Of course, we didn't really have the means. But still, if I had known more, I would have known that that was a possibility. But at the time, I was such a true believer and it just didn't seem like it was even a possibility. Of course, it wasn't in most cases, but it did happen. Now that I've heard some of the stories of the women, I wish I could have done something or helped in some way at the time that they were being silenced. But again, I think more democracy within the movement would have helped protect them more. Dissonant voices are often the right foot, often have the truth. I used to think of that and they talked me into thinking of that as bourgeois, and I don't think it's a bourgeois anymore.

Regina Mills: I know you did a lot of your work here obviously in the US, were there any time where you felt maybe afraid of being a part of the movement or was there any fear in being part of the solidarity movement?

Norma: I actually did feel fear a number of times because my husband's family was in Guatemala, all his relatives and his family. We were very visible and very public, and so I did feel that way. A couple of times, I did go to Guatemala and I was absolutely terrified that either upon entering Guatemala, something was going to come up and I was going to be detained or more importantly, coming back to the United States. For years when they would run my passport, when they finally got the computers, and I was like, oh no, why is he looking at that screen for so long? What is he reading? I got it. But nothing like anybody more involved felt but I did feel fear.

I felt fear of endangering others. That was actually also a big fear. Not that I personally, but I stopped going to Guatemala at a certain point because we were so involved. But up until that point, I did go to Guatemala. I did talk to people, and I was aware enough to know that whoever I talked to might be in danger. At most, I would be asked to leave. It wasn't my life that was endangered, but it's like sometimes people would disappear after you talk to them. You didn't know if it was you or somebody else. There were places where the foreigners would go and stay; hotels that turned out to be totally full of spies. You'd ask, even the amnesty person had that problem, she would ask people to come to the hotel to talk to her and then turned out later there. Yeah, and letters and phone calls, you knew they were monitored, but you didn't know quite what else to do. Yeah, I can't remember specific things, but there was enough evidence of terror around US women. Everyone somehow was afraid of my university job, but anyway, I lost two jobs and landed on my feet, so by By time, that wasn't my biggest fear.

Regina Mills: Thinking a different way, what is maybe the proudest moment you had being part of the solidarity movement?

Norma: I'm going to think about that for a minute. I did think of something. The other side of the fear is, I have learned. It's taken me a long time, but I have learned to speak up and speak out. Everybody thinks I'm a very strong, independent woman, and in some ways I have been. But I'll tell you the truth. I went through graduate school and didn't say very much. Even though before graduate school, I was very extrovert, I was always a leader. My mom was a very strong woman, very independent, very ahead of her time, and she really helped create three independent young women. But when I got to graduate school, I was so intimidated. I can't tell you. People seemed much more verbal. The men were much more verbal. They were mostly men. Some of them came from very political families that talked about

things at the dinner table. I knew who Republicans and Democrats were at most, but I didn't know Rosa Luxemburg had this dispute with Lenin. I didn't know certain things they knew. The male professors were very intimidating. They could just cut you off at the knees with one remark or one critique, and I was terrified in graduate school. I became pretty silent, especially when powerful men were around.

I think of myself as a lifelong feminist. But I realized that in graduate school and in the university in my early years, especially in the Research I UC University, I was very silenced. Through the solidarity work and the work since then, it took a long time, but I finally speak up in the moment. I used to always say, why didn't I speak up? Why didn't I say something? Why didn't I intervene verbally at that moment or defend that person? Well, of course, I couldn't think fast from my feet, but now I do. I hope that by doing that, people around me also, I've learned that once you open the question then other people have courage. I guess one thing I've gotten is courage. Personal courage. I can always have courage on behalf of an entire movement. So, what's one thing that I'm most proud of? I think I'm most proud of creating a group that tried to be multi-national, multi-racial, with an advanced consciousness around sexism and homophobia. The work that we were able to do, even though we were a small group, and the sense of family that we were able to create. It was a little utopia in the midst of a big sea. Of course, it wasn't perfect or anything like that, but we've gotten together in recent years, and I often wonder that, well, maybe the Guatemalans don't feel as positive about the experience as I do. They feel really positive about it. I'm very proud of their work and wanting their kids to know about it too, and so we've decided to try to document it. But I don't know, things split so many times around race, around ethnicity, around gender. I'm not saying, I don't know, maybe were determined not to or something like that, but we created something where there was nothing, and I think that's one of the coolest things in the world; is to create a space.

Then the women's movement in Guatemala, I didn't create it in any way, shape, or form. Sometimes even, the II, I believe that gives me too much credit. I accompanied them, but they did it. But to see these young women who are so feminist and young men actually even taking workshops on violence and becoming spokespeople against violence, who would've ever thought in a million years that would happen? Who would have ever thought there'd be this indigenous Mayan movement influencing education, influencing health in views that I never would have thought in centuries there would be that. But there was, and I think it's just maybe luck or something that timing, luck, whatever. But it's not something I'm proud of, but it's something I'm so grateful for that I got to be there. I think everybody has the calling, whether you think it comes from the universe or God, or inside of you, but to be able to find your calling, to be to find your niche, it's like the life's ultimate achievement, and I didn't find it, it found me, but I think I'm just really lucky.

Regina Mills: Do you have to talk about your proudest moment, do you have one specific memory that's the happiest, or the one that sticks out in your mind the most?

Norma: What's that news? The recent genocide trial, although probably I'm not really that active in the movement anymore to the extent that there is a movement, but the fact that the trial happened, the fact that it was streamed all over the world, the fact that one of my daughters who very much identifies as Guatemalan and is very much in contact with children of immigrants all over, through Facebook, through all the networks they have online, the fact that they were all watching it and learning sometimes for the first time, sometimes just putting the pieces together. Like, my kids still have to put the pieces together from their experience, but it didn't ever make sense to them at the time. In fact, some of it they didn't really like being stuck in childcare or, as they say, sleeping in strange places. But the genocide trial, I think, brought these so many people together, but particularly this younger

generation. Then just to see the conviction, it doesn't matter that it was stayed in any way, shape, or form, I think that was an incredible moment. Prior to that, probably one of the happiest moments was the victory of the Sandinistas, and what happened afterwards, the literacy campaign. The first few years those were very happy times. Later it got a little darker. We thought that it was the first of multiple revolutions. It's hard to find a happy time in the Guatemalan Movement; one that really stands out there, a little with individual ones I've mentioned that.

Regina Mills: One question would be, how do you want your work to be remembered in the solidarity movement and also your academic work? Either one or both.

Norma: Well, I'd like to be remembered as someone who sought ways to combine scholarship and activism and use the activism to influence both the topics that she wrote about. But also had a sense of responsibility towards helping to shape generations to come behind, and shared as much as possible and didn't do it for individual glory. Somehow that's very important to me because I think we're in the part of a collective like this. When so many people have helped you, it's very important to make sure that people know that it's not you, but it's you and everybody who helped you. To also many people, women just before me, created openings for my generation that hadn't existed ever. I hope we always reach out and create those spaces for the ones who come behind us, whether they're women or whoever's been excluded. Because nothing happens automatically. Nothing happens just through sheer evolution. They used to teach us that it did in my early academic years, and it just nothing happens without human intervention. If today, for example, LASA the Latin American Studies Association is the wonderful diverse place that it is, it only happened because we bang the door down. When we first join LASA as graduate students, it was all US policy dominated, all State Department types, mostly men. They had antagonism to women. I mean, they saw us as secretaries, as researchers, as wives, but not as true partners. We bang that door down from the first days we were in that association. Of course, we were angry and the Vietnam War was going on. I just see all these things that happened as having happened not naturally, but because people make them happen. I guess I'd like to be seen as a truly transnational person, as someone who's comfortable in multiple settings, and who understands that people welcoming me into those settings has made my life in so many ways, not just academically but personally. Hopefully that's the model of the future; people who can move comfortably across boundaries and that's all.

Regina Mills: One question I believe we were all talking about asking was is there anything that you haven't told anybody regarding the solidarity you have been that you'd want to tell now?

Norma: Well, I think there are things that I haven't told but I'm not sure that I can tell them now. I don't know if this really is one of those in that category, but there's something interesting about spirituality. I grew up as a Presbyterian and very active in my church, more active than my parents really, and more of a believer. Then I went to college and I got involved in the civil rights movement that Freedom Summer was happening and I just didn't think my home church was that all committed the way the National Presbyterian Church seemed to be. I wrote a letter and I renounce my membership very angrily in my local church. From then on, I was never member of a church and I became a pretty strong atheist and worked in the solidarity movement. My closest people I worked with were priests, nuns, missionaries, ministers, and Jewish women, Jewish men, rabbis and I felt totally comfortable with them. But I never really wanted to, I didn't think of myself as a religious woman. I certainly didn't think of myself though, and didn't really think of myself as spiritual either. Now I've come around a little bit full circle to the point where I realize, well, my spirituality is social justice. It's what sustains me, it's what motivates me, it's what makes me get up in the morning, it's what gives me the light, joy, pleasure. I figured it out

that's my theology, I guess. It was because of them sharing that project together that made it possible for me to get over my anger about particular churches, particular church beliefs, particular things that I've been carrying. I'm not going to give up critiquing certain aspects of religion. I'm a spiritual person, I understand that now.

What else? Anything I haven't told? It's hard to raise kids in a social movement, and I didn't realize it. I was so idealistic that I just thought if you had group childcare and sometimes even if you put the politics into the group childcare, I never saw things from the point of view of my kids and they have spent plenty of time reminding me of that fact. I just think we were so idealistic that we thought that kids just got taken care of in the course of this movement. I know the kids of the revolutionaries also often had a terrible time and have a lot to say about that experience. I guess if I had one thing to do over again, it would be to learn more and read more and talk more and provide more space for the kids to, well, first of all, express themselves and be listened to. But I just thought childrearing took care of itself. I didn't realize it involves so much. I think my kids and I have come to, we're okay about it. But there were pretty devastating periods where how kids have to rebel anyway. They end up telling you what a terrible mother you are and you're like, "Oh, you thought you were a great mother. You thought you are the mother you wanted to have." Then they tell you all these horrible things, supposedly, that happened to them. But of course at that time they got together with other kids of activists at college and they all started dishing on their parents since then. I'm not sure even these things actually happened to my children. By talking to the other kids, they develop this critique that was really hard to hear. Was it any worse than anybody else's?

One problem, of course, was that it was the Reagan era. My kids, the kids they went to school with, their parents, were all Reagan supporters. They had this life with us in LA, with kids of immigrants, with brown kids, with black kids, with very diverse kids. Then they have this other world, and they had to navigate those two worlds, and never dawned on me how hard that was for them. That would be one thing I think in a future movement. More tension, more consciousness, more awareness of what the kids are going through.

Regina Mills: It depends on how much more time you want to spend. I can give you a last question if you'd like. What did it mean to be part of this archiving the Central American Revolutions conference? What is this conference going to mean to you? What do you feel like, especially now that it's over?

Norma: It's been an incredible experience because there's so few spaces where we can talk about these things. One big helpful thing for me is that actually there's a plan to gather the documents and preserve them, and most important to me, to make them available all over the world through digitizing. That was a dream, and I didn't know it could come through so quickly, but I've been holding onto my things because I wanted to make sure that the students who contact me quite a bit, who were, let's say, in high school or college, at state universities, who won't get necessarily travel grants to go to some big archive can access things. For them, it's a very important personal search for who they are and who their families are and why they came, and what their role is. I see it as part of creating future leadership, them having access to this. It looks like we're going to be able to do that through the efforts here at the University of Texas and then to have them accessible to people in Guatemala. That was the other dream. It's like I'm not going to give anything away until I figure out a way that they can have access too. That's been the realization of a dream. Then just talking about these different topics. Starting with the first night, some of the dreams deferred in terms of the very powerful, very sobering, but truth-telling.

I think truth-telling is something else I've become a fan of. Even when it goes against what you believe politically, there has to be a moment when you tell the truth because you have to regroup and have a new plan. You can't stick to a plan that doesn't work as hard as that is. Then going on to the discussion of the journalists and what it was like to be on the ground, and what were the barriers to reporting and all the risks that were taken. We were often critical of the press, but we also had our allies and friends among the reporters who wasn't really the reporters usually. It was their editors in there. The people back in New York or LA who were censoring the news. The panel that I was on solidarity and the religious folks. Things you think you dismiss as unimportant, like these theological questions. But liberation theology was like a theological breakthrough. Sometimes you need people who work on theology, even though it's not your thing, to help make certain things possible.

I'd like to know more about this theology of peace that was talked about, since it's something new for me. I don't know about it. But also then the way in which these things intersected with other things, like the way in which the religious movements in Central America intersected with the Solidarity Movement in the US. What's going on in Guatemala in terms of truth-telling, in terms of accountability, of very impressive under such difficult conditions? Where do you get to hear about that in such concentrated way and from people doing it? Then tremendously helpful the efforts that everybody seems to be trying to make space for the youth. Not everybody find everybody who understands that youth have their own ways and their own codes and their own styles and that it's okay. Mostly what we always do when we get to my age is we always think we have the truth. We think we have the truth in terms of style too, we don't realize that we can't impose. It's hard to realize that. When you teach undergraduates like I do, from inner-city schools, it's pretty obvious that you're style is not their style. You can't even understand what, the people that they listen to in terms of music and stuff like that. It seems encouraging that hopefully it'll work, but at least it seems like there's big efforts. I just wish there were more spaces like this, but I'm really grateful that I got to be part of this, the space. I have hot tons of ideas about what I'm going to do now. I feel like I've been given a working at some orders. I've accepted them voluntarily obviously, but I have a whole to-do list as a result of this conference, and it's like with everything I do, I guess I just probably should have been a missionary just to start with, but I think I'm sort secular missionary. I did use to go when I was about six or seven to every missionary presentation in church. I would always tell my mom, can we go? I remember looking at the slides and I was never interested in the preaching the gospel part very much, but I was always interested in latrines that they would build, the shots that they would give, education for women and all these things. I guess I'm just back to where I was when I was six years old doing missionary work.

Regina Mills: Do you have any final comments or reflection of the solidarity movement that you'd like to end on?

Norma: Just that I got to meet the most wonderful people that one could ever meet in the world through this movement. All ages, all races, genders, and to have that human connection, that deep human connection where you're bonded at the cellular level really is the essence of living. It just makes life worth living. We all encounter problems. We all sometimes are sick, sometimes they break a leg. We have huge challenges. Sometimes we fail our PhD exam, all kinds of things happen. But when you have that deep human connection it's like, you can do it, there be some way. It might not be the way you planned, but there'll be some way as long as you have those people with you. I think some of the very best people in the world are attracted to these kinds of movements. They may not know how to read and write, for example, but the wisdom is there. If I were God, I would just bring all those people together in a grand design and make sure they knew each other. But they're everywhere. I guess that's one of the things I did learn is that, everywhere, in every place, in every country and every place you go,

there's some of these people. Once you find them, you can connect with them then something good happens.

Regina Mills: Thank you very much.

TRANSCRIPT END