



Pursuing Justice in South America

EDWARD J. FILLENWARTH JR., '61 B.B.A., '63 J.D.

My wife, Valerie, and I have long had a concern for the poor and deprived people in this country and throughout the world. We both grew up in Indianapolis, where I was the son of a lawyer who represented labor unions. I was greatly influenced by my father and went into practice with him after my graduation from Notre Dame Law School in 1963. Another significant influence on me was Notre Dame Law School Prof. John Broderick, “the Chief,” as he was affectionately called by his students, who taught labor law, and who further instilled in me a need to show compassion for the underdog.

Val joined the Maryknoll Sisters’ novitiate for two years and then attended Marian College in Indianapolis. She and I were married in 1964. We raised seven children and have 17 grandchildren; we both were active volunteers with our children’s schools, sports, and other activities.

In 1980, Val was shocked to read that four churchwomen were raped and killed in El Salvador, two of them Maryknoll Sisters. Later that year, Archbishop Oscar Romero was gunned down while saying Mass in El Salvador. While deeply disturbed by these events, Val could not foresee how they would affect the rest of her life. In 1989, Val learned of another assassination in El Salvador: this time of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and the housekeeper’s teenage daughter.

It later became known that soldiers, many of whom had been trained at the School of the Americas (SOA), committed the brutal killings of 1980 and 1989. Originally named the Latin

American Training Center—Ground Division, SOA was started in Panama at Fort Glick in 1946. In 1963, it was renamed the US Army School of the Americas. In 1984, it was moved to the grounds of Fort Benning, Ga., following the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty. Its stated mission is to “provide professional education and training” while “promoting democratic values, respect for human rights, and knowledge and understanding of United States customs and traditions.” Military personnel are trained there from many countries in Central and South America. In 2000, under mounting congressional pressure to stop its funding, the Pentagon renamed the school the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation.

SOA’s history is controversial, at best. Shortly after its founding, it came to be known as the “School of Assassins” or “School of Coups.” Father Roy Bourgeois, a Maryknoll priest who was a decorated Naval officer in Vietnam, discovered that hundreds of graduates of the SOA have been responsible for terrible human rights violations in their own countries. In November 1990, on the weekend closest to the date that the Jesuits were killed the year before, Father Roy and a few friends protested at the gates of Fort Benning with a water-only fast. Repeated every year since 1990, this peaceful, nonviolent vigil has grown: This past November, at least 22,000 people were at the gates of Fort Benning to participate in a very peaceful, solemn funeral procession to honor those killed by graduates of the SOA.

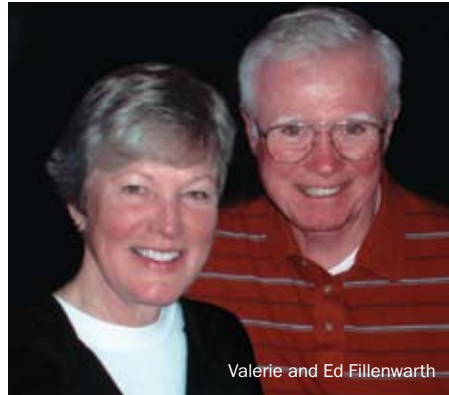
Val has participated in these annual vigils since 1998. In 2002, she and I attended the trial of Kathleen Desautels from

Indianapolis, a Sister of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, Ind., who had trespassed onto the base. Sister Kathleen was sentenced to six months in a federal prison for her nonviolent civil disobedience. When asked why the news media has reported so little about the SOA, Sister Kathleen replied, “Who owns the media?” referring to the large corporations in the United States who benefit from SOA grads keeping the poor, human rights workers, youth leaders, missionaries, and union organizers “in line” in their own countries.

While attending the annual vigils, Val and I also learned of Witness For Peace (WFP), an organization that has a presence each year at the vigils. WFP is a nondenominational, faith-based, grassroots organization that raises awareness of some of the United States’ unconscionable policies in Central and South America.

WFP began in 1983 during the US Contra war in Nicaragua. In 2003, Val and I participated in a WFP trip to Mexico to study the effects of NAFTA on the Mexican people. I was already familiar with the terrible effects of NAFTA in Indiana and in the United States, one of which was thousands of lost union jobs. However, we were surprised to learn that NAFTA has been just as bad, and maybe worse, for the Mexican people. Thousands of Mexican farmers have been put out of work by huge American-owned agribusinesses; numerous small- to medium-sized Mexican companies have also been closed as a result of NAFTA. We have been working since 2003 to try to get the United States government more concerned about fair trade than it is about free trade, which, in our judgement, primarily benefits multinational companies based in the US.

In 2004, I was asked to become a member of the national board of WFP and quickly accepted the opportunity. While I had hoped to travel to Cuba with WFP, our current administration refused to renew the WFP license to take delegations to Cuba. I did join a delegation to Colombia in 2006 to study human rights and labor rights in that country and am now working to educate people in the US about the problems caused by its Colombian policies and huge shipments of arms to that country.



Valerie and Ed Fillenwarth

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Val crossed Fort Benning’s property lines at the November 19, 2006 vigil, along with other protesters, seeking to close the SOA. While the Indianapolis media did not report the vigil itself, there have been two articles about this mother of seven and grandmother of 17 who risked jail to raise awareness of the SOA/WHINSEC.

As it turns out, Val and 13 of her fellow protesters now face jail time. By the time you read this article, many will have begun their sentences, which range from 30 days to six months. Val begins serving her 100 days in the Federal Corrections Institution in Danbury, Connecticut on April 17.

During the history of the SOA annual demonstrations, 231 people have been sentenced to a combined 92 years in

prison for this Class B misdemeanor, and 50 others have been given probation. Accountability by those who run the school for their conduct and the conduct of the school’s graduates has yet to happen. There has also been close to complete impunity for graduates of the school whom we believe to have committed numerous atrocities.

Val and I love our country very much, but we reject policies that cause human rights abuses for the benefit of huge multinational corporations. We believe the United States can do better. We can start by learning about the terrible effects of our policies on millions of poor people in Central and South America, and then work to change those policies.

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Ed and Val Fillenwarth have been married for 42 years and live in Indianapolis, Ind. Ed is a retired partner with Fillenwarth Dennerline et al, having practiced labor law for most of his career. Ed currently sits on the board of Witness for Peace, an organization that supports the cause of peace, justice, and sustainable economies in the Americas.

He is a “double Domer,” having received a B.A. in business in 1961.