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Eitel, James R.

The making of solidarity: Jim Eitel  
and the Nicaragua Information Center

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**THE MAKING OF SOLIDARITY**

**Jim Eitel and the Nicaragua Information Center**

**An Oral History**

**Narrator: James R. Eitel, M.D.**

**Interviewer: Norma Smith**

**Topic: History of the Nicaragua Information Center**

**Interview Date: February, 1990**



THE MAKING OF SOLIDARITY

An Oral History

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## Preface

The Nicaragua Information Center was formed in late 1979 by Latin American and North American students at the University of California at Berkeley who were inspired by Nicaragua's efforts to build a new, more just and independent society. The people of Nicaragua, led by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), had just overthrown the U.S.-backed Somoza family dictatorship, and the U.S. disinformation apparatus was about to swing into action against the new government. The purpose of NIC was to provide the University community and the public accurate information about the small Central American country. The founders of the organization felt that providing such information was a vital part of expressing their solidarity with the Nicaraguan people.

For a decade, throughout the "contra" war against Nicaragua, the Information Center played an important role in the Bay Area progressive community. It became a source not only of information about Nicaragua, but of political leadership in Central America peace issues in the Bay Area, in the region, and nationally.

Jim Eitel was active in the Nicaragua Information Center from late 1981, when he came back from several months working as a pediatrician in a clinic in a poor neighborhood of Nicaragua's capital, until late 1989, after NIC had undergone a major change in



its structure, following a difficult split among its membership. I chose to interview Jim about the Information Center, because I have always found him to be thoughtful and articulate about the organization's history, process and activities, and about his own personal and political development.

The Nicaragua Information Center was important, and Jim Eitel played a key role within NIC. What interests me though, and the reason that this oral history is only one in a series, is why such "solidarity" organizations exist and why and how individuals in this most powerful of all countries develop feelings (and lives) of solidarity with other peoples of the world and with the less powerful sectors of the U.S. population.

Jim's wood frame house perches among others on a hillside in East Oakland. We spoke about his life and political work on two sunny mornings in February, 1990. During the first one-hour session, we talked about Jim's early years in the Mid West, his first political awareness during his college years, his decision to become a doctor, and his participation in solidarity work. We spent our second meeting talking about the Nicaragua Information Center, its beginnings, its growth, its strengths and its weaknesses. Jim ended by assessing the present and future of solidarity work in this country and spoke of his own plans for further study and involvement.



## THE GOOD DR. JIM EITEL

by Sherry Gendelman

In 1983 the U.S. war of aggression against Nicaragua was intensifying with each moment. I decided to visit Nicaragua to see first hand what was happening there. The Nicaragua Information Center tour seemed the most comprehensive one, so I signed up. At our orientation, conducted in Berkeley, I found that our 29-member delegation was quite eclectic politically, spanning the almost limitless range of political persuasions found in the Bay Area. Our group leader, one Dr. Jim Eitel, had gone ahead to Nicaragua to complete plans for our trip.

I was looking forward with excitement to seeing the revolution, but I was also rather anxious about the trip. I think many members of our group had similar feelings, friends and family having counseled us not to go. All of us were very engaged in our immediate community and with world events as well, and felt that the trip was important.

We left San Francisco, flew through Miami, and made our way to the "international" airport in Managua. It was the antithesis of First World airports. The building was crowded with Nicaraguans, internationalistas, taxi drivers, beggars, and young boys in



military uniforms. The weather was hot and incredibly humid. We were sweating, tired, excited and a bit overwhelmed visually. My nerves were at their peak. It was fortunate, therefore, that a delightful looking gentleman, tall, lean, very fair-skinned, wearing a white cap and glasses, met us at the airport. This was my first glimpse of Jim Eitel. He was reserved and gentle, almost ethereal. This first impression changed, of course. In addition to other qualities, Jim revealed an outrageous sense of humor, which intensified incrementally over the course of the next two weeks. But it was his calm in the midst of all the confusion at the airport that impressed me most.

As the leader of our group, he was my guide and entree into Nicaraguan culture, society and the revolution. He is a very cerebral man, with a lightness to his intellect. He demonstrated a vast knowledge of almost all aspects of Nicaraguan life, from neighborhood medical centers to children's performing groups to the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs of the Revolution. He knew people involved in each social sector. He operated on the presumption that all of us who signed up for the tour not only needed to know, but wanted to know everything we could learn within our short period of time there. He therefore scheduled daily visits, conversations and meetings with people involved in the government, with campesinos, with high schools, neighborhood groups, health centers, and with each other. All of these encounters were designed to give us the maximum amount of information possible. Jim was so objective and



clear in his approach that I was inspired to be more open-minded myself, and I learned constantly.

Unlike many political people I've met, Jim did not depend on slogans to describe the Nicaraguan revolution or to talk about politics in general. Since every person in our group had a different agenda and different attitudes, Jim had to perform quite a balancing act to keep us together and focussed on the Revolution and not on our own political agendas. The revolution was so intense, the life so hard and yet so vital, and the suffering of the people so profound, that we also needed some spiritual nurturance to withstand the experience of pain and joy that we saw in the Nicaraguans' lives. Somehow, Jim managed to satisfy that need as well.

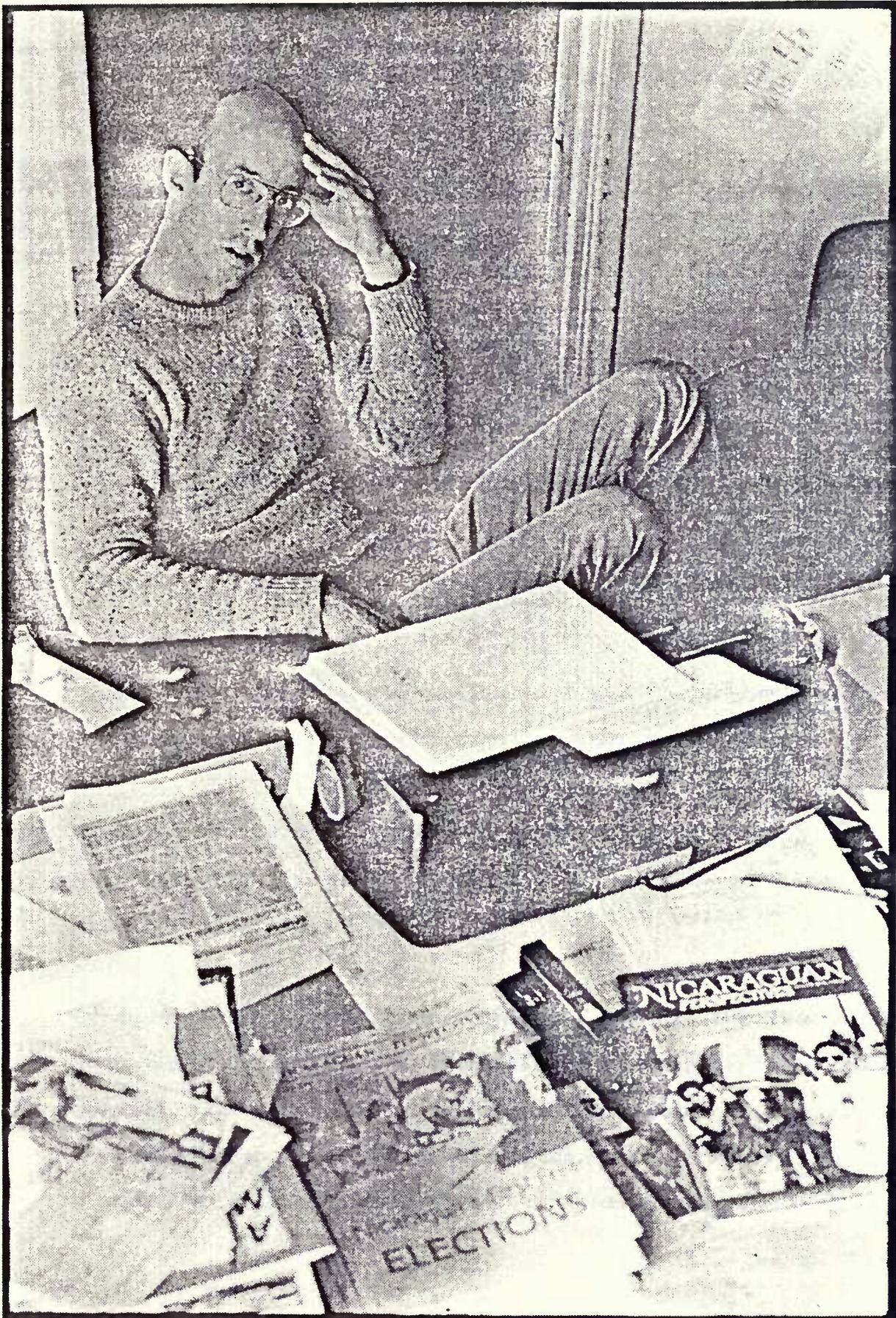
As is common in many Latin American countries, Nicaraguans have a passion for poetry. Every event, commonplace or extraordinary, usually inspires a poem. I cannot say how surprised I was initially to see that this trait had affected Jim to his very soul. One night he began to read to us from some poems he had written. His gesture inspired many other people in our group. Soon, everywhere I turned, a poem from one or more of my tourmates was being read aloud. It seemed as if the men on the tour were more effected by this than the women. Perhaps the poetry provided an outlet for passion and emotions not encouraged in men in the United States.

Jim proved himself to be a person of great compassion, great



intelligence and great fun. I was inspired by his seriousness toward his role as guide for political activists visiting the Nicaraguan revolution. Once we returned to the Bay Area, Jim continued to energetically pursue the members of our group, encouraging us to contribute in some way to the revolution. He explored our reactions, our commitments, our philosophy. He encouraged our projects, lending logistical, as well as moral, support. He attended our lectures, slide shows, presentations, talks. Without slogans, without fanfare, he was there. To this day, it is hard for me to categorize Jim's politics. It is a tribute to his political intelligence that he does not align himself with any group philosophically, but with many, in the work there is to be done in support of the revolution.





*After Neagom's critique of magazine*



jim eitel interview/n.smith

February 13, 1990  
Oakland, California  
Narrator: JIM EITEL  
Interviewer: Norma Smith  
Topic: History of Nicaragua Information Center

## SOLIDARITY.....

Session I: Personal History (60 minute)  
-Family Background  
-Schooling  
-Professional Training and Early Political Development

[TAPE I, SIDE A]

### Family Background

NS: We're going to be talking with Jim Eitel about the Nicaragua Information Center and his history with NIC. Today we're going to be talking, Jim, about your own family background. Tell me about your family's nationality, ethnic background, class background.

JIM: My father's side of the family-- his father and grandfather-- came from German decent. The name Eitel means vain or proud in German. My father's mother came from a well-to-do family in a Chicago suburb.

My mother's father's side of the family are DAR kind of people. (Daughters of the American Revolution-- supposedly they came over on the Mayflower). I think they go back pretty far Anglo-Saxon kind of decent. My mother's great grandfather made a lot of money in the mint business, growing spearmint which was sold in later days to Wrigley for chewing gum and all kinds of things, including, I understand, Coca Cola. He travelled to Europe, bought a lot of



paintings in the late nineteenth century and gave a lot of money to Kalamazoo College. There's a rare book room in the library at Kalamazoo College with books that he found in Europe. With that money, he made a big attempt to bring a lot of culture to the relatively small city in the Midwest, Kalamazoo.

My mother's mother came from Cincinnati, which to me is a similar kind of city, a medium sized, industrial city, I'm sure she was from an upper middle class background. My father's father was from Indianapolis, a similar kind of city again, and I'm sure upper middle class. They all are white. They all found each other, coming from similar social classes.

#### **Immediate Family and Childhood**

NS: What about your own childhood. Did you have siblings? What was your family like?

JIM: I have one sister who is four years older than I am. In some ways it was a very fifties kind of family. My father was a very hard-working man, a very good material provider, but he is not somebody who is real comfortable around people, nor do I think he was with children. There are times that I remember dearly of him, you know, really playing with us, but he was a self-absorbed man, probably pretty tired from work. My mom was a hard-working housewife. She liked to do volunteer work in hospitals; there was something in her about distracting herself from her own depression. You know, somehow taking care of the troubles of other people. I don't know how much of that had to do with coming through the depression and World War II. I think probably more than we realize, those are things that affected a lot of our families.

My father told me a very interesting story recently. I had asked him how he met my mother. She was working as a secretary at Price-Waterhouse, which was a big accounting firm in



Chicago, and he was working there, also. They met and fell in love, and that was that. But my father's company requested a draft deferment for him at the beginning of World War II, because he was a smart guy, a good worker. He said that really didn't sit right with him, that he should get off while other people were going off and risking their lives. So he said, 'Well I'll stay and work but only if I can work on defense-related companies,' and eventually he just felt bad about that and put his name up for the draft and immediately was drafted. By then my mother was pregnant with my sister, and he said, 'You know, the darn draft board sort of made a big deal like, "Well, you knew you were going to get drafted, why'd you get her pregnant." But then he was able to basically extend his deferment long enough till my sister was born. Then he went into the military and was separated from my mother and sister for I think two or three years of World War II. I just have a feeling that was very hard on my mother and probably hard on my sister. Even though he wasn't in combat, it must have been just scary and hard for him. But the story also says something to me about my Dad. He's a very conservative guy at this point. You know, he believes the wildest stories that William F. Buckley and those kind of guys can come up with, but there's a way he's an honest man and a principled man. Hopefully that's something that's rubbed off on me.

NS: Talk more about what you think their influence as people and their values have on how you grew up, especially during your childhood.

JIM: My mother was somebody who would have been called a bleeding heart or somebody who had a social conscience in a way; I don't remember a lot of how she put it, but that attitude about being concerned about other people that I have certainly came from her. My father's influence was much more, 'Work hard, everything is serious, take everything very seriously, do it very well, work hard.' There was very little play amongst them, although my father would occasionally tell sort of fairly crude jokes about. For example, he worked for Wilson Meats,



and so he would tell jokes about, 'You know that sauce that comes with tongue, it's saliva.' He would let down and really try to laugh, but we didn't get a lot of that as kids. They were unhappy people, and it wasn't a fun household. I think my sister and I were pretty isolated. But in terms of positive values, I think the hard work, and being honest, those kinds of things were the values that were put forward.

NS What kind of relationship did you have with your sister?

JIM: You know, I don't remember a lot about my relationship with my sister. I can remember a couple of things at earlier ages. Certainly an innocence, you know, taking a bath together and just not being ashamed or afraid about being nude together. Even things like when we were on long car rides, physically laying on top of each other (chuckles at memory) in the back of the car. So there was that. Then when she hit puberty, it was a hard time for me, because she, you know, not only was four years older than me, but she had her crowd of friends. I'm not sure exactly what it is girls need to do at that age, but certainly I was made to feel like the jerky younger brother. I just felt kind of intimidated by them. Those were hard times for me. Later on, when she went away to college, that changed very quickly. I remember when she would come home for Christmas vacation, she was really happy to see me, and we would spend a lot of time together. So that was different.

One other thing about our childhood that people of a certain social class probably share in some way: we had a summer cottage for ten or twelve years when I was growing up. The summers would be this escape where my Mom would be there all week long, and my Dad would come for week ends. Mom would kind of just tune out and make us lunch and breakfast and dinner and just kind of do her thing. I had some cousins up there and we each



had our own little boat and we had all kinds of adventures on our own and it was... I think it was an easier time for both my sister and I 'cause we were not under the pressure of school and not under the kind of strains of our household. We had a lot of autonomy.

NS: What kinds of friendships did you have with people your own age?

JIM: I remember in elementary school, kind of being part of a crowd. We would play football or we would go to movies together. I have a great memory of walking home a very long way from a movie and being caught in a warm rain in Chicago, getting totally wet and deliberately splashing through all the puddles I could find until I was totally soaked.

High school was a bit harder for me. I was very shy around girls at that point, and I also ended up going to a private school in the neighborhood. There weren't very many girls in the school, which made it easier for me. On the other hand, I had less opportunities to develop those kinds of social skills. I certainly had some good friendships in that school.

Part of what I did around that age was to really try to fit in, and in high school that had to do with trying to become athletic. I was a pretty fast runner, so I did well on the track team, but I even went out for football, which is kind of a joke, because I'm not very robust. And I tried out for basketball. Somehow that wish to excel physically and to be in fantasy almost like superman was a big part of my life then.

NS: Did you grow up in Chicago then?

JIM: I grew up in Chicago in middle, upper-middle class neighborhoods.



NS: What other kinds of activities did you take part in during your school years?

JIM: As far as I remember about high school, I didn't do too much else outside of sports and some stuff with my friends. I didn't belong to a History Club or a French Club or any of those things. I remember once actually I did take part in a school play. I was given a girl's part and even had falsies on. It amazes me to remember that I did that, 'cause in those days I was very self-conscious. I actually ended up being valedictorian of my class. If I had been as political then as I am now I would have had a great opportunity, but in fact (laughs) I was just very shy and very threatened by the idea of leaving home and going off to college, and my speech was something about that. I remember I was absolutely petrified, and my mother had to get a tranquilizer from my pediatrician so I could go through it. I haven't thought about it for years.

#### College and Political Awakening

NS: And what about going off to school? Where did you go?

JIM: Well, I think one of the great turning points in my life was not making it into Princeton. I had known this guy, George Gorman, who was a friend of the family's, a very nice man, who later on became a pastor, I'm sure he's a very progressive kind of pastor. George Gorman went to Princeton at the time. My Dad took me out to look at colleges when I was a senior in high school. We went to some of the Ivy League schools, and Princeton seemed very cool. I think that the part of me that wanted to be whatever you're supposed to be in corporate America wanted to go to Princeton. I didn't make it, and I was upset, but I think it was a very good thing for me.



I ended up going to Duke, which certainly, you know, aspires to be considered as an Ivy League kind of school, and I think is a very good school. But it was not Princeton, and whatever might have seduced me at Princeton just never took place (chuckles). I remember one of the turning points at Duke -- it was very ironic how it happened, 'cause immediately I somehow got involved in sort of sports-related things, you know the "Pep" squad, which was to rile people up for football games. One night I was running around the dormitory putting up leaflets for the pep rally, and I saw this guy tear down a flyer. He had just taken one of the leaflets down to have one in his room, and I was being this good little soldier, running around putting up the flyers, and was upset with him. But we got over that and became very good friends.

Kent was one of the incipient left-wing people at Duke. He had grown up in Turkey. His father was in the military. Kent had travelled around a lot and you know how getting out of this country really opens your mind. He was one of the people that really got me thinking about not the little world that I had come out of, my family, but Viet Nam and how interesting other countries were and all those things. That was kind of the beginning of the beginning for me.

NS: What year was that?

JIM: I graduated from high school in '64 so it would have been the autumn of 1964. For a historical note, in those days Duke only had one or two black students. As it happened, my friend Kent was good friends with one of them. That was really my first contact with any black people.

To go back a little bit, on that tangent, the only black people I ever saw or knew in those days were, for example, my family had a man who used to come to clean, to rake the leaves and



do yard work. Maybe once or twice my dad gave him a ride back home, and I would drive over with them to the black neighborhood in Chicago. I would look out the window and just wonder, why did it look the way it did: run down. The other kind of thing I remember is taking the train to downtown Chicago from the basically suburban neighborhoods we lived in, and looking out the window and seeing tenements and seeing people living in a very different way and people that appeared to be poor. Other than that having no contact of any kind. None of the schools I went to had black students, and probably not many Jewish students.

NS: How did your parents treat that black man?

JIM: I think he was treated respectfully, but you know there was no discussion of how hard things were in the black community, or that segregation was wrong, or any reference to any events of the times that had been going on.

NS: So during your very first political awakening, or what you call the turning point, what was the content of that? How did you feel about it? What happened?

JIM: (chuckles). That's a big one. Really, what first happened for me as I saw a lot of things going on around me, in a way it was very threatening. I remember that ...it was my senior year, when Martin Luther King was assassinated, there was a big student strike, and a lot of things going on. And I was...it's like I felt I should be out there, but I also felt that if I were out there it would make me the focus of a lot of shame. I really had this fear of not conforming. It paralyzed me. At the same time, I felt there were things I should be doing. Maybe I can say that was my resistance, but I think the attraction was just finding some really nice people who



weren't competitive with me, who accepted me as who I was, who were rebelling, -- and there certainly was a part of me that wanted to rebel-- and it felt good to have some solidarity.

Probably my biggest awakening --and this comes from my friend getting me interested in other countries-- was travelling, in 1967 after my junior year, to the Balkans: Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey, Bulgaria, and travelling with a bunch of East Coast marijuana-smoking smart progressive people. I mean I was just totally in another league of people that I didn't understand, but we travelled around, and it was just wonderful kind of seeing what was going on in these countries.

We were in Greece in 1967, right after the coup, and I had no idea of what was going on. There was a guy in the group who said, 'Oh these fascist colonels.' He seemed very angry, and I really didn't understand it. But on that trip somebody gave me a copy of Franz Fanon's THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH, and I read that, and it really struck a chord with me. Along with sort of struggling with Camus' THE MYTH OF SISYPHUS and very depressive kind of thoughts also, I was also very inspired by Fanon, and just began to have an awakening that there was another way that things could be, that injustice could be resisted.

It's good for me to think about this, because I have a niece who's that age now and is alienated from the world, you know, the status quo, and is really groping to find some sense of personal power and ability to change the world. I think that's what I was feeling: the world seemed so threatening in those days, to not succeed, to not achieve, that it was very threatening to want to be different, and very kind of hopeless. I think it took me many more years to have a sense of an understanding of history, of being a part of history and of the power of peoples' movements, because back then I was one scared little individual trying to find his way.



NS: How was it that you happened to take that trip?

JIM: Well, the story of how that trip came about is pretty humorous. It has an element of real unconscious rebellion in it. I took some Russian courses at Duke, because it just seemed exotic. Out of that I ended up taking a Polish literature course, taught by a professor who was a Polish emigre and a very interesting intellectual man. Originally, he told us about a trip to go to the Soviet Union for the summer to travel and study Russian. So I just signed myself up, and then I sent home for money. (Laughs). You know, here's my dad, who's a Republican, and he, in a way, good father that he was, went along with the program, but it was a pretty a hostile thing for me to do (chuckles). So, anyway, that trip fell through, but then my mother found out about this other trip and plugged me into that. So that was how it started.

NS: Interesting. So, in a way it was an accident and in another way not an accident at all.

JIM: Right. And, you know, as I think about it, that's a paradox for me, because I've pretty much felt estranged from my parents in my adult life, if not all my life, but certainly in their own way they attempted to provide and even let me go my own way.

### **Career Decision**

NS: How did you make the decision to become a doctor?

JIM: Well, I'm a pediatrician. It's kind of interesting how I got there. My mother used to say to me, 'You would make a really good doctor, because you've suffered so much as a child.' She really had a thing about suffering, having suffered a lot herself, I think, and then trying to deal with that by taking care of other people's suffering. I guess I was moderately sick as a young kid.



So she had said that to me over and over. I started out being a science major, a math major in college, and I think that has a lot to do with being cut off from emotions and being very into science and totally not knowing what to do about people or my own emotions. But more and more as I took, on the side, liberal arts courses, I became more interested in humanity and social processes and so on. As I saw it then, my idea about going into medicine was to connect my aptitude for science with doing something for people. So sometime toward the end of my junior year I said, well maybe I'll go to medical school.

I had no idea what medical school was like, except it seemed comparable to seminary: a lot of deprivation, a lot of hard work, and nothing about the joys of working with people, which is why I still do it. It just seemed like an extremely intimidating thing to do. But I decided to do it, and I had to go to summer school, one year and was able to complete the prerequisites. I had the good fortune of having good enough grades so I could get into medical school.

### **Medical Training/First Political Activism**

So I went to Northwestern Medical School in Chicago starting in 1968. That was the year of the Democratic convention and there were very wild-in-the-streets, very vigorous and sometimes violent protests against the U.S. foreign policy, focussed at then-President Lyndon Johnson. I again went through that kind of feeling that I should be there, and yet feeling afraid of being slaughtered by the police, and just kind of being on the sidelines, even though I was very fascinated by what was going on.

I went through the first year of medical school just trying to get oriented and make it, but the second year, I got involved with the crowd of basically the radical medical students. Among them was one guy, who's very charismatic, his name is Nick Rango, a very charismatic person who really loved to tackle and defy authority. He's doing geriatrics somewhere now. We were



kind of his-- shock troops is kind of a strong word. There was a group of us that were pretty alienated and again kind of open to that kind of solidarity with each other. We formed an extremely active group on campus that focussed a lot on racism in the medical school, which took a couple of forms. One thing was the situation of non-professional workers: the people who worked in the kitchens, orderlies, maintenance, etc., who were mostly black people. There was a struggle supporting them around founding a union. I still have a picture of myself on a picket line with the Chicago red squad, the tactical squad, right behind us. That was certainly something. That was my first contact with labor politics.

There was also the issue of the nature of what patients are used for teaching. In those days there were Wesley and Passavant Hospitals, which were very white, well-to-do private hospitals. Each of them had a charity ward, and then there was Cook County and there was the Veterans Administration Hospital. For instance, when you were going to learn to do vaginal exams and rectal exams, you did not do it on the private white patients; you would go do it at Cook County or you'd do it at the VA or you would perhaps do that in the clinics that these hospitals had. The only reason they did any of these charity services was in order to have their training programs certified. Especially in residency, they had to have a certain quota of brain tumors and hysterectomies and whatever. Those were the kinds of things we protested against.

In the spring of 1970, when there was a huge amount of anti-war activity in the country and after the Kent State murders/assassinations, we did a sit-in at our medical school. For twenty-four hours we did a teach-in and took over some administration offices. I can actually remember... I had very long hair in those days and for the sit-in I wore a dashiki. I was the one who told Dr. Lawson, who was the head of the medical school, that we were not going



to leave (chuckles). That was one of my big times on the barricades. We stayed there for 24 hours and talked about the war and talked about lots of things.

We lit a fire under the liberal faculty, and the faculty formed a support organization that defended us, so none of us would get kicked out. A very innovative program, called an Urban Preceptorship was started as a result of our activities. It was an attempt to bring urban social studies into the medical school curriculum, and make the studies more relevant to the social realities we were dealing with. That was the real politicization that I went through in those times.

Also in those times Fred Hampton, a talented young, leader of the Black Panther Party was killed. One of the things we were also doing in those years was working in the free clinics. The first free clinic I worked in was in a part of Chicago called Uptown, which is where a lot of people from Appalachia lived when they came up to get factory jobs. Uptown was a very rough, run down, economically depressed place. The very first thing I probably did was just count pills, samples from drug companies, and put them in bottles, not very interesting stuff, but it was the beginning of rubbing shoulders with people who were revolutionaries.

There was a Young Patriots Party that was part of the Rainbow Coalition, an attempt at a multi-racial coalition. It also included the Young Lords, who were Puerto Rican nationalists, radicals, and the Black Panthers. I was pretty naive, and I didn't realize the Chicago police would go around, if they could get away with it, killing people. The Black Panthers paid with the most lives, by far.

One night, after Fred Hampton was killed, we had a meeting with the Young Patriots up in some apartment in Uptown. Some of us had our white medical student coats on. It was a mix



of the white working class radicals and some medical students. The police came in and busted down the door. They had heard there was a meeting, and they thought there was a plot going on. Who knows what they thought was going to happen. They came in, and I'm sure had we not been there they would have cracked a lot of heads and dragged some people off, maybe even killed somebody. They saw half the people in the room with white coats (chuckles), so they kind of made a lot of bluster and then had to leave. I didn't quite get it, but that was a taste of police repression.

[TAPE I, SIDE B]

I remember going to downtown Chicago and passing out leaflets about Fred Hampton's assassination. I remember going to Fred Hampton's apartment. You could see that there were hundreds of bullet holes on the inside walls of the apartment, that clearly the police had shot from the outside in. There was maybe one hole that had been shot from the inside out. You could see that his bed was right under a window. Very clearly, they had just surrounded the place and opened fire, although the story they gave out was that it was a mutual gun battle. Basically those people were defenseless. Later they found out that Fred was probably sleeping very deeply, because he was taking phenobarbital, or something like that to try to control his nerves, because he was clearly persecuted as a Black Panther in those days.

I remember going to a rally, and it was probably one of the first times I was in a mixed crowd of white and black people and realized that, you know, you're pretty much taught to be afraid of black people, but I saw there was no particular hostility towards me. There was none. So, just little by little there were different lessons that I was going through in those days.

NS: It sounds like a lot of your political awareness came out of activities connected with the work



that you were in training to do; you were trying to find ways to practice those skills in more useful and more socially conscious ways. It seems that it also came out of your experience of being with kinds of people that you had not been around before. Can you talk about any political studying that you were doing or lessons that you felt people were intentionally teaching you. Was there any guidance of that kind or that you sought out?

JIM: You know, certainly over subsequent years I've read a whole lot about politics. We had regular meetings of this medical group at the medical school and probably read the things that Healthpac was putting out in those days and MCHR. They were early radical and progressive health organizations. But I think it was more a matter of kind of sponging it up for those of us who are not red diaper babies, who sort of come from parents with a fairly well-formed mainstream ideology, for me to find it on my own in the midst of so many personal conflicts and struggling to keep my head above water in medical school was... I can't say that anybody really took me by the hand and guided me.

Certainly one of the hard things about medical school if you're progressive is that there are very few role models, if any. I can think of one guy who maybe was a role model in those days, but he wasn't really accessible. That was really hard. Now, I don't know if I would have accepted one had there been one, but there were not really good role models, as far as I remember. I think we attempted in our group to provide solidarity for each other; we socialized a lot.

Later on I worked with another clinic in a Puerto Rican neighborhood. The principal organizers were Mexican, and definitely came from some kind of defined left party -- I'm not sure what it was-- but they sure had theory and we hung out a lot with them. That was also the beginning of working with latino culture, which is what I'm still doing.

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So I spent a lot more time in medical school thinking about politics than I did about medicine; that's the truth of it. In some ways, I wish I had learned a little more about some of the fundamentals. But the reality was, what was much more compelling with me was the politics of the world: how people are treated, economically, socially, and even how we were treated as students. That was what I really put my heart into, and I think that's my strength as a physician. I think I'm conscientious in keeping up with medical developments, but I think what I'm valued for and what I do well is my concern for people and my compassion and my willingness to keep learning about all the complexities of people and their problems, particularly people coming from devastated countries or devastated social groups in this country. If not always devastated, certainly oppressed.

#### Further Training and Marriage

NS: What did you do directly after medical school? What did you work at?

JIM: I was married in those days, and my wife and I moved up to Milwaukee to do a couple of years of training. In those days there had been very radical stuff happening at Cook County Hospital in Chicago, but because it was undermined, we ended up going to Milwaukee, and did a couple of years there.

It was a less overwhelming city to live in. That part of training, internship and residency, really makes it hard to do a lot of activism. I dabbled a little bit, but mostly I was just trying to keep up with becoming a doctor. A lot of people who go into medicine have physicians in the family and know what it's about; they're really kind of advanced, but for those of us who weren't... I had years of catching up with sort of the culture of medicine. So those were hard times. It was hard on our relationship, because I was just so wrapped up in trying to prove



myself in medicine, that I wasn't very available for my wife, and we really began to struggle in our relationship. That was very painful. Just in the sense also of trying to be a good man, be a good husband, be a good lover.

On the other hand, we had a wonderful living relationship in Milwaukee. Milwaukee has these enormous duplexes and triplexes, gigantic frame houses. The one we lived in was so big that the downstairs was occupied by a Native American family with all kinds of extended family and kids running all around, and upstairs there were two apartments. We lived in the back, and you could go through the attic and climb down a ladder to our friends' front porch. So we had both privacy, and community. They had a couple of dogs, and we had a dog. John and I were the most progressive interns of our group. It was a mixed neighborhood, black and Native American and working class whites.

I have to say something about my wedding, now that I've brought up my marriage. The second free clinic we worked with in Chicago was named for Pedro Albizo Campos, who was a famous Puerto Rican patriot. It was set up by a group called the Latin American Defense Organization, which dealt with welfare rights, draft resistance, serve-the-people kinds of programs such as the free clinic. And there definitely were community events. There was a progressive pastor named Norm Wells, who worked at a settlement house, which was a social work agency in the neighborhood, and he would perform special ceremonies, like christenings, but only if they were community events. So Chris and I did a community wedding.

The irony of it was that her parents were Norwegian and Polish and grew up in the very same neighborhood, and nowadays they had the attitude, living out in the suburbs, 'How can you be living there with these colored people?', you know a little bit of the fear of the inner city



that folks out in the suburbs have. Nevertheless, for the wedding, we brought together her family, our peers, you know, people from around the medical school and nursing school, and from the free clinics, and then a lot of people from the community. My family was not too much involved. LADO had a children's chorus, so we had the chorus sing a song in Spanish-- I think it was "De Colores"-- but it was some kind of a political song. We had sort of an open part of the ceremony for people to sort of testify-- mainly to say what great people we were, but also to wish us well, give us words of wisdom. There were some friends of Chris' parents there who were old lefties who had been involved in major struggles in the thirties and forties and who once had offered to bail us out when we went to jail after a demonstration. The guy who made our rings was a gay man, who was a wonderful silversmith. I didn't really understand what it meant to be gay, but he was a great man, and very warm. It was a kind of community hippie political wedding, and it was wonderful (laughs at the memory).

When we began to have difficulties, it was also very painful, because we had put so much hope into getting together. Now I can remember it as a wonderful thing that I did when I was young. Chris and I are great friends and can be proud of it.

### **Move to California**

NS: Tell me more about your political development and how that fit with your professional life.

JIM: Let's see, we finished our two years in Milwaukee and we did a little bit of work with a community organization there, but didn't get too far. I came out here to do one last year of training at Oakland Children's Hospital. California seemed incredibly exotic. Nothing I can think of now anywhere in the world seemed as exotic as California did to a couple of hicks from the Midwest who had never been outside of Chicago or Milwaukee (chuckles). Just the



way things looked: the hills, the mountains, the eucalyptus trees, people playing conga drums at Sproul Plaza, going to jazz clubs.... It's a different kind of experience, and in some ways threatening, because, you know, you go up on Telegraph Avenue and there's the Hare Krishnas and the 90 million people doing every single thing, and for somebody-- at least me-- who had a streak of conformity, it was threatening, because it was like all of a sudden people were telling me I should be all these different things. Now, it wouldn't bother me, but then it was sort of fascinating and threatening at the same time. This would have been '74.

Training was pretty absorbing, and there was still that feeling of catching up and trying to do well. But some time in one of those early years, we for the first time were in a political study group. Very serious, people who had probably been in one or another left political parties. We read the main book on Marxist political economy, it's an explanation of Capital. Baran and Sweezy, Marxist political economy.

Adding the ammunition of an intellectual understanding of the labor theory of value and the law of the falling rate of profit and the concentration of capital and things that we see around us every day, adding that logic of why capitalism is problematic to the moral outrage was wonderful. While I envy people who are passionate speakers, the Helen Caldicotts, the people who inspire: Malcolm, Martin, the people who can mobilize, I certainly admire that, but I also really admire the people who can build on the logic of why things need to be different. In my own mind I would prefer to be that kind of orator, were I to do that. An explainer, in some ways, as well as a motivator. So that was really thrilling, to begin to get that. That was certainly the most formal kind of study I had done up to that point.

NS: And where did that take you?



JIM: I don't know if it led to anything in particular. In a lot of ways I got into my work, which was very nice: someone who was leaving the clinic that I work at now just walked up to me and offered me the job. It's a community clinic in the Mexican district of Oakland. It was just perfect. I had been kind of on this pathway of getting to know latin culture. At least I had an ear for Spanish even though I couldn't speak it yet and a level of comfort with that culture. He basically said, 'I'm leaving this job. Are you interested?' I don't even know why he knew that I might be, but there were two applicants, and I got the job. And that was the last time I ever had to look for a job (laughs).

So I spent the early years just trying to become fluent in Spanish and become a reasonable physician, which again, I think, was somewhat of a catch-up phenomenon. I would say in those days I spent a lot of my spare time just trying to have fun. I got interested in conga drums; I learned Afro-Cuban rhythms. I played a lot of tennis. Physical fitness was still very important to me and still is. And I think we were, well, not exactly oblivious; I was open-minded, but just kind of not... I think for me, that the problem with politics has always been if I really realize how much suffering there is out there, I feel like I can't say no, and I will totally lose myself.

I think that as the years have gone by, I've learned how to create a balance and not feel guilty about what I choose to do in my personal life. But I think in some of those years, the demands I felt of trying to learn to be a doctor were still so heavy that I didn't do much. Or it was with a kind of a keeping it at arms length so to speak.



## Nicaragua

In March of 1980, Chris and I got separated, after years of trying to really work out our relationship. Then another relationship I got into kind of fell apart, and I really was at wits end. I really felt like I just needed to get away and to plunge into something. Really, without even knowing who Sandino was and what the FSLN was, I decided I was going to be a doctor in revolutionary Nicaragua. That was based partly on having heard about Joshua Horn, a Canadian physician who worked in China in the early years of their revolution, and some of these physicians who in one country or another went to work during revolutionary times. I certainly had the idea that if I could help Nicaragua achieve what it wanted to, that could benefit large numbers of people much more than I could ever do as an individual physician seeing a few kids a week.

So I went to Nicaragua. It was the first year of the Reagan administration. You know, once you leave this country and the spell of the media, and the way we're either lied to or the way things are framed here, things fall into place pretty quickly. Any vestiges of patriotism or somehow belief in the flag and all that, that remained in me were rapidly eliminated (laughs). I was really able to finally cut the cord to the beliefs of my family and my upbringing.

The contras did not really exist then as a fighting force, but there were random attacks in the country and just tremendous belligerence and hostility coming from the Reagan administration. This was at the same time that I was seeing the Sandinistas just going out of their way to do all these programs to help their people. It couldn't have been made more clear that the Sandinistas were doing on a national level all the things that the clinic I worked for was trying to do: the spirit of 'Serve the People: serve the people that need the most, take care of the majority of the people who are the most oppressed.' And here is our country trying to stop that. I mean, it's been the double tragedy of Nicaragua, of Mozambique, Angola,



especially Viet Nam, of these countries that were trying to build socialism, do wonderful things for their people, the tragedy of the lost potential as well as the tragedy of the just outright carnage and all the people who were killed by U.S. bombs, by U.S.-supplied weapons.

It was very inspiring and exhilarating to be in Nicaragua in 1981, when there still was a euphoria. There was a lot of unity in the country and they were able to do marvelous things by mobilizing people, and people believed in the possibilities. I don't think everybody is going to be able to be in one of those countries at the right time, because I don't think it's able to last in any country, but it's a real different consciousness. I think they still have a lot of it in Cuba and some in Nicaragua. I was in Mozambique this last year, and I know that Frelimo started out with the same ideals. Just the level of atrocities that South Africa has inflicted on that country is immense. These kinds of periods of extreme euphoria and confidence and optimism, unfortunately they're limited by the hostile forces of the world.

All of us who went to Nicaragua in those days know what I'm talking about. For several years there, people from the U.S. would go, and beyond being outraged by what the United States was trying to do, they experienced a kind of solidarity and optimism and a selflessness that wasn't based on guilt but on being part of a collective historical movement. It was a way of giving up your ego, although certainly there were some very big egos around in our movement that we all learned about later and that led to political conflicts, but, given that kind of framework, there were ways to really give up your ego and move with progressive programs that were just very right, in the sense of human solidarity. That should be the way life is. It's not that we're these little atoms running around in our consumptionist Browneian movement, keeping our own little atomic space from one another. We're really part of something bigger; we're being pulled by gravitational fields. We're not atoms, at least we're



parts of molecules.

To actually be in a country where there was a very alive social movement at its absolutely best moment of historical time was just a real privilege that I feel very lucky to have been through.

NS: Let's go back a bit. You said you were in a political study group for the first time. I'd like to know how that happened: how you happened to join that study group, and where that led you in terms of your more structured, more theoretical political study.

JIM: You know, I don't remember positively how it got started, but my guess is that my ex-wife was in a women's groups in those days, consciousness raising groups and such. And I think amongst her friends there were some definitely Marxist political people. Now that I think about it, I'm sure she initiated it, and a little bit I think I got dragged along, but I certainly found it compelling. Like I said, it gave me the idea of Marxism as a tool, rather than a dogma, that I think is incredibly useful. I think I was smart enough to get some of the major concepts and be able to use them to look at the world and how things happen and get an understanding of class, how capitalism works.

In general my overview of how things worked was tremendously enhanced. I don't think I've done any particular formal study since then, unless we might have done some through the Information Center, but I've just at times decided I needed to understand a certain issue, and the understanding I got from that study group has been very helpful.

NS: What was the study group? Were you part of forming it?

JIM: I think we were pretty much in on the beginning of a cycle. I think the goal of the study



group was to go through Baran and Sweezy, which is basically a way to go through the elements of Marx's CAPITAL and get down at least the main fundamentals of Marxist political economy. We did not, for instance, go into WHAT IS TO BE DONE, or THE NATURE OF VANGUARD PARTIES, or THE NATURE OF THE STATE, those kinds of classics. It was more on understanding political economy, which was really a critique of capitalism.

NS: Did other members of the group belong to a particular political party or group?

JIM: One of the people of the group was an economist and belonged to URPE, which is the Union of Radical Political Economists. They put out the publication DOLLARS AND SENSE.

We tried to rotate responsibility for presentations. It's funny, just to come back to the personal, in terms of somebody who groped a lot of the time in becoming a realized, active rather than a reactive person, or a subject, rather than an object, to use Paulo Freire's terms. In those days I was still in this kind of push-pull of being pulled to things and being afraid of what it would mean to be fully involved. I don't know to what extent other people have that psychology that they deal with, but my family was dysfunctional, and there wasn't a sense of clear boundaries or the joys of companionship and yet a respect for individuality. It's taken me a long time to get to where I feel good about wanting to be part of a group, without being overwhelmed. So all through my political growth it was contaminated by those kinds of personal issues.

NS: I'd like to move forward a little bit and talk about some of the people you met when you started to do Nicaragua solidarity work.



JIM: My first contact with the people doing solidarity was in the first committee I worked with, which was called the East Bay Nicaragua Medical Brigade, I believe. The main Nicaragua solidarity activity in those days was Casa Nicaragua in San Francisco. And there was a core of people like David Paul and Nora Roman and Celia and Tony Mana, who had been doing that work probably for five or six years or more. Tony and Celia were planning to go to Nicaragua to teach. There was Melody, who was planning to go to Nicaragua, if she had not already been, and a handful of people who had barely gone. It seemed like people were very serious, very disciplined.

The Nicaraguans who were around seemed very secretive. I remember we had a discussion in October or November of 1980, well, should we vote for Carter or Reagan and the more ultra left people saying well, you know, we shouldn't vote at all; it doesn't matter; they're all the same and they'll all screw Nicaragua, and the Nicaraguans and some people saying, well, Reagan's going to mean how many lives. It's still going to be worse under Reagan. Those typical kinds of left debates. I remember watching on the sidelines. Unfortunately, Reagan was elected, and I don't think our handful of votes would have made a difference.

So there was a little bit of contact with the Nicaraguans and some with the very committed kinds of North American left people. In our medical group I also had my first experience with disabled people. We used to meet in the Center for Independent Living building in Berkeley, and one of the people active in the committee, Dave Landes, a Latin America activist who teaches locally-- I'm not sure where these days-- was part of that group. I can remember doing things like having a meeting at my house, which has hills front and back and carrying Dave in his wheel chair down the stairs into the house. Again, I was being exposed to things that I hadn't been exposed to or had avoided in some ways.



I think for me part of the appeal of solidarity work was something about the exoticness of travel. I'm not sure why that appealed to me more than, say, go to the south with civil rights kind of people.

I did actually do a little bit of Vista work in college. I did some kind of work with working class black and white children in Durham, North Carolina, so I had a little bit of that impulse, but there was something I think a little bit romantic about going to a revolutionary country. I guess that is part of the difference: going to where the struggle's been won rather than maybe being in the heat of the struggle, which requires maybe a little more toughness or different kinds of politics that I have more now than I had then.



Interview #2 Jim Eitel  
27 February 1990  
History of Nicaragua Information Center

TAPE II, SIDE A

**Early Involvement with NIC**

NS: Jim, you were in the leadership of the Nicaragua Information Center almost from the beginning, from when you first joined it I think. Try to remember when you first approached the Nicaragua Information Center (I think it might have been called the Nicaragua Resource Center at that point). What do you remember about that first contact? Who was there; where was it; why did you go there; what was it like?

JIM: Well, I was in Nicaragua from March of 1981 until August. Those were the first months of the Reagan Administration. It became very clear to me that the groundwork was being laid for destabilizing Nicaragua. What I saw in the American newspapers was distorted, and hostile to wonderful things that I saw going on in Nicaragua. For instance, Nicaragua was accused of being repressive toward the Church, when in reality priests and nuns worked actively in and with the government.

It became very clear to me that, as much as I loved being there and being a part of the building process that was going on in those days, and all the hope, the hope for a better life for those people, I realized that I needed to come back to the United States and work on countering the lies and disinformation. I also personally had an interest in writing and trying to communicate against injustice. I did some writing while I was there. I circulated a newsletter among friends, like a lot of people did who went to Nicaragua. When I came back I put together a slide show. I did the "Jim Eitel Slide Show" quite a few times. In those days I was one of a relatively small number of people who had actually spent time in Nicaragua.



It was not until '82-83 that really hundreds and thousands of people started to travel.

I had met the people who worked on the first issue of the Information Center's magazine, NICARAGUAN PERSPECTIVES, at the 1981 July 19 celebration of the Sandinista victory, Deborah Reuben and Gary Ruchwager. Deborah later became coordinator of the Nicaragua Network, the national network of organizations working in solidarity with Nicaragua, and Gary wrote at least one book about Nicaragua. Both are I'm sure involved to this day. They were there at the celebration with the new magazine, the first issue of NICARAGUAN PERSPECTIVES.

So when I got back, without really knowing how to connect, I kind of found out who the magazine people were. The first thing I did was to go to an event at La Pena Cultural Center in Berkeley. They used to hold an update on Nicaragua on a monthly basis. Various people would come in and talk about what they'd seen, updating the latest news, the latest events.

Some of the people involved there were Melody, who had gone to Nicaragua in 1980 and came back and now lives in Brazil; there was Dierdre, who worked with the committee in those days; there was Mona, who now works with La Pena. In that immediate period the people I remember included a number of Latin Americans. In particular there was a couple from Argentina. They had three wonderful, totally wild, cute children. As I think of it now, they were people who knew what was at stake in Nicaragua. They were people who had fled the death squads in Argentina, I'm sure. They were intellectuals. They were progressive people.

There was a Nicaraguan man who was a law student at the time, I believe, or was finishing his pre-law studies, whose family had been involved in the struggle in various ways inside



Nicaragua. He had a brother who, as a medical student, worked in clandestine hospitals during the insurrection in late '78 and the first half of '79. While this law student had very much wanted to go to Nicaragua during the insurrection, he had been told that it was best for him to be in the United States, trying to organize solidarity work and to stop the aggression that was going to come. He knew it already back then, before the triumph.

NS: Told by whom?

JIM: By the FSLN. By the resistance in Nicaragua. There were also people from Mexico who, as Latin Americans, were concerned that the Latin American viewpoint on world affairs be expressed in the United States through the magazine. In other words, that the work of talking about what Nicaragua meant to the world and to its people not only be presented by North Americans, but that Nicaragua's sovereignty meant that Nicaragua could present its perspective. For them, that meant in the broader sense a Latin American perspective on the world, including what Nicaragua was doing. For them the name NICARAGUAN PERSPECTIVES had a lot to do with that.

As the years went along, the increasing role of the United States in destabilizing Nicaragua forced us much more into talking to the North American people. We had to talk more and more about U.S. policy and less and less about the profundity of social transformation in Nicaragua.

### **NIC Purpose and Structure**

NS: Let's back up a little: Let's talk about the goals and purposes of the Nicaragua Information Center and something about its structure and its methods of doing things.



JIM: Well in those days (1981) it was called the Nicaragua Information Center/East Bay Nicaragua Solidarity Committee. The hybrid name at that point represented philosophically two approaches in the work.

One approach was based on information, with the understanding that the softening of resistance to U.S. intervention in Nicaragua would be based on lies and disinformation. So one of the strategies of trying to protect the sovereignty of Nicaragua, the right of those people to make a progressive social change, was to tell the truth both about the positive aspects of the revolution and to counteract or neutralize the lies that were becoming increasingly common in those days. That meant not talking to the left as much as talking to the broader American public. That meant a certain kind of approach that we could say would be avoiding leftist rhetoric-- even if leftist rhetoric is based on truth. It meant using a language that would be understood by the broader American public--as broad as possible. It meant reaching out we could say to more middle-of-the-road types of organizations and even the leadership of those organizations or to traditional politicians of all kinds as part of a strategy of seeking, wherever could be found, support for Nicaragua's independence and right to have a social revolution.

The other part of the name reflected the other part of the work. The reality was that most of the people who wanted to do this kind of work, were willing for no money, for a lot of anxiety about what was happening in Nicaragua, a lot of late night meetings, were people who considered themselves on the left and part of the counterculture. We need a better word than counter culture, because that just sounds anti-, but the progressive culture of the United States, people who resist corporate America.



Early on there was still somewhat of a strain within the organization, because it's very hard to do both of those things. It's hard for people who are in the progressive culture to go out and work in mainstream America, because it's oppressive to us. It's hard to keep going out there and trying to talk to people whose-- if not they themselves then the system they presently are part of is really working against you. So there were just inherent strains in the nature of the organization even early on.

In terms of the work though, my memory of the activities of those days were threefold: predominantly there were periodic informational presentations that were at La Pena mostly. Some of us as individuals also had slideshows and so on based on working in Nicaragua. Not long after that there were times when we would do film presentations periodically at La Pena, or we might do outreach to community organizations, and do presentations.

Another aspect of the work was the magazine, which, in the first three to four years came out three times a year. We did everything. We did all the typing, we did the magazine design, we prepared the magazine for the printer and took it to the printer and so on, on an extremely low budget.

The third activity, which was a lesser part of our particular group, was direct material aid. Certainly in 1980-81 there was all over the country people working on material aid for the national literacy crusade and subsequent to that there were myriad projects. I can't really remember what specific ones we did in those days, but that was certainly one of the goals: to materially support the reconstruction efforts of the government.

NS: In the days when you first joined the organization, how many people would you say were active members?



JIM: I would say in those days there were, on the magazine, which was the committee I really began working with the most, I'd say a group of six to ten people who were regularly active. Then there were the people who worked on other kinds of things; there was maybe another I'd say half a dozen. That's ballpark.

NS: And were those mostly students or some other people who were professionals? Who were they?

JIM: I think originally the majority of people were students from Berkeley, Latin American and North American with some of us being community activists or recent returnees from Nicaragua that worked at various jobs in the community.

NS: The Information Center was connected with the University of California, wasn't it?

JIM: Originally the Information Center was founded as a student organization through the Community Projects Office. One of the benefits of that was the ability to do bulk mailings through the University as a University-related activity, and certain grants that were available through the Graduate Assembly helped to publish early issues of the magazine, that's true. I can certainly remember going into the mailroom of the University and helping to stamp the envelopes for the bulk mailings.

### **NIC Origins**

NS: Can you talk some about what you know of the origins of the organization before you got there, and tell me how you know that, since it's not firsthand information from you.



JIM: I think what we could say about that is that people who had been doing Latin America work for years and know the history of Guatemala, the destabilization and overthrow of a progressive government there, in Chile, in Jamaica, knew very, very much what was going to happen in some way. I don't think anyone dreamed it was going to be as bad as it's been nor the result that we all know about today, the defeat of the Sandinistas in the elections this year, so I think among those people, it was very clear to them that disinformation and anti-communism would be a vehicle for paving the way for military intervention.

Both in Nicaragua and in the United States, some people saw that as a very important vehicle, that we would have to be able to communicate to the broader American public, because in the present era the American left is (deep sigh) not a powerful enough political force. So out of that came... concretely, there was a Nicaraguan at Berkeley who was close to people in the FSLN in Nicaragua and certainly sympathetic. He was among the people who understood the need to do that kind of work.

Those of us like myself having been there and having experienced the beginnings of the war against Nicaragua were likewise convinced of the need to do that kind of work and felt maybe more comfortable doing that kind of work than organizing people in the streets. It was a combination of things.

NS: Do you know anything about the antecedents of NIC in the Bay Area? Other solidarity organizations that were active before the triumph in '79.

JIM: Well before I went down myself, from about May of 1980 until I went in the spring of 1981 I worked with something called the East Bay Nicaragua Medical Brigade. I believe that's what it was called.



The fact that we called ourselves a brigade indicates the sometimes I think the problem with people overly identifying with what was happening in Nicaragua, because to most of the people in this country, "brigade" just sounds very militaristic. That was one of the things that I think in NIC we tried to use North American language and to translate the Nicaraguan experience rather than to only model ourselves after it, as much as we admired what it was doing in Nicaragua.

Really that group was an outgrowth of Casa Nicaragua in San Francisco. My sense of it is that, in the mid '70's, as the FSLN became a much more powerful force within Nicaragua, 1974 and 1975, they began doing a lot more organizing in those parts of the world where there were many Nicaraguan exiles, and especially in the United States, because it was the United States that was keeping the Somoza regime in power.

In 1974-75 there were people like Roberto Vargas, who is well-known in the Bay Area, a poet and community activist and later was Cultural Attache in the Nicaraguan Embassy. Alejandro Murgia, who's Chicano, was early on a very active supporter of the FSLN. There were Nicaraguans very active in the trade union movement in San Francisco who went back, participated in the insurrection and unfortunately one of them, very heroic, died recently, in the last couple of years, fighting the contras.

The Bay Area produced quite a number of people who went back to Nicaragua and played important roles in the revolutionary government. There were Latin Americans, Mexican Americans, who went and fought in Nicaragua, particularly in 1979, on the Southern Front, coming out of Costa Rica, along with Nicaraguans from up here who returned to join the fighting. But there were also Mexican Americans who fought, that I know of. It's very



important that we remember it, because sometime when we think of the solidarity movement, it's very white, and yet it was not. There were people of all kinds who made all kinds of contributions.

Those organizations-- Casa Nicaragua, because it was very much the people most in the lead in that work were Nicaraguan exiles who were affiliated with the FSLN for the most part-- after the victory worked with the FSLN as the basis of the new government and moved, particularly in the first year, into the national literacy crusade.

NS: Let's move forward again to the Nicaragua Information Center. What was the Information Center's relation to other organizations in the Bay Area? Both solidarity and other organizations doing political work and informational work.

JIM: You know, in those days I was kind of a newcomer to how progressive movements worked together in the United States. I think from time to time there would be events where two groups would join together to do something, but a lot of what I remember was pretty much just struggling to maintain our own organization, trying desperately to get enough attention on Nicaragua. I can remember we would frequently be contacted to endorse an event or a rally or a demonstration put on by people supporting the cause of the Salvadorans or the Guatemalans.

#### NIC Work

NS: Let's talk about the organization itself. Maybe the best way to talk about it is in chronological periods. Talk about that *first period from when you came into the organization to....* Well, why don't you designate the time periods.



JIM: I want to also put it in a historical context in terms of certain dynamics that I saw going on. I came into it without really understanding the Sandinista victory. When I came into it, Reagan had just been elected and Nicaragua was still in a honeymoon period. There was wonderful support around the world for Nicaragua's national literacy crusade of 1980, generally world and U.S. support for the Sandinistas. What there was very positive.

As a reaction to that, the U.S. started doing two things. One it began the disinformation campaign against Nicaragua, and it began creating what were to become the contras and at the same time it fired up the death squads more in El Salvador. What happened in the public mind was two things, and the progressive movement was not immune to this. First of all, Nicaragua was systematically lied about: We were told it was communist; that the church was being persecuted; that private businesses were being taken away. It was being portrayed as the worst kind of stalinist dictatorship. At the same time, word of the slaughter in El Salvador and ultimately the murder of Archbishop Romero started to happen. So on the one hand, many people began to say, 'Well, uh oh, Nicaragua is going to be just like all of these other terrible communist countries', and support for Nicaragua, in my mind, either began to dwindle, or we spent a tremendous amount of energy being on the defensive, saying, 'Well Nicaragua's not totalitarian' and 'Nicaragua's not persecuting the church', at the time when the contra were already starting to kill teachers in the countryside. Progressive Catholic priests and layworkers were being sent home under the influence of the pope and the bishops.

It was like truth was standing on its head. Other people were against the atrocities in El Salvador, but they couldn't understand the difficulties of building socialism in Nicaragua, of overcoming disinformation. That even got to the point of affecting the Nicaragua Network, which hit a low point in the period, somewhere around 1982.



Then in 1983, the contra war, right after the pope's visit, broke out in earnest. Also, I believe it was in 1982 the United States closed all the consulates that Nicaragua had in the United States, so travelers couldn't get visas to enter Nicaragua. This was an attempt to isolate Nicaragua. In response, Nicaragua suspended their requirement for visas. So there also began to be a much bigger flow of U.S. citizens to Nicaragua.

On the one hand there was a period from late '81, most of '82 of stagnation or being on the defensive while other people were preoccupied with El Salvador, but people beginning to go to Nicaragua in large numbers. During that period there were a number of us, you and I and others, trying to maintain a critical mass to develop and find the few people who were going to Nicaragua and coming back, to build the organization and ultimately coming up with a regular steering committee that would function on a regular basis and do very serious long-term planning and so on, as well as beginning to try to form various subgroups that would work actively not only on the magazine but on outreach, on material aid, on a variety of things.

When we hit the spring of 1983 and the contra war was clearly breaking out into the open, all of a sudden, at that point, there was a tremendous outpouring of interest by people who wanted to do something. It was a real breakthrough, because at that point we really overcame the disinformation. People were not paralyzed.

The challenge organizationally became somehow how to maintain the directions that those of us with experience to that date saw as correct or necessary, with the myriad ideas and energy of this tremendous influx of people. I think as a leadership it was very challenging, because we were so busy trying to respond to the day-after-day crises that were happening in Nicaragua and to the lies in the U.S. press, that it was also hard to pay adequate attention to



and nurture new volunteers, to consider what ideas might be the most useful and worthwhile to try out and so on. It was a very stressful period.

We were all very afraid for Nicaragua; we didn't know if at any moment the United States might invade. And on the other hand we had many, many people of very diverse ideas and political backgrounds and often tremendous sympathy for Nicaragua but little acquaintance with it or what work had already been done.

It was a time of immense growth in the organization and development of a variety of subcommittees and intermediate structures for communicating amongst the different kinds of work that was going on. It was also very difficult sometime to be in the leadership to try to keep up with fundraising, to find a way to support an office, to pay for one, then two, then three, then four staff and so on.

NS: So that period, you would say, was from '82 to late '83 maybe?

JIM: Yeah, as I remember it, the news about the contras began to come out more and more heavily in 1982. And I think by the end of 1982 and early 1983, on the one hand, the contras were no longer a secret, but the propaganda campaign began in very, very heavy earnestness. I think the big mobilization campaign with the Miskitu Indians and the accusations of genocide would have been during the winter of 1981.

From the point of view of the propaganda apparatus, things had really been set in motion, but also people were really beginning to say, 'Hey, wait a minute, let's not blame the victims here. We're not going to be sucked in by all this propaganda. Let's defend the Sandinistas, before



it's too late, before it's another Guatemala, another Chile.' So I think it was late 1982 and especially the first six months of 1983 that things turned around and people responded to the crisis.

[TAPE 2, SIDE B]

NS: So you said that there was paid staff at that period and growth. How did those decisions get made? How did that come about?

JIM: Well, I think that part of what we saw happening was that as a critical mass of people in the Bay Area accumulated and there were people who wanted to do work, those of us in leadership with our own lives to live and our own responsibilities, there needed to be some glue to tie together the work to make an amplifying effect. I can just remember very concretely, when we got an answering machine, and people could actually leave messages in one place, even when only volunteers came in and took off the messages, that was a qualitative change in the work, because it allowed communication to take place, it allowed for a continuity of work that transcended our unpredictable or limited capacities as volunteers.

I remember when we first got our own independent office over on Woolsey Street. Before we had been sort of step-children in La Pena, in what is now the store (La Tienda). That was a real concrete step. Then at a certain point somehow we found a way to hire somebody half time. Her name was Stephanie Groebel. She of course worked probably 60 hours a week in those days. Again, it was beginning, it was establishing an organization that was much more concrete, and that could respond in many ways. I think what was always so, so hard was, because of Nicaragua being literally under threat of being exterminated, all the time, starting in 1983, we were always in a crisis mode, as the Nicaraguans have been for not ten, but those who are the true revolutionaries have been for 30 years. Those who are still around.



Just as an aside, the people of Mozambique, where I visited last year, have been at war, really without peace, since 1962. How many years is that? Almost thirty years. It's very similar. The Cubans, in their own way, since the mid-50's. (deep sigh) If I look at myself, and how I've been worn down by all this, with all the privilege and ease that I have in this country, I can understand why the Nicaraguans are exhausted now. It's amazing that 40 % of them still voted for the FSLN, for more of the same, because they believed in it.

NS: In those days the structure of NIC was a steering committee and subgroups that had their own heads. Talk about the numbers in those groups and what their relations were.

JIM: Well, I think early on it was a challenge for us to keep together a steering committee of maybe three people. The history of the steering committee was that it went from a group that had three people with change every six months to a group that, at the end, had I think there were seven of us that were there for almost two years. It was at that point a problem in the sense of stagnation or of not knowing how to rotate leadership. But early on it was a challenge to maintain three people meeting every couple of weeks. Then we would have the different subcommittees that had usually a chair and a co-chair. We would use the Nicaraguan term of "responsable" and "co-responsable."

We did have a model that depended on, I guess we could call it some kind of centralized responsibility, people with defined responsibilities, with, as much as possible, full discussions of the work that went on. It was an attempt at-- because of the crisis in Nicaragua-- having an accountability, and having a means of really getting work done, focussing on the process of getting results.



The end was not democracy for democracy's sake. The end was to protect Nicaragua in the best way that we and the Nicaraguans thought possible.

At a certain point, when we got big enough, and I would guess that this would be sometime in 1983, there were enough different subcommittees that there was a need for a coordinating body. That was called the Coordinating Committee, where one or two representatives of each of those groups would come to a weekly or biweekly meeting. There was an overlap in those days.

Generally, everybody on the Steering Committee was leading some committee as well as being on the Steering Committee, so that brought them to Coordinating Committee meetings. (chuckles) For example, I was on the Steering Committee and I was also the editor of the magazine and thus on the Coordinating Committee as well. Certainly in those days I was going to two to three meetings a week, and I was probably spending at peak times 20 hours a week outside of my work and personal life. And I was only one of many people doing that.

NS: To give a sense of what the work of the Nicaragua Information Center was, can you try to list those subcommittees, the different work committees.

JIM: Well, there was the magazine, there was a committee which at one point was called the Action Committee, that produced a different kind of publication, which became the NIC Bulletin. It was a publication much more in the language of the progressive movement and aimed at what I would call orienting the progressive movement. Somebody at NIC, Tony Ryan, used to talk about what he called "the standing committee" who were by those days the thousands of people in the Bay Area who had been to Nicaragua, who could not be absorbed into NIC, but who wanted to do something for Nicaragua. There were various smaller groups around the



Bay Area, so the Bulletin became a means of keeping those people involved, oriented I like to say, encouraged, informed, doing some work for Nicaragua.

The Action Committee did leafletting or would respond to what we would call information crises, where there were particularly 'Big Lies' about Nicaragua, in the Orwellian sense, combined usually with some military action. So there would be times when we would go nuts trying to find out what really happened, what to do, and go leafletting or call other organizations, call meetings together.

At one point there was a Video Committee. There were people who had experience making videos and both were interested in producing videos based on their trips to Nicaragua as well as arranging for showings of movies and videos on Nicaragua. Somewhere in there, '83-'84, we did a month-long series of films on Nicaragua at La Pena with brief talks and updates at the beginning of each one. There was quite a big turn-out for each of those.

There probably was an events committee, because periodically we needed to put on a dance or host a Nicaraguan group that was on a tour, both as a fund-raising event and as a means of letting the Nicaraguans present their views. I know that you, Norma, worked a lot on tours and I don't remember so much if that was a subgroup, but that was certainly a big activity of NIC, that periodically representatives of the trade unions or of Christian Base Communities or other kinds of people came through. The Minister of Commerce, various people would come to the United States and give talks.

Then there was a Media Committee that would work both in the arena of arranging for Nicaraguans to talk to the major media, television, major print media, radio, as well as work



with reporters and with editorial page staffs on the kinds of things the Reagan Administration was throwing out about Nicaragua, the misinformation. Certainly by 1984-'85-'86 and subsequently, the media began to call us. They realized they were not getting the truth from Washington. And, to the extent that we could find what the real truth was, they would rely on us.

It's hard now to remember all the years, but if we talk now about the middle years, the period of growth, another activity that began to happen was the tours to Nicaragua. In 1983 and '84, NIC did three tours to Nicaragua, political education tours, hosted by members of NIC. I was on each of them, actually, and some other people helped lead them also. Many of the people who went on those tours either became active in NIC or were active in the community, working on Nicaragua in their own way. There were coffee brigades, who began to go to Nicaragua to work as volunteers for a couple of weeks. That was another way people went to Nicaragua to learn and support the Nicaraguan people.

There was something called a cursillo that you, Norma and Vilma conducted. It was an educational series with outside speakers. It's really impressive! (chuckles) Very impressive, all the things we did with a very small paid staff and many very dedicated volunteers.

NS: At that point, after the period of growth, or at the peak, there were other Central America organizations around. You mentioned the National Nicaragua Network. There were also a couple of coalitions in the Bay Area working for peace in Central America. How did NIC during that period fit into that?

JIM: Well we originally even shared the Woolsey Street office with the Oakland-Berkeley CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador). We rented the office together,



because we couldn't afford it alone. Eventually NIC became large enough that it needed all the office space. We even had a printshop going. Scott, the person who printed the magazine also worked on printing leaflets for various progressive causes, but also produced the Bulletin and the magazine.

There were I believe two major coalitions working on Central America issues. One of the strains in that period-- and it's just unfortunate that the limited energy sometimes has to compete and we can't always find the best way to cooperate-- In that period where people were outraged at human rights violations in El Salvador and many people were questioning what was happening in Nicaragua, a lot of the energy did go much more towards El Salvador. So early on the Nicaraguan role in those coalitions was uncomfortable; it was even uphill in those coalitions to convince people, 'Well,yeah, that what the Sandinistas are doing is still okay, and it's what you people are going to have to face when El Salvador wins.' That was a difficult period.

As the contra war became much more ascendant and people saw that Nicaragua's survival was threatened and that if Nicaragua went under, there was no way that people in El Salvador could achieve their social justice, their revolution, the momentum shifted again much more towards Nicaragua. It also was just difficult, given the limitations of each group, with so many crises to respond to, the ability to maintain a coalition was difficult. Of course, people working on Guatemala found their issues getting the least attention.

I would say where the coalitions achieved their greatest success was in a couple of areas: One was that, as a prelude to the time that became the invasion of Grenada, in 1983, there was something formed called the Pledge of Resistance, because they saw what was coming, in the



belligerence of U.S. policy, a possible invasion of Nicaragua. The U.S. hinted at it, threatened it, used the threat to distort Nicaragua by making them build up their military, as well as it really had the plan for invasion on the books. Some people started the threat of active non-violent demonstrations to tie up the United States if the U.S. invaded. After the invasion of Grenada, there was a huge outpouring of rage, upset and influx into the Pledge of Resistance. It is very possible that we were able to stop a direct invasion of Nicaragua in those days because of it. So that was one of the successes of the coalition.

The second thing, I believe, was the steady pressure on Congress over a period of probably three to four years, of constantly raising hell with Congress when they would vote or approve aid to the contras. As we all know, relentlessly they found ways to get around and ultimately to subvert Nicaragua. But in the legislative arena, we were definitely able to have an impact. Some members of Congress were just deluged with mail against any more aid to the contras. I would say the peak of that was probably '86-'87.

NS: To get back to the chronology, that period of growth for NIC lasted until when? Do you see a dividing line into the next period?

JIM: It's hard to remember now. There was another layer of work that NIC did that was very important. Due to various reasons, and I think the great difficulties of working in Washington, which is the nerve center along with New York of the American Empire, the force that was trying to overthrow Nicaragua, the national office of the Nicaragua Network had many demands on it; it did not have a large activist base the way the Bay Area does; and it had many demands on it just to try to work with congress. So NIC felt it was very important to support the development of a national organization.



That came about in a number of ways. It came about with very intense dialogue with the national office, political dialogue about what would be the correct policies. It came about in the way of lending our resources to the national office for national use and national prestige, particularly the magazine. And it came about in the form of NIC becoming the regional coordinator for what became the Pacific Southwest Region, which was California, Nevada, Arizona, and I believe possibly Utah.

It was really amazing. NIC was able to take a group of uncoordinated committees with not only different philosophies, but which were geographically isolated, and by '87, organize a very strong, cooperative regional effort. There was an ability to mobilize groups around these states, to keep them informed, encourage them, to support them, especially the smaller groups, that was a tremendous example for the rest of the country. It was a real support for the national office.

NS: Could you describe just briefly what it was a national office of?

JIM: The organization originally was called the National Network in Solidarity with the Nicaraguan People. Probably in 1983 or '84, they shortened that to the Nicaragua Network. That organization was born out of a conference in early 1979 of human rights and religious activists, progressive and left-wing people who had been working on Nicaragua, some labor people and even a few progressive people in Congress, like Tom Harkins, who, for various reasons had come together to oppose the Somoza dictatorship. They started having a national office in, I would say, later in 1979, and became the principle national coordinating body for Nicaragua solidarity work, particularly the literacy crusade.



NS: What is your source of information about that, since you weren't part of that?

JIM: At one point I actually did research on the history of the Network for the magazine. I talked to some of the people who were the founders and who participated in those conferences in 1979.

NS: Let's see, how far have we gotten in the history of NIC? I think we had gotten to where there was a steering committee and a large coordinating body made up of the heads of working groups.

#### Strains and Contradictions

JIM: And now we're into the "classic period". (chuckles)

NS: The Golden Age. (chuckles)

JIM: I think without going into a lot of details or about personalities, I think a number of things happened as we moved into 1988 and 1989.

I mentioned early on that there were different kinds of people attracted to work for Nicaragua and there were different styles of work and I think different political beliefs. There were some people who were more --and I think very correctly-- interested in working on organizing for political change in this country, because without that, small countries like Nicaragua ultimately cannot really be sovereign, as long as the United States is powerful enough (sighs) to-- it's not a matter of being powerful enough-- as long as the government of the United States is hostile to sovereign forces elsewhere in the world. It's really true. So some people were much more into joining forces with other kinds of progressive groups in



a very active way. One of the difficulties in that was sometimes feeling that issues became too scattered. It was hard to maintain a focus on Nicaragua when there were so many kinds of issues that some people wanted to connect with. And yet there is a very important element of truth in that belief.

The other strain were people who were more focussed on working in the mainstream arena, because, in some ways, you could say that's also where the power is: The power is in the leadership. The other people would say the power is in the masses. And both things are true, on some level.

Unfortunately, at this point in time, the masses in this country are not strong enough to defend Nicaragua. But, on the other hand, the leadership in power is too corrupt. We've all seen what the so-called liberals and democrats in Congress have done.

I think there was a war-weariness amongst ourselves, that even as we were able to defeat contra aid, the Nicaraguan economy two, three, four years ago was totally destroyed, and that U.S. policy was successful, in the sense that it made the country ungovernable. It made it very hard for the Nicaraguan leadership, the Sandinistas, to give anything to their people except hope, a distant hope, and it made it very hard for us to say, 'This is a worthwhile alternative.'

I just think that constant strain also in some way-- part of what happens I think in those circumstances is people turn against each other. Just as families do, under situations of deprivation, people can be heroic, but they also can make mistakes and turn against each other.



I think also, out of really not knowing what was the right thing to do, it became harder to really have the full political discussions that we needed to in the group. It was hard even to admit to ourselves maybe that the victories we could achieve at this moment in time were very limited by the Reagan-Bush era that we live in.

The strains in the organization tended to focus on personalities, but in many ways it had to do with the tremendous pressures of the work over all these years and this turning inward. When there were fewer successes, then it was harder for people of differing viewpoints to hang together when we were unable to have some really hard political discussions. In reality neither strategy was working real well. It wasn't possible.

I want to point out another process that I observed. Those of us who started early on did really wonderful work. We poured our lives into it, and by the nature of doing good work for a good cause that was attractive, we created a growing organization. Because of Nicaragua being under a death threat all the time, we were always in a crisis mode. We had to grow much faster, then. By the time we had a larger organization, questions of democracy and communication within the organization were very important, plus supervision of staff, plus fund-raising, plus mediating between staff and volunteers and the myriad questions that come up in non-profit organizations, plus trying as a leading organization, relate responsibly to groups working on other single issues.

As a tiny organization, NIC really had an obligation just to work on Nicaragua; but as a powerful organization, NIC had an obligation to also try to defend Gay-Lesbian rights, to defend the rights of people of color, and yet, there we were, this poor little leadership... (chuckles ruefully) For myself, I'm trained to be a doctor, and so I have certain decision-making skills that I have to have as a physician, communication skills... but I don't have



administrative skills, and I had to do all those things. I had to try to run a magazine, turn that over somehow to other people, help maintain that without a paid staff for the magazine; I had to try to keep (or chose to) stay in the leadership on the Steering Committee and so on.

My self-criticism would be that I *didn't* find a way to take the risk of letting new leadership come in. Some of that was ego reasons, and some of that was the fear that if I wasn't there with my experience, Nicaragua would literally get killed, people I knew down there would get killed. And yet as I became more exhausted, I was less capable of providing the leadership.

I think these same phenomena have probably happened in Guatemala, in Nicaragua, in Jamaica, in Chile, in the Soviet Union, in the very cruel realities of this historical epoch. It probably happened to the capitalists when the kings and the princes were trying to kill them off in the days of the rise of capitalism (chuckles).

[TAPE III, SIDE A]

NS: You have some perspective on that time period now. What do you think NIC could have done to make leadership development part of the organization, to have those political discussions? A second question is, What was the content of those political discussions?

JIM: One thing that is really clear to me is that communication is fundamental; truth has to be said. And the truth is often complex. What allows the Bush Administration to do what it's done in Nicaragua is manipulation of the truth. The reason that progressive change is still very limited in this country is because of the vast control of the media by corporate America.

Within NIC, some things happened due to people's various personal limitations of a variety



of kinds, that communication began to stop. It's because I think we weren't clear enough then that there were kind of two differing viewpoints of how to work in NIC. I would say that there were some of us who may have been more professionals but in somehow worked more in the mainstream world and probably in some ways have to adapt. I personally have to adapt myself to that. There are limits at least psychologically and personally to how radically different I can make myself and still function in a world that is somewhat hostile. It's hard for me to constantly do that. It makes me think politically in a certain way. Also, for somebody like me, I have a certain credibility in some places that other people might not. I'm not sure what it's worth. That's certainly my take on where I was and my own tendency. I think there are other people who are maybe more fearless but would also pretty much rather have nothing to do with the mainstream culture except to confront it in an angry way.

I think what would have really helped us would have been to say, 'Look, people, we really have at least two kinds of approaches here, and they're both useful; they've been useful up until now. I think that's what was amazing about NIC: for a long time we were able to co-exist. I don't think either approach alone is enough. I think political work is complicated. I think people can become way too leadership-oriented or things can become too ultra-democratic and not get anywhere. I don't think there is a perfect answer. My sense is it's always going to go back and forth in every country, every organization. I do think that because of the way people would either stop communication by accusations or by defensiveness, communication began to be stifled. So, the organization began to polarize.

I'll just take myself personally, and I'll be very frank here. It's a little scary. You know, we are brought up in a society to be competitive, to be competitive individuals, and what the work requires and what people whose lives are on the line in Nicaragua require is real selflessness. It's true, some people have to be leaders, but only because the situation needs



leaders, not because those people are better or different. I confess that there were times where my own personal ego in a sense of needing to feel important got in the way and made me what to hang on to the power I had obtained. It also comes across in the sense of thinking that I can do it better than other people. I had talks with Nicaraguans about what the difficulties are of being from the so-called petty-bourgeoisie. On the one hand I'm very skilled, on the other hand, it's very hard for me to work collectively. And it's not that people can't work collectively and still be efficient.

I think these are challenges peculiar to American culture and to our social upbringing. I think when we get this figured out, we'll be a lot better off in this country.

In terms of leadership development, I think the other thing that was very hard, I think with so much pressure on Nicaragua and the need to defend them, it was just hard at a certain point to let things go. It was one thing to let new things start, but it was harder to turn over established things, because it just seemed like we knew how to do it and we needed to keep doing it. We did expand the Steering Committee from three to five to seven and let in new people of differing political viewpoints. There were certainly people on the Steering Committee at the end who had a much more activist, grassroots philosophy, compared to say my professional-oriented philosophy if you want to call it that. On the other hand, there began to be a gulf between the Steering Committee and the Coordinating Committee. I just think it's hard.

### **Thoughts on Next Directions**

What I personally see for myself at this point is, on the one hand I feel like I can't abandon Nicaragua, and yet I understand the people who left that country to avoid the draft or who



could just no longer take the pressure. It got to where I personally felt it was very hard for me to take the burden. And I have the privilege of walking away from it. The South Africans and the Salvadorans and the Nicaraguans don't. That's what Sandino meant when he said the workers and the campesinos will go all the way. With whatever mistakes they made, or make, they're the ones who don't have a choice, who stay around and face the bullets. (deep sigh)

There's another couple of thoughts I have. I find where I am personally is working in the direction of both politically wanting to work with the people in our country who've been the most oppressed, people of color, Native Americans, women, gay, lesbians, bisexuals, because I'm becoming much more clear through work I've done with groups that focus on these issues of how patriarchy works. It's a term that seems loaded or rhetorical, but it's a very real thing.

In a lot of ways, what I'm coming back to are the things that affect me in a very personal way in this country. The things that involve my own true liberation also involve working for the liberation of people in this country. That, in the political sense, means working more in this country supporting the struggle of chicanos for their rights, for bilingual education, for adequate money for AIDS research, for an end to oppression of people according to sexual preference, supporting people of color, Native Americans in their land struggles and their on-going struggle for survival. Because only then, by really making the change in this country, can a Nicaragua be free to do what it wants to do. That's the cruel reality, but it is the reality.

I do have a long view of history, and even if I'm weary now, there are many people in the struggle. There's no alternative but (laughs) to become a depressed existentialist like Camus or to keep struggling. Who was it, Leone! Rugama, who said, 'There's no alternative but to struggle.' I refuse to give up hope, even though that's what Reagan and Bush would like me to do: give up hope and get in to consumption. I don't want to do that.



The other thing is, I just wish I had it here to read from, but there's a poem of Bertolt Brecht, and I believe it's called "To the Later Generations". I think a very appropriate poem for our particular era. He wrote it in the era of the thirties, during the rise of fascists and leading to World War II, a very hopeless period, which is how I've often felt from the point of view of identifying with Nicaragua. The poem says something like, 'We lived through bitter times and our voices became hoarse and harsh from shouting protests. It's not pretty to have to be angry all the time or to be on the attack; we all would like to live in peace and have kids and dance and do all those things, and yet history doesn't allow us to do enough of that or to do only that, which is what we should be doing.'

NS: I want to connect what you've said most recently with the idea of working through an organization. You say now you feel you need to connect yourself with struggles of other oppressed groups. Do you see yourself working in organizations? And in what capacity?

JIM: You know, that's...(laughs) One of my individual problems is that I've sort of accumulated a whole series of connections, obligations of the heart. I'm sorting that out, because I tend to want to do everything very well. I feel I need to narrow it down, but I definitely see it as working in organizations. I think part of what I feel is that, on the one hand, as a white man and white men being the biggest problem, in some ways I need to do the very difficult work of trying to communicate with, recruit, and support other white men to oppose the system.

On the other hand, the people who are going to be in the forefront of the struggles are not white men. We need to be the allies. We need to be the subversives perhaps, but we need to be the allies of people of color, of Native Americans. So it means not being in the leadership in the same way; it means not being... I'm not sure what the proper word is; it just means



understanding that their struggles are critical towards all of our liberation. I think that's what I'm seeking, how to do that. How not to run away from the hard work of tackling white power. In this country, the call for that, the insistence on that, came from the black power movement, SNCC, and later the Black Panthers and other groups, and at the same time to support their struggles. That's what I'm trying to understand.

I think that some of it really comes down to, most immediately the work I'm going to do is around opposing racism, anti-semitism, oppression of gay-lesbians, bisexuals, because as whites in this country become the minority, racism is going to be the tool that is going to be used to try to attack the progressive movement. In California in ten years, people of color will be the majority and in the rest of the country it will be a trend.

In the sense of women's rights, this bogus garbage about the family, the anti-abortion movement, what that's really about is keeping women in their place. So it's important not only to support the women's movement but also the gay, lesbian and bisexual movement, because they also are attacking these conservative notions of the family. That's where all these different things come together.

NS: In fact, most of the strong leadership of NIC was made up of women.

JIM: The leadership of NIC was definitely made up of women and many lesbian and bisexual women. Certainly as a man, when I look around at the American movement or the white movement, I feel that the best leadership is among women, because women are not bought off by the system. More women now are being bought off by the system, but on the whole, women don't benefit from the system. They're not contaminated; they're not coopted by it. That's a dialectic that's okay with me, but still, my work is to work with men.



### **The NIC Divorce**

**NS:** Still, I just don't want to leave NIC there in sort of vague terms: There was polarization, and then there was nothing. Can you talk about that period? What happened?

**JIM:** Let me back up a bit here. Based on the middle period of growth, those of us on the Steering committee had acquired a pretty strong bonding, a good chemistry. Part of what made it worth all the stress was being able to be in a collective of really smart people; our political discussions were really varied and sophisticated, and we complemented each other well. Becky and I had worked in Nicaragua and knew it really well. Byron had worked around the left for years, and understood the maneuverings out there. Kathy was really strong on organization building. Phil was very strong on how to work on the media. Becky was also the paid NIC Coordinator from around '84 to '86. So you have this steering committee leadership that was bonded and experienced.

In '86 or maybe '87, Becky wanted to step back somewhat, and we hired Leah as Coordinator. Around that time, most of us wanted to step back somewhat, but preserve our leadership role. I stopped coming to Coordinating Committee meetings, but stayed as editor of the magazine and on the Steering Committee. Becky also stopped coming to CC meetings. So we began a process as leadership of pulling back, which was good, because it allowed us to preserve our mental health.

We added a few new people from the CC to the SC, to add energy to the top leadership, Rick and Leslie. But at the same time, because some of us no longer came to the CC, more of a gap between leadership and other people began to develop. Also, we had hoped that Leah would



become a bonded part of the SC. It was not that the SC never had conflict-- we had plenty-- but mostly, we were able to resolve it and stay effective as a group. But Leah never became truly integrated; perhaps our personalities were all too strong, or perhaps we were not able to accept her different point of view. The result was that she bonded more with the CC, in a way against the SC, at a time when the SC was becoming less visible to the CC.

When Leah left, around a year later, the Steering Committee was even more weary. We hired Catherine, partly because she was a strong personality, someone who could keep things moving. But again, she did not really integrate into the SC; rather, we had increasing conflict with her, and again, she bonded with the CC, who in turn had begun to turn against the SC. In other words, there were some problems with distrust at that time-- fall 1987, spring 1988.

There were attempts to mediate, to revise structure, all through that time, but distrust was such that people in the CC would have totally different understandings of proposals and agreements from the SC. What we wanted as a steering committee was recognition of authority for the SC as a structure; we felt that our cumulative experience warranted that. The CC wanted to eliminate or change that role; they wanted more of the leadership action, which was partly justified.

Around August of 1988, things came to a head. The SC felt that either we had to leave the organization or retake effective control. We were weary, and yet, uncomfortable with the direction NIC was taking politically, of working narrowly on the left. We had criticisms of Catherine's budget and other procedural things.

The thing came to a head, in an atmosphere of polarization and distrust. We tried to fire her-- the SC had authority to hire and fire. The CC met-- none of the SC went, so as to respect



their process-- and they, including Catherine, fired us as SC. That's right, the employee fired her employer. We had become, in the eyes of the CC, as bad as capitalist bosses.

So we locked them out; they took the checkbooks. Both sides lobbied the community for support, and people in the community were either dismayed or took sides. It totally degenerated, the way divorces do sometimes. I remember feeling like I was in a Greek tragedy: that nothing I could do would stop the course of events until the worst had happened. I lost a number of friendships over it. It was extremely painful; I took sides to protect myself, even as I knew the escalating actions were destructive, that we were really not each other's enemies. It's frightening to see how distrust can build and then explosively escalate. It gives me some understanding of how ethnic conflicts blow up sometimes.

How could it have been prevented? We could have instituted a regular rotation/election of the Steering Committee, which would have kept the division from becoming a gulf. We also could have been much firmer about dealing with communication problems, which could have meant helping some individuals change how they worked in groups. Or maybe we could have recognized that we needed to divide, and divided in a conscious rather than a destructive way.

It was very messy for a while. I think what's happening now is both groups are now doing the kind of work they feel they do best and they're complementary. They are working together in the Nicaragua Solidarity Coalition. I think what needs to happen is for both groups to try to rebuild, do their respective kinds of work, and hopefully let the wounds of personal animosity heal and fade into the distance. I hope people on both sides can admit to the mistakes that they made, and learn to work together in the larger movement.



Part of our work of being in the progressive movement is to learn from our mistakes. I admire all of us for what we are trying to do, in (sighs) the most scary and powerful country on the planet, that has the most means of physical repression and the most means of psychological control at its hands, and we're still trying to stand up to it. We need to look at each other and remember that, and forgive our own mistakes, forgive those of others, and do the work of learning and talking to each other, so we can build a better movement the next time around.

### **NIC In History**

NS: You see the Nicaragua Information Center in historical terms. That is, it's part of history; it played a role at a time in history. Can you talk a little bit about that, taking a step back and seeing the process and the current reality. How do you see that?

JIM: I think the very positive role is that a growing, ultimately very large number of people were able to work in an extremely dedicated, in an extremely effective, in an extremely varied way, to oppose U.S. intervention in Nicaragua. There was a willingness and an ability of people to be true internationalists: to support people of another country selflessly, because they're our brothers and sisters, not to allow ourselves to be divided by national boundaries.

I think internationalism is something that's extremely important. In the Twentieth Century, with the world via communications and travel becoming one world, I think the kind of work NIC did is extremely important. And it was part of a larger movement. I think that the coming demise of apartheid is due to that broader internationalist movement. In that sense, I'm extremely proud of the work that NIC did and that I did within it.





