

Who We Are

Fr. Roy Bourgeois, MM, is a decorated U.S. Navy veteran and has been a Catholic priest for 38 years. As a young missionary, he worked in Bolivia for five years. He says: "The poor of Bolivia became my teachers and began to teach me about U.S. foreign policy."

Back in the United States, Bourgeois started the movement to close the School of the Americas (SOA) – now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHINSEC) – which is located at Fort Benning, Georgia. Since 1946, SOA/WHINSEC has trained Latin American soldiers and police, first in Panama and now in Georgia. That training has resulted in numerous human-rights abuses throughout Latin America.

For the last 20 years, the movement to monitor and close the School has been known as SOA Watch (SOAW). SOA Watch also seeks to change U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America by educating the public, lobbying Congress, and participating in creative, nonviolent resistance.

More than 240 SOAW activists have served federal prison sentences for nonviolently calling for closure of the SOA/WHINSEC. These activists are known as Prisoners of Conscience (POCs), and Fr. Roy has himself served more than four years in federal prisons.

Rebecca Kanner has worked as a mechanical engineer and environmental educator and currently works on an organic farm. She has been involved in the SOA Watch movement since 1996, as an SOAW POC and chairperson of the labor caucus. She says: "I am inspired by the Jewish concept of *tikkun olam*. Translated from the Hebrew, this means the just ordering of human society and the world or, more literally, the repair of the world. As a Jew, I am moved to work to repair the tragic consequences of the SOA/WHINSEC."

Sr. Moira Kenny, RSM, is legal manager for the South Texas Civil Rights Project and an SOAW POC. Kenny was awarded the 2004 Cunningham Award, the national peace and justice award of the Sisters of Mercy, her religious order. Kenny is participating in this vigil because: "I want to convey solidarity with the Colombian people as they struggle with our military's presence, which only serves to perpetuate a war against the poor."

Ed Kinane, of New York, first visited Colombia in 1969. He has returned twice on fact-finding delegations. He has met with Colombian workers, farmers, academics, prisoners, representatives of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous communities, internally displaced persons (IDPs), the tortured, Colombian military officers, and U.S. Embassy staff. Ed has worked since 1994 to close the Pentagon's School of the Americas. He served two prison terms as an SOAW POC.

Margaret Knapke has done trauma-reduction work with war-traumatized people in El Salvador and Colombia and is an SOAW POC. Knapke says: "The Obama Administration should renounce the goal of achieving 'full-spectrum dominance' in the Latin American region and instead commit to a full-spectrum respect for human rights."

Fr. Joseph E. Mulligan, a Jesuit priest from Detroit, lives in Managua, Nicaragua where he works with the Christian Base Communities. During his early years in Nicaragua, he worked against U.S. aid to the Nicaraguan Contras (the armed group which was waging war against the Sandinista government of Nicaragua). He is an SOAW POC. With regard to the agreement last year between Colombia and the United States giving the U.S. access to seven Colombian bases, he points to a U.S. Air Force document which, in requesting \$46 million from the U.S. Congress to upgrade the Palanquero base, expresses concern about "anti-U.S. governments" in Latin America. "This agreement is an outrageous escalation of U.S. military presence and is seen, with good reason, as a threat to the elected governments which are charting an independent and progressive course in their continent," Mulligan said.

Ursula Rozum became interested in U.S. - Latin America relations while studying Political Science and Latin American Literature at McGill University. She is concerned about the effects of militarization on people who are struggling to protect the environment and create a sustainable economy. Rozum says: "The United States has a history of supporting violence against peaceful social movements throughout Latin America. The U.S. military build-up at the seven Colombian bases is another effort to protect the exploitation of natural resources by multinational companies and to threaten those who get in the way."

Ann Tiffany is a retired nurse, mother of four, grandmother of 10, and an SOAW POC. She has great respect and admiration for the Colombian people. Tiffany says: "I have visited Colombia six times – leading delegations or visiting our Sister Community in Cauca. I've watched with deep shame as our nation has undermined Colombian sovereignty in the interests of its regional economic ambitions. The United States must no longer provide money and training for Colombia's often lawless military, nor have access to Colombian bases."

Wayne Wittman is a husband, father, and grandfather in Minnesota. In November of 1987, Wittman went to Nicaragua with other U.S. veterans to monitor a cease-fire. He has been an active member of the U.S. organization Veterans for Peace ever since. In 1993 his Veteran for Peace chapter sent a delegation to Ft. Benning, Georgia, with petitions on discarded doors calling for "Closing the Door" on the School of the Americas.