



Going to Jail to Fight Oppression: the education of gay activist Palmer LeGare

BY PALMER LEGARE

On December 6, I was released from FMC Devens federal prison, after serving a 90-day sentence for nonviolent protest against a terrorist training camp. It was my experience growing up gay that opened my eyes to the School of Americas (SOA), one of the world's oldest and most effective terrorist training camps, located in Ft. Benning, Georgia.

Before I began to accept my sexuality during my sophomore year in high school, I had believed the homophobic myths that were propagated by the people around me. Not that I understood what the word gay meant or knew anyone who was "out," but I heard that it was somehow connected to AIDS and pedophilia, and I was quite comfortable using the word "faggot" as an insult.

My journey to accepting my sexuality was as shocking as it was enlightening. I found out that homosexuality wasn't what people said it was, so where did these oppressive anti-gay beliefs come from? I became the victim of daily verbal harassment and occasional physical assaults. Yet I knew the perpetrators were merely following a socialization that I had once believed in, and I started to wonder what other falsehoods I was still supporting.

I began speaking out against homophobia. As my eyes opened, I realized the crippling effects of individual and institutional racism, bias against people with mental illness, and other forms of oppression.

A friend accidentally helped me realize that I was spending a lot of time and energy spreading a very narrow message: "Look at me, I'm a reasonably attractive, masculine, white guy who's a four-sport athlete. Gays can be normal, too!"

In effect I was merely arguing for them to accept gay men and perhaps lesbians who didn't have any other "minority" characteristics. As a white male with access to a college education and reasonable economic opportunity, I am far more privileged than most people on earth, despite some of the difficulties I have had from being gay.

I had been trying to tear down oppressive homophobic attitudes and behaviors, but was unintentionally relying on and supporting oppressive hierarchies that supported me.

I had known that a lot of people were poor, though I would never have guessed that

60,000 people die each day of hunger and related diseases. Most importantly, I had been fooled into believing that this was a natural phenomenon that had nothing to do with me. People in Africa and Latin America had always been poor, I thought, unaware that they had once been members of societies far more advanced than any in Western Europe.

In order for this type of inequality to exist, three things were necessary: the people on top had to use their influence to remain on top, the people on the bottom needed to be intentionally and maliciously held down, and the people in the middle simply needed to stay quiet.

So when I realized that I was one of the people in the middle who had to be quiet in order for the suffering to continue, I knew I had to speak up.

Then I found out about the SOA, which is now officially called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation (WHISC). The SOA has been located in Ft. Benning, Georgia since it was kicked out of Panama in 1984. At the time, a major newspaper in Panama dubbed it the "School of Assassins."

Nearly 60,000 Latin American military personnel have graduated from this school. Its original purpose was to train Latin American soldiers in "counterinsurgency" warfare to fight Communist guerrillas. When the Cold War ended, the institute's purpose was to train soldiers in counter-narcotics. Since 9/11, the Army has said that the SOA now has something to do with the war on terrorism.

The well-documented fact is that the SOA itself is a terrorist training camp. It trains Latin American military personnel in terrorist warfare against civilians in order to keep in power highly unpopular governments that support US military and corporate interests.

This heavy accusation comes with heavy proof. In 1996 the Pentagon was forced to release training manuals used at the school. These manuals advocate using false imprisonment, torture and assassination of citizens who "make accusations that the government is not meeting the basic needs of the people."

Numerous graduates of the SOA have gone on to become dictators, including Manuel Noriega of Panama and Juan Velasco Alvarado of Peru. Lower-level SOA graduates have been involved in some of the worst atrocities in Latin

America over the past 50 years, including the El Mozote massacre of 500 civilians and the assassination of Archbishop Oscar Romero.

Hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans died at the orders of SOA trainees in the decades-long civil war started after the CIA overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz in 1954. While, the war was officially ended by the 1996 Peace Accords, the government has not followed through on many of the promises it made.

This war, supported by the US and led in part by graduates of the SOA, continues to have a terrorizing impact in Guatemala. Every person I talked to in Guatemala expressed dissatisfaction with the current government. But they have lived through times when people demanded change, and the result was terrorism.

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The SOA is run by our (somewhat) elected government with our tax dollars. Are we interested in ending oppression, or do we just want to be oppressors ourselves by being quiet about all oppressions but our own? We can't work against homophobia in isolation, all the while consenting and financially supporting the terrorist activities of our government.

For me, part of this struggle included risking arrest. I went to the annual protest to close the SOA in November of 2001. I participated in the very moving funeral procession Sunday morning, where thousands of people call out "presente" in response to the reading of names of individuals who are known to have been murdered by graduates of the SOA.

The SOA Watch, an organization committed to using nonviolent tactics to close the SOA, organized this protest (for more information visit www.soaw.org), and had received a permit to hold this protest up to the entrance to

Ft. Benning. Beginning with the first protest in 1996, thousands of individuals have risked arrest and walked onto the base. About 100 people have spent over 50 years in prison for doing so.

Until 2001, only people who were crossing the line for the second or third year were chosen for prosecution. This time the protest was barely two months after 9/11, and we all knew the risks of crossing were greater. About 90 people crossed onto the base property, fewer than usual.

I felt that the tragedy of 9/11 was even more of a reason to cross the line. Now was the time to, as George Bush put it, "close all terrorist training camps." More importantly, it was an essential time to tell the government that we opposed all terrorism, even if it was done or supported by the US.

I didn't think that I would be prosecuted for this action, but in April I found out that I was one of the 37 people chosen for prosecution. [After a brief pro-forma trial] I entered prison on September 10, and spent all of September 11 in the "hole" [a punishment cell] because there were no beds at the prison camp I was going to.

Spending three months in prison was not a whole lot of fun. I had to leave school, a good job, my friends and family, and enter the inhumane prison system. But there is no comparison between this relatively minor sacrifice and the reality I was protesting: the extreme suffering caused by graduates of the SOA.

Prison was an amazing experience for me. I didn't take advantage of it as much as I should have, personally or politically. But by being in prison, I learned a lot about what freedom is. Would I have been more free if the harsh treatment given to SOA protesters had silenced me into consent? Would I have been more free if I worked only against homophobia, while relying on much larger systems of oppression to support my daily material comfort?

I have also gained much greater knowledge of the reality of life for millions of people whose talents are being wasted in our nation — which has the highest incarceration rate on earth. I met many good people who are victims more of their color and class than what may have been a single poor choice.

I am frequently frustrated with my

own lack of vision and commitment to the struggle for peace and justice, and that of others. But isn't broadening our efforts beyond anti-homophobia an obvious step? How can we speak out against homophobia while carelessly using products that result from extreme exploitation, such as much oil, cell phones, clothes and computers?

Let's not fool ourselves. We could have easily been duped into being homophobic, or at least extremely ignorant on the topic, had we not been GLBT ourselves or had close contacts with people who were openly so. Instead, many of us have been duped into supporting a brutal, oppressive and terrorist US foreign policy. If we want our fight against homophobia to truly be a struggle against oppression, let's broaden our efforts. ▼

Palmer Legare founded a Gay-Straight Alliance at Cabot High School and is on his way to Guatemala.