

For immediate Release

New Oral History explores how Madison got its First Official Sister City in 1986

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Bombs were falling on Arcatao, El Salvador when Madison's Common Council voted to make it Madison's first sister city on April 1, 1986. Eight activists recount the events leading up to this moment in a new oral history published in the online Living History Project sponsored by Madison Public Library (MPL).

View the collection at <https://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/resources/living-history-project>.

Today, Madison, Wisconsin has ten sister cities around the world. Sister cities engage in mutually beneficial partnerships. While some sister city relationships focus on cross-cultural understanding, the Madison-Arcatao partnership is also rooted in solidarity and accompaniment, providing direct economic and political support to the Arcatao community.

In 1986, Wisconsin was a sanctuary state, Madison was a sanctuary city and asylum seekers from Guatemala and El Salvador were fleeing the US financed bombings, massacres, torture and kidnappings in their countries. Antonio Portillo, a young man from Guatemala found sanctuary in Madison and told his horrific story at hundreds of community gatherings between 1983-4. His purpose in being so public was to educate Madisonians about what the US government was perpetrating on the local population of his country and in El Salvador. He starts his story this way:

“My father was a community activist helping people get running water and electricity. At that time in Guatemala, if you proposed anything that had to do with justice, you were labeled a communist and sentenced to death.”

Other interviews in this collection include leaders in the sanctuary movement, community activists and Common Council alders at the time. Billy Feitlinger, who was an alder at the time, explained his support of the official sistering resolution this way:

“ This was an issue that was a moral imperative ...part of the purpose of the resolution was to raise public awareness that it was a very bad thing that the American government was involved financially and militarily in El Salvador.”

The stories in this collection illuminate a unique period of history and will be of special interest to anyone interested in the history of Madison, the history of El Salvador, or community involvement in the struggle for social justice.

Members of Madison Arcatao Sister City Project (MASCP) answered the recent call for proposals from the MPL and collected the interviews and materials. MASCP celebrates its 37th anniversary this year by sponsoring another trip, June 9-16, to El Salvador for any interested community members.

Website: www.mascp.org



Antonio Portillo's family in sanctuary in Madison 1984. Credit Jenny Beatty



Public presentation of Salvadorans in sanctuary in Madison. Credit WSJ, May 24, 1983



Alder Billy Feitlinger, 1986. Credit Susie Hobart