

H.I.J.O.S. Raises Awareness

By Erin FAGAN

**"Because we are children of living ghosts, of people who became invisible . . ."
(Excerpt from "Collective Substratum," written by members of HIJOS)**

On the evening of Friday, September 13th, just under fifty people came to the AVC lecture hall A for a public presentation by two young human rights activists from Guatemala City.

Marina Gomez and Erick Fortin, aged 18 and 20 respectively, were at UPEI as part of a speaking tour of the Maritimes (coordinated by the Breaking the Silence Network, and organized on PEI by the Oxfam Committee). As members of a youth human rights collective called HIJOS (Hijos e Hijas por la Identidad y la Justicia Contra el Olvido y el Silencio, or Sons and Daughters for Identity, Justice, Remembrance and Against Silence), they were here to inform people about the situation in their country and of their ongoing work for human rights and social justice.

"It is very important that you've been here tonight," Marina Gomez told the audience (through the assistance of local translator, Joe Byrne), "It is important for you to tell other people about it, to read, to research, to know what goes on in the whole world, and to not let the mainstream media take advantage."

HIJOS Guatemala is made up by young people between the ages of 18 and 27, most of whom had parents or relatives who were "disappeared" during Guatemala's violent civil war period. Their activity involves therapeutic and creative social protest against state and military violence, as well as the promotion of peace and justice in Guatemala.

Their group, with twenty permanently active members, is one of several HIJOS groups in Latin American countries such as Argentina and Chile.

The presentation was prefaced by a short video made by an affiliated group called FAMDEGUA (Relatives Of The "Disappeared" People Of Guatemala) in 1995. It was a starkly revealing film about a forensic investi-

gation at the site of a 1982 massacre (one of about 600) in a village (one of over 200) called Las Dos Erres, where a minimum of 162 individual remains were found at the bottom of an abandoned well (42 of remains were determined to be those of children under the age of twelve, with an average age of 7).

After the film ended, Gomez displayed documents from human rights investigations compiled in the aftermath of the war. She explained that over 45,000 people disappeared, over a million people (predominantly indigenous Mayan) were displaced, and about 200,000 people were killed over the course of the conflict.

She cited a report entitled Guatemala: Memory of Silence, prepared by a commission involved with the 1996 Peace Accords, which determined that 93% of the violence was perpetrated by the state due to exaggerated suspicions of Marxist guerilla activity. The report had compiled over 14 volumes of witness testimony. Another document, a leaked military file released by a retired general living in the U.S., contained information on over 180 people who were later killed or disappeared.

Gomez also explained that, although eleven people were accused of the Las Dos Erres murders, none have been brought to justice in the past twenty years. General Efraim Rios Montt, who was president during that peak period of violence, is currently Guatemala's President of Congress.

After the Peace Accords were signed in 1996, explained Gomez, young people whose families were murdered or disappeared returned from exile and formed a collective so that they could share their experiences from the war. Many people, she added, remain silenced by fear, pressured or threatened by those who remain untouched by the legal system.

In May of 1999, with the peace accords still largely unimple-

mented, their chapter of HIJOS became public. The first peaceful demonstration took place on June 30th of that year, which is celebrated as Army Day in that country.

Fortin, also translated by Byrne, began to show overheads of graffiti art created by HIJOS throughout Guatemala City.

"It's very important not to forget what has happened to us," Fortin stated, "Graffiti is the free public press and reflects the national attitude."

He added that the national press is either very select or self-censored out of fear.

Their art has had some impact, he said, since many of their works are covered up or removed within a week or a month. "And who else would have the resources to just paint over what we're painting?"

When a member of the audience questioned the legality of graffiti art after the talk, Gomez explained that many Guatemalans remain illiterate and that pictures are a way to reach out to more people.

"It is not about having the space, but taking the space," Fortin added.

In addition, the group volunteers support to other autonomous youth movements throughout the nation.

The group is also working on a project called "Search for Identity". Photographs of the disappeared are being mounted on white banners, the goal being that the banner will become long enough to wrap around the national palace.

Original songs are included in both their Saturday meetings and during protests, since many of the members sing or play instruments. Peaceful marches are conducted throughout different parts of the country, although their path has often been blocked or intimidated by police presence.

Popular theatre and art therapy has been used and well-received, according

to Gomez.

Since the spring of 2000, the level of threats, raids, and violence directed against human rights groups in Guatemala has escalated. The UN Human Rights Commissioner, for example, visited in May of this year and released a report confirming and addressing this alarming trend.

After her departure, an anonymous letter containing offensive words, death threats, and a list of names was sent out to the organizations.

The HIJOS office itself, said Gomez, has been raided six times this past year. Also, a 17 year old founding member was gunned down in March when she answered her door to unknown persons. Also, the very morning of the presentation, they had just learned of a young colleague who had been found tortured and murdered. The young man had been one of the few translators working with Mayan witnesses.

In spite of this climate of terror, Gomez said that members focus upon "what they can do, and on not being too concerned about what could happen to them."

Fortin also explained that, "If we don't do this work, who is going to do it?"

"For that reason, we won't stop struggling until the peace accords are implemented and we can find justice, which doesn't appear anywhere around us right now."

Throughout their Maritime tour, Fortin and Gomez have found a lot of acceptance among the young people of this region and have found the area "very pretty." She added, however, that they have found it "hard to adjust to the very peaceful and tranquil" nature in this area.

UPEI has been the fourteenth stop on the Maritime tour, which began earlier this month. Fortin and Gomez will continue with visits in Halifax and Wolfville throughout the next two weeks.