

Group Works to Bring Peace to a Strife-Torn World Region

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BY KATE SCHNEIDER - Evanston Review

Two Evanstonians are doing their part to promote global peace, traveling last month to Colombia and Cuba on peace delegations.

Martha Pierce, 57, and Dan Selden, 16, traveled with Witness For Peace, a politically independent grassroots organization that studies poverty and oppression in Latin America.

The organization promotes efforts to change U.S. foreign policy in Latin American countries through "socially responsible travel" programs like the ones in which Selden and Pierce participated. The organization has sent about 10,000 people on delegations throughout Latin America. It also operates with permanent staff in Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and Cuba.

The program "encourages U.S. citizens to learn about and become aware of" the issues facing Latin America and advocate policies that are "more just, more human and more attuned to the needs of the people there," Pierce said.

Pierce is director of the Chicago Metropolitan Sanctuary Alliance, an organization that promotes peace and justice in Latin America. She has been to Guatemala more than 20 times, Chiapas, Mexico, more than 10 times, and travels to Guatemala and El Salvador regularly. This was her fourth trip with Witness for Peace.

Selden will be a junior at Evanston Township High School in the fall. This was his first trip with Witness for Peace.

The 70 Americans that went on this year's 20th anniversary trips to Nicaragua, Colombia, Cuba and Mexico met in Washington, D.C., for orientation, including nonviolence and safety training.

Selden spent a week in Cuba, where he and a group of 24 others met with government officials, farmers and citizens three times daily.

While in Cuba, Selden's group studied the effects of the United States' trade embargo with Cuba, which has been in effect since the 1960s.

"They have a lot restricting them," Selden said. "[Cuba] hasn't reached its full potential because it can't get certain materials," like farming equipment, cars and medicines.

"[The embargo] has really affected the people," he said. "It has lost its meaning."

Despite the embargo, Selden said, he feels the Cuban people are succeeding because they have lost their "dependence" on the United States.

"It has really allowed them to experiment and use what they have to create what they need," Selden said.

Pierce spent 10 days in Colombia, where she met with government officials, indigenous groups, farmers and other groups.

Her delegation focused on the ongoing drug trade that has ravaged the country, infamous for its production of cocaine.

The U.S. policy, called Plan Colombia, has pledged more than \$1.6 billion in aid through the anti-drug, anti-terrorism initiative.

But, according to Pierce, it's not working. Pierce said she found U.S. initiatives were doing more harm than good, causing devastation to crops, livestock and land.

"U.S. policy is failing in terms of controlling the drug trade," she said. "[Plan Colombia] is a failed plan -- it's not accomplishing what it's supposed to be about. It's added more fuel to the conflict that is already going on there."

Colombia has been enduring a civil war since the 1940s, with civilians in the middle of paramilitary, guerrilla and government groups battling each other.

"[Civilians] are really the ones who are suffering," she said.

Colombia is not a safe place for Americans, either; numerous aid workers and journalists have been kidnapped in the country and held for ransom.

But neither Pierce nor Selden ever feared for their safety, they said, despite the anti-American sentiment that pervaded.

Witness for Peace instructed group members to never travel alone, especially at night. Pierce and her group were required to wear blue T-shirts clearly marked "Witness for Peace" at all times.

"I felt out of place, but I didn't feel unwanted," Selden said.

Both Pierce and Selden hope to bring their insights to Americans, particularly legislators. The group met with U.S. Sens. Richard Durbin, D-Illinois, and Peter Fitzgerald, R-Illinois, as well as U.S. **Rep. Jan Schakowsky**, D-9th, after returning from their trips, and shared with them their experiences.

"We want to try to carry those voices ... those people we met and the stories we heard, and bring them to our congressmen," Pierce said. "We can't change what the Colombian government does. But we can change what our government does."

Selden and Pierce hope to continue lobbying Congress to change U.S. policy in the countries they visited, specifically to abolish U.S. military aid to Colombia and the trade embargo with Cuba.

The goal, Pierce said, is "educating and informing people. And going there gives you some credibility."

Selden said he values his trip immensely.

"It was the best history class I have ever taken," he said.

Pierce said her work has made her appreciate the freedoms Americans take for granted.

"I am grateful to live in a country where we have the right to speak truth that is different from what our government is doing ... without being in danger," she said.

"It's great to meet with people from other sectors of society we never hear from," Pierce said. "It's an absolute privilege."

