

# Voluntown Peace Trust

News from "The Farm"



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## Coming Home to Voluntown

by Kate Foran and Steve Borla

Connecticut natives Kate Foran and Steve Borla are Roman Catholics formed in the Catholic Worker movement's understanding of faith and social justice. After their marriage in 2004, they relocated to Greensboro, North Carolina, where they ran the office for Word and World, an organization which holds schools for faith-based activists and organizers. They also worked with the Beloved Community Center (BCC), a group led by veteran civil rights organizers whose work for social and economic justice includes addressing race issues through the first Truth and Reconciliation Commission in this country. Kate and Steve returned to Connecticut in February to be with Kate's dad, who died of cancer in October. They have supported the Voluntown Peace Trust since its beginning, and we are excited to welcome them to the community in January.



As we write, the forsythia and dogwoods are blooming in December, apparitions of spring. No doubt temperatures will drop and we will have a spell of real New England winter, but the warmth is off-putting. It feels more like a North Carolina winter than the season of our memories. We find ourselves trying to interpret the signs of the unfrozen ground and budding shrubs.

They say you do not know what home is until you leave it. We were strangers in Greensboro, welcomed in by a community of people of a different race, geography, class, and religious denomination. In this location, though we technically spoke the same language, we had to work to understand the common tongue. Listening to the accents, cultural cues, histories, and struggles of our neighbors was the marrow of our work and our delight. When we listened hard enough, there were moments that transcended language, when communication was in the bones. One Sunday at Faith Community Church, Reverend Nelson Johnson began to sing, a cappella, an old spiritual his "greats" used to sing. Without missing a beat, the congregation took up the hymn, stamping their feet in time. Nelson called up the memory of a time when the only thing the people had was their bodies, their voices. We felt the ground resonate with the slave songs of our friends' ancestors.

In those moments we realized a source of the community's power: it was the combination of these people in *that* home place. The organizing work of the

Beloved Community Center is influential on the national scene, but they are rooted in their locality. Their work arises from and responds to the needs of the city's most vulnerable. Though the BCC's agitating for change has often made them targets of government surveillance and the ire of the powerful, they remain committed to the place and people. We recognized in their engagement with Greensboro our own ties to the land of our birth—the pull New England has on us, and Connecticut, the home of our people, themselves immigrants from Ireland, Italy, and Poland. (How long before a migrating people believe they are born of the very ground that supports them? The settled dust was delivered by the wind.) Through our immersion in an African-American community in the South, we began to understand that the wages of

white privilege is a severance from cultural heritage, and the price of a mobile and global economy is alienation from the particularity of place. We came to see how much we took for granted about the place that raised us, how few of the trees and birds we could name, how much of the communication we presumed to understand.

At the Voluntown Peace Trust we have found friends who have opened their doors, heard our story, and told theirs over common meals. In this community, one that welcomes people no matter their background, experience, or faith tradition, we have discovered a place where we can integrate our discipleship of Jesus, our history with the Catholic Worker movement, our deepening understanding of racism, our experience with gender and sexuality injustice, a broader economic analysis, and the urgent need for environmental stewardship. We have found in Harold, Mary, Danny, Patty, and their extended community, fellow travelers making a home in this nest of concerns. In this corner of the land of the long tidal waters, we seek a common tongue—a language of beauty and precision that comes from mutual work on this shared ground.

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## A Journey to Home

by Patricia Adams

It is said: there is no place like home. This statement is certainly true in my case, as I have found myself torn between many homes in the past years. I am from St. Louis, Missouri, but have not really lived there since I left for college at 18. The San Francisco Bay Area then became home, for four years of college and a bit of time after that. But halfway through my time in California, another place started to compete for my heart: El Salvador. And now I am here at the Voluntown Peace Trust, unpacking my experience in El Salvador, transitioning back to life in the Empire. To this day, it is hard to know where home really is. If it is where the heart is, then El Salvador is definitely it.

I went to El Salvador for the first time in the summer of 2001. I went looking for a new perspective. My Jesuit university campus was abuzz with conversations about social justice and globalization. I was already deeply involved in working to eradicate forms of domestic oppression and injustice, mostly

focusing on racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism. I was soon exposed to a wider scope of problems. Specifically, it seemed that the aforementioned—and many other—oppressions were being perpetrated worldwide, were being globalized. Through learning more about the U.S. involvement in Latin America and especially the growing student anti-sweatshop movement, I found myself increasingly intrigued by the concept of globalization—and not entirely sold on the tidy explanations that were being handed to me by the ethicists, economists, or engineers. I did not want an executive summary—filtered through the lens of academia—of what globalization *could* or *would* do for people. I wanted to know what globalization really meant for the people on the receiving end of U.S. foreign and economic policy. I wanted to see for myself what it was already doing to communities.

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### History of “The Farm”

When we left the history section last issue, we described Northeast Committee for Nonviolent Action’s (NECNVA) formation, move to “the farm” and first project – in coordination with national CNVA – the San Francisco to Moscow Peace Walk. In 1963, NECNVA participated in the Quebec to Washington to Guantánamo (QWG) Walk for Peace sponsored by the national CNVA. Walk organizer Brad Lyttle said that through the QWG we opposed “nuclear weapons testing, nuclear missiles, racial discrimination, and the Cuba travel ban/trade embargo, and bring Canadian and U.S. peace activists into closer cooperation.” Walkers from Denmark also joined in this multi-national and biracial group.

The walkers faced considerable hostility at several points. Due to bombings prior to their arrival by the unaffiliated Quebec independence movement, political tension in Quebec was high. In the March’s first weeks, the group suffered an attack by a gang of young men, insults by bystanders, vandalism of their equipment, rough handling by the police and the arrest of some of their members. As Brad Lyttle said at the time “If this is the way it is in Quebec, we may never make it to the Deep South. If we do, I hate to think what it will be like.”

In Washington DC, the walkers initiated a week-long training program in nonviolence in preparation for their walk through the South. Barbara Deming, Eric Weinberger of Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Bob Zellner and Reggie Robinson of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) supported them in this training. The timing of the Walk allowed them to participate in the great March on Washington and hear Dr. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

The Walk had an advance team visiting with the African-American community, local media, and law enforcement in every town through which they planned to walk. The walkers therefore experienced only low-level hostility as they made their way through Virginia and the Carolinas, but no physical

violence. These tactics worked until the Walk reached Georgia.

In Georgia, the group was forced to put their nonviolence training into dramatic action. A Peacemaker magazine report from December 1963 describes this scene somewhere north of Atlanta:

“[A man] ran after [Yvonne Klein] with a small paring knife in his hand, shouting, “I’m gonna kill you.” Whereupon he seized Yvonne by the nape of the neck and attempted to plunge the knife into her shoulder. She stopped walking and as calmly as possible turned and looked silently at the man, who abruptly released her without having drawn blood.”

South of Atlanta, the situation changed dramatically. In Griffin, Georgia police arrested the entire group for attempting “to distribute peace leaflets to Negroes in a park at the end of town.” Many of the walkers refused to cooperate; in response a member of the Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) used an electric prod to torture 12 of the walkers ranging in age from 17 to 63. The officers applied the prod freely to the victims’ bodies, including the base of the spine, eyes, face, and genitals. In his unpublished memoirs, Brad Lyttle reports extensively on the brutality the walkers endured:

“Ray Robinson, Jr. a negro ex-boxer from Washington, received particularly brutal treatment. He was stretched full length on the floor and burned on his legs, arms and spine. The prod was shifted to his genitals and held firmly in place. ‘Get up and walk,’ they yelled at him, but he refused. ‘I’ll die before I’d get up for you,’ he replied. Writhing in pain, he repeatedly shouted, ‘Kill me, Kill me, go ahead and kill me!’ He was eventually dragged upstairs, the prod constantly being jabbed into his face.”

*We would like to thank former Voluntown CNVA resident Brad Lyttle for making his memoirs available to us. We will continue to develop*



### Fall festivities at VPT!



**Playing in the Garden.** Left: VPT Partner Mary Novak (right) harvesting veggies for the harvest party with Rhonda Miska, who visited VPT on retreat for several days in October. Since returning from working for two years in Cusmapa, Nicaragua, Rhonda has been serving as the Social Justice Minister and Hispanic Ministry Coordinator at Incarnation Catholic Parish in Charlottesville, Virginia.



**Smiles all Around.** Above: Juanita Nelson (left) and Joanne Sheehan during a talent show at the NE War Tax Resister Weekend held at VPT. Below: Local Voluntown Residents Wayne (left), Eli and Levi Lachappelle enjoy the wholesome goodness of the cauldron soup at VPT's Fall Harvest Party.



**Actions Speak Louder.** Above: VPT hosted the fall retreat for Jesuit Volunteer Corps East, a collection of young adults engaged in social justice work and living together in communities throughout the North East.

Below: VPT Activist-in-Residence Patricia Adams (left) speaking as part of a panel with nonviolent activists from Europe. Patricia was invited to speak about the Declaration of Peace at the fifth annual Conference on Active Nonviolence, hosted by a nonviolent collective in Euskal Herria [the Basque Country], in the north of Spain.



**Hard at Work.** Left: Andrew Malec builds the new wheelchair ramp at the A.J. Muste Center.



**Lend a Hand.** Right. From Boston, Haley House Community Members Caliph Johnson and Anna Clark stack logs for the cordwood cabin that will be built in the spring with the help and leadership of VPT Board Chair Jackie Allen-Doucot and former VPT Intern Matt Turcotte, both of whom are trained in the cordwood building technique, which is a low-cost sustainable building practice.





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Soon after, I discovered that my university had a relationship with some community members in a small village in northern El Salvador, in the mountains where much of the fighting took place during the twelve year civil war. After a few short months—filled with long conversations with my parents and much grassroots fundraising—I was set to go to El Salvador, a country I had heard of for the first time only months before.

Change seems too small a word to describe the process I went through in those first two months in El Salvador. I was utterly transformed. Suddenly in a different world, I was learning in every moment how thoroughly rooted in privilege my existence is. I certainly got the different perspective I was seeking. But I got a lot more during my first summer in El Salvador: I got sick a few times, got a lot better in Spanish, and got my heart broken. Jesuit priest Dean Brackley describes well the experience of coming to El Salvador and meeting Salvadorans: they absolutely break your heart. But they are there with you, accompanying you, helping you put it back together again in a different way. That was truly my experience.

My heart was broken that first summer, so much so that I came to feel that I left much of it there in El Salvador. I had to keep returning to try and find it, each time asking the Salvadorans for help in reassembling it in a way that could make sense of the paradoxical horror and hope that colors their story; horror and hope had now become a part of my story too.

I returned the following summer to the same village, to honor the relationships I had made that first year, but also to flee the horror of a post September 11<sup>th</sup> U.S. society. So much of what happened in the days and months following that fateful day seems lost in our collective trauma and the hysteria that ensued. Many voices clamored for justice, for reconciliation, for a heart-felt examination of the root causes of the disaster. So many voices cried out for peace, the world over. But the drum-beat of war was more deafening and thus, war rages on. The wars manufactured in Afghanistan and Iraq are strikingly similar to the war that was manufactured in El Salvador—by the very same people. My heart was breaking again.

On the day that the U.S. invaded Iraq for the second time, in March of 2003, I was back in El Salvador, this time to stay. I had found work with a grassroots solidarity organization and would end up staying for three years, working to facilitate delegations for U.S. communities seeking first-hand and relationship-based experiences in El Salvador. The day the invasion began, I was back in the village where I had lived the two previous summers. I was walking around from house to house, *saludando* the folks I had lived with and known, asking how they and their families were doing. At house after house, the very first thing each person said to me as I greeted them that day was *¡Que lastima!* What a shame! These folks—who, like many in the US, did not even know where Iraq was before this—were expressing deep sadness and sympathy for what the Iraqi people were suffering. They know firsthand the brutality and horror of the U.S. imperialist and hegemonic enterprise that is war, be it war against communism or terrorism.

And the war in El Salvador has never truly ended. The heart of El Salvador breaks open day after day, moment after moment. And not just for the historic burden of the years of violence

from the civil war, or the centuries of violence before that. Today there is death. Today there is pain. Today there is starvation, anguish, suffering. These are the norms. This is what globalization means for El Salvador.

The open heart of El Salvador bleeds red. It can be seen everywhere: the red dress of the elderly woman who has put on her best outfit to stand on the street corner and beg for change; the red coffee cherries that lay rotting on the ground because the global coffee crisis makes it unprofitable to even harvest; the red Coca-Cola signs that color even the most remote and desolate rural landscape; the red propaganda of a guerilla group-turned political party struggling to gain ground in a corrupt political system designed to exclude, assimilate, or annihilate it and the people it represents; the red flames that devour a bus during a protest over the continued increase in bus fare that is never accompanied by an increase in minimum wage or a guarantee of employment for the almost 70% of the country's population that does not have access to a steady job.

I have seen this firsthand during the last five and a half years I have been in El Salvador. The majority of that time, I was there living with Salvadorans and learning a different way of being a woman, a U.S. citizen, a community member, a human. But even during the short times that I was not physically there, I have been spiritually and emotionally there throughout. This is why I call El Salvador my home.

But the U.S. is also my home. I have recently felt a calling to return here and work more directly against the U.S. occupation in Iraq, participating in the Declaration of Peace campaign. It continues to be a difficult transition from life in El Salvador to life in the U.S., but this is made infinitely gentler by the gift of living at VPT. I have always known that coming back to the States would mean confronting the "American" ethos which forces us daily to choose, ostensibly between our wellbeing and that of everyone else. But in fact, it is a choice between our individual and collective destruction, and redemption. Choosing a radical lifestyle means that every day I must make conscious choices not to rejoin mainstream society—not to give up and give in, not resign myself to the capitalistic paradigm which requires that I be disconnected from myself and others. I am reconnecting. I am finding a new home here, within myself and here at VPT. I am daily in the process of integrating my life, rediscovering the little pieces of the many homes I carry inside me, especially El Salvador, and planting them here, hoping they will grow with the spirit of hope that keeps things growing in El Salvador after all this time.

### **Thank you for your kind support!**

We are grateful to all who have given to VPT so generously this year and particularly as part of our Annual Fundraising Appeal. Our goal is to raise \$30,000 as part of this fundraising appeal in order to support: the construction of a new cabin for teen counselors for summer camp and a green latrine; the installation of a new deep well; the growth of our gardening cooperative; and other peace and justice initiatives. We are still far from meeting this goal, so please consider responding if you



## Three Years of Solitude

by Rod Owens

*We are honored to welcome Rod Owens to the Voluntown Peace Trust this winter. Rod is a young activist from Boston we have the pleasure of knowing through Charlie Arpe and the Wise Street Collective. Beginning in late December, Rod will be spending 100 days in silent retreat in the Rachel Corrie House. He has chosen to do this in preparation for a three-year silent meditation retreat. Below Rod shares some reflections on this life direction.*

When I tell people that I have decided to undergo a three year silent meditation retreat, most people stare at me for a second then ask, "what do you mean, a *three year* meditation retreat?" I proceed to explain in detail as their eyes begin to widen unblinkingly, struggling to grasp why anyone in their sane mind would consider something like this.

Others have still more questions like what about my family and friends. I respond by admitting that I think that they will survive my absence. Some are concerned about my career. I assure them that there will still be a demand for social service professionals in three years. One flustered friend accused me of being irresponsible, choosing a path that did not produce any security for me as I grew older. I could only look at him and shrug my shoulders.

Most often, the poignant and vital question posed is how does one even attempt to do something like this. The answer lies in the deepest parts of my utter fatigue with my own suffering. Crawling out of severe depression two years ago, I found myself like a newborn baby shuddering in a life that was seeing dawn for the first time in many years. Truly, for the first time I could see that much of my suffering was due to my identification with it. I broke from depression when I finally understood that I was not sad or depressed, but that these were just experiences that pass like clouds pass across the sun. These emotions and feelings come and go.

Naturally, I longed to learn more about the alleviation of suffering. I was eventually led into Buddhist meditation where I practiced ways of looking at the mind and its tendency to grasp and identify with often harmful emotions. It was through this initial Buddhist practice that I understood true natures to be perfect, radiant and full of love, unmarked by the suffering and pain around us or in us. Our only goal in life is to see that our true natures are perfect, that we are in the heart of Christ and Buddha and they are in turn in the hearts of each of us.

When I first began this practice I saw clearly how our over-engagement in the routine of our lives perpetuates suffering. Much of our lives is distraction from the things we should really be examining. When we feel the hurt, we pop a pill, or turn on the television, eat, talk, sleep, have sex, do laundry, anything to keep us from facing our suffering and our total identification with it. The same was true for me during my depression and continues to be true in my meditation practice. Early on I knew that to really look at my suffering and possible remedies, I needed seclusion to minimize my relationship with distraction.

So, how does one attempt to enter a retreat of any length? All you have to do is let go and know that this will eventually be the foundation of your liberation; that however extreme or drastic this action may seem, our situation of being buried in

lifetimes of suffering is even more extreme.

Moreover, it is my fear of death that also leads me into retreat. Within Buddhist death philosophy, the ways we have suffered most in life will be those things that will haunt us even more strongly as our consciousness attempts to enter another body, affecting the rebirth negatively or positively depending on the level of suffering. I know to be prepared for death, I must work at this very moment to cultivate deep peace, happiness, and wellbeing.

I have decided to do this retreat for several additional reasons, some of which you may understand, and some not.

First, I am being called to undergo retreat. In our lives, we are presented with choices that will maximize our happiness and minimize our suffering. Making a choice to be happy is making the choice to help others to choose happiness. This is perhaps the central purpose of our lives, to choose happiness. In my case, this choice has already been made for me. The only difficulty that I have had to face was recognizing and accepting the reality that this is my path.

Being black and growing up in the black community, I have seen and been a victim of centuries of racial oppression, violence, exploitation, and deeply internalized inferiority. Such oppressive forces have manifested with blacks and our community as violence against each other, hate, serious depression, poverty, and anger. My practice has become knowing that love for both ourselves and those that cause us suffering is the principle way in which we understand that true suffering is the absence of love, the state of internalizing the harmful and inflictive characteristics of whomever we designate as oppressor. My hope is that this retreat will equip me with the tools to return to my community to offer effective alternatives to help blacks see through our pain toward our radiant Christ-like or Buddha nature.

I also have a deep belief that places of refuge are imperative. We spend so much of our lives over-engaged in maintaining stability that we believe we can control change. Cases of peoples' homes burning down overnight or other's suddenly becoming ill prove that things fall apart. Change is the nature of reality. Times and places of refuge provide safe spaces for us to accept the inevitability of change and to develop a mentality of openness that takes in all that occurs. In refuge, we are more relaxed and feel safer to ease into openness and eventually learn to incorporate such spaciousness into all situations in our lives. Essentially, I hope to become a boat that rides each wave of a sometimes turbulent ocean instead of being anchored and overcome by its waves.

Often, people have said that I am brave to be willing to do this. I find this sentiment strange because I am only doing what I am being called to do, nothing more. I see and understand my suffering and I am choosing to end it.



Rod Owens and VPT Partner Mary Novak discuss Rod's plans for his 100 days in solitude at VPT.



## Voluntown Peace Trust

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### The Mission of VPT

*Voluntown Peace Trust creates and facilitates processes for healing and transforming relationships with ourselves, our communities and the natural world. We offer individuals and groups the opportunity to gather, reflect and share experiences; to learn from each other in creative ways. At VPT, the work of building a just world integrates: artistic and natural sustainable processes; spiritual exploration; self-care; skills exchange; collaborative research, analysis and strategy development; and ongoing collective organizing and action.*

### Come Join us for the VPT Winter Film and Discussion Series

For the second year, the Voluntown Peace Trust will host a series of films exploring themes of peace, justice and ecological sustainability. Each film is followed by a time for dialogue to bring the film's theme home to our personal lives and our local reality. We emphasize the importance of the dialogue following the film, believing that seeing the film together is important, but the conversation and sharing that follows is the foundation for democracy and constructive action.

All are welcome! Come for the potluck dinner starting at 6:00 p.m. and stay for the film and discussion starting at 7:00 p.m. This year we'll begin on **Friday, January 19** and will continue every other Friday into March. Check the VPT website for the full listing of the upcoming films.

Kickoff Film: ***Thirst***  
By Alan Snitow and Deborah Kaufman

*Is water part of a shared "commons", a human right for all people? Or is it a commodity to be bought, sold and traded in a global marketplace? Thirst tells the stories of communities in Bolivia, India and the United States that are asking these fundamental questions, as water becomes the most valuable global resource of the 21st century.*

