

**MERLIN PEÑA—Transcript**

My name is Merlín Peña, I'm 51 years old and I'm originally from El Salvador, from a city called Zacatecoluca located in La Paz department.

I was in high school when the kidnappings of high profile politicians and business people began, became very frequent in El Salvador. And we witnessed the deterioration of that tranquility we were used to. The situation kept worsening, getting more and more violent until the war started. I left El Salvador in 1980 but you could already see how things were getting worse. I worked in social work and I had to face many situations on the street, because there were confrontations between the government and the urban guerrilla. Three, no... Four times I was caught in the crossfire. I would have to park my car where I could, duck and wait until the gun firing was over. And then I would lift my head to make sure it was over, that everything was back to normal, and I'd go straight to work as if nothing had happened.

Yes, like I was telling you, the kidnappings had begun and people were feeling more and more uneasy. The freedom we knew of was gone. The people were protesting, there were mass demonstrations, specially among university students. I remember a student march on July 30th that turned into a terrible massacre.

It was around 1975. A huge massacre on 25 North Avenue. That is, there was a large student march from the university, and the government was getting ready to confront them and then there was a massacre, a massacre indeed. Dozens of students died. My stepmother was in a building nearby and she said she saw everything from the 4<sup>th</sup> floor. Everything. It was really sad.

She saw when they fell and fell to the ground, how the soldiers were firing at them and the government's tanks moving forward. Many people like her who worked in the social security building (in the Salvadoran Social Security Institute) saw perfectly how the tanks advanced and how the students were shot at... All of it.

Later, the radio news announced it and you could see on television the conflict and the kind of massacre that it had been.

I finished my studies in 1979. I had two classmates then, whose names were Delmi, the small one, and Delmi, the tall one. Back then we didn't know anything about anyone, nothing except issues about school and studying. But one day I was in my apartment. I

was reading a book, I think, laying down when I heard someone knocking urgently at the door. I opened and said, what's going on? My social work classmates told me to get up because Delmi, the small one, had heard that big Delmi had been killed.

And we went to see what was going on. The rumor was that the big Delmi had been killed in front of the cathedral. There had been a protest at the cathedral. She was a member of the guerrilla. But back then I didn't know that. Delmi was a member of the guerilla but carried a university student flag as it happened often.

Well, those students were protesting at the cathedral with signs and they had taken it over for several days, weeks really. What happened is that the armed forces came to disperse them and what they did is shoot at them indiscriminately and many died, many young people died. The next day we were quite concerned and weren't sure if Delmi had died because the other Delmi said that she had been there, that big Delmi was going to protest.

The next morning, very early, we organized ourselves as we could. There was no transportation, but we made it there. The dead bodies had been there for two days, maybe a day and a half. And we walked all the way there, and bodies were already in coffins because the military had finally left. The bodies were there night and day, under a striking sun. It was early in the morning and when we arrived, we had to lift the coffin lids looking for her but the bodies were purple, violet. Purple really. And we had to go through all the coffins and thought she wasn't there. For a second we thought she had not been among the protesters but all of a sudden, small Delmi, who knew her better since they were very good friends... All of a sudden cried out. And we were almost convinced she wasn't there, that she wasn't among the dead bodies. But Delmi shouted out, "She's here! She's here!" She was just lying there, her arms crossed on her chest. Delmi recognized her because of a bracelet that big Delmi used to wear. And we saw her and said, yes, it was her. Delmi had died in the massacre. It was so sad because we didn't know, at least I didn't know that she was involved in those things... And like many other young people. One just couldn't know.

Later I found out that one of my other classmates, a very shy quiet one, beautiful, very tall and long hair. I remember her because she had a simple, beautiful face; apparently she was a guerrilla, a guerrilla. I can't remember her name now, but I remember her face. But one didn't know these things because they were really good about leading their second lives. And I'm not judging them, quite on the contrary. I respect them, because to be able to take those kinds risks... Many fell.

Later I had a classmate, a dear friend who also died. I was in a professional agronomy school in Sonsonate and a great friend of mine, Maristela Serrano... I was the only woman in that program, it was my first year. And two months later I was told that a second woman had joined the program. I was really happy because I thought, another woman, that's great. It won't be just me. I had 50 to 60 male classmates and got along well with all of them, but it was a great happiness to see another woman join. When she

arrived, we got along great. Right from the beginning, we became great friends and studied together. But then I got married and didn't finish school. I wanted her to be my daughter's godmother but unfortunately the situation had become even more turbulent, violence was boiling.

I had gone to see a soccer match, because one tries to lead a normal life despite all the violence. It was a Sunday and I loved going to the stadium. I was in the Cuscatlán Stadium. As I was leaving I ran into one of my classmates and he told me, Merlín, Merlín, do you know already who is taking part in the take over of the Christian Democratic Party offices?

That week, or maybe 10 days earlier, some people had taken over the Christian Democratic Party and we knew there was a woman leading the takeover and that they had hostages and everything. Well, do you know who is taking part of the takeover of the Christian Democratic Party? No, I said. Maristela, he said. What?! I said. Yes, he said, she's one of the people who were leading the takeover. Oh, god. I started praying for her so that nothing would happen to her. I don't know exactly if it was the next day or on Tuesday, but I saw on the news that the military had broken into the Christian Democratic Party and of course, she got killed. My dear great friend... Yes...

Look, there was a lot of repression. We had a military government for decades and like in many parts of Latin America, the military governments were repressive. I hope my military family forgives me, but it's part of our history and we can't deny that, whether we had a friend or close family member in the military. But that is our history, not only in El Salvador but in other Latin American countries, we saw dictatorships like those of Stroessner, Pinochet, and many others... In Guatemala also. The workers were dissatisfied because of the lack of social benefits, the low salaries and high cost of life.

I remember when I was studying to be a social worker. They sent us to a poor neighborhood and it was incredible to see people living in those conditions, that in our society you could still see such degrading conditions. They sent me to an area near the San Jacinto neighborhood, a very poor area. I remember it was called the Buenos Aires community. And I saw people living on the streets, on the sidewalks. Their houses were made of plastic and cardboard. They were like, this table... Yes, one of their houses were as big as half of this table. I remember a pregnant woman. And because of the role we played as social workers, they took us to see those communities, the reality of our country. That was the truth, the real poverty, and in some ways one could see it as proof of the neglect of authorities for allowing human beings to live under those conditions.

Listen, the tension could always be felt. But the Salvadoran people is blessed by god and we are a very hard working community. We've demonstrated that outside El Salvador, we have an amazing capacity to organize. There are many Salvadoran organizations created to look after our country, to help in every way we can. And I could see that back then, I could see that how despite the conflict, after a confrontation, people would come out right after and start cleaning, sweeping the streets, selling their goods, the buses would start

circulating... And that's what we as Salvadorans have done. We learned to live with the war, learned to subsist and to be strong. To know that life goes on and that we had to keep striving for it. That's the Salvadoran community.

Well, and that's what took us, thank god, to the end of the war. Thank god for the peace accords. We never imagined, never in our lifetime, that the guerrilla and the military could be at the peace table, never. It didn't even cross our minds because there was so much polarization at the time.

There wasn't one family that didn't suffer the death of a family member. My cousin was about to graduate from medical school, in May he was to graduate and was doing his residency in a town called Cojutepeque, in the Cuscatlán Department. And we got the terrible news that he was murdered, he died tortured in a horrible way. They tortured him and one of his classmates. No one had a family member that was not assassinated, or had died in the conflict.

*And was your cousin a guerrilla member or just one more victim?*

I think he was one more victim. What he was doing was his job as a professional. They said someone gave them the wrong information because he was doing his year of social work in that city, in the clinic. And they said (although I haven't seen proof of this) that there was a confrontation and some guerrillas were treated there and that the military found out. But, what kind of doctor does not keep up with his responsibilities? It's a moral obligation. And he was such a noble, social guy. He was... His name was Carlos and he left behind a two-week old baby.

*Tell me the reason why you had to leave El Salvador.*

Because of the conflict, the armed conflict. We had a stable situation. I was married, with two children and my husband, he was a teacher. During the day he worked at the National School of Commerce, which was part of the Ministry of Education, and in the afternoons he worked as a teacher in a well-to-do private school.

Then one time, I got home from work around five o'clock, and when I got there, our maid opened the door and she was crying. She had been crying a lot. What happened to you? I said. They came looking for your husband, she said, some armed men. And where was he? He was in there but I lied, I didn't tell. And on the wall they had written, death to José, the teacher. They had painted it on the wall. Well, what else could I say... And where is he now? I asked. He's at his mother's home, around the block.

I started trembling. My god. I tried to calm down and went to where he was and said, we can't take chances. You have a visa. And I said, we can't start guessing... Because they had recently killed another teacher who taught at the same school, they killed him inside his home, just like that. They had gone looking for him in the same way. He was the

afternoon teacher, and my husband was the morning teacher but their names were very similar. There was some confusion, I guess. I don't know.

*Was your husband involved in anything?*

Oh no, not at all! He was working at the National School of Commerce and I guess a lot of students from that school were going into the guerrilla. And well... But teachers were generally accused of being subversives. Subversives. It was a very delicate thing to be a teacher. In El Salvador many teachers, priests, and laborers were killed... Ugh! Many of them!

So that's how we planned his trip and he came here, as painful as that was, to see our home fall apart. But I didn't stay or wait. I told him that I wouldn't let my family disintegrate like that. I spent three months organizing everything and finally joined him. And that's how we arrived to this country, in 1980.

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