

Parents of Rachel Corrie speak at University of Michigan

Pro-Palestinian activist killed by Israeli bulldozer

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Several pro-Palestinian activists and the parents of Rachel Corrie spoke at the University of Michigan January 25, in an effort to increase political awareness among young people about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Cindy and Craig Corrie spoke of the life of their daughter, a student from Evergreen College in Olympia, Washington, who was crushed by an Israeli bulldozer on March 16, 2003. Over 100 people attended the meeting.

Also speaking at the meeting was Adam Shapiro, one of the founders of the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), and Brian Avery, a member of ISM who was shot in the face by Israeli soldiers while aiding Palestinians in the city of Jenin. The Corries spoke at the end of the meeting, discussing the history and personality of their daughter.

Rachel Corrie, 23 years old, was killed while attempting to prevent the demolition of Palestinian homes in the refugee town of Rafah, in southern Gaza. She was a victim of the escalating violence of the Israeli state against Palestinians and groups supporting Palestinian rights, including the ISM, of which she was a member.

An Israeli military investigation into Rachel Corrie's death has absolved the soldiers and military of all responsibility. The investigation concluded that ISM activists were at fault for the death through their irresponsible actions. Though she was a US citizen, the American government has done nothing to ensure a serious investigation into her death. The United States government is itself complicit in her death, having given its backing to the escalation of violence against the Palestinian people. [See "Rachel Corrie: a victim of Israeli policy and US complicity"].

Adam Shapiro began the meeting by discussing some of the problems facing the Palestinian people given the recent escalation of Israeli violence. He pointed out that more than 2,000 Palestinians had been killed since the uprising began and that the Israeli army has caused untold damage to cities such as Nablus and Jenin.

Speaking after Shapiro was Brian Avery, a 24-year-old US citizen. He was injured by the Israeli military less than a month after Rachel Corrie's killing. The circumstances of his injury are indicative of the general repression meted out by the Israeli state.

Avery began by describing the "sick phenomenon" of routine Israeli aggression against ambulances seeking to aid Palestinians injured during Israeli incursions. According to Avery, even in those cases where crews are able to reach the injured before it is too late, it is not rare for the ambulances to be shot at or even fired at with missiles from helicopters on their way to hospitals. The ambulances are regularly denied passage through security checkpoints, allegedly for fear that they may be smuggling weapons. Rather than perform searches, however, the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) often hold the vehicles up for hours.

Avery said that he and other ISM activists intervene directly in these types of situations in order to prevent IDF violence and insure that the injured receive proper medical treatment. This direct intervention involves assisting medical crews on the ground, riding in ambulances, and escorting ambulances through security checkpoints. The presence of foreign nationals in these situations is seen as a means to reduce violent responses, and therefore increase the chance that proper medical treatment may be given to those in need.

The incident involving Avery took place in Jenin a year after a major Israeli incursion into the city had left 50 to 100 Palestinians dead. [See "Israel on Jenin: 'Nothing to hide'...but no one can look"] In early April 2003, residents had gathered to pay tribute to those who had been killed, and the Israeli military responded by imposing a curfew. According to Avery, any Palestinians on the streets during the curfew would be placing themselves at great risk of being shot.

Avery was shot while walking in the streets of Jenin last April 5. Generally, the Israeli military refrains from shooting at foreign nationals engaged in humanitarian aid. "On this

case it was a little different,” noted Avery. The IDF opened fire on him and another activist as they stood with their hands outstretched, indicating that they were unarmed. Avery was hit in the face with a 50-caliber bullet, and the IDF passed by as if nothing had happened.

Because he is a US citizen, it was thought that he could be transferred across the border for advanced medical treatment in Israel. However, his ambulance was denied access to Israel for two hours before being allowed to pass through.

Cindy and Craig Corrie spoke last, making an effort to describe the hopeful and uplifting nature of Rachel’s character, rather than speaking of her death, already well known among the many students, local residents, and press in attendance. From the Corries’ recollections one gets the sense that Rachel’s abiding interest in the cause of the Palestinian people was part of a broad humanism and passion for understanding and justice.

“Rachel’s mind didn’t touch yours lightly; she *impacted* you,” recalled Cindy Corrie of her daughter. “She was a curious person, thoughtful, and she questioned. She questioned the role and impact of her country in the world, even the role of her family in the world, and herself.” Many who met Rachel were impressed by her talents, passions and interests. She immersed herself in all areas of study, remarkably refusing to abandon any area of interest she thought worthwhile. “She was part of a vibrant learning community,” said her mother, adding that Rachel’s interest in others led her to “eventually [connect] with a vibrant activist community in the Olympia-Seattle area.”

“From her earliest years,” Cindy Corrie said, “it was clear that she had a unique way of looking at the world and at her place in it. She was an observer of people, of places, of life, and she had a special way of communicating what she thought, that helped those around her to see as well.”

Rachel’s ability to observe her surroundings and communicate her experiences would find expression in her many letters, written while working as a peace activist in Gaza. After reading extensively on the Israeli human rights abuses perpetrated against the Palestinian people, Rachel chose to join ISM and travel to the Gaza Strip. The purpose of ISM, and her decision to live in Gaza, was a belief “in the Right to Freedom of the Palestinian People...[and] nonviolent direct action methods of resisting.”

“I don’t know if many of the children here have ever existed without tank-shell holes in their walls and the towers of an occupying army surveying them constantly from the near horizons,” Rachel wrote, after two weeks in Gaza. Her understanding of the problems facing the Palestinian people changed quickly at her arrival. “An eight-year-old was shot and killed by an Israeli tank two days before I got here, and many of the children murmur his name to me—Ali—or point

at the posters of him on the walls.”

In her numerous letters, Rachel spoke of the horrors of life in Gaza, horrors that clearly had a sobering effect upon her idealistic beliefs. In one letter, Rachel described the arrest and humiliation of 150 Palestinians, subjected to gunfire while bound, as Israeli tanks and bulldozers destroyed surrounding crops and greenhouses. She listed the checkpoints closed, job opportunities lost, homes and wells destroyed, farmland stolen, and the daily threat of death for those who were kind enough to house her.

“All of the situation that I tried to enumerate above—and a lot of other things,” Rachel wrote, “constitutes a somewhat gradual—often hidden, but nevertheless massive—removal and destruction of the ability of a particular group of people to survive. This is what I am seeing here. The assassinations, rocket attacks and shooting of children are atrocities—but in focusing on them I’m terrified of missing their context. The vast majority of people here—even if they had the economic means to escape, even if they actually wanted to give up resisting on their land and just leave...can’t leave. Because they can’t even get into Israel to apply for visas, and because their destination countries won’t let them in (both our country [the US] and Arab countries). So I think when all means of survival is cut off in a pen (Gaza) which people can’t get out of, I think that qualifies as genocide.”

Rachel’s father Craig said that her accounts were somewhat unbelievable until he and his wife Cindy visited the Gaza Strip for themselves. As they traveled over Gaza meeting Palestinian families that Rachel had worked with, Craig stated that he, his wife, and the Palestinians who helped them were harassed and threatened by the Israeli military. He also noted that the five Palestinian homes where they stayed have since been demolished.

Rachel’s letters, her activism and her parents’ recollections depict someone of extraordinary intelligence and bravery, committed to her beliefs.



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