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How one Colombian woman learned to help other war victims

After the killing of her husband, Lucía Castro overcame her grief and now helps others tell their stories.

from the October 17, 2008 edition

El Peñol, Colombia - Even at the height of the violence in this lakeside town, Lucía Castro rarely missed a chance to show solidarity with the victims. So when they dared to hold a public meeting in November 2001, she was there. The next day, she found the dead body of her husband, Francisco Javier Monsalve, crumpled in the front seat of his car, killed, she suspects, by paramilitaries. Not one of the victims she had accompanied the day before went to her husband's funeral. Ms. Castro, who had once prided herself on her community activism, felt alone, frightened to speak out. She stayed at home, and often would not bathe for days.

Today, Castro leads a regional initiative to empower victims of eastern Antioquia Province, one of the areas hit hardest in the battle between leftist and rightist forces that reached its peak between 2000 and 2004.

A powerful, energetic woman now, Castro, is the president of the "From Victims to Citizens Provincial Association," or APROVIACI, which links groups from 23 municipalities. The central theme of the group is that victims should not feel like outcasts but rather be active in politics and community life. Four of the groups' members, including Castro, ran for town council seats in their respective municipalities in the last election. Castro says she lost by two votes.

As the head of APROVIACI, Castro has learned to help other gain strength from their pain, as she did.

In 2004, she joined a program that trains women to help themselves and others grieve through group therapy.

"That changed my life," she says. "I realized I couldn't just sit and cry the rest of my life." The two-year training process, helped Castro feel stronger. "I started recovering my dignity. I got stronger so I could be there for others," she says.

But while she has learned to accept her loss, she says true reconciliation in Colombia will be difficult until the victimizers are brought to justice and the victims are fully recognized and offered reparations. "It is very hard to find reconciliation in the middle of the conflict," she says.

Creating a shared memory, however, is easier, says Castro. As a first act of memorializing, Castro and the victims' group cut the shape of a person's head and shoulders out of a thin sheet of wood and wrote the names of each of the nearly 200 victims of the town. It was something they would

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prop up at their meetings and take to public events.

Then she had each relative of a victim write the life stories of their loved one on brightly colored paper to be added to a three-ring binder titled "The Book of Memory."

Last year, the group made a memorial, setting short wedges of concrete enscribed with the names of 44 of El Peñol's victims, into a hill overlooking the town's main entrance. At night, each name is lit up in a different colored neon light. Castro says she hopes they can soon expand the memorial to include all the victims.

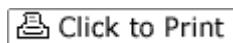
Beside the memorial, a plaque reads: "This is a space for collective memory ... [that acts] as a moral shield, which looks to the past so that it never again happens in the future."

Castro passes her hand over the wedge with her husband's name. "There he is, just like I loved him. Like I still love him."

– Sibylla Brodzinsky

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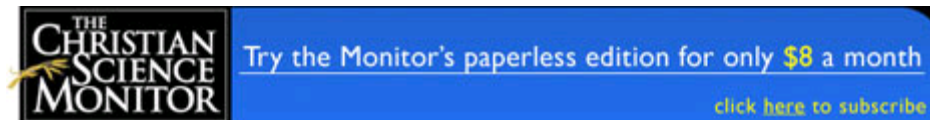
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