

School of America Reflections



Presenté : This was the theme of the School of Americas (SOA) vigil this past weekend in Columbus, Georgia. Thanks to a sponsorship from the Inter Faith Committee for Latin America and the Marianist Office of Peace & Justice, my roommates and I were able to join the other 6900 protesters at the gates of Ft. Benning in opposition to the violence carried out by Latin American graduates of this US Military base. Although Saint Louis University (my alma mater) sponsors an SOA trip every year, I never had the chance to go during college due to soccer season. I was very excited to finally experience the vigil that I had previously heard so much about.

MVP Volunteers Pam Morelli, Lauren Olson and Megan Frasier at the SOA Vigil

The weekend was a whirlwind of events, speakers, performances and festivities. On the bus ride back we were encouraged to share with the group one thing we will take away from our SOA experience. What I learned from the weekend is embodied in the one theme word: "presenté." As I continuously lifted and presented the name written on my cross of an innocent 5-yr-old girl murdered in El Salvador, I thought about the significance of the weekend's theme word in my own life. My participation in the SOA vigil reminds me to be fully present to the diversity of people and powerful, life-giving experiences I encounter on a daily basis. On a larger scale, being present calls for a greater sense of awareness. No matter what your political or religious convictions may be, it's important to be aware of past and current events. This weekend helped me become more present to two of my own convictions:

1) **Solidarity: Presenté!** - The most powerful part of the weekend was the overwhelming sense of solidarity. With around 7,000 people in attendance, there was an amazing diversity of ages, ethnicities and lifestyles. Despite varying beliefs and backgrounds, everyone was able to gather from all corners of the country on one big

street in Georgia for one reason: PEACE. Standing in the massive crowd with my one little cross, I realized the importance of being part of something bigger than myself.

2) **Social Justice: Présenté!** - As a volunteer working at a non-profit and living in an underprivileged neighborhood, social justice has become a routine value. As with anything else in life, I can become very focused on my own work and experiences, and forget about other injustices of society. That is why my roommates and I used this SOA weekend as an opportunity to expand our social justice horizons to investigate a variety of global human rights violations on a more intimate level. On Saturday morning we attended the Ignatian Family Teach-In (a Jesuit sponsored SOA conference) where we had the chance to hear a well-known social justice lawyer speak. A few simple words from his extensive power point stuck with me. He emphasized that while it's important to speak out against evil with anger, it's just as important to keep your heart open to signs of hope and actions of love. By listening to inspiring spiritual speakers and witnessing the passion of the Jesuit universities from all over, I was reassured of the power, vitality and goodness of the Catholic Church.

At the end of the procession, all in attendance were reminded that our work does not stop at the gates of the School of Americas. Rather we must continue to honor the victims of violence from all over the world through our peaceful presence in times to come.