

## Peace Group Saves Lives Worldwide

by Fred Coppersmith

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Peace Brigades International (PBI) describes itself as “a non-governmental organization...which protects human rights and promotes nonviolent transformation of conflicts.” In order to achieve these goals, they work directly with local activists in various countries in order to foster communication, provide training and education programs, as well as to show support from the international community through a process they call “protective international accompaniment”. Andrew Miller, Co-Director of PBI/USA and a central Pennsylvania native, visited State College the week of April 5 in order to discuss in a number of talks and workshops the success his group has had in these areas. As Miller says, “we’re less of a grassroots organization than you might imagine.”

For Miller, the choice to become involved with Peace Brigades International—and, specifically, to join their active program in Colombia—was, he says, the logical next step in his role as a human rights activist. Miller had been involved with a number of Amnesty International campaigns while a student at Penn State, and PBI, he says, simply does on an international level what he and many other activists have been doing in the United States for a long time.

The group has a number of on-going projects, including others in Guatemala, Indonesia, and Mexico. However, in order “to make a real life-or-death impact”, Miller believed that he would have to go to Colombia, a nation which PBI calls “notorious for its politics of fear”, as well as for an atmosphere of violence perpetuated by both paramilitary groups and the opposing guerrilla forces.

In 1999, PBI produced a 52-minute video called *In the Company of Fear* in order to highlight the protective accompaniment work they have done in Colombia. According to group, the video explains not only how protective accompaniment works but, more importantly, why. International volunteers act, essentially, as “unarmed

bodyguards” for local human rights workers. The belief is that the presence of these volunteers will in itself often be enough to deter violence.

Liam Mahoney, a PBI volunteer as well as the co-author of *Unarmed Bodyguards: International Accompaniment for the Protection of Human Rights*, says that “protective international accompaniment is...based on two related premises. One is that when governments are killing their own population, they don’t want the rest of the world to know about it. So the presence of foreigners with the targets of that violence tends to protect them. The second is that when people are being terrorized by their government, they’re in dire need of any sort of encouragement they can get.”

Andrew Miller has first-hand experience in providing that kind of encouragement, having first arrived in Colombia in April of 1999. However, while protective accompaniment is certainly the most visible aspect of the work PBI does, Miller contends that there are other equally important elements to what his group is able to do.

“Fundamentally,” he says, “the work is about communication,” and much of it is “actually boring and quite mundane.”

Peace Brigades volunteers conduct or attend meetings with local activists, attempt to forge connections within local communities, and gather intelligence in an attempt to gauge the local situation and prevent violence before it occurs if possible. In Colombia, or paramilitary execution. Yet these same groups are often much less confrontational when faced with international observers, Miller says. By throwing a spotlight on their activities—what PBI calls their state-sanctioned “politics of fear”—activist groups like Amnesty International, the Red Cross, and PBI can make a real difference, Miller says.

Indeed, many others in the international community seem to agree.

“The presence of PBI in the [Colombian] city of Barrancabermeja is extremely important,” recently reported Hina Jilani, Special Representative of the UN Secretary General for Human Rights Defenders. “The paramilitaries in the city have made it clear that the

international support for human rights defenders is the only reason they have not assassinated more of them.”

Miller therefore considers this international support—what he calls simply strength in numbers—to be extremely important and necessary to protect those under threat in Colombia. The presence of international organizations like PBI, he contends, is perhaps even more important now than when he left Colombia in early 2000.

“The prospects for peace in Colombia anytime soon,” he says, “are just about zero.”

Yet Miller and his fellow activists remain hopeful that change will be possible and that the “politics of fear” will eventually give way to the true democracy that Colombia professes to be. That change, Miller says, has to come from local groups and activists, and the nonviolent methods employed by Peace Brigades worldwide in nations like Colombia, Guatemala, Indonesia, and elsewhere can be applied on a level even as local as central Pennsylvania.