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MacQuarrie revels in challenges; SOCIAL ACTIVIST: She's always tried to help people whose power has been taken away

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Ever since she was a young activist, working with human rights groups in El Salvador and Guatemala, Barb MacQuarrie has felt a sense of duty to be socially conscious.

But even during her days with the Peace Brigades International, a non-profit group that sends volunteers to conflict areas, MacQuarrie knew she was treated differently because she was a woman.

"I was always aware of having to work harder to let your experience count," the London woman says now in her office at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children, where she's the community director.

"In Central America, women were not treated equally, but also within my own organization, the guys always got the first crack at the risky stuff."

MacQuarrie spent several months in El Salvador during its years-long civil war in the 1980s. Part of Peace Brigades International, she and other volunteers accompanied local activists during their work because it was safer for them to work with Westerners by their side. "I didn't have children then, so I was able to be in those situations and I felt completely able to assume all that," MacQuarrie says. "Now, with kids, I wouldn't be able to do that."

Despite the fact male volunteers were sent on riskier assignments, she and a Salvadorian friend were detained by the military for 72 hours, not allowed legal representation, not given access to a phone or food.

She was interrogated and deprived of sleep before being let go.

"I wasn't physically harmed. I was concerned for my friend and how my detention would impact on the organization's ability to stay in the country," MacQuarrie says, wondering now, slightly, at her courage at the time.

Born in Belleville, MacQuarrie studied political science at McMaster University in Hamilton. She lived in New Brunswick, Montreal, countries in Central America and eventually moved to London. She has two children -- a daughter, 15, whose hand-written note, Peace is In, Hate is Out, sits on

MacQuarrie's desk, and a 20-year-old son who's inherited his mom's activist roots. He's now in El Salvador, teaching people in a small village about theatre and collective power.

MacQuarrie's own activism started after high school, when she travelled to Senegal with Canada World Youth.

"It was a practical lesson in how inequality is structured," she says.

"I met tourists when I was in Senegal, and I had that sense that the local people were being blamed for their poverty without looking at the history of colonialism and how the conditions of that poverty came about. That really awakened something in me about inequality and injustice in the world.

"It's not OK to pretend you don't see it and blame people for their own misery."

MacQuarrie worked at several non-profit organizations. In London, she's worked at the Cross Cultural Learner Centre and the Sexual Assault Centre.

Although she's never placed herself in a particular group -- she's fought for the environment, for peace and social justice and against apartheid -- MacQuarrie says she's always tried to help people whose power has been taken away.

"When I see young women being strong and powerful and standing up for themselves, that's what matters," she says.

Her work at the Centre for Research and Education on Violence against Women and Children, in the education faculty of the University of Western Ontario, has been rewarding.

"Around the world there are really compelling issues, but there are also many here at home . . . Sexual violence is really one of the most fundamental manifestations of women's inequality in our society and other societies across the world."

MacQuarrie is most proud of the Neighbours, Friends and Families campaign, which the centre launched in 2006. It aims to educate people about how to talk to women in abusive relationships and show men who abuse them how to get help.

"With Neighbours, Friends and Families, we're breaking through the expectation that women have to reach out to an expert," MacQuarrie says. "Violence affects women we meet everywhere. Instead of feeling badly, we can take small action. We give people effective tools, tell them what services exist. I'm really excited about that work."

Although she sometimes misses the immediacy of her face-to-face activist work, MacQuarrie is happy at the centre but thinks of her front-line friends often.

"Sometimes, knowing how hard my colleagues are working on the front lines, I wonder if I am holding up my end of the bargain," she says. "But the work I'm involved in interests me a lot. It's learning how to do research, influencing policy and making connections between people who can influence the policy makers and those on the front lines. I can see a future here."

MacQuarrie loves to cook, and sometimes daydreams about opening up a cafe, a safe space where everyone is welcome.

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