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IN PERSON; Taking and Teaching The Humbling Course Of Passive Resistance

By **MARY ANN CASTRONOVO FUSCO**

LIKE many teachers, Anna Brown spent part of her summer vacation traveling abroad. But what set Dr. Brown apart was the fact that the political science professor at St. Peter's College visited a country where she was -- in the government's view, at least -- unwelcome. She has been banned from Mexico, labeled a fugitive and a terrorist.

Last January, during a visit to the strife-torn Mexican state of Chiapas, Dr. Brown had her visa seized by Mexican officials who accused her and her fellow travelers with Global Exchange, a San Francisco human rights organization, of being "revolutionary tourists" living with the Zapatista rebels who have been pressing the Mexican government for agrarian and other economic and social changes.

On Jan. 4, she was ordered to go to San Cristobal de las Casas to be interrogated by immigration. Instead, she returned home. Published reports of her banishment conflict. Some say it's for life; others, two years. Unsure of her status, Dr. Brown has asked Representative Robert Menendez, a St. Peter's alumnus, to help clarify the situation.

"Who do you call?" she said, sitting in her office in the Dorothy Day House at St. Peter's, where the six principles of nonviolence hang on the wall of the Martin Luther King Center. "I'm assuming that I am banned, but to be quite honest, I didn't get an official letter from them. But then again, only a gringo would think that. I could see myself sitting in a prison saying, 'Uh, but I didn't get a letter.'" And she laughs at the absurdity of the scenario.

Yet, she did return -- "quietly," she said -- this summer, but not to Chiapas. Although the 35-year-old professor can joke about her ambiguous status, the conflict in Mexico is no laughing matter to her.

"One of the reasons the Mexican government doesn't want people down there is because they can see what's going on," she said. "The more you can see, the more you make it visible, the harder it is in the public eye to get away with certain things."

She describes the situation in Chiapas as "a low-intensity war" being fought by Mexico against its own people. Internal refugees whose homes have been burned and crops stolen to harass them into submission live in makeshift encampments, often without electricity, running water or food.

Life has never been easy in Chiapas, which sits on the Pacific Ocean at the Guatemalan border. Mountainous and lush with rainforests, the land is "stunningly beautiful," said Dr. Brown, and is rich in coffee, cacao, timber, and oil, which makes it desirable to developers.

The current crisis stems from a Jan. 1, 1994, uprising of locals led by Zapatista rebels after a 1993 bill introduced under President Carlos Salinas de Gortari sought to privatize the country's ejidos, or collective farms. Under the current Mexican president, Ernesto Zedillo, negotiations have been an on-again, off-again affair. But human rights organizations charge that Mexico has been using foreign aid earmarked to fight narcotics traffic to send soldiers into Chiapas to keep the natives from rebelling.

"One-third of Mexico's armed forces are in Chiapas now," said Dr. Brown, who is on the board of the Strategic Pastoral Action Network, a religious human rights group in Rushville, N.Y.

In December 1997, 45 locals, mostly women and children and members of the Abejas, a nonviolent group allied with the Zapatistas, were murdered by pro-government supporters in Acteal.

"Now clearly that is wrong," said Dr. Brown. "I knew that I wasn't about to pick up a gun and go running down there, but I could go down and bear witness to what people were enduring. You don't go down and tell people how to live their life. 'Oh, you poor people, if you only lived like the Americans lived, or if you only did X, Y, and Z.' "

During the trip Dr. Brown took to Mexico during her winter break last December and January, which ultimately led to her banishment, she attended a five-hour commemorative service, including a re-enactment of the murders and a Mass, for those slaughtered in Acteal. During the ceremony, a military helicopter hovered menacingly.

Not all of the causes she champions arouse as much sympathy as that of barefoot peasants being massacred by armed forces. A member of Kairos-Plowshares, New York City, a religious activist group cofounded by Daniel Berrigan, Dr. Brown said she had been involved in 40 acts of civil disobedience, including an effort to shut down the Liberty Bell on July 3 in support of Mumia Abu-Jamal, who is on death row for killing a Philadelphia police officer.

Knowing her political leanings, one could easily conjure an image of Anna Brown as a militantly strident, tie-dyed remnant of the 60's. Indeed, her office is papered with posters proclaiming an array of pacifist and social justice causes. But in a recent interview, she appeared as a nonthreatening icon of neutrality, with a physique closer to that of a model than a guerilla.

She spoke with obvious affection about her parents, siblings, and nieces, and jokingly bemoaned her single status. She praised the work of her colleagues, particularly the Rev. Robert Kennedy, chairman of the college's theology department and a zen master who leads her and a group of others in meditation each morning.

Her blue eyes sparkled with intelligence as she spoke in a gentle voice of the deprivation and humiliation endured by the poor. Resolute in her faith and convictions, she also made it clear that she knows her way is not for everyone. "I never demand that they think the way I do," she said of her students. "I want them to think about how and why they think the way they do."

To Eugene J. Cornacchia, chairman of the political science department at St. Peter's, "she's absolutely one of the most popular professors here.

"I think it's because she's so sincere in her commitment to social justice, but also to them," Dr. Cornacchia said. "I've seen her work long hours with individual students. She seems to be boundless with her energy. Through her example, she's showing them that you defend what you believe in."

Although he worries for her safety and occasionally teases her by saying, "I hope you'll be here Monday, and not in jail," he allowed that "not everyone would probably agree that it's appropriate for a faculty member to be so active so publicly."

But not everyone teaches at an institution run by Jesuit priests, who historically have been noted educators, intellectuals, missionaries, and most recently, proponents of liberation theology.

"This is a community that seems to be extraordinarily tolerant of faculties pushing students and ideas to the edge," said Dr. Cornacchia. "We have a responsibility, particularly in a Jesuit Catholic institution, to educate our students and enlighten them to the social, political, and economic impacts of what businesses do."

Or, as Dr. Brown says with a laugh, "I always blame the Jesuits for my downfall."

Born in Allentown, Pa., the eldest of four children, she was attracted to the study of political science by an interest in service and leadership instilled in her by her parents, both schoolteachers. "My parents, in many ways, lived the example of what some of the gospel stories are all about. They really led the way."

In 1986, she graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor's degree in political science from Allentown College of St. Francis de Sales in Center Valley. But an internship on Capitol Hill during her junior year soured her on the practice, but not on the study, of politics. "When I saw what it was really like, I wanted to get out as soon as possible," she recalled. "There was a lot of showmanship. It was sad which letters got read and didn't get read from constituents."

She then earned advanced degrees at Fordham University, where she also worked full-time as assistant director of the government relations and urban affairs office. Stimulated by the diversity of people and ideas she encountered, Anna the altruist became Anna the activist.

"Intellectually I was really challenged," she said. "At Fordham, a political consciousness began to be developed, a consciousness that was a bit more radical and now engaged in resistance and civil disobedience."

While at Fordham she participated in her first act of civil disobedience, blocking the entrance to the Salvadoran consulate to protest the murder of Jesuit missionaries in El Salvador, with the Rev. Dean Brackley, who is now the rector of the University of Central America in El Salvador. She also served on the board of the POTS (Part Of The Solution) soup kitchen and homeless shelter near the campus, and distributed meals to the homeless living in subway stations.

In this vein, Dr. Brown now gives community service classes through St. Peter's Community Service Office, guiding students in local service projects. She also moderates the campus branch of Pax Christi, an international Catholic peace movement with headquarters in Brussels.

Interestingly, however, with Wall Street just across the Hudson and an array of multinational corporations nearby, many students at St. Peter's yearn to work precisely for the privileged institutions whose policies Dr. Brown decries.

She resists being tagged a communist. "I don't know what that word really means," she said with a laugh. But radical is a label that does not offend her.

"If people have a sense of what the word radical means, it's root," she explained. "Rootedness and roots

go down real deep, and they're the base of support. So what comes from that root? What can grow from that root? For me, thought and action should pretty much be linked."

'Perfect' Place for an Office

THE letters identifying the three-story building with the yellow brick facade that houses the political science department at St. Peter's College are barely visible. But if you look closely, you can make them out: Dorothy Day House.

Born in Brooklyn in 1907, Dorothy Day cofounded the "Catholic Worker," a publication that supports social reform and opposes war. Having begun her career as a reporter for socialist publications, she was a member of the Socialist Party and of Communist Party affiliates before converting to Catholicism in 1927. She established more than 30 houses of hospitality for the poor and homeless during the Depression. Throughout her life, which she lived in voluntary poverty, she campaigned for racial justice, pacifism, and disarmament. She died in New York City in 1980, and has been proposed as a candidate for sainthood.

"It's so perfect that here is Anna's office," said Dr. Eugene J. Cornacchia, chairman of the political science department. "She's such a perfect example of Dorothy Day's philosophy and values."

Photo: "I want them to think about how and why they think the way they do," Dr. Anna Brown says of her students at St. Peter's College. (Norman Y. Lono for The New York Times)