

Woman takes on feds in search for brother

By Alice Collins
staff writer

Virginia Smith knows that many of her friends and even some family members don't understand the road of political activism she now walks — a road that winds into Central America.

It's put the once-conservative Beverly Hills grandmother into direct conflict with President Reagan and U.S. government policies there. "I speak out any time I'm asked," Smith said in an interview last week. "It's very hard for me to do, but I never miss an opportunity to spread the word."

Smith, who's walked through the villages of Honduras and Nicaragua talking with the peasants, says Reagan's support for the rebels in Nicaragua and for the established governments in Honduras and El Salvador are hurting the people.

"To the ordinary people, it's causing so much suffering, so much death. It's put additional burdens on the poor who were never very good to start with."

Life for Smith, mother of 12 and grandmother of 35, began a major change on Sept. 20, 1983, the day she and her brother and sisters were notified by a friend that their brother, American missionary priest Jim Carney, was missing and presumed dead in Honduras.

CARNEY HAD been a missionary there for 20 years living with the poor, fighting for their rights and to better their lives. He was considered a subversive by the Honduran government.

Because the Honduran government gave several versions of what happened to Carney and because the U.S. State Department couldn't help, the family launched its own investigation to determine the truth and to find their brother's body.

Smith and her other brother and sisters, who live in other parts of the United States, never found their brother's body and never accepted the final word of the Honduran government — that Carney starved to death somewhere in the jungle.

The family maintains that the U.S. government, out of embarrassment because of its support for the Honduran government, went along with the Honduran cover-up.

"We came up with our own answers that we know are very, very close to the truth," said Smith.

Carney's family believes he was arrested, tortured and executed in early September of 1983 at El Aguacate, the military base where U.S.-supported Hondurans were flying personnel into Nicaragua to fight the established Sandinista government.

"WE HAVE actual evidence of the capture and torture and a pretty

good idea of the assassination," said Smith. "But we don't have all the facts yet. There are still things coming out of Honduras."

The family has been trying unsuccessfully to get the U.S. Congress to conduct an official investigation. "The family hasn't been back to Honduras since 1984," said Smith, "because we don't think it would be safe for us to go now. And the lives of anybody caught talking to us would be in danger."

But last July, Smith, one of her daughters and her brother went to Nicaragua at the invitation of some of the peasants Carney worked with. They attended the seventh anniversary celebration of the Sandinista revolution at Esteli, about 25 miles from the Honduran border.

"It was so exciting," she said. "The ordinary people came in droves. There were about 100,000 in the plaza. Sixty different countries were represented. Most of the peasants came standing up on trucks."

THE PEOPLE of Nicaragua live in fear of a U.S. invasion, said Smith. "It's with them all the time."

Smith said she felt safe in Nicaragua. But there was concern by Nicaraguan officials of bombs going off during the celebration.

Smith, her daughter and brother stayed in Managua and drove to the celebration in Esteli in a bus convoy. "It's normally a 2 1/2 hour drive. But it took six hours because the convoy had to keep stopping to check for land mines on the road."

U.S. citizens in Nicaragua who oppose current U.S. policies in Central America demonstrate peacefully in front of the U.S. Embassy in Managua. "I spoke at one of the demon-

strations while I was there," said Smith.

"I came away from Nicaragua with a feeling of great sadness that the United States has caused so much suffering there."

BECAUSE OF her political activism, Smith had a special guest at her Beverly Hills house last week. Zenaida Velasquez, a founder and president of a Honduran human rights organization, COFADEH, and her interpreter visited there as part of a U.S. tour.

COFADEH is the Committee of the Families of the Disappeared-Deceased of Honduras. The committee was organized in 1981 as a response to increased human rights violations by the Honduran military and security forces, according to Velasquez.

In an interview at Smith's house, Velasquez through her interpreter spoke of "death squads." In that country, more than 150 people, including her own brother, have disappeared in Honduras for political reasons in the last five years, she said. "I'm here," she said, "hoping to

gain some kind of support, solidarity for the Honduran people. The Reagan administration is seen as responsible for creating the human rights violations by the government of Honduras.

The Honduran government is a repressive government," said Velasquez.

"I am asking the people of the U.S. to help in the struggle for peace in Central America, especially because U.S. policy is bringing Honduras closer to a war with Nicaragua."

U.S.-supported Nicaraguan contra rebels are based in neighboring Honduras.

AS IN the case of the Rev. Carney, "it's especially torture not knowing if the family member is dead," said Velasquez. "That's the big question. They probably are, but we have never found their cadavers. We ask for them to be returned alive."

Smith hopes that there will be a change in policy after the 1988 presidential election.

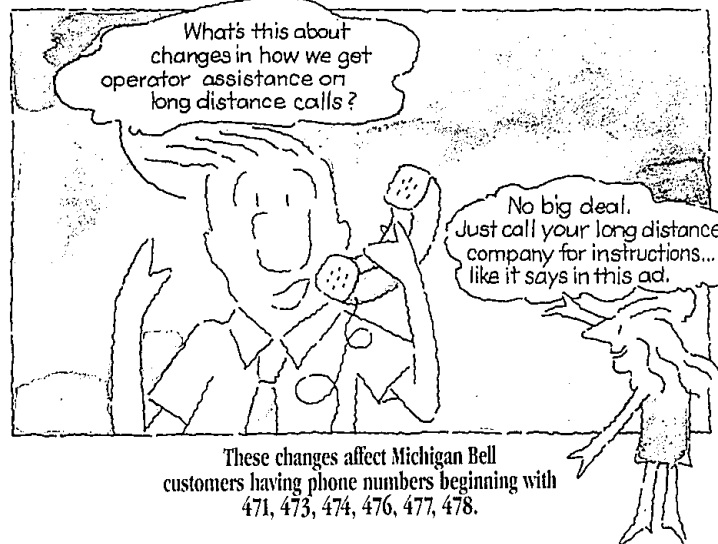


Zenaida Velasquez (left), president of the Honduran human rights organization COFADEH, and Virginia Smith, whose brother, missionary priest Jim Carney, is missing and presumed

dead in Honduras, spoke of common interests at Smith's home in Beverly Hills.

STEPHEN CANTRELL/staff photographer

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