

Transcript:

Thank you for coming this evening, on the occasion of the death of leader Fidel Castro, to discuss our future relations with the government and people of Cuba. My name is Rachel Bruhnke and I am on the Board of Directors of Witness for Peace Southwest.

Witness for Peace is a national organization begun over 35 years ago during the Reagan Wars against Central America. (It was begun in order) to defend the poor farmers of Central America who were struggling to create a just system in their countries and who, unfortunately, were bombarded by U.S. Military might and were unable to create the change in their system that they were trying to do.

So Witness for Peace (Southwest) has been in existence ever since and we invite you all to look at our website and join us in the struggle for what used to be seen as separate continents, but now with the immigration issue in the United States becoming so front and center I think it is very, very important that we make the point that in so many cases, and the American people need to understand this, it is U.S. wars abroad that create immigration into this country. People fleeing their countries' economic and political violence in order to come here.

We are here to help the American people, the Cuban people, and the World. Fidel Castro died this week, and the press that was made in the United States is not the press that the rest of the world saw. So we are here, people of goodwill, of truth, of peace and of justice, to make our own press.

We believe that it is an historic opportunity that can produce true understanding in the population of the United States of the important role that peace with Cuba can play for ourselves, for the Cuban people, and as a model of peaceful and constructive dialogue so needed in the world today.

Some may call us Communists. So be it. If goodwill, and truth, and peace, and justice are labeled Communist, then it is not we, but the name-callers who have a lot of explaining to do.

The American people today are facing extreme hardships by not having affordable and adequate education and health care, secure neighborhoods and communities, affordable housing, lives not burdened with crushing debt, uplifting rather than debasing culture all around us, nor environmental protection. Nor do we have peaceful international relations with all nations, or constructive media coverage. Because of this, it is incumbent upon citizens of all levels, including in media, to participate and assist their government and their communities in solving these pressing problems.

All of the above-mentioned hardships, faced in one way or another by the over 300,000,000 in the United States, have been positively addressed by Cuba and its people for over 55 years. The American people need to be free to share in the open and constructive discussion of problem-solving with any and all people of the world. We should not be oppressed in our desperate need to meet our own human needs. So we, local stakeholders in U.S. healthcare, education, trade and labor, environmental protection and community democracy are meeting here tonight to express our support for improved relations with Cuba, and to reject the uninformed reaction and bellicose threats of Donald Trump and his advisors.

We, on the steps of the San Pedro Courthouse, call for justice in our future relations with the government and people of Cuba... I would like to introduce a few of our speakers today. The first one, his name is Caney Arnold, running (as a Green Party Candidate) for local office, and his main issue that he is going to speak to tonight is the problem of homelessness in the Harbor Area. Caney...

CANEY ARNOLD:

Thank you, Rachel. Thank you for inviting me here to speak for a few moments. As Rachel said, my name is Caney Arnold. I am a candidate for Los Angeles City Council here for District 15, which includes San Pedro, Wilmington, Harbor City, the Gateway and Watts, and in all those areas, economic and social justice is a major issue.

Since we're here in San Pedro the one thing that I'd like to talk about is the issue of homelessness, as Rachel mentioned, a major economic and

social justice issue that is not being adequately addressed by our City today. Most areas around the country have understood now that “Housing First” and affordable housing are the ways to solve the homelessness issue that Los Angeles seems to not to be able to come to grips with.

We see huge numbers of homeless here in San Pedro and throughout Los Angeles, and instead of using a more humane and empathetic approach, what we see is people being moved from encampment to encampment, pushed from one area to another, spending huge amounts of money that instead could easily be spent on housing, on drug addiction and on alcohol abuse addiction rehab, bringing people up, uplifting them, giving them job training, being able to then put them into affordable housing or even public housing. (It’s) a much simpler approach. More humane approach. More empathetic, and actually less expensive than the current approach. That’s one of my major platforms, and I just want to be able to say again, thank you Rachel for having me here to speak on this today.

RACHEL BRUHNKE:

Thank you. There are many things that the Cuban people may not have, or have to do, and one of them is to have to step over homeless people on a daily basis. There are no homeless people in Cuba. While there are over 200 million people who are homeless every day on Earth, not one of them is homeless in Cuba.

It’s very important to have affordable housing, and one of the first things they did back in 1959 was to lower rents in the cities and to also begin to secure housing for all of the people of Cuba. We would now like to call up Julia Scoville, who is a (95-year old!) retired nurse to speak on health care issues, here, and what she has seen in Cuba also.

JULIA SCOVILLE:

I’m a retired registered nurse, and I had the opportunity to visit Cuba several times. I was very impressed with the health care. First of all, the World Health Organization has indicated that Cuba has a lower infancy

death rate than the United States, which is something when you consider the scientific efforts that we have here.

The other factor that impressed me was their generosity in sending medical help wherever it is needed around the world, whether it is earthquakes, floods or whatever. They offered to send help to Louisiana during the floods several years ago, and they were rejected. They could have really helped because a number of people died after that.

The other thing that impressed me was that the medical staff lives right among the patients, among the people they serve. Usually, when we were travelling, if anyone in our group was ill, they would send a whole group of people, medical staff to take care, and in just a few minutes because they were right nearby...

The other thing, and I don't know if many people know this, but they also help to train medical students from the United States, medical students who are refused entrance to (cannot afford) the U.S. medical schools. If they qualify, they get free medical education and can work wherever they're needed.

The other factor about their health care is their generosity in sending medical people to different parts of the world. They were very active in many of the tragic situations that occurred. One of the things that they worked on was the (West Nile) mosquito Virus. They go right in and take care of it.

So I think we should be working together in cooperation because we each have something to learn.

(Cheers and clapping from crowd members...)

RACHEL BRUHNKE:

Yeah!...The United States Government, in all its cynicism toward Cuba, has often said that those international attempts to help around the world is just a form of "Cuban propaganda" to get people on their side, and in the beautiful Cuban way, their answer to that is, "Then the United States should do better propaganda than us. It would help more

people.” ...Now I’d like to introduce Dave Arian, who is President and Founder of the Harry Bridges Institute to speak on the history of labor relations between the United States and Cuba, and we are calling for a complete end to the U.S. Embargo against Cuba, and to open and fair trade between our nations.

DAVE ARIAN:

Thank you, Rachel. You know, the Harry Bridges Institute was founded on the principles that Harry, who was the founder of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union stood for, and one of the main things he talked about was the support for international workers everywhere. In 1948 there was a coalition between the ILWU, who had sugar workers and farm workers in Hawaii, along with the sugar workers in Cuba and a series of other countries. And that coalition was fighting for better wages and conditions for sugar workers worldwide. At that moment that regime that was in Cuba, assassinated the head of the sugar workers in 1948. The ILWU came to the defense of his wife and his kids and stood strongly with the workers in Cuba. The ILWU has had a close relationship with the Cuban workers from that day to this, and has always said that we need to open up trade, that we need to be supportive of worker to worker. We’ve been there a number of times, and let me give you just one, short story.

After Fidel came in, he understood that in order to move the country forward he needed to educate the people, and he needed to be able to ensure that people had jobs, and ensure that they had housing. When you go outside, right outside of Havana, you’ll see a housing area that has high-rise housing, and there are seven of them, and one of them is dedicated to all of the individuals who work on the waterfront. In other words, you go to work on the waterfront, you’ve got medical care, you’ve got housing, you’ve got the basics that are taken care of in terms of what you need. And you see this. The next set of housing belongs to the steelworkers and so forth and so on.

But you know, there was an understanding from day one, the government had to play a role, not only in putting people to work, providing medical care, housing and education. It would be a great advancement in America if this country was committed to the same

thing. But it's not. (Applause) So I'd just like to say, I'd like to thank Rachel and I think the key question here is opening up trade with Cuba. I think, you know, it's on the verge of doing that. It's in the interest of the Cuban people. It's in the interest of the American people and it's in the interest of workers throughout the world. So again, thank you Rachel for pulling this thing together.

(Applause)

RACHEL BRUHNKE:

Thank you, Dave. One more note on trade that I would like everyone to maybe research for yourselves is the current trade paradigm we always here is "free trade, free trade", and what we need to understand when we here free trade, it's actually really about unregulated trade. And what we've been finding, and even the people of the United States of America, who have lost out because of these quote unquote free trade agreements, are coming to understand: that we need a different paradigm of trade.

Let me offer to you a paradigm that Cuba and Venezuela began almost 20 years ago. It's called ALBA. It's a Spanish acronym which basically means the "Bolivarian Alternative for Latin America". So if you would look that up. It's A-L-B-A, and it's a beautiful paradigm that talks about "fair trade" between nations. That the purpose of trade between two countries should be to uplift, uplift both countries, especially if they are poor. So it's not just how we trade, but it's what we trade, and for what purpose.

They quantify-economically-cultural and sports trade and travel between people that has nothing to do with products. And if we can start "valuing" people sharing together in cultural events, and sporting, or international conferences or cooperation as Dave mentioned, then we start to truly "value" peaceful international relations in a quantifiable sense. So it's very, very important that we also change our trade paradigm and Cuba is already beginning that throughout Latin America. I would like to read a couple of quotes. Two people who could not be here, but about 15 years ago, we (Global Exchange/Eco Cuba Exchange) held another press conference in Washington D.C. It was specifically

between United States and Cuba in the area of Sustainable Development and in Environment. Many of us had been going for many years to Cuba, working in areas of energy, and agriculture and water especially. And these people got up on the halls of Congress and were able to share their experience as American experts in these very important resource issues, and their experience, therefore, in Cuba.

And I have to tell you that after these three people got up and spoke on energy, on water issues and on agriculture, a young man came up to me at the end of the press conference, stunned, and he said, "I work in the international development community. Everyone in the international development community should have been here today to hear this." And I said, "I know."

The world needs to understand that there are other models of developing.

So I want to share from Laurie Stone. She is an engineer who works for Solar Energy International and has been many, many times to Cuba, working with renewable energies with those countries. She says: "Cuba has a goal to produce 24% of its electricity from renewables by 2030." Just 14 years from now. "And has already made incredible progress in energy efficiency. While the U.S. is in drastic need of an energy transition to efficiency and cleaner sources of electricity, it is imperative for these neighboring countries to work together to both advance towards a cleaner energy future."

It's very interesting to be in a country where oil is not for profit. It makes it a lot easier to transition away from it.

And while we're here tonight, I would like to please "represent" also for Standing Rock and for the people right now who are suffering through a snow storm trying to protect all of our waters, and trying to shout out, loudly to this country, America, that we must transition away from fossil fuels and towards greater efficiency and greater renewable energies.

(Applause)

Their lives are on the line. We must begin to transition in our own lives.

And secondly, my dear friend and advisor when I was at Humboldt State University. His name is Bob Gearheart. He is a water engineer, and a biologist. He has been several times to Cuba and he's also been around the world to many, many poor countries, working often with Peace Corps volunteers who invited him to their villages where they are living to work on water treatment systems. Biological, low impact, low cost in areas that have no money. And so he has seen around the world the way that water systems and wastewater treatment needs to happen in order to save lives.

And when he was in Washington DC with us at that conference he said that "Cuba does it exactly right." That in terms of their wastewater treatment, their top, top priority in terms of water-is Public Health, and that if we come from a perspective of Public Health, then we begin to make water decisions wisely. And this is what he has written for me to read:

"In the several trips to Cuba over the last decade I have had the opportunity to experience the strength and determination of Cubans' human spirit to prevail and to sustain their culture and development in spite of serious injustices imposed upon them by the United States. There is now an opportunity to engage and innovate in a reciprocal manner for the betterment of all of us."

(Applause)

...And I'm just going to say a few words before we hear from our final person....I grow food. I'm very much into sustainable agriculture and local agriculture. And Cuba is world-known for urban agriculture, organic agriculture and a transition away from what they used to have, which was more of a large farm, export model, like we have. Entire states in the United States are corn fields, and we have lost, especially since the 1980's, tens of thousands of family farms.

The irony, and I just need to speak to the rural population of America, is that the irony is (sigh, pause) your great hero, Ronald Reagan, was greatly responsible for the loss of tens of thousands of family farms throughout the 1980's, and that the transition to corporate agriculture

during the 1980's and since, has been an incredible loss to the American rural way of life, and we need to start recognizing that.

I'm going to bring up Carrie but I want to just say also is that if you know of the organization the World Wildlife Fund. They are the one with the cute panda logo. Ten years ago in 2006 they did a study. They were looking for the nations in the world that could be called sustainable or close to sustainable. And so what they did is they took the United Nations "Human Development Index" (HDI) that showed life expectancy, infant mortality, education rate and basically said, 'Who in the world, what country in the world, their people are pretty well off in terms of human development, yet also perhaps have a low carbon footprint.' And when they put those two sets of data together, only one country in the world scored positive, according to the World Wildlife Fund-not a Communist front-in both of those, and that country was Cuba. So they declared Cuba, by their records, to be the only sustainable country in the world at that time...and now Carrie, who works very, very hard to create citizen participation here in the Harbor Area, is going to speak of her experience.

(Applause)

CARRIE SCOVILLE:

Good evening. My name is Carrie Scoville and I, too, have been to Cuba, twice. Once in 1988 and again in 2007 and the difference was striking, because in 1988 Cuba was able to obtain oil from the Soviet Union. After 1992 they were no longer able to, and they had to go off oil, and they had to become sustainable, as Rachel mentioned. They went to organic farming because fertilizers, by and large, are made with oil, with chemicals derived from petroleum products. They went to organic farming. They brought, they had to bring trained people out of their (work) fields and back to the farms to conduct agriculture, to be able to feed the nation. They couldn't import food, they had to sustain themselves.

And so I want to talk about that a little bit, because they had to go to fully rechargeable batteries, much sooner than we did. Solar power resources, much sooner than we did. They had to go through it all, much

sooner than we did. And they made it, and they sustained themselves. In spite of the Embargo. The Embargo was very, very difficult in Cuba. They had a lot of hunger during that time, during the Embargo, but they overcame it, they grew their own food. Now they have organic food, organic markets. In every community there's a farmers market along with recipes on how to cook this new organic food, which they didn't eat before and didn't know how to prepare. So there's a mass education program on how to prepare this food, and why it's good for you, and why it's good for the country.

Also, I had the privilege of being able to go to other countries with Cubans, and see how they are beloved throughout the world. The world loves the Cubans, and that's what we don't realize here in the United States. Why do they love the Cubans? Because the Cubans don't send drones. They send doctors. They send literacy brigades. They teach countries how to train their own people to teach people how to read, so people are literate. We could use that here! That's all I want to say, and thank you.

(APPLAUSE)

RACHEL BRUHNKE:

World Peace in a nutshell!...And lastly before we end the press conference I want to draw attention to another of the signs we have here is calling for the U.S. Military to leave Guantanamo. Guantanamo is known as a U.S. Military base, a terrorist prison by the American people, but what it is, is a harbor. And it's Cuba's second largest harbor and most important harbor, and it was taken over by us Americans, with our tax dollars, over 100 years ago, and they want it back. They have wanted it back ever since. So not only have we defiled it with our military base and our torture prison, but it is their harbor. So we ask you, in the Harbor Area to consider how if our entire Los Angeles Harbor were to be taken over by a hostile power for over a century, how would we feel? So we must have solidarity between our harbor areas and between our countries.

Please consider the words we have spoken here tonight, and again, we are asking for “Justice in our future relations with Cuba.” Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE)...

Viva Fidel