



Postal carrier delivers message of peace

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By **ELIZABETH A. PERRY**

Twinkling blue Irish eyes and a kind smile grace Kevin Cahalan's face when he greets his friends at Pax Christi meetings and Tau House Masses, where he and his wife, Chris, are fixtures.

He has survived two tours of duty as a Marine in Vietnam and was once jailed in Paraguay in a case of mistaken identity when he was executive director of Catholic Relief Services. He and his family eventually relocated back to the U.S. for a quieter life in Kenner, where Cahalan works as a mail carrier.

Now 58, Cahalan hasn't lost his youthful passion for social justice honed during a stint in the Peace Corps earlier in his life. Last month

he went with a delegation of Americans from the Southern states to be witness for peace in Colombia, a land hit hard by constant war, corruption and poverty.

Fighting between the paramilitary force and two guerilla forces has plunged the country into a constant state of war. Half of the country's 40 million people have been driven from their homes in the past six years.

"Everyone wants a negotiated peace between the government and the paramilitary," he said. "People believe it's possible, except for the fact that the U.S. is giving \$2 million a day to Colombia. Most of it goes to strengthen the Colombian military, which the U.S. recognizes has links to the paramilitary.



Kevin Cahalan delivers a message of peace
(Photo by Elizabeth A. Perry)

Every day there are 20 politically motivated murders in Colombia, perpetrated by the paramilitary.”

A native of Franklin Square, N.Y., Cahalan joined the Peace Corps out of college in 1964. His dream at the time was to continue studying for a graduate degree in social work, but he said few men were able to get into social work programs at the time because it was considered a “women’s profession.”

In the Peace Corps, he was trained to raise pigs and poultry at Oregon State University. He also spent some time as a garbage man on the Yakima (Wash.) Indian Reservation in. World travel came his way when he was sent to India for two years.

When Cahalan returned home, the U.S. was at war with Vietnam. Knowing he would be drafted anyway, he joined the Marines in order to be with the most professional group possible. He was sent to officers’ training school and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in 1967.

He arrived for his first tour of duty on Dec. 21, 1967 – his 25th birthday. He was platoon commander of his battalion when he was wounded in the attempt to cut off a North Vietnamese escape.

“We were at maximum range and the Vietnamese sent in mortar fire,” Cahalan said. “They killed 20 and wounded another 120 of us. I had shrapnel wounds in my backside, hand and neck. As I lay on the ground and felt the life seeping out of me, I thought of how sorry I was that I didn’t write home more often. I recovered, but I was afraid to write home because I didn’t want my family to worry about me.”

Cahalan reenlisted for another tour in Vietnam because he felt competent at what he was doing and because he was sure the U.S. would win. Then came the Tet Offensive, and Cahalan began to question the morality of U.S. involvement in the war.

Cahalan spent the six remaining months of his tour at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba as assistant director of planning. He was shocked to see the Cuban army training guns on its own people, who were attempting to seek asylum on the U.S. military base.

“In Colombia, Uruguay and Paraguay I’ve seen the same thing many times since,” he said. “Armies not trained against aggressors, but to keep their own populations docile.”

In 1971 Cahalan joined Catholic Relief Services and went to work in Honduras as assistant director. That is where he met his wife Chris, who was a volunteer for the Catholic Institute for International Relations, the British equivalent of the Peace Corps.

Cahalan was made director of CRS in 1973 and was responsible for starting homemakers' clubs and food for work projects using government surplus food commodities. The homemakers' clubs proved to be wildly successful.

"The idea began spreading and in three and a half years the women had organized themselves so well that a woman was elected mayor," he said. "The women would build access roads and start digging. Their husbands would be so embarrassed that they would take their wives' shovels away and start digging. This led the way to many of the couples becoming much more equal in their marriage partnerships."

Cahalan was transferred to Paraguay the following year, where he oversaw the CRS feeding program for a sixth of the entire population. He said the program was aligned with the ruling dictatorship instead of the church and was about maintaining the status quo.

"The program was gutted because it wasn't in the best interests of the people," he said. "The CRS programs weren't wanted, just the feeding program. Progress stopped. We were supposed to be witnesses of what was going on in the country and aligned with the church."

In 1975, Cahalan was arrested by the Paraguayan army while on a visit with a priest to a village. The soldiers mistook the priest for the local bishop they disliked, and they were both arrested. At the urging of the American embassy and the papal nuncio, Cahalan was released after spending a weekend in jail.

"After we were released people we worked with realized that we were there to be witnesses, and we got a type of respect we didn't have before," said Cahalan. "By the same token, we were observed individuals. It was more difficult to go to villages because we put them in danger, so we had to meet in the larger cities."

In 1977, Cahalan made it back to the U.S. and became assistant program director of the drug rehab facility at Odyssey House in New Orleans. Although his job involved advertising and fund-raising, Cahalan found himself enmeshed with the addicts who were in rehab and took it hard when some of them left without completing the program.

"I realized after a year and a half that if another person left, my heart would break," he said. "After having been in Vietnam and the Peace Corps, I was in a more delicate condition than many of the recovering addicts we were trying to help."

It was at this point that Cahalan knew the time had come to take a step back and reevaluate his life. He wanted to spend more time with his family, work in a less stressful occupation and have some free time to devote to social justice work. Cahalan chose the rather unorthodox career path from executive director to mail carrier.

“Everybody likes the mailman,” he said. “It gives me the opportunity to dedicate myself to other things, like Pax Christi. With CRS I thought I was doing such great work that I didn’t have to give of myself. This is different. Now I feel I have to contribute something of me, whether it’s lobbying for or against bills or writing letters to the Clarion Herald. It has restored me in so many ways. I give more time to my family.”

Since then Cahalan has made the journey to Fort Benning, Ga., for the annual protest against the School of the Americas (now called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation), and participates in many of Pax Christi’s protests outside the Federal Building.

In less than six years he will retire, but he doesn’t plan on sitting still for very long. He plans to go to Africa and take Chris with him.

“My dream is to go to Africa as a lay missionary and hold babies with AIDS,” he said. “Maybe I will raise pigs and poultry. By then it will be time to broaden my horizons.”

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