

“We’re not surviving; we’re living.”

Cristina Coronado

Cristina Coronado learned that she had breast cancer on September 17th, 2012. During the course of her treatment, she thought about starting a cancer support group in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico where she lives. That idea became an urgent need on July 20, 2013 when she met Cynthia Montoya at Clinic Guadalupana where she often volunteers. Cynthia had just arrived there after a desperate search for treatment for cervical cancer, that by that time had spread throughout her body. Before coming to the clinic, Cynthia’s mother-in-law, Martha, had taken her to all the hospitals in Juárez, but at every hospital she was told: “There’s no room for your daughter-in-law here.”

Although Clinic Guadalupana doesn’t provide cancer treatments, Martha was desperate enough to take Cynthia there after meeting a couple with a special needs child who told her about the clinic. When Cristina saw Cynthia she quickly recognized that the young woman was suffering from a disease she knew well. From that moment until Cynthia died twenty days later, Cristina and a group of her friends gave Cynthia the support the institutions had refused her. They took her to hospitals and clinics and appealed for monetary donations and other forms of assistance.

During the time that Cristina and her friends accompanied Cynthia, they learned about the difficult life she had endured. As a young teenager, she suffered sexual abuse and was abandoned by her mother. She self-medicated with drugs and

for a time lived in a shack without a roof. When she was sixteen, she met Martha's son, Carlos. They had their first son, Carlos Jr., when she was seventeen. Cynthia and Carlos lived with Martha who treated Cynthia – or “Chacha” as she called her-- like her own daughter. While pregnant with her second son, Cynthia learned that she had cervical cancer. Doctors recommended that she have an abortion, but Cynthia decided to continue the pregnancy. Her son Israel was born in the spring of 2013.

Despite successfully delivering a beautiful baby boy, Cynthia's cancer diagnosis marked the beginning of a tortuous journey. Like millions of Mexican women and men, she did not have resources to travel to a clinic in a city with radiation and chemotherapy. Shockingly, Ciudad Juárez has no cancer clinic or hospital with comprehensive services. The Mexican Social Security Institute (IMSS), does not have an oncology department and has very poor services for people with cancer. Also, one must qualify through specific employment to obtain help through IMSS. The Institute of Security and Social Services of State Workers (ISSSTE) only serves government workers and does not have an oncology unit. Cristina was fortunate to receive the treatment she needed only because she could afford to make the four-hour journey to Chihuahua City. Cynthia was not so lucky.

Cristina and friends who accompanied Cynthia during the last weeks of her life tried to restore to her the dignity that she had been deprived of by the medical system in Juárez. They wanted her to know that she had the right to be cared for and to be cared about. They recall that during her last days Cynthia laughed often, even through her pain and worry about her two young children. They say that their

journey with Cynthia was a privilege and a blessing that led them to important understandings that eventually resulted in the formation of Junt@s Vamos (Together We Move Forward).

The month following Cynthia's death, the five founding members of Junt@s Vamos searched for a place to meet and developed a mission statement which declares: "We are a group of people in remission from cancer and are volunteers who give integral support to people with few resources during and after cancer treatment. We attend to the psychological, spiritual, emotional, and nutritional needs of people with cancer. We stress prevention and early detection of cancer and promote the organized participation of the community."

Junt@s Vamos envisions a city and a nation where there are "no more Cynthias." Through Cynthia, the group's founders learned about the lacerating poverty that is the cause of most deaths from cancer in Juárez. A 2013 Colégio de la Frontera Norte study found that Juárez has 432,000 people living in poverty and 62,000 in extreme poverty, the total representing about 37% of the population.¹ According to the World Health Organization, mortality from female breast cancer has increased in Mexico from 3,433 deaths in 2000 to 4,803 deaths in 2009. Mortality has, however, decreased for cervical cancer due to a national prevention campaign.² Mexico ranks 34th out of 34 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries in mortality from cancer.³ The Panamerican Health Organization reported in 2013 that Mexico had no cancer policy, strategy, or

¹ http://diario.mx/Local/2013-04-12_30a84ffc/tiene-juarez-432-mil-pobres-y-62-mil-en-pobreza-extrema/.

² <http://www.who.int/bulletin/volumes/91/9/12-116699/en/>.

³ <http://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/Briefing-Note-MEXICO-2014.pdf>.

action plan.⁴

With no access to comprehensive cancer services in Juárez, poor people with cancer experience a slow form of violence affecting not only themselves, but their families and neighborhoods. For example, Cynthia's death led to a chain of events which resulted in Carlos confronting severe depression and battling thoughts of suicide. In October 2016, Carlos took his own life. The loss of both Cynthia and Carlos has left Martha as the sole support of her two grandchildren now ages seven and three and nine months. Fortunately, Martha is currently receiving various forms of holistic therapies that Junt@s Vamos provides. It's difficult to imagine how Martha could find the strength to continue on in life without the many forms of support that Junt@s Vamos provides.

Networks of accompaniment like Junt@s Vamos are not unique in Mexico. In fact, they are a major means through which women are able to deal with their fears and survive the violence, impunity, and economic crises that have come to characterize life in Mexico over the past few decades. In Ciudad Juárez alone several groups have formed around the shared realities and needs of women and their families. In the late 1990s, women whose daughters disappeared formed *Voces sin Eco* (Voices without an Echo), *Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa* (Bring our Daughters Home), and *Justicia para Nuestras Hijas* (Justice for Our Daughters). *Mujeres de Negro* (Women Dressed in Black), a network of women in Chihuahua demanding an end to feminicides, were an integral part of the "Ni Una Mas" movement that raised national and international attention to violence toward women in Mexico at a march

⁴ Mexico Cancer Profile PAHO 2013.

in Mexico City in 2002. In solidarity with these women's groups, during the 1990s and early 2000s, two U.S. border groups formed in solidarity with women and their families in Juárez and Chihuahua -- The Coalition Against Violence Toward Women and Families in El Paso, Texas and *Amigos de Las Mujeres de Juárez* (Friends of the Women of Juárez) in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

While cancer brings them together, the members of Junt@s Vamos use it as a vehicle to talk about other issues in which cancer is embedded. Group members stress that they are not "survivors" of a traumatic experience, but people living with a disease that is part of a larger struggle for social and economic justice. One can only imagine how it must feel to live in Juárez, a stone's throw from El Paso, and be able to see in the distance hospitals that provide cancer treatment to people of all socio-economic backgrounds. The members of Junt@s Vamos need no reminder that they can't deal with cancer without dealing with economic inequality and other pressing forms of structural violence, such as police brutality, gang violence, and the U.S. government's fortification of the border and xenophobic immigration policies. Junt@s Vamos has developed a strong critique of the social injustices rife in Mexican society and worldwide.

In group meetings and organizing, members of Junt@s Vamos stress the collective experience of cancer, providing an alternative to the dominant discourse surrounding the disease. They do not see cancer as it is often depicted - as an enemy that individuals must enter into battle with, one-on-one. Instead they view it as "something in the world," one of many challenges that they encounter -- and not alone, but in the company of others. Group members say that being a collective is

their strength. Through support, information, and assistance from one another, they learn to accept their disease while continuing to seek treatment and strategies of living with it. Group members say that each person walks a distinct path with cancer and that others must respect their way of walking that path.

At the same time as group members see their struggle as interwoven with other collective efforts to confront injustice in their city and nation, they value their group autonomy and are cautious of becoming a symbol of something that others seek to use for their own ends. For this reason, they have not taken steps to become a non-profit organization. Nor do they accept government funds. Nevertheless, group members have developed strong alliances with students and faculty at the Autonomous University of Juárez as well as Dr. Rocio Agauyo, the State Oncologist in Chihuahua. Junt@s Vamos receives its funds for outreach programs to poor colonias of Juárez and other programs from its members and donations received at the many fundraisers that they have held in Juárez and one in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

The Las Cruces fundraiser had its roots in a visit that we (Mary Alice Scott and Christine Eber) made to Junt@s Vamos on a Sunday afternoon in Juárez in the summer of 2015. After several hours listening to the group members recount their experiences with cancer and sharing some of our own with family members, we asked the group how we could help. They decided that we could help by writing an article telling the story of Junt@s Vamos and helping them in future fundraising efforts. At a subsequent meeting with Cristina in Las Cruces, we made plans for a fundraising dinner at Mary Alice's house. With donations of food from Junt@s Vamos and the Las Cruces community and monetary donations from those who

attended the dinner, enough funds were raised at the dinner to enable three members of Junt@s Vamos -- Cristina, Marisela, and Bertha -- to travel to Mexico City to obtain diagnostic screening to rule out recurrence of cancer.

Both Cristina's and Marisela's scans showed them to be free of cancer. Bertha's scan showed a lesion, but fortunately it had not yet developed into a tumor and could be treated with radiation. Bertha Alicia Ramírez is Rarámuri, an indigenous group from the Sierra in Chihuahua, many of whose members have migrated to Ciudad Juárez due to the extended drought in their region and the need to find employment. Bertha leads a Junt@s Vamos outreach program providing information about cancer for Rarámuri migrants in their native language. Bertha also creates artisanry based on traditional Rarámuri artistic traditions. Through Junt@s Vamos she intends to sell her handiwork and help others in the group to do the same.

Mainstream media in Mexico and the U.S. pay scarce attention to death from cancer in Juárez, a city that has become notorious for death by violent means. We hope that by bringing light to the story of cancer in Juárez we can expand awareness of the broader conditions of life in the U.S.-Mexico border region, where our fates are ever more tied in the global economy.

Mary Alice Scott is Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Affiliated Faculty in Public Health Sciences at New Mexico State University and adjunct research faculty at the Southern New Mexico Family Medicine Residency Program.

Christine Eber is Emerita Professor of Anthropology at New Mexico State University and founding member of Weaving for Justice.