



Oral History Interview of Fran Price (OH-007)

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Oral History Interview of Fran Price

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Interview Summary

Fran Price, a member of the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America (JPCOCA), discusses the formation of JPCOCA and its activism on Central American policy issues. She describes meetings and correspondence with Congressman Moakley; local action taken to bring community awareness to Jamaica Plain residents; interaction with refugees from El Salvador; United States Immigration policy in the eighties; and the role of Congressman Moakley and his aide Jim McGovern.

Subject Headings

Community organization

El Salvador History 1979-1992

Immigration policy and research

Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America

McGovern, James P., 1959-

Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001

Price, Fran

Refugees Legal status, laws, etc. El Salvador.

Social action



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This interview took place on Wednesday May 7, 2003, at the home of Fran Price.

Interview Transcript

FRANCIS WEYMOUTH: I'd like to begin with a couple of background questions. First of all, where were you born?

FRAN PRICE: I was born in New York.

WEYMOUTH: And did you grow up in New York?

PRICE: Yes.

WEYMOUTH: Did you go to school there?

PRICE: Mm-hmm.

WEYMOUTH: Any higher education?

PRICE: I went to the University of Rochester for undergraduate and the University of Pennsylvania for a master's degree in urban planning.

WEYMOUTH: And through your education, what finally got you interested in the situation in El Salvador?

PRICE: Well, I had spent a couple of years in Latin America working and traveling in the seventies, and so I had a great interest in Latin America in general. And having been in college in the Vietnam War days, I was very aware of the impact of U.S. foreign policy on other nations. And when, really, the internal war in El Salvador became more and more in the news, and in particular the U.S. role in that war became more publicized; for those two reasons I had a particular interest.

WEYMOUTH: Now a group of individuals wrote a letter in 1982. Actually nine people signed it, a group that you belonged to. What made your group finally decide to write a letter to Congressman Moakley?

PRICE: Well, I had moved to Jamaica Plain in 1981 and didn't know many people. And in the beginning of 1982 I noticed that there was a general information session—discussion—on Salvadoran politics at the local community school. And the guest was Mauricio Silva,¹ who I think had been part of the cabinet of the government which perhaps had—it was a very short-lived reform government. And when that government fell I think he came to Boston, perhaps MIT, to study. And it was a really interesting session

And afterwards one of the organizers, Ginny Zanger, invited people who were interested in pursuing this more to meet in her home in Jamaica Plain. And we met there in early 1982. And it was a group of people who were all, I think mature, in their probably in their thirties, maybe some in their forties; I would say mainly our thirties. Very busy, some had young children; others were very busy professionally. And together we all decided that there was an issue of really blatant injustice to which the U.S. was contributing. And the question was, what could we do as a group?

We made certain agreements beforehand that we only had limited time, and we shouldn't be guilty about what we couldn't do, and also that we were not going to be ideological. I think a lot of people remembered some of the struggles during the peace movement in the sixties and seventies around Vietnam. And there was an agreement that we were not going to prescribe what kind of government and what faction in El Salvador was the one that would be most important to govern or was the best to govern, but we were going to say, How could we stop our contribution to the violence and the injustice?

And so as a group we were trying to get a handle on how to influence U.S. policy. And the first step is through your congress people. At that time, Joe Moakley was very, very available to his

¹ Mauricio Silva was Undersecretary of Planning for a 1979 reform government in El Salvador.

constituency and I believe he was even having monthly or periodic meetings in the local post office on a Saturday morning. So the first thing we did during several months in which we were simply educating ourselves about the situation in El Salvador, reading a lot, discussing, we also started to get on line in the post office, and meet the representative and talk about our concerns about what was happening.

Before I think we were as aware, we were becoming aware of the refugee population in the Boston area. And of course Jamaica Plain was at that time a heavily Latino area, perhaps at that time mainly Cuban and Puerto Rican, and presumably Salvadoran as well. And when we invited a professional lobbyist who lived in the neighborhood and was a friend of some of ours to come in and talk to us about how we can best approach the congressmen, he said, "Well, Moakley is a bread-and-butter type of guy. He's a real constituency guy. He's not sophisticated in international politics; who knows if he's even been outside the country? But he's a real constituency guy. Is there a constituency service that you could interest him about?" And the obvious was the refugee population, that there were people within his district who are living in fear of their lives.

And so there are always illegal immigrants; that's always been an issue. But there was a heavy deportation at that point of Salvadorans who were going back to, in many cases, certain death. So in one way, the issue of refugees started out with us to be a handle on interesting Representative Moakley in what was happening in Central America. And amazingly so, not only did he take that up and really make it his but he took the next step and he really saw the bigger picture. So it was really quite an amazing transformation.

But that was the first meeting. And I in fact have here the article [attachment A] about that meeting and even the letter itself [attachment B]. It was really to introduce him to what was happening in his own district and the larger picture in El Salvador from our point of view.

WEYMOUTH: Now you said you met with a professional lobbyist and he advised you on using something that would interest Joe Moakley.

PRICE: Mm-hmm.

WEYMOUTH: He said the refugee—

PRICE: Well he didn't say that. What he basically said was, is there something about this war that could be seen as a constituency issue or could be seen as a bread-and-butter type of issue?

WEYMOUTH: Now when he made that comment to you, you guys go, Yes, refugees in Boston. Those will obviously affect Congressman Moakley; it's in his district. Had you already started meeting refugees, or at that point was it, Let's go out, let's find some people? Let's find out what's happening?

PRICE: I think at that point we knew about it more from the press. As I say, in 1984, the written press, the *Boston Globe*, the TV were showing images of refugees with ski masks on. No one wanted to give their actual identity but they were appearing in the press. They were being sheltered, often by churches, in church basements, in rectories, in the families of church members. And often, in fact, as a statement of civil disobedience, almost. But they had already become part of the public identification of the war. So it was in our mind but we hadn't really investigated it very much ourselves at that point, or until that point.

WEYMOUTH: Now when this letter was written, the group here met with Joe Moakley in January of 1982, I believe?

PRICE: Mm-hmm.

WEYMOUTH: Or 1983.

PRICE: Nineteen eighty-three.

WEYMOUTH: And were you at this meeting with them, or—?

PRICE: No, I wasn't at that meeting. I think we determined that it should be a small meeting; that the meeting should include church people and members of the Jamaica Plain Latino leadership, and a couple other people who were more active in organizing our group.

WEYMOUTH: Now after this meeting occurred, I'm assuming that your group got back together and discussed what actually occurred with Joe Moakley in this meeting itself?

PRICE: Sure, and I think that one of the important things that happened in that meeting is—and I wasn't there, but if I remember correctly—Joe picked up the phone. I don't know if he picked up the phone then, or said he would, to call his aide. And that was our first introduction to Jim McGovern,² and Jim started investigating the issue. So we certainly came back and discussed it. Let me see what else. (pauses) I'm just trying to remember what else happened here because the meeting was—and what date, do you have the meeting as?

WEYMOUTH: Well the letter [see attachment B] says that they would like to meet on January third.

PRICE: Of?

WEYMOUTH: It would have been 1983 because it was written in December.

PRICE: Okay. So I'm just looking at old notes that I have about what we had done. These notes were written in 1985, '84 perhaps, because as a result of this work, the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America [JPCOCA] became a model. And we were asked to do some training for other groups. And just looking, it seems to me that before that, we had done several public presentations, really trying to reach what we thought were the real Jamaica Plain folks.

The real Jamaica Plain folks at that time were mainly Irish Catholic, working-class people. And for instance, we had **Sister Jeanne Gallo** do a presentation of her experience in El Salvador and

² James P. McGovern (1959-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts' Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1997. He was a member of Moakley's congressional staff from 1982 to 1996. He worked extensively with Moakley on Salvadoran issues.

also talking about a film about the church where they had been massacred in El Salvador. And at that time we had some testimony by ordinary Salvadorans—some Salvadorans came. So I realized that we were certainly in touch with Salvadoran folks before that, who were refugees here.

And then we were invited to some celebration of the martyrs of 1932 by a group of Salvadoran refugees in Boston. So I should say that we did have a connection with some young people who were trying to organize in some cases. They weren't doing really political organizing as much as self-help and trying to get their story out.

And then I see that in December '82, before that meeting, we gathered about five hundred signatures on a Justice for All pledge petition that was a—I don't know if those were actually delivered in that meeting or not. I could just show you that; maybe I have a copy of that [attachment C]. But you can see it was helped.

By that time, Oxfam America was participating in this. Oxfam had never been political before. As a nonprofit it stayed very clear of politics, but what was happening in El Salvador was becoming so much more outrageous, that groups that were typically apolitical and that felt a risk to their existence of being political were becoming involved. So we had the five hundred signatures on this before we actually went to visit Representative Moakley.

WEYMOUTH: Now during these meetings you had speakers, you said Sister Jean Gallo, and El Salvadoran refugees. What were you hearing from them? What was going on in El Salvador?

PRICE: First let me just mention that right after meeting with Moakley, we had another one which was called Invisible Neighbors, where we had several on the church in El Salvador, the air war in El Salvador. The air war in El Salvador was presented by Jim Harney who is a former priest and a photojournalist. So there's that.

There were Invisible Neighbors, in their own words, "the experiences of Salvadoran refugees through children's work," immigration lawyers and church people who worked with the

Salvadorans and their representatives in the Salvadoran community. I mean, we were really hearing that in El Salvador there were certain professions, like being a teacher that made you automatically suspect. And any kind of profession or action, especially in small towns but in the capitol as well, that made you a potential agent for social change, be it a teacher, be it a priest, certainly union organizers, certainly anyone who complained about working conditions, were all at risk. There was the Salvadoran army but there were also many different death squads that were clearly supported by the army or the right-wing government, which the U.S. was supporting.

So things were very, very difficult. People were at risk; their families were at risk. People who came to the U.S. were concerned about seeking asylum because the asylum rate was so low at a time when coming from a communist country was almost automatically reason for asylum, but the ability of proving asylum was so low.

I think it was the Justice Department that had to act with the State Department. INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service], I believe, is part of the Justice Department but before the INS could make a finding of asylum, they had to have it investigated by the State Department. The State Department had this automatic response for Salvadoran refugees so most people never even got a real investigation. But people were afraid that if in fact it was investigated, then they were putting their families at risk in those countries. So what happened was— And we have all the documentation here, but if I remember— they were being advised not to seek asylum because there was no chance, but only if they got caught and then they were to seek asylum or lose their own safety.

And this was also a time when a new detention center was being built in Boston. And that detention center—it was an INS detention center which then became a focus of concern because it symbolized heightened activity by the INS to identify illegal immigrants, and most particularly Central Americans.

WEYMOUTH: Now for Salvadorans, you said that they were only advised to seek asylum if they were actually caught here illegally?

PRICE: I believe that. And I think that the article I gave you [attachment D], which was written in 1985, discusses it more. And I believe that the person who could best be of help on this, whose name I believe you have, is Maureen O’Sullivan, who worked a lot with the National Immigration—I’m trying to think of what her organization was, but it was identified in the article. I’m not sure if she advised them, but I think that people were basically warned that the rate was something like two or three percent of refugees actually got asylum compared to maybe one third of the people who went, and probably a much higher percentage of people from the Republic of China, or the Soviet Union at that time.

WEYMOUTH: And all this was brought to Joe Moakley’s attention in the meeting in 1983? You said during that meeting he made a phone call, or possibly right after that meeting he made a phone call to Jim McGovern?

PRICE: Mm-hmm.

WEYMOUTH: After all of this, was your group still in contact with Joe Moakley or in contact with Jim McGovern? How did your group keep an eye on the situation itself?

PRICE: One of the things that we were doing besides going to the post office, meeting in his office, and also doing street tables on Saturdays, putting out tables in the center of Jamaica Plain right by the post office—we were getting signatures on letters. I see one letter that we had [attachment E] which was probably one of the earlier ones, which is just saying that:

“I am writing to register my strong opinion that the United States should not be involved in the civil wars of Central America. In particular, no military aid or any other type of aid should be given to the repressive government of El Salvador. If we wish to promote democracy we must stop propping up dictatorships.”

So that was one that we have, and it’s not dated. But I can see that very soon after we have another one [attachment F] which says, among other things:

“I believe that the U.S. Congress must dedicate itself to granting extended voluntary departure status to Salvadoran and Guatemalan refugees until they can safely return home.”

And then I see another one [attachment G] which obviously came later, because by this time it was:

“Support the Moakley-DeConcini bill, with the HR-822 and Senate-377 numbers attached, to temporarily halt the deportation of Salvadorans living in the US”

Obviously, that came later. But after we met him we prepared these letters. I think we got about fifty to hundred letters. And at another point we actually lobbied his office again. And at the same time we were lobbying—I think maybe it was Tsongas.³ I’m not sure why it was Tsongas and not Kennedy’s⁴ office, but we were lobbying Tsongas, as well—Senator Tsongas.

But the interesting thing is, just looking through my pile I see how quickly Joe Moakley really picked up on this because I have a letter here that he wrote to me [attachment H], and probably to all the people who he had received these letters from, starting out:

“Knowing of your interest in the plight of Salvadoran refugees, I thought you might like to see the attached letter that I, along with eighty-seven of my colleagues, sent to the attorney general and the secretary of state, urging that expanded voluntary departure status be granted to these people.”

Now this was on May twenty-fourth. We had seen him—

WEYMOUTH: In January of the same year?

³ Paul E. Tsongas (1941-1997), a Democrat, represented Massachusetts’ Fifth Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1975 to 1979, then represented Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate from 1979 to 1995.

⁴ Edward Moore “Ted” Kennedy (1932-), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since 1962.

PRICE: And I'm reading that eighty-seven members signed on, so I thought that was very impressive. I should say, at one time, and I can't tell you at what point in this process it was; it was at the early point of the process. I was among a second group that went to visit him. And it was not a very directed visit. We wanted again to talk about our concern about what was happening in Central America. And soon it wasn't just El Salvador; it was Guatemala, it was, soon after, Nicaragua.

But I remember him saying to us, "You have to understand I have many constituencies I serve. And right after you, the Veterans of Foreign Wars is coming up." And at this time, I'm sure the Veterans of Foreign Wars was supporting the U.S. government against communism, as it was seen. And sure enough, as we were leaving, we got into the elevator as a contingent left. And so we were very aware that he was treading a very—that he was trying to balance a lot of different issues while he was also trying to educate himself about what was happening in Central America. So that was very telling.

Now, the other kinds of things we were doing was—obviously, **there were several marches on Washington at the time**. We were organizing busloads of people from Jamaica Plain as other groups were doing more citywide organizing. And we also started to support, for instance, Centro Presente, which was this wonderful group that was directly supporting Salvadorans. By that time we were working with Moakley on the legislation, the Moakley-DeConcini Act.⁵ So we were doing all this.

Then finally, I thought this was interesting: I found something which—the committee [JPCOCA] put an ad in the *Jamaica Plain Citizen* in December of '84 [attachment I]. And this

⁵ Starting in 1983, Congressman Moakley introduced legislation to protect Salvadorans in the U.S. using the "Extended Voluntary Departure" provision that allowed a temporary stay of deportation and work authorization. Moakley was finally able to pass legislation that granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadorans in the Immigration Act of 1990 (PL. 101-649). TPS grants temporary legal residency and work authorization to immigrants fleeing civil wars, natural disasters or other conditions in their home country for a set period of time. In El Salvador's case, TPS has been extended several times since 1990. The TPS designation has been used by other countries experiencing civil unrest and is administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). (See <http://www.uscis.gov>.)

was after—by this time the whole issue of the U.S. role in Central America—and I believe also that the refugee status was being made an issue in the state house. Senator [Jack] Backman from Brookline, I think, introduced some legislation. I just noticed that by going over that article again. And there was a referendum; it must have been as a part of the regular Boston vote because I think it happened in November, so I think it must have been part of whatever vote was happening in Boston in November of '84. And Jamaica Plain, seventy-two percent voted yes. And the vote was:

“Shall the Representative from this district be instructed to vote in favor of a resolution calling on Congress and the President to immediately withdraw all troops and military advisors from El Salvador and Honduras; stop all military aid to El Salvador and Honduras and Guatemala; and stop all aid to forces fighting to over-throw the government of Nicaragua? Funds now used for such purposes should be redirected to the domestic economy to create jobs and improve services.”

So this was a citywide referendum of which seventy-two percent in Jamaica Plain voted yes.

WEYMOUTH: Now you brought the issue to Joe Moakley. You also said you brought the issue to Senator Tsongas. What was his reaction?

PRICE: You know, I don't remember because this was really taken up by—

WEYMOUTH: By Congressman Moakley?

PRICE: And DeConcini is a senator, right? By the Senate. So I don't know that we—you know, I really don't remember how much we pursued this with Tsongas' office.

WEYMOUTH: Now in the early eighties, obviously President Reagan was elected, and he was a huge supporter of the government in El Salvador. How was that affecting what your group was attempting to do?

PRICE: Well, I think ultimately the kinds of policies that we were dealing with, be them the funding of military expenditures or this immigration policy, had to be taken up in Congress. Remember, unlike these days, that was a time when you had a conservative Republican president. Because in fact, the first really right—we'd had Republicans in the past but none, I think, quite like Reagan in this century, I believe. But we had a democratic Congress. So the possibilities of changes were through the Congress and not through the president.

WEYMOUTH: Now change does occur through the Congress. And I believe it was 1986, Moakley actually had his refugee plan attached to a bill that ended up getting put down. Was your group still involved at this time, or had you sort of dropped by the wayside, or did you follow it all the way to the end?

PRICE: I think what we did was, we were a group of volunteers doing really local organizing. And I think what happened was once Moakley— and others can tell you this in a little more— Anne Wheelock, for instance, I think might be someone who was a little more connected this period, to this. But when he really took this on, we then passed the mantle to a large extent to some of the both statewide and national organizing groups that were staffed. For instance, I believe that there was an active group in CPPAX [Citizens for Participation in Political Action], which is a liberal Massachusetts policy, political organizing group. And the other was the Friends. What do we call the Friends? Ah, it'll come back to me later.

And then probably the national immigration project that Maureen O'Sullivan was working on, I think was active—I don't know if it was actually a national group or not. Oh, the American Friends Service became very active in it. And so it became really much more of a national effort through the American Friends, through the national immigration groups. Also some of the other religious groups became actively involved. But because we were a volunteer group, we actually

moved on. We were by that time, I think, becoming a lot more involved in protesting the Contra war,⁶ in fact, at that time.

END OF SIDE A

WEYMOUTH: So did you bring the Contra war—I know that in this letter it’s not only El Salvador that’s mentioned; you have Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua—issues that you also brought up with Joe Moakley? Other congressmen or senators?

PRICE: Yeah, I’m sure we did. But my memory is that Joe Moakley was working mainly at that time on the immigration. But I think it was ironic in the end that the only way that it was passed was to make it broader. See, I think that this seemed like the immigration issue was a humanitarian issue when it was applied to Ethiopians, when it was applied to Afghans, when it was applied to Ugandans—which were, I think, the main beneficiaries at that time—it was a humanitarian issue. But when it was applied to Salvadorans and Guatemalans it became a political issue, because they were only at risk because we were supporting the violence in those countries.

What happened was that ultimately, I believe, it only passed by extending it to the Nicaraguans. The Nicaraguans who were coming here tended to be the more comfortable ones or the ones who were supporting the Right. And I’m not sure whether that was actually broadened after—well, it was broadened, obviously, during the time when the Sandanistas were in power, and the Sandanistas were on the Left. So the people who felt themselves marginalized and left the country were the Right, and so they were covered under that, too.

And so certainly all these things were happening. He was aware that those were the political compromises but I don’t remember, frankly, more direct—I think that by that time we might have seen that he was becoming educated. His aide, Jim McGovern, was becoming more and more sophisticated and was I think very actively organizing with him around Central America

⁶ Contras is a name given to the rebel groups that opposed Nicaragua’s Sandinista Junta of National Reconstruction, which was the socialist political party that took control of Nicaragua’s government following the 1979 overthrow of the corrupt Somoza regime.

issues. And we were just trying to be part of a more national movement; this is how I remember it, to be part of a more national movement.

At that time there were massive civil disobedience activities planned. And one time I think three to five hundred people were arrested in a sit-in after hours at the JFK Building—carted away in buses and buses and buses. So there were things happening all over the country and we were more oriented towards that. I think at that point we assumed we had Joe Moakley on our side, I believe, but that we were part of simply a national effort to raise consciousness.

WEYMOUTH: Now we had already talked about refugees staying in churches, and then protecting them from deportation. The Sanctuary Movement,⁷ which started in Tucson, moved out here. Did you guys actively participate in any of that or you were just aware of what was going on? Did you know any churches—I mean were any churches in this area actually participating in that?

PRICE: I don't think that there were churches in Jamaica Plain, for instance. There were certainly downtown Boston churches. I'm trying to remember if it was the Arlington Street Church, but one of the downtown churches, I believe, participated. But there were a number around. And certainly, when we did our presentations we brought people, not from the churches but people who were living in the community illegally, and who very bravely told their stories, even despite the fact that there was publicity about these presentations.

And then our group started interviewing refugees. I know that there was a young Salvadoran woman who—I don't remember her personal status but she worked in Hyde Square here for the Blessed Sacrament Church. And there were a number of Salvadorans that she put us in touch with. And she talked about her circumstances and those of other people she knew.

⁷ First started in 1981, the Sanctuary Movement was an inter-denominational effort by congregations and temples in the United States to provide social services and support to Central American refugees who were denied asylum by the U.S. government. The movement has recently been revived and is officially called the New Sanctuary Movement. (see <http://www.newsanctuarymovement.org>)

So we certainly made a lot of contacts with refugees, to the extent that while the bill was being promoted, we felt that the best way to bring out the story of the refugees was to write an article for the *Boston Globe*. At that time the husband of one of our active members was a stringer, I believe, or he'd done a number of *Globe* stories. And he gave us access. And he and I co-wrote an article that went into the *Boston Globe* of October 6, 1985 [attachment J].

And at that point our goal was to unmask the Salvadorans. It was really to say that the faces that our neighbors saw on TV and in newspapers with masks over them were the very people who were living next door and were their neighbors. And what we were trying to do was bring the war home, really give it a human face. Not that we included those faces in our article but we told many, many stories and described the lives of people who were living in the Boston area.

And so that was another way that we stayed active with the issue; with contributing to, at least getting the truth out about the Salvadoran community in Boston and their stories. And each of their stories is a story of the violence in the war and basically who it was directed to, which were very ordinary people living ordinary lives in a very extraordinary time.

WEYMOUTH: Then you're meeting all these refugees. Life as an illegal alien can't be easy either. And besides either participating in the Sanctuary Movement, where they were actually maybe staying in a church, where were the rest of these refugees living at?

PRICE: You know, the church—I'm not sure that people stayed in the churches that long. I think ultimately they were assisted, often by other Salvadorans or by the churches, to find jobs and find apartments.

There were cases in which you had five to ten often young men. There were certainly women and children who came but at this time, being a male in El Salvador was extremely dangerous. You were at risk of being drafted to fight for the Salvadoran army against people who were very much like yourself. Young boys were being drafted.

So a lot of people who came here really came overland through Central America and Mexico and got to Boston, which just seems like a very unfriendly climate for people from El Salvador, basically based on a contact or two. And when they came, they were often young men who lived five to ten in a small apartment, worked often in restaurants, certainly cleaning was another one. But working in restaurants washing dishes was a very familiar job. And they simply worked and sent money home.

There were some young people who came and tried to get an education. It was really astounding to talk to a couple of teachers at that time from—there were a couple teachers who were working with young people at Cambridge Rindge and Latin, who found themselves guardians to allow themselves to go to school. And I know that several years later, those young people were at college age. And the real question was could they go on to college, really, without status? And it became an issue at that time, but at this time it was before anyone would have thought of having the education.

So you had these young people coming. They were often from the countryside. There were some towns that kept on showing up. San Vicente, San Miguel, I think, kept on showing up as places where people came from who were in Boston. And there were certainly some middle-class Salvadorans. I remember there was one story of a young man whose mother was a social worker. And almost as protection for her and for the family, because being a social worker was seen as a subversive activity, she put her son into military school. And finally, when it was clear how he might be expected to fight and who he might be expected to fight, she left the country with her sons. But he was clearly very different. When I interviewed him, he was extremely different from some of the other young men who were from small villages.

WEYMOUTH: Different in that—?

PRICE: In terms of education, in terms of class. And in terms of his own longing for—I think he almost saw that his mother had made a mistake by putting him into military school, because here he was in the U.S., an illegal alien, while his—I believe he was illegal; I'd have to check that again. But the point was, he left the country instead of serving, having been in military

school. He was only fifteen. And his friends who were from his class in El Salvador were getting ready to go to college and pursue careers, and he was here really speaking Spanish. And actually he was in Boston by himself. So he was a fifteen-year-old; so he was, I believe, here alone.

WEYMOUTH: So it wasn't that he had a different ideology about what was going on in El Salvador, it was just that he had a different upbringing?

PRICE: His ideology was held very closely to his chest. I think he did not want to talk about his ideology. He was like many others, who really did not trust the people he was living with. He didn't know them, he didn't trust them, and he kept his politics to himself. And he just found himself in a totally different environment, mainly the uneducated, working-class Salvadorans, and dishwashing with them rather than pursuing his life in El Salvador in a more middle-class capacity. So there were certainly some middle-class Salvadorans who were here. But I think mainly they were very poor peasants, or not necessarily peasants, but the people who worked as teachers. But simple people, humble people.

WEYMOUTH: Now as far as refugees go, as Boston goes, were there only Salvadorans or were you getting people from Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua?

PRICE: I believe that the Salvadorans might have come first; I don't remember. And then after the Salvadoran community, more Guatemalans came because it was just the progression of the war, the timing of the wars in those countries. But I believe that the Salvadorans were here first or that the community was growing earlier than the Guatemalan community did. And the question in all these cases, they were earlier—there certainly were some people earlier from the sixties, seventies who came but those were just a handful, from those countries.

WEYMOUTH: Now as far as Joe Moakley goes, after everything had finally come to an end and he had gotten his legislation passed, what were your feelings either personally or as a group as to how Joe had handled the situation? I mean, it obviously took a long time. This letter, 1982—I think the legislation got passed in 1989 so you're talking about quite a span of time.

PRICE: Yeah. I think a lot of us had gone on to become more active, for instance, as I said, in organizing against the U.S. role in support of the Contras at that point. But I think we were thrilled. I mean, it wasn't just this; it was his whole understanding of what was happening there in El Salvador. And I'm trying to remember—there was another major issue, I think, which affected him and I'm trying to remember what year it was. But I think it was the massacre of the Jesuits—

WEYMOUTH: The six Jesuits?

PRICE: Yeah, and their housekeeper.

WEYMOUTH: I think that was in—I believe it was in '86. [sic—1989]⁸

PRICE: And remember, before this all started; for someone like Joe Moakley who had deep Catholic ties, there had also been Oscar Romero, the archbishop of El Salvador who was murdered while serving Mass.⁹ I think that was in 1980. So there was certainly this history. But still, he was not very sophisticated in foreign policy, but I think he became more and more so. And I think that massacre of the Jesuits even brought him more into it.

So in some way, I feel that our relationship at that time was growing with his aide, Jim McGovern. And I don't really remember anybody celebrating that achievement of that bill. By that time, I think the wars had calmed down a lot and in fact there was less of a flow of refugees. But on the other hand, I think that this pushing for that legislation was one of the things that affected the U.S. policy towards Central America. So even though it came at the late end of it, it certainly was one of the things that I think helped to politicize the Congress and educate the Congress about what was happening in Central America.

⁸ On November 16, 1989, six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper, and her daughter were murdered at the University of Central America in San Salvador.

⁹ Óscar Romero (1917-1980) served as a Roman Catholic priest and bishop of San Salvador before being appointed archbishop of San Salvador in 1977. Archbishop Romero is known for speaking out against human rights violations in El Salvador and supporting the country's poor and victims of its civil war. He was assassinated in 1980 while celebrating Mass in San Salvador.

But after that, I think we were less together as a group. We really weren't meeting as a group after—I think that the last thing I remember was the beginning of 1989. And by that time we were organizing fundraisers for a sister school in Nicaragua and I don't remember so much our relationship with him. But certainly as individuals we watched his whole political progression to the point where one of his last political acts was traveling to Cuba, and not the first time. So I think that we were just really amazed by the path that he took.

And at the same time, by that time we really thought that Jim McGovern was fabulous. Obviously, we could not have been as effective without Jim McGovern, his aide. And I don't think that Moakley would have perhaps taken on this without Jim's encouragement. And I think that they were two who learned so much from each other. So by the 1990s we were coming back together to support Jim McGovern and his own congressional base, including his first one which was not successful. So some reunions of this group were really to support Jim at that point.

WEYMOUTH: Now you said you had met Joe Moakley at a post office? Or you had just heard about the people going to the post office to meet him?

PRICE: Well I myself got in line one time to come. And I think it was a tiny post office at the time. Someone, it might have been one of the postal workers there, told me that it was maybe the most active post office in the country. It's dreadfully undersized for the amount of use and people. There's always a long line and especially on Saturdays, so it was certainly a place to meet people. And when you walk in, there is basically the room where everyone is waiting and a very compressed little snake to be attended. But everyone was pushed aside, and there was a long line going right back to the very tiny manager's office.

And I remember him sitting in that management office and just on the receiving line. And I just went up like everyone else and told him that I was just—this was at the very beginning—that I was just very, very concerned about what was happening in El Salvador and what the role of the U.S. government was. Of course, we had packed that line (laughter), so there were many, many

people delivering the same message. And he was just very gracious, but it was very early and he certainly wasn't committing to anything at that point.

WEYMOUTH: Now I've heard stories about these post office meetings where someone would bring something to Joe's attention. He would grab the phone, call whoever was in charge of that particular issue, and get things underway. Is that what happened at this, or was it that he listened, he'd thank you very much for your input—

PRICE: I think it was fairly early, and I think what he said was, "I've heard that a lot of your neighbors are concerned, as well." And that's what you wanted to hear him say. I think we were talking about something much broader; we weren't talking about the refugee issue. We were just talking about, I believe at that time, the violence against the people that the U.S. government was supporting. So I think he was just very gracious but acknowledged that he was hearing it from many people.

WEYMOUTH: Now you also said you met with Joe Moakley in a second meeting with the Jamaica Plain group. What was your impression of him as an individual? I mean, he obviously was very interested in what was going on. But not only with this issue but as constituents in general, meeting him, what sort of impression did you get from him as far as what kind of a person he was, and what he stood for?

PRICE: Well, I think he was very warm. He was a very warm person, and I thought he was very straightforward. He didn't promise us anything. I don't think that we were talking about the refugees there; I think we were talking about the larger issue. He didn't promise us anything. He said that he had a lot of constituencies to balance. So I think that we felt that he heard us. And we weren't sure really what to expect after that. But I guess it was good we were there.

END OF INTERVIEW

OH-007 Attachments

- Attachment A** February 3, 1983, *Jamaica Plain Citizen* article, “Residents Lobby Moakley About Central American Issues,” by Ann Wheelock
- Attachment B** December 13, 1982, letter from JPCOCA to Moakley
- Attachment C** Oxfam America Justice for All Campaign Pledge Sheet (n.d.)
- Attachment D** October 1985 *Peacework Magazine* article, “The Plight of Salvadoran Refugees in Boston,” by Sarah Beckford
- Attachment E** JPCOCA letter to members of Congress (n.d.)
- Attachment F** JPCOCA letter to members of Congress (n.d.)
- Attachment G** JPCOCA letter to members of Congress (n.d.)
- Attachment H** May 24, 1983, letter from Moakley to Fran Price (with accompanying April 28, 1983, letter from Moakley to the U.S. attorney general)
- Attachment I** December 13, 1984, *Jamaica Plain Citizen* advertisement placed by JPCOCA, “Thank you for voting yes for peace in Central America”
- Attachment J** October 6, 1985, *Boston Globe Magazine* article, “Invisible Neighbors,” by Fran Price and Mark Zanger