

The Miami Herald

Posted on Tue, May. 21, 2013

Fabiola Santiago: Damas de Blanco are true heroes

Fabiola Santiago

fsantiago@MiamiHerald.com



In this photo circulated on the Internet by Cuban dissidents, Sonia Garro, now in prison, is shown attending church with other Ladies in White after a beating by Cuban government agents.

Whether in the streets of Cuba, at international forums — or now in Miami before they return to the island — these brave women are a peaceful but powerful force to behold.

Las Damas de Blanco.

Ten long years ago they came together after the government crackdown on dissidents and independent journalists known as Black Spring, when 74 men and one woman were thrown in prison and handed long sentences.

The men were their husbands, fathers, sons and brothers. The Ladies in White became their voices on the outside.

To this day, despite beatings and detentions, in Havana and eastern Santiago de Cuba, they silently march together to church on Sundays wearing white and carrying gladioli to call the world's attention to the regime's repression and abuses.

"The love of family," the women say, united them and fueled a movement that despite the increasing repression, the brutal beatings by police and paramilitary thugs, the suspicious death of their founder, Laura Pollán, and the incarceration of members, is growing.

In temporary freedom in Miami — where as Belkis Cantillo, leader in Santiago de Cuba puts it, "we feel at home" — they tell their story with simple but effective words.

The Cuban regime's brutes — grown men with closed fists — beat them and drag them from the street into buses to keep them away from public view.

One of those men who hit and dragged her into a bus was a 26-year-old named Norberto.

Cantillo told him: "You really don't want to hit us, but you're doing it for the jaba," the bag of needed supplies with which the government rewards loyalty.

He lowered his head, Cantillo says.

Later, Norberto asked one of the two nurses the Cuban government has on hand — to make sure the women don't die from a public beating — how Cantillo was feeling.

Cantillo told him: "Isn't the real question here, how hungry are you?"

And so, the Damas carry on their work, spreading their message of peaceful change toward freedom and democracy.

Cantillo shared the stage Monday at the landmark Freedom Tower with María Labrado Pollán, daughter of the late founder of Las Damas de Blanco, and with Berta Soler, the group's current leader.

"Guardians of freedom," Miami Dade College President Eduardo Padrón called them.

Theirs are no small acts of heroism. Not when you consider that one of their members, Sonia Garro, has been imprisoned by the Cuban government since March 18, 2012. More than a year later, she hasn't been charged, nor has there been a trial.

What was her crime? Expressing her desire for an audience with Pope Benedict XVI, who made time to see both the Castro brothers but had no time for the church-going Ladies in White.

Garro and her husband, Ramón Muñoz González, were arrested as part of a massive sweep to keep dissidents away from the events surrounding the pope's trip to Cuba.

Human rights organizations have denounced that police raided her home, shot her with rubber bullets and took her away to Manto Negro women's prison, where she is being held with criminal and insane inmates. Her husband was sent to Combinado del Este, where he also remains without charges or trial.

Despite the lack of intervention on their behalf by Cardinal Jaime Ortega, these women express nothing but love of God and church, and mention generous parish priests who support them.

"We love Christ and we're not going to fight with the church," Soler says.

Theirs are no small acts of heroism when one takes into account that Laura Pollán was taken to the hospital by Soler to be treated for shortness of breath and a diabetic imbalance — and Pollán never made it out alive.

Labrado says that she was so sure her mother was going to recuperate that, when the hospital called and asked her to come, she took the time to make cafecito to share with the people who had been there all night.

"They thought that, without Laura, Las Damas were going to dissolve, to disappear, but instead we're growing and will continue to grow," Labrado says. "Laura Pollán lives through us, and we're not afraid because the freedom of Cuba is worth it."

When the history of 21st century women's movements is written, Las Damas de Blanco will merit an extensive chapter.

As they begin the return to their homeland, they deserve the world's vigilance, support, and protection.

© 2013 Miami Herald Media Company. All Rights Reserved.
<http://www.miamiherald.com>