

# AFTER 40 YEARS, JONESTOWN SURVIVOR STILL STRUGGLES WITH TRAGEDY'S LEGACY, LESSONS



CHARLIE NEUMAN

**Laura Johnston Kohl of San Marcos gives interviews and writes publicly about surviving the Jonestown massacre in 1978.**

BY JOHN WILKENS

Forty years later, even after the way it ended, there's a part of Laura Johnston Kohl that still misses Jonestown.

She's standing in the living room of her San Marcos home, holding a framed photo that usually hangs on a bedroom wall. It's an aerial shot of the compound where she and other followers of the Rev. Jim Jones had turned a jungle in Guyana into what they hoped would be a utopia of respect, justice and fulfillment.

"Look how much we accomplished in just two years," the retired 71-year-old schoolteacher said, pointing at the rows of dormitories and cottages. This is where more than 900 people lived.

And where they died.

It remains among the 20th century's signature horrors and one of the most chilling massacres in the history of reli-

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CHARLIE NEUMAN PHOTOS

Jonestown survivor Laura Johnston Kohl holds a large banner displaying passport photos of Peoples Temple members, many of whom died in the mass suicide.

## JONESTOWN • Speaker last week at remembrance in Oakland

FROM A1

gious movements. Men, women and children followed the orders of their messiah and drank cyanide-laced punch.

Kohl would have been among them if she hadn't been working with other Peoples Temple members 150 miles away in Georgetown, securing food and supplies for the group.

The photo of the compound held her attention for a few more seconds and then she set it down on a couch.

"I was a total zealot who did not see it coming," she said.

Now she's made it her mission to help others avoid that mistake.

She regularly gives talks at schools and libraries, urging people to think critically and pay attention to the hidden agendas of those in power.

She writes articles for a website, sponsored by San Diego State University, that's dedicated to the proposition that "the story of Jonestown did not start or end on 18 November 1978."

She's donated boxes of documents, photos and letters to a university in Indiana, the state where Jim Jones was born and raised.

Her willingness to "come out of the Peoples Temple closet" made her one of the featured speakers last Sunday at an annual Jonestown remembrance in Oakland, where the remains of more than 400 unidentified and unclaimed victims are buried.

She talked about her long journey to embrace the messiness of her story — how her time in Peoples Temple was one of the highlights of her life, and also the source of her deepest sorrows.

"I thought that I was making the commitment to building a different world, based on principles I believed in — equality, dignity for all, integrity," she said. "I was foolish and naive."

She used to be angry, but not anymore.

"My existence in and survival from Jonestown and Peoples Temple is part of my core," she said. "I somehow survived. I can't waste my life now, even 40 years later."

### Drawing her in

As an atheist, Kohl wasn't drawn to Peoples Temple for the religion. She went for the civil rights.

She grew up near Washington, D.C., where her politically active, single mother often hosted activists in town for protests and rallies.

In college, in Connecticut, she studied philosophy and was involved with campus groups that pushed 1960s progressive causes, including the fight against racism.

Tired of the East Coast college life, she dropped out and moved in early 1970 to San Francisco. She was 22. Before long, she'd heard about Jones and his church north of the city.

She found a diverse group of people — young and old, rich and poor, black and white, college-educated and illiterate — dedicated to a more-just society and pursuing it with boots-on-the-ground charity: convalescent homes, drug rehabilitation, foster care.

She wanted in.

Religious scholars have spent decades studying and writing about Jones, and if there's one thing many of them agree on, it's that he had a gift for reading people. Many can artists do.

"He told you what you wanted to hear," Kohl said.

In her case, he dropped the names of civil rights leaders who were heroes of hers — Cesar Chavez, Angela Davis, Dennis Banks. Here, she thought, was someone who could give voice to her activism.



Kohl says her time with Peoples Temple was one of the highlights of her life, and also the source of her deepest sorrows.

While working a day job for the state welfare department, Kohl also became more and more involved with the temple. She was part of Jones' planning committee and drove buses on cross-country recruiting trips.

When Jones took the group to Guyana to "create heaven on earth," Kohl followed, arriving in 1977. She worked in Georgetown and lived in a house the temple owned there. She bought food, equipment and other supplies. She helped with the paperwork of new arrivals.

She loved it there, loved the people and the culture, but after she violated a temple rule, she was ordered to the compound. Jones scolded her in front of the group. She was put on a work crew before he sent her back to Georgetown, in October 1978 — one month before the massacre.

When she looks back on it now, she sees all the "red flags" that should have told her Jones was losing his grip on sanity, she said. How he stifled dissent. How so much of what he did was about control, not teaching.

But she didn't see it then. "I would have done it (taken the poison), too," she said. "That was my family."

She also became a Quaker, which she credits with helping to give her the space and the silence necessary to work through her thoughts and emotions, to get past what she jokingly calls PTSD.

— Post Temple Stress Disorder.

In 1990, feeling like her life was more in order, she attended the 20th anniversary remembrance of the mass killings in Oakland. She re-connected with other survivors.

"That is when my healing really began," she said.

She began giving interviews to journalists and documentary film-



One of the Peoples Temple medallions that were traded with local residents for food and other things.

finding it a comfortable place to talk about Jonestown. She met her husband, Ron, and they had a son, Raul.

In 1990, with Synanon's legal and tax troubles mounting, her family left. "I was ready to be an adult," she said.

Kohl went back to college and finished her bachelor's degree. She got a teaching credential and settled into a 25-year career that eventually brought her to the North County, where she specialized in sixth grade. Earlier this year, she retired.

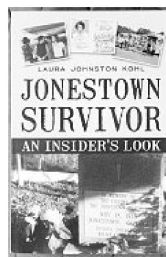
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The memoir self-published by Kohl in 2010. She joined Peoples Temple in the early 1970s and was among the roughly 90 survivors.

makers, excavating her Jonestown story from underneath two decades of guilt and sorrow.

### 'You don't look crazy'

Along the way, she grew accustomed to people coming up after hearing her speak and giving her what they probably thought was a compliment. "You don't look crazy," they said, a bit confused that she didn't fit into the public image of mindless zombies following their maniacal Moses to a deadly promised land.

"My job as a survivor is to continue the conversation, to continue the search for understanding, and to teach that those who died in the tragedy were some of the best people I could ever hope to meet in my life," Kohl wrote in one of her articles. "Jim Jones was only one of 918."

In 2010, she self-published a memoir about her experience, "Jonestown Survivor: An Insider's Look."

"I speak only for myself," she wrote in the introduction. "My reflections about and understanding of my experiences continue to evolve."

### Return to Jonestown

She was never going to go back. In her mind, there was no way to separate Guyana from what had happened at Jonestown, and all that death still felt too fresh, too horrible.

About six years ago, though, she began thinking it might be a good idea. And in March she went, flying into Georgetown with her family, a few friends, and Jordan Vilchez, another survivor.

They went the next morning to what is left of Jonestown. The original sign marking the compound is long gone.

The road is overgrown and unrecognizable. Kohl's group followed guides along a narrow, slippery path until they came to what used to be the pavilion.

In a clearing there is a large tombstone, dedicated to "the victims of the Jonestown tragedy."

While the other visitors went off to see what else might be nearby, Kohl stayed by the tombstone. It felt to her like a reunion — a reunion of her past self and her present one.

"The day everything happened, when my friends and adopted family died, and my dreams were shattered, I split in half," she would later write. "Part of me died that November day, the part that was optimistic, cheerful, hopeful, determined and fulfilled. That day, my sense of humor and my sense of well-being were sucked out of me."

"It took many years to allow them back in."

A month later, back in San Marcos, she noticed lumps on her arm and went to the doctor. The diagnosis was soft tissue sarcoma, the prescription radiation and then chemotherapy.

As last Sunday's Jonestown remembrance approached, Kohl worried that her cancer treatment might keep her from Oakland. She asked her doctor if it was OK to go.

"Live your life," he told her.

She is, she said. After 40 years, she is.

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