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

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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Laura Johnston Kohl of San Marcos gives interviews and writes publicly about surviving the Jonestown massacre in 1978.
Jonestown survivor Laura Johnston Kohl holds a large banner displaying passport photos of Peoples Temple members, many of whom died in the mass suicide.

JENSI TOWN • Speaker last week at remembrance in Oakland

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Kohl would have been among them if he hadn't been working with other Peoples Temple members. He drove to the town in a few days after the mass suicide, leaving his family behind.

“Once a total zealot who did not see the meaning,” he said.

Now he makes it his 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 November 15.”

She's donated boxes of documents, photos and letters to a university in Oakland.

Dawn Wilbur, a survivor of the Peoples Temple mass suicide, made her one of the featured speakers. Kohl last year 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 and the milestones of her story — how she met Peoples Temple was one of the highlights of her life, and also the source of her deepest sorrows.

“I thought that I was making a commitment to building a new world, based on principles of equality, honesty and dignity that was not possible,” she said. “I was being led to see myself and to be something more than I ever was.”

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