

Virginia “Ginny” Bouvier: An Indefatigable Voice for Peace and Inclusion

by **Adam Isacson**, *Director for Defense Oversight, Washington Office on Latin America*

Virginia Marie Bouvier, known universally as Ginny, passed on July 29, 2017, at Georgetown University Hospital in Washington, DC, where she lived and worked. The cause was complications from salmonella, typhoid, and lupus. She was 58.

Ginny contracted her illness while doing what she loved. In April 2017, in her role as Senior Advisor for Peace Processes at the US Institute of Peace (USIP), an autonomous US government conflict-resolution agency, she was on one of countless visits to Colombia. She was visiting rural areas accompanying grassroots groups, including women and victims, who had organized to bring an end to the country’s decades-long armed conflict.

Just months before, that conflict had taken a giant step toward ending, with the signing and ratification of a peace accord with Colombia’s largest guerrilla group, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Ginny’s tragic loss cut short a great deal of ongoing work to consolidate that accord, and to ensure that its implementation would include—and benefit—historically excluded victims, women, campesinos, ethnic groups, LGBT communities, and others who were only starting to find space to organize.

Ginny was born in 1958 and raised in a middle-class family near New Haven, Connecticut. (She didn’t mention it often, but she was a distant relative of Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy Onassis.) She attended Wellesley College from 1976 to 1980. Unlike most undergraduates, she started out with a strong sense of what she wanted to do with her life: she was the first Wellesley student to major in Latin American studies. At a time when most of the region was under the yoke of brutal military dictatorships, she joined the local Amnesty International chapter. She participated in a liberation theology study group.

From there, she went to the University of South Carolina, where she would earn an MA in Spanish, focusing on literature and culture.

It was during that period, in 1982, that Ginny would join the Washington Office on Latin America, a nongovernmental organization founded in 1974 to promote a human rights-respecting US foreign policy toward the region. She began as an intern and soon rose to be a senior associate focused on Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, and Uruguay—all of which were ruled by military dictators at the time. Joe Eldridge, WOLA’s cofounder and then director, said in USIP’s commemoration that “when she first walked into the office, it became immediately apparent that she would be a fierce champion for democracy and human rights. . . . She was relentless in her pursuit of a more gentle and a kinder world.”¹

She would work at WOLA until 1989, accompanying dissidents, human rights advocates, and relatives of the disappeared. Her work on Bolivia made her one of the first to warn about the human rights dangers inherent to the military-heavy “war on drugs” model. Her WOLA tenure is perhaps most remembered for her dogged advocacy of an end to General Alfredo Stroessner’s dictatorship in Paraguay. Colleagues who knew her then say—only partially in jest—that Ginny was instrumental to the general’s 1989 downfall. Her 1988 WOLA report “Decline of a Dictator: Paraguay at a Crossroads” is a touchstone document, “critical to the downfall of the longest standing Latin American dictatorship,” according to WOLA’s reflection on her life and career.²

In 1989, Ginny left WOLA to pursue a doctorate in Latin American studies at the University of California at Berkeley, which she earned in 1995. She specialized in Spanish American literature,

Brazilian literature, gender studies, anthropology, and Latin American history, including the history of the US Southwest. In 2001 the University of Arizona Press would publish her doctoral work as *Women and the Conquest of California, 1542-1840: Codes of Silence*.

While at Berkeley, she met and married her husband, James Lyons. They would have a daughter, Maya, and move to the Washington, DC, area, where Ginny taught for seven years at the University of Maryland as an assistant professor of Latin American literature and culture.

Ginny arrived in early 2003 at USIP, an agency that by then maintained a rather small Latin America portfolio. She “quickly established herself as the institute’s resident expert on Latin America,” the Institute notes. She dove into work on Colombia, the only country in the region with an active armed conflict. In 2006 she would come to head USIP’s Colombia team.

The year 2003 was an especially grim time to advocate peace in Colombia. A four-year peace process with the FARC had just collapsed. Colombian public opinion was strongly behind a new president who promised all-out war against the guerrillas. Human rights abuses and every measure of victimization were at or near historic highs. Colombia was among the world’s top five recipients of US military assistance, and the Bush administration was increasing its appropriations.

Still, Ginny was determined and optimistic—so much that in 2005, as the war raged with few prospects for peace in sight, she gathered an unusual combination of scholars and activists to discuss their work and to contribute to a volume highlighting paths to peace. The resulting book, *Colombia: Building Peace in a Time of War* (USIP, 2009), is one of a vanishingly small number of resources in English about Colombia’s conflict and the efforts—especially at the local level—to end it. Published later in Spanish, *Building Peace* is a staple of university courses on both Colombia and conflict resolution worldwide.

During the armed conflict’s most intense period, many in the Colombian and international peace and human rights communities focused their work on denouncing abuses and corruption, criticizing US policy, and telling heartbreaking accounts of terrorized populations. While this was important work, Ginny focused elsewhere. She sought pockets of hope and inspiration, of people and organizations trying to carve out space and promote peaceful outcomes, to have their voices heard and their rights recognized, and to improve conditions for their communities. She worked with human rights lawyers, victims’ organizations, youth groups, and indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities; with women trying to give their sisters a greater voice; with researchers trying to identify windows of opportunity and more inclusive, democratic approaches.

Such civil-society conflict-resolution and democratization “*procesos*” exist all over Colombia, but they are fragile. They need accompaniment, solidarity, advice, and financial support. And Ginny was there for them. USIP was a great place for her to be because it allowed her to put to maximum use one of her most impressive qualities: the ability to bring together people who would otherwise never meet—thus multiplying the effectiveness of each other’s work, to create networks where none exist, and to seek out new voices. Ginny used her position to raise the profile of those who were too “new” or outsider, too unconventional, or too grassroots to normally have a say in mainstream, elite discussions of how Colombia could emerge from its nightmare. She was always seeking out foci of innovation, creativity, and energy, often in places where nobody else was looking.

“Social change continues to demand the capacity for critical thinking, research, and analysis; strong communications and leadership skills; the ability to engage in active listening; and the capacity for teamwork,” she told a graduating class at William and Mary in 2010.³ Following her own advice, Ginny carried out her work with peace and conflict-resolution advocates all over Colombia, usually outside Bogotá, with limitless patience for often slow-moving *procesos* and an unparalleled capacity for active listening.

She was especially inspired by grassroots women's organizations. "In the absence of peace talks," she wrote in 2016, local women's groups "worked quietly in the regions to address the growing violence, and they organized regional and massive national marches to keep their demands for peace in the public eye."⁴

"She trained female mediators, religious organizations, Afro-Colombian ethnic groups, displaced homeowners, agricultural workers, landowners and business executives in methods to work for and support peaceful resolutions of conflict," the *Washington Post* noted.⁵ Her accompaniment and USIP grant-making fostered numerous organizations throughout Colombia. Some prominent examples included:

- A network of women mediators working to reduce local tensions in a dozen regions around Colombia
- A national network, the Ruta Pacífica de la Mujer, and local initiatives like the Women's Association of Eastern Antioquia, which negotiated local ceasefires during the worst years of the fighting
- An Ecumenical Group of Women Peacebuilders organizing former adversaries for local-level reconciliation
- The Women's Initiative for Peace and the 1325 Coalition, working to get women to play a greater role in formal negotiations and channeling demands from women's organizations
- The Weavers of Mampuján, victims of a 2002 paramilitary massacre who have used art, especially weaving vivid quilts, to tell their story and to reconcile
- The Fundación Mi Sangre, founded by the musician Juanes to promote art projects established by at-risk youth in Medellín's marginalized neighborhoods
- The government's Historical Memory Commission, where she served on an international advisory committee, an autonomous group of scholars working to tell the story of what actually happened in the conflict, giving primacy to victims' accounts.

Throughout Colombia's armed-conflict years, Ginny used her position at USIP to convene policymaker audiences as well. She hosted countless fora and panel discussions in Washington, on Capitol Hill, in Bogotá, and at universities. She maintained a heavy public-speaking schedule as a much sought-after explainer of Colombia's conflict and efforts to end it, peppering her analysis with personal anecdotes and on-the-ground examples.

Ever the optimist—and always curious about new ways to communicate—Ginny started a blog, *Colombia Calls*, in late July 2012, a month before we would all learn that the government and FARC had been secretly negotiating an agenda for formal talks, which would begin in November in Havana, Cuba.⁶ The very first post, "Approaching a Tipping Point in Colombia?" is almost eerily prescient. It starts: "Occasionally, and I believe this is such a time, one is privileged to stand before a moment of potential change. It is the moment when the repeated striking of the flint produces a spark. Eventually, the spark flickers, catches hold, and bursts into flame. . . . Here in Colombia, where I arrived last night, I am seeing the spark. Colombians across the country, who have been demanding peace for years, are now seeking to exercise this constitutionally-sanctioned right to live in peace."⁷

Ginny posted often to *Colombia Calls* throughout the peace process, until the moment she fell ill. The blog stands today as a remarkable, thorough, essential document of the FARC negotiations and other efforts to end Colombia's violence. It is a rich record of a scholar-insider's work and reflections, recorded as events were unfolding.

The peace process expanded Ginny's job into an unusual hybrid of rigorous academic research and active participation in the dialogues. Her colleagues in Washington saw less of her as she spent extended periods in Colombia and Havana.

Ginny was seconded to the United Nations Standby Team of Mediation Experts in 2012-2013, where, she said, "I wrote policy papers and gave briefings and trainings addressing a variety of design challenges

for peace processes, mediation and facilitation, and provided guidance to senior diplomats and special envoys.”⁸

The FARC talks were occurring behind closed doors between top government officials and top guerrilla chieftains. Ginny was a leading, outspoken advocate of a greater role for civil society in the process. “Research has shown that engaging civil society in peace talks produces better results,” she reminded us in one of her last essays, and she promoted visits of conflict victims to the negotiating table and transformative civil-society dialogues and interaction throughout Colombia.⁹

Ginny especially helped to foster the role of Colombian women in the peace process. “With women as a separate sector excluded at the start, Ginny encouraged, funded and supported Colombian women’s persistent efforts to be heard at the peace table in Havana,” wrote Latin America Working Group Director Lisa Haugaard, “not just as individual victims but as women, with distinct and invaluable perspectives.”¹⁰

Ginny was a major force behind a National Summit of Women for Peace held in Bogotá in October 2013. The event convened 450 representatives of women’s organizations from 30 of Colombia’s 32 departments. As Ginny described it in a 2016 USIP/ UN Women study, participants “put forth three key demands: that the parties stay at the table until an agreement is reached; that women be included at the peace table and at every stage of the process; and that women’s needs, interests, and experiences of conflict be considered during the talks.”¹¹ The role of women in the dialogues increased notably after the Summit.

After four years of intense but usually disciplined negotiations, the FARC and government arrived at a final accord in August 2016. Ginny Bouvier was among very few foreign nongovernmental guests invited to attend the signing ceremony in Cartagena.

Ginny’s contributions are missed in other fora. In addition to her USIP work, she was a consultant and research director for the Women’s Leadership Conference of the Americas, a joint project of the

Inter-American Dialogue and the International Center for Research on Women. She consulted for USAID, UN Women, the World Bank, the Levi Strauss Foundation, and the C.S. Fund, and in 2016 she somehow found time to teach a Georgetown graduate course called “Comparative Peace Processes in Latin America.”

Ginny suffered health complications later in life. She privately battled lupus, which weakened her immune system and made her susceptible to the infection she contracted while traveling in Colombia. That she persisted through these challenges, insisting on maintaining a heavy travel schedule and work on another book, inspires those of us who hope to keep carrying on what Ginny built, in Colombia and elsewhere.

Her death fell heavily on hundreds whose lives she touched in the United States and Colombia. Colleagues and friends held memorial services and remembrances throughout Colombia and at least three in Washington. Rep. Jim McGovern (D-Massachusetts), the most dedicated Colombia peace advocate in the US Congress, spoke about Ginny on the floor of the US House of Representatives the day before she died: “I have known Ginny for over 30 years. She is a powerful voice for peace and a strong, loving, generous spirit. I have seen her create the conditions, open up the spaces so that peace may take hold even during violent conflict. Around the world, but especially in Colombia, she has brought together people from different points of view, different walks of life, the powerful and the marginalized. She has worked alongside them to find common ground and common purpose in building peace.”¹²

“She was one of those people who was not known to the general public,” wrote former Colombian high commissioner for peace Daniel García-Peña in the daily *El Espectador*, “but whose committed, discreet, and persistent work for peace in Colombia has been and continues to be key to the success of peace in Colombia.”¹³

Ginny Bouvier has left behind a great deal of written work, including an archive that was on its way to becoming an essential volume for understanding civil society’s role in achieving and

implementing a peace accord. She has also left behind a great deal of human capacity and energy in Colombia, in the United States, and elsewhere. This lives on in the efforts of dozens of organizations and hundreds of individuals, from the grassroots to the highest levels of government, who inspired her and continue to be inspired by her.

Notes

- ¹ "In Memoriam: Virginia M. 'Ginny' Bouvier," United States Institute of Peace, July 31, 2017, <https://www.usip.org/press/2017/07/memoriam-virginia-m-ginny-bouvier>.
- ² "WOLA's Tribute to Virginia Bouvier," July 31, 2017, <https://www.wola.org/2017/07/wolas-tribute-virginia-bouvier/>.
- ³ "IR/GS 2010 Commencement remarks from Dr. Virginia Bouvier," July 10, 2010, William and Mary, <https://www.wm.edu/as/globalstudies/news/irgs-commencement-remarks-from-dr.-virginia-bouvier.php>.
- ⁴ Virginia M. Bouvier, "Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Process" (New York: UN Women, March 4, 2016), <https://www.wm.edu/as/globalstudies/news/irgs-commencement-remarks-from-dr.-virginia-bouvier.php>.
- ⁵ Bart Barnes, "Virginia Bouvier, Who Worked for Peace in Colombia, Dies at 58," *Washington Post*, August 9, 2017, <https://www.wm.edu/as/globalstudies/news/irgs-commencement-remarks-from-dr.-virginia-bouvier.php>.
- ⁶ *Colombia Calls*, <https://vbouvier.wordpress.com>.
- ⁷ Virginia Bouvier, "Approaching a Tipping Point in Colombia?," *Colombia Calls* (blog), July 28, 2012, <https://vbouvier.wordpress.com/2012/07/28/approaching-a-tipping-point-in-colombia/>
- ⁸ Virginia Bouvier, LinkedIn, https://www.linkedin.com/in/ginnybouvier/?locale=de_DE.
- ⁹ Virginia M. Bouvier, "Colombia Peace Talks Open with Second Rebel Group," February 6, 2017, United States Institute of Peace blog, <https://www.usip.org/blog/2017/02/colombia-peace-talks-open-second-rebel-group>.
- ¹⁰ Lisa Haugaard, "Ginny Bouvier, a Force for Peace," Latin America Working Group, August 28, 2017, <http://lawg.org/action-center/lawg-blog/69-general/1893-ginny-bouvier-a-force-for-peace>.
- ¹¹ Bouvier, "Gender and the Role of Women in Colombia's Peace Process."
- ¹² Cong. Rec. H6561, July 28, 2017 (statement of Mr. McGovern), <https://www.congress.gov/crec/2017/07/28/CREC-2017-07-28-pt1-PgH6561.pdf>.
- ¹³ Daniel García-Peña, "Ginny," *El Espectador*, July 31, 2017, <https://www.elespectador.com/opinion/ginny-columna-705889>. //