First Place:
Sandi Dolbee
*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

Second Place:
Bruce Nolan
*The Times Picayune*

Third Place:
Darren Barbee
*Fort Worth Star-Telegram*
They were two American daughters who went to the Middle East believing their presence could make a difference, and instead became young casualties of a conflict that is much too old.

Marla Bennett was 24 when, on July 31, 2002, a terrorist’s bomb exploded in the cafeteria at Hebrew University in Jerusalem, where she was working toward her master’s degree in Judaic studies.

Rachel Corrie was 23 when, on March 16, she was run over by an Israeli bulldozer in the southern Gaza Strip town of Rafah. Rachel, who had gone as a pro-Palestinian peace activist, was trying to stop the bulldozer from demolishing a house.

Both were college students who liked political science and collected food for the needy. They were natives of the West Coast; Marla was from San Diego and Rachel grew up in Olympia, the capital of Washington. Both were raised in middle-class families by parents who loved them very much.

This could be a tale of these two families, the mothers and fathers who lost children in a place we call the Holy Land. A story of how the San Diego community will gather tomorrow night in commemoration of Marla’s life, to mourn her passing a year ago and collect money for a fund in her name. And a story of how another community mourns Rachel’s death, seeking justice from afar and creating memorials in her honor.

But it’s not that simple. Comparing Marla and Rachel opens a Pandora’s box bursting with hostility and disagreement.

The violence is half a world away, but the tensions here are nearly as raw and complex as they are over there. And if their lives were similar, their deaths may be a symbol of the deep and complex divisions that continue in a region of the world that is as volatile as it is ancient.

Linking the two women, even in a story, “is outrageous,” says Yuval Rotem, Israel’s consul general in Los Angeles.

Marla’s death was clearly the result of terrorism, but Rachel’s death remains a matter of debate. The Israeli government contends that it was a regrettable accident, while others argue that the act was deliberate—that she was a human shield who got in the way of that country’s controversial policy of demolishing homes linked to terrorism or to the families of terrorists.

“Marla Bennett came to Israel with no political agenda, came to be a student, and she was killed because there is a cult of death in the Middle East that wants to kill innocent civilians without any discrimination,” Rotem says. Rachel, he adds, was “someone who deliberately pursued a political agenda.”

After Rachel was killed, an Israeli representative telephoned her family to offer his condolences for what that government insists was a tragic accident. The man told the family that while he did not agree with Rachel’s politics, he admired her courage. Her father remembers how her older brother bridled.

“He said, ‘Sir, I don’t think you knew my sister and didn’t understand her politics,’ ” Craig Corrie recalls. “She was for all people.”

At their apartment in Charlotte, N.C., Rachel’s mother brushes a hand over the emblem pinned to her jumper, a pair of Israeli and Palestinian flags unfurled side by side.

“I think we just have to work for understanding,” Cindy Corrie says softly, as if the words are a prayer.

“People ask me, ‘Why was she there?’ “ Craig Corrie says. “Why aren’t we all there?”

He says his daughter had slept as a guest in the house she was trying to defend, sharing a pool of blankets with the children. “She would have had to do everything she could to stop it.”

His voice breaks with a sob. His wife hugs herself tightly. “I think Rachel believed that the people would stop,” he says.

Rachel grew up in the family house overlooking Mud Bay, just outside Olympia. She remained there, working and going to Evergreen State College after her parents moved so her father could take a new job at another insurance company.

Her parents were shocked when she told them she was planning to take a break and leave for Gaza in January with a pro-Palestinian activist group called the International Solidarity Movement. But they knew better than to try to dissuade her.
“She was always searching for where to put her energy and where to find the most meaning in life, what work would be the most meaningful for her,” says Cindy Corrie, sitting next to her husband in their apartment. “I couldn’t discourage her from doing that kind of searching.”

After the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Rachel became active in the peace movement in Olympia. She began to focus on what she regarded as the injustices suffered by Palestinians under Israeli occupation.

“She was feeling compelled to try and repair some of the damage brought by the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East,” says Simona Sharoni, an Israeli who runs the Peace and Justice Studies Association, which has its headquarters on the Evergreen State campus.

Sharoni, who became a friend and mentor, shared Rachel’s conviction that the balance of power is too heavily weighted in Israel’s favor. To them, mainstream media reports are skewed, U.S. aid to Israel has gotten out of hand and the Palestinians are being unfairly treated—despite the terrorist bombings.

“She wanted to be in Palestine to bear witness,” says Sharoni, invoking the politically charged name for the West Bank and Gaza Strip territories.

What exactly happened in Rafah late on the afternoon of March 16 is unclear. Accounts vary, but at some point Rachel apparently fell and the bulldozer rolled over her. After it stopped, it backed over her, witnesses say.

The Israeli government declared it an accident. An investigation exonerated the soldiers involved, concluding that neither the bulldozer driver nor those in the escort vehicle could have seen Rachel from their perches.

But Tom Dale, another International Solidarity Movement protester from Great Britain who was with Rachel, says in a written statement that “there is no way she could not have been seen by them in their elevated cabin. They knew where she was, there is no doubt.”

Marla was probably eating lunch when the bomb that killed her was detonated. She had gone to the university to take a final exam and was planning to come home for a vacation, attend a wedding and spend the High Holy Days with her family. Instead, they held her funeral.

The militant Islamic group Hamas took credit for the bombing, which killed nine people, including Marla and four other Americans. Four Arab residents of east Jerusalem were charged in September with the murders.

Marla was a graduate of Patrick Henry High School and earned a bachelor’s degree in political science at the University of California Berkeley. She would have completed her master’s degree in May and planned to return to the United States and teach Jewish children.

“Marla wanted to be an educator. She was very altruistic. She saw good in everything and everybody,” says Norman Greene, a family friend.

She went to Israel out of a love for her faith and for her spiritual homeland. There was an idealism in her writings and a commitment.

“This is undoubtedly an important historic moment for both Israel and for the Jewish people,” Marla wrote in an essay two months before her death. “I have the privilege of reporting to my friends and family in the U.S. about the realities of living in Israel at this time and I also have the honor of being an American choosing to remain in Israel, and assist, however minimally, in Israel’s triumph.”

She also wrote of the importance of being there to help both sides.

“I can volunteer in the homes of Israelis affected by terrorism,” she wrote in a column published in the San Diego Jewish Press-Heritage, a weekly newspaper. “I can put food in collection baskets for Palestinian families.”

Marla knew there was risk. She acknowledged in the column that just deciding whether to turn left or right “may have life-threatening consequences.” But, she concluded, “I know that this struggle is worthwhile.”

Rachel also believed in her struggle. Her e-mails back home carried blistering accounts of fear and destruction.

In February, she was photographed in Gaza burning a drawing of a U.S. flag. Her parents say she was protesting the impending war in Iraq and was not trying to be anti-American.

“Protesting an injustice is at the core of what it means to be an American,” Cindy Corrie adds.

But that picture didn’t bode well for her legacy. “Rachel Corrie went to America’s enemies to burn her country’s flag,” is how one Internet message reads.

Since his daughter’s death, Craig Corrie has been on a leave of absence. He and his wife have been swept into a perpetual motion of mourning and activism.

They have been to Washington, D.C., to lobby for an independent inquiry into their daughter’s death. Rep. Brian Baird, D-Wash., who represents Rachel’s district, sponsored a resolution calling on the United States “to undertake a full, fair and expeditious investigation.” The bill remains before a House committee, its future uncertain.

Cindy Corrie spoke at Evergreen State College’s commencement, where she said her daughter “dreamed of a day when all Palestinians and Israelis could live in freedom with security and dignity.” She also spoke at a Mother’s Day gathering in a park in Olympia.

A couple who had paid little attention to that region of the world are now
converts to their daughter’s cause.

“We in America see the horror of the suicide bombings,” Cindy Corrie told the Mother’s Day audience. “We seem to see much less the ongoing violence against the Palestinian people.”

She knows what the mainstream sentiment is about the Middle East.

“But I have the words of Rachel about what it was like being there,” she says. “. . . I have her shoes. I stuck my hands in her shoes and the sands from Gaza were still in her shoes. She was there and walked there.”

The Bennett family declined to be interviewed for this story. There is sadness in Linda Bennett’s voice when she says that it just wouldn’t be appropriate to write about her daughter and Rachel together. Their deaths, as some family friends put it, are not “morally equivalent.”

It’s a decision supported by Rabbi Martin Lawson of Temple Emanu-El, the Bennett family’s synagogue in Del Cerro.

“Marla’s death was a result of a terrorist act meant to kill,” Lawson says. She was simply “an innocent graduate student trying to get an education.”

The other woman’s death was an accident, Lawson says. “Rachel Corrie’s death was a tragedy, but she knew what she was doing. It’s just not the same.”

Rachel wasn’t anti-Jewish or anti-Israel, say those who knew her.

“Nothing could be further from the truth,” says Sharoni, who is Jewish. She says Rachel wanted separate Palestinian and Israeli states—with justice, equality and security for each. “If you looked Rachel in the eye, you knew that she was not there because she hated anyone.”

Rachel’s parents, who are Christians and who grew up in Iowa, say they were committed to nonviolence. She wanted a safer world for Israelis and Palestinians, as well as U.S. citizens, they say.

Marla probably would have agreed.

“She felt there should be peace and harmony, that the divisions were artificial and were whipped up politically,” says Greene, the Bennett family friend who also is co-publisher of the Press-Heritage.

The grieving continues for Linda and Michael Bennett, Greene says. Linda Bennett has been to Israel to see where her daughter was killed; she also spoke at a national Anti-Defamation League dinner in Washington, D.C.

Tomorrow, beginning at 7:30 p.m., 1,500 to 2,000 people are expected at the Lawrence Family Jewish Community Center to celebrate Marla’s life. The event is free, though commemorative bracelets will be sold for $18, with proceeds to go toward a memorial fund.

Meanwhile, there is a fragile truce and a road map toward a possible peace in the Middle East. Someday, maybe, there will be no more dying daughters.
Tragic truths
25 years after Jonestown deaths, couple are committed to bringing to light disaster’s complexities and shades of gray

They left California in search of a Promised Land of socialism, equality and fulfillment—a utopia that they would carve out in a jungle wilderness in South America.

Instead, they found death.

On Nov. 18, 1978, the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project in Guyana, better known as Jonestown, became the site of one of the worst mass deaths in the history of religious movements. Out of a population of roughly 1,000 in the wilderness near the Venezuelan border, more than 900 men, women and children died, most from a grape-flavored vat of cyanide punch.

Twenty-five years later, Rebecca Moore is on a quest to persuade us that more than anything else, these people were human. “They were more than just faceless bodies rotting in the sun,” is how she puts it.

Much more.

Two of those faces were her only sisters: Carolyn Layton was 33 and Annie Moore was 24.

Another face was her only nephew—3-year-old Jim Jon Prokes, or Kimo as he was called, who also happened to be an out-of-wedlock son of the Rev. Jim Jones, the malignant Moses who led his members to their demise.

It’s a quest that led Moore to change careers, leaving jobs in public broadcasting, community relations and teaching film and television editing to get a doctorate in religion. At 52, she is now an assistant professor in the religious studies department at San Diego State University.

She’s written five books about Peoples Temple and Jonestown, two with the help of her husband, 53-year-old freelance writer and editor Fielding McGehee III. Another book, a joint effort with other scholars, is due out early next year.

She and McGehee also publish The Jonestown Report, an annual journal featuring essays and updates from researchers and former members, and have assembled an extensive Web site called “Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple” (jonestown.sdsu.edu).

They’ve turned a room in their Normal Heights home into a library of Jonestown history. That material, petitioned over the years from the U.S. government, includes thousands of pages of documents and hundreds of audiotapecs recorded there.

Together they are championing a cause that reminds us that life is filled with shades of gray. That pushes us beyond the popular image that Jonestown was just a bunch of brainwashed crazies who followed their cultic leader off the deep end.

“I view the job that Becky and I have to do is make this story increasingly messy, to keep on bringing out more and more information that not only ratifies and validates what your position is, but also to challenge it,” says McGehee.

“My bias,” says Moore, “is trying to present the lives, hopes and dreams for the people who were trying to create a better society. I do realize that they were flawed and that they made terrible and tragic decisions and mistakes.”

Jonestown’s awful images of sprawled bodies shocked us. But it was not the end of such images.

Among the others to come: the 1993 deaths of nearly 80 Branch Davidians in Waco, Texas, after a fiery standoff with federal agents and the mass suicide of 39 members of Heaven’s Gate in Rancho Santa Fe in 1997. Then, three years ago Uganda, a disgruntled doomsday sect called the Movement for the Restoration of the Ten Commandments of God was blamed for the deaths of more than 920 people—surpassing Jonestown as the worst modern-day, cult-related mass killing.

Over and over, we’ve seen that religion can sometimes go terribly wrong.

“I do condemn the deception, I do condemn the lies, and of course I condemn the final day,” says Moore of Jonestown.

“But I think condemnation is insufficient. I think that we need to look at the group within its social, political and religious context to understand why they did what they did.”

The Rev. John and Barbara Moore raised their three daughters to practice what he preached. Pastor Moore, a United Methodist minister, pushed social justice issues from the pulpit. Mrs. Moore role-modeled them, opening the family’s home to anyone in need of help.

Rebecca Moore grew up in Northern California, the middle child who went with her parents to civil rights marches and anti-war demonstrations in the 1960s.

Her older sister, Carolyn, became a French teacher and married a conscientious objector named Larry Layton (if that
name sounds familiar, it's because Layton is serving a life sentence for his part in the airstrip ambush near Jonestown that same day in which a U.S. congressman and four other people were killed.

The couple joined Peoples Temple in Redwood Valley near Ukiah in 1968. Jones, a Disciples of Christ minister, moved his congregation there from Indiana because he read that it was one of the few places that could survive a nuclear attack in the United States.

Moore's younger sister, Annie, joined right out of high school in 1972. "It's the only place I have seen real true Christianity being practiced," she wrote in a letter to her older sister.

To its most faithful members, Peoples Temple was a communal commitment in which they turned over paychecks and possessions in exchange for the promise of being taken care of in a life free of the sexism, racism, ageism and other prejudices that plagued society. To its critics, it was a cult that was growing increasingly dangerous.

But Jones' socialist message was a popular one, attracting a growing rainbow congregation (the majority was black). Peoples Temple branched out into Los Angeles and San Francisco, which eventually became the new headquarters.

To Moore, her sisters represent the two typical types of members. Carolyn was attracted by the politics of reform; Annie wanted the religion that came with this transformation.

Both women became part of the inner circle. Annie went to school and became a nurse under the temple's guidance. Carolyn became pregnant with Jones' child (the leader remained married to his wife, Marceline).

Moore's clergyman father was appalled. "Dad's reaction was, 'Oh great, another Elmer Gantry,'" Her mother wasn't happy, either. But they stifled their public response.

Moore defends their decision. "My parents chose not to criticize Jim Jones or the temple, to affirm the good things they saw the temple doing so that they could remain on good terms with my sisters. That's the choice that any family member makes when your child chooses a spouse or partner you don't approve of, your child joins a group or movement you don't approve of."

The Jonestown settlement began in 1974. By the time Jones moved to Guyana three years later, he was feeling increasingly besieged. The media, along with an opposition group calling itself the Concerned Relatives, were accusing him of financial wrongdoing, physical and sexual abuse and holding people against their will.

On Nov. 17, 1978, California Congressman Leo Ryan arrived in Jonestown with a contingent of relatives, journalists and other officials to check things out for himself.

When Ryan and the others departed the next day, more than a dozen members were clamoring to leave with them. After arriving at the waiting planes, the group was ambushed by a squad of Jones' followers.

Ryan, three journalists and a defector were killed. And back in Jonestown, the final suicide drill, known as "white nights," was beginning.

An audiotape made from that last gathering in Jonestown's pavilion gives a chilling account of Jones' lethal seduction. "How very much I've tried my best to give you the good life," he is heard saying. "But in spite of all of my trying, a handful of our people, with their lies, have made our life impossible."

Tim Carter, who now lives in Eugene, Ore., was among a handful of people who got out during the carnage. But before he left, he saw his wife and 15-month-old son die. "I felt myself almost leaving my body. It's like I became a spectator," he remembers.

From a distance, he saw his wife holding their son while another woman put a plunger of the poisonous liquid into his mouth. He says he didn't see his wife take the poison, but she was dying by the time he got to her side. "I knelt down and I held her and I just said, 'I love you so much.'"

To this day, he cannot answer the question of why he didn't try to stop it. "All I can say is, I didn't and neither did anyone else."

How could this have happened? "They did everything together," says McGehee. "They lived together, they ate together, they slept together, they went to meetings together, they sang together. It was an incredibly communal experience all the way around. And when it came time to die, they died together."

Moore doesn't think her sisters—or the others—joined Peoples Temple to commit suicide. "They signed up for what they thought was a good organization that shared the values and ideals that they had. But little by little, they made compromises along the way."

Fake healings. Abusive punishment. Suicide drills to prove their loyalty. And a manipulative, apocalyptic leader spinning out of control into drug addiction and paranoia. They accepted these compromises until, in the end, says Moore, "it wasn't a big compromise to kill themselves."

McGehee's database of the casualties includes three women with San Diego roots—Lydia Morgan, 30; Rose Marie McKnight, 25, and Phyllis Houston, 34.

It was both suicide and murder, says Moore. Jones and Annie Moore had gunshot wounds, and a Guyanese medical examiner reported finding injection marks on many of the bodies.

"So the question is, were the able-bodied coerced in some way?" Moore asks. "I tend to think that if so many had been unwilling, then it would have stopped or there would have been more evidence of violence."
Moores and McGeehe were heading out jogging on Sunday morning, Nov. 19, 1978, when they saw the headline in the newspaper. A congressman had been killed the day before in Guyana.

Her tears were a mixture of fear and anger. Her sister Annie had just written a letter declaring they had uncovered a government conspiracy against them. Moore wondered if this death was connected.

The next day came the news that about 400 bodies had been found in Jonestown. "I was pretty convinced that my sisters were dead because they were the true believers," she says. But there was also a glimmer of hope, because more than twice that many people lived in Jonestown.

She and McGeehe were living in Washington, D.C. Her parents were in Reno, where her father was pastoring a church. On Tuesday, as the death toll climbed, he asked them to come home.

"My mom was in total denial, and my dad and I were a wreck," she says. Her voice cracks and there are tears in her eyes as she remembers that as Thanksgiving Day came and went, they realized there was no hope.

On the Sunday after Thanksgiving, her father stepped up to the pulpit and gave an emotional sermon to a hushed church.

"During these days, we have been asked frequently, 'How did your children become involved in Peoples Temple?' There is no simple answer," said Moore.

He blamed what happened on idolatry and paranoia. "The adulation and worship Jim Jones' followers gave him was idolatrous," he said. Their own paranoia "overwhelmed them."

But he refused to denounce Peoples Temple completely. "Few movements in our time have been more expressive of Jesus' parable of the Last Judgment of feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, giving shelter to the homeless and visiting those in prison than Peoples Temple."
Survivors’ perspectives differ

Not everyone associated with Peoples Temple died Nov. 18, 1978. Roughly 80 members who were in Guyana lived. Most were in the capital city of Georgetown to the south, where the temple kept a house. There also are many former members who left the group or never moved to South America.

And there were survivors from the airstrip ambush.

“If anyone tells you that they've got the Jonestown story, you know they are lying,” says Fielding McGhee III, a San Diego man who has spent years studying this subject with his wife, Rebecca Moore, an assistant professor in religious studies at San Diego State University.

“There is no one Jonestown story,” he says. “There are as many stories as there are people who tell them.”

Here are five of those stories.

— SANDI DOLBEE

Laura Johnston Kohl
SAN MARCOS—She remembers Jonestown as “heaven on Earth.” Everyone was equal, pulling together toward a shared vision. She worked in the fields and made soap.

“I really loved it,” says Laura Johnston Kohl. “It was so exciting.”

She joined Peoples Temple in the Northern California community of Redwood Valley in 1970, moving to Guyana in 1977. She was drawn not by the religious part but the socialist political agenda. “Really, my interest was being in an integrated community,” says the 56-year-old Kohl.

An estimated 68 percent of the members living in Guyana were African-American; 24 percent were white, and the remainder were either mixed or of another ethnic group, according to a demographic study by Moore of SDSU.

It doesn’t take Kohl long to weep as she relives the memories. “Unfortunately,” she says, “Jim really went crazy.”

She says she didn’t notice how bad he’d gotten. Or perhaps she was willing to overlook it. “The rest of our life was fine.”

She was in Georgetown on the day of the mass deaths. She returned to the United States as a lost soul; her world had been obliterated. Kohl drifted into Synanon, another controversial, cultic group. She met her new husband, Ron, there, and they stayed until the late 1980s, when Synanon began falling apart.

They are now school teachers and Quakers who live in San Marcos with their 14-year-old son, Raul. “I have a really good life now,” she says. “I really like who I am.”

On Tuesday morning, when relatives, former members and others gather for the annual anniversary service at a mass grave at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, Kohl plans to be there. “It’s reconnecting, reuniting, with the people who died,” she says.

If she had been in Jonestown that day, would she have drunk the poisoned punch?

“I probably would have. I wasn’t interested in returning to the life I had in the United States.”

Stephan Jones and Jim Jones Jr.

THE BAY AREA—They are sons of the father. Stephan Jones is the only biological son of the Rev. Jim and Marceline Jones. Jim Jones Jr. is an adopted son and namesake, one of a menagerie of accumulated children in their family coming from a rainbow of ethnicities.

Stephan Jones, a 44-year-old Marin County resident, is the introvert—intense and cautious. Jim Jones Jr., who is a year younger and lives in Pacifica near San Francisco, is the extrovert—a joker who laughs easily and often.

They were in Georgetown with Jonestown’s basketball team on the day of the deaths.

“My primary experience of my father was somebody who did it on the fly. He was an overgrown kid, and people were his candy store—and most especially the people in Jonestown,” says Stephan Jones.

His brother just shakes his head. “I had a great childhood. We had so much fun. I thought my brothers had fun. I didn’t know until it was all over of the angst they were feeling.”

Both say there were many reasons why folks were attracted to Peoples Temple.

“But there is one universal—that deep desire to belong to something,” says Stephan Jones.

Stephan Jones, who has two daughters and works in the commercial furniture business, says people in Jonestown were looking outside of themselves for the answers. He has learned that the answers come from within.

Jim Jones Jr., who has three sons and works for a cardiac care company, says he last spoke to his father on the day of his death. His dad called the Georgetown house from Jonestown’s radio. “He told me it was a day of reckoning.”

Looking back on it, he says his father fed off his own neurosis, and there was no one to stop him. “The mind is a dangerous place,” he says. “Don’t go into it alone.”
Tim Stoyn
EUREKA—On Tim Stoyn’s desk in the Humboldt County District Attorney’s Office is a photograph of a young boy, his eyes bright, his smile warm.

It’s his 6-year-old son, John Victor Stoyn, who died in Jonestown.

For years, Stoyn was lawyer to leader Jim Jones, a loyal member who turned over his child to the commune and even signed a statement saying that Jones was the boy’s father. Like so many, he was attracted to Peoples Temple’s egalitarianism. “I became very angry about how black people were being treated at large,” he says. “I turned on the white power structure.”

But in 1977, he says his estranged wife, Grace, another former insider who had already left Peoples Temple, unloaded on him about Jones’ abusive behavior and staged healings. It was his epiphany. Stoyn became a vocal opponent and fought for custody of the boy he left behind in Jonestown.

In November 1978, Stoyn went to Guyana with Democratic Congressman Leo Ryan’s fact-finding party. When they got there, he stayed in Georgetown to avoid angering Jones.

For 10 years afterward, he didn’t speak about it. Eventually, he returned to Ukiah, went back to work for the Mendocino County District Attorney’s Office and remarried. Earlier this year, he took the job as assistant district attorney in neighboring Humboldt County.

Stoyn won’t say why he signed the paternity statement, except that it is not true. He insists that he is the boy’s father.

He’s 65 now, goes to a Baptist church and says he’s at peace. He rejects suggestions that Ryan’s visit, and his own public crusade against Jones, triggered the deaths.

“I did it again. If I hadn’t tried everything, then I would have more guilt about losing my son. I believe it would have happened anyway. It was just a matter of time.”

State Sen. Jackie Speier
SAN FRANCISCO—Left for dead, bleeding from five bullet wounds, she prayed and waited. Her boss, Congressman Leo Ryan, was already dead. So were three journalists and a defector.

After 22 hours, Guayanese rescue workers airlifted her to safety.

Jackie Speier is a Democratic state senator now for parts of San Francisco and San Mateo counties. But then she was Ryan’s 28-year-old legal counsel, who went along with a contingent of officials, journalists and relatives to take a look at what was going on in this jungle where Jim Jones and his Peoples Temple had moved to from California.

They arrived on Nov. 17, 1978, and things were going pretty well, she remembers, until a reporter was slipped a note saying some members wanted to leave. “Jones became almost manic,” she says.

She and the others in the departing group were attacked the next day at a remote airstrip near Jonestown.

“It was very much like a plantation, ironically, for someone who preached equality,” Speier says of the compound. “The whites were in leadership, and the African-Americans were subservient.”

What happened there was murder, she adds. “These people’s minds had been manipulated.”

And she’s not sure we’ve learned anything. “Jim Jones got away with what he got away with because he was politically connected and because he had the ability to call what he had a religion.”

“Our commitment to protecting the First Amendment clouded reasonable people from recognizing that even though religions have a right to exist, they do not have a right to conduct themselves in a manner that suggests criminal conduct.”

Was it a mistake to go to Jonestown 25 years ago?

“I don’t think people who got out thought it was a mistake,” she says. “And there were people who got out because we went down there. It was a mistake that our State Department did such a lousy job of monitoring the situation. Those were American citizens.”

She points out that the suicides had been rehearsed time and again, in drills that Peoples Temple called “white nights.”

“We knew about the white-night trials. I think that Jim Jones was going to be exposed, and he couldn’t allow that to happen and was willing to take 900 people with him. He was a maniacal narcissist.”

---
Reaching the youth

Stadium rocks with music, message for young people

Mission San Diego with Billy Graham turned Qualcomm Stadium into a pair of giant evangelical festivals for young people yesterday, beginning with a sun-drenched morning service for children and ending with an ear-splitting, overflowing concert for youth.

"Who's the man?" Graham called out to a sea of faces that stretched from center field to the highest deck. "Jesus!" they shouted back.

Even before the 84-year-old Graham took the stage last night, the crowd had spilled into the overflow area in the stadium parking lot. In all, 74,000 attended the two-hour "Velocity: A Concert for Our Generation" (72,000 inside the stadium and 2,000 in the overflow area watching on a 20-foot-wide video wall).

It was the largest attendance so far of this free, four-day mission that wraps up tonight with a tamer service beginning at 6.

A stadium official said that counting the overflow, it was the largest overall crowd for an event there.

"This is really cool," said Skyler Cummins, a 13-year-old Spring Valley resident. "It's the first time I've seen something like this at Qualcomm."

And as the music played, he added, "This is better than hymns." It was not your grandmother's church service. The bands were loud, the heat fast and the congregation rocked the house. There was even a beach ball or two.

"No running—just dancing," Betsy Mackey, one of the ushers, told a group of teenagers. Not your grandmother's church service, indeed.

In addition to the packed stadium seats, about 5,000 people were allowed onto the field by the stage, where they clapped, shouted, hugged and jumped up and down.

"There's some motion going on—I like that," shouted Nic Gonzales, the lead singer for Salvador, a hot young Latin Christian band. And the crowd roared.

"This kind of music just frees you to get up and dance," said Jennifer Sapp, a 22-year-old sales manager from Poway. "It's not about sitting there and singing choral music. It's about your entire body being free to worship God."

And all this was just fine with Jessie Luevano, a 30-year-old assistant youth minister who came with a bus load from First Assembly of God Church in El Centro. These young people are the future of the church, he said.

"There could be the next Billy Graham here," Luevano said. "You never know."

Friars Road was clogged about an hour before the 6 p.m. start and traffic was backed up for about a mile on Interstate 15. But the gridlock soon smoothed out.

Even before the gates opened, the parking lot had a festive atmosphere. Footballs were tossed over cars, the smell of barbecuing meat filled the air and radios blared the music of that evening's performers.

Ryan Santiago, 17, of Spring Valley was getting energy for the evening by gnashing on carne asada tacos.

"I'm just here to see Billy Graham; he's, like, famous," said Ryan, a San Diego student. "It's gonna be a party."

Some protesters, ranging from anti-abortion activists to a group who criticized Graham for not opposing the recent Iraq war, stood outside the stadium with messages for the late arrivals.

The Graham organization began turning the Saturday night program into a contemporary Christian music concert for young people in 1994—and the crowds have responded (attendance topped 82,000 in Dallas last October).

As the story goes, Ruth Graham, Billy Graham's wife, once told Toby McKeehan of the Christian rock and rap group dcTalk, "You boys fill the pond, and Billy goes fishing."

McKeehan, better known as TobyMac to his fans, was one of last night's performers—along with dcTalk colleague Michael Tait, singer Kirk Franklin and Salvador.

"I'm so glad to see white people, black people, Hispanic people praising God," shouted Franklin, who then led the crowd into a deafening cheering fest for Jesus.

And just when it couldn't get much louder, Franklin slowed it down with a ballad and then introduced a man that he called "the bomb." That's when the white-haired Graham made his way across the stage, with the help of his son, Franklin, to an ovation that lasted a full minute.

He launched into a sermon about seeking satisfaction. "You may have to give up some things that are wrong in your life," he told them.

He told them he was old enough to be their great-grandfather but he was their age when he made his faith commitment. "I was 17 when I received Christ into my heart and it changed my life."

His theme, as it was the previous two nights, was the evangelical Christian message of judgment and salvation. "You are all
going to be judged. You’ll stand before God someday to give an account of your life. How did you live? What did you do? How did you treat your boyfriend or your girlfriend, your father or your mother or your friends?"

His sermon lasted about 15 minutes, half as long as previous nights, before he invited people to "come on down" and make a decision. An estimated 4,200 people responded.

At the morning Kidz Mix, an estimated 40,000 children and adults attended the two-hour service, featuring singing, dancing and a giant gift-wrapped package on stage to represent the Christian belief in God’s gift of his son, Jesus.

Organizers said it was the largest attendance at any Graham-sponsored children’s event.

“I came to praise the Lord because he died on the cross for all our sins,” said Sydney Delville, 9, of El Cajon, who sang along with a choir of 5,000 children and danced in the aisles wearing a homemade crown bearing Jesus’ name.

They also came to celebrate Graham, even though he did not preach at the morning program.

“He’s led so many people to Christ,” said Jessica Rickard, a Clairemont 16-year-old who came to watch friends in the program. “Our society is filled with so much sin, in movies and stuff, and this is a good Christian thing to come to.”

Organizers said 2,930 people came forward to make a declaration of faith at the Kidz Mix. Final figures for Friday night’s response was 2,255.

Graham has plied his trade for more years than most of these people—either from yesterday morning or last night—have been alive. What makes him so special to them? Thomas Lopez, 19, of Coronado, said it’s Graham’s simplicity that makes him so popular.

“He explained everything the way you can understand it,” Lopez said.

“Sometimes pastors use words you cannot understand. . . . He just went straight to it.”

Miles McPherson, a former Chargers football player who is now pastor of The Rock, a youth-oriented church that meets on the San Diego State University campus, spoke of the history that was being made during the four-day event.

“There will always be people searching for God, but there may not be another Billy Graham,” McPherson said. “He was a special guy in a special era.”
Keeping the faith or changing it?
Mission shines its light on question of conversion

The bumper sticker in the parking lot of a south San Diego Home Depot may say it all: "Friends don't let friends die without Jesus." To evangelical Christians, there is one highway to heaven and it's paved by Jesus Christ.

They back up their convictions with the New Testament: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

From tonight through Sunday, as 84-year-old evangelist Billy Graham takes the field at Qualcomm Stadium for mission No. 413, the spotlight will be on Christianity in San Diego—in particular, evangelical Christianity and the emotionally charged question of whether it's right to try to convert people of other faiths.

"You have to make a choice," Graham is fond of saying at the end of his sermons, as he invites people to come forward and make a faith decision. "Will you choose to accept Christ and the life that he alone can give you? Or will you choose to reject him and be lost for all eternity?"

Over more than half a century of these altar calls, some 3.2 million people have responded. For them, and many evangelicals, this issue is a matter of eternal life and death.

But for many other Christians, and followers of other religions, it is not that simple. For them, these words remind them not of the ties that bind, but of the walls that divide.

It began with Jesus' commission to go out and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19). But just what is evangelism?

There is no single answer, says Rebecca Moore, assistant professor in religious studies at San Diego State University who specializes in Christian history.

"Certainly within evangelical Christianity and fundamentalist Christianity there is a belief that there is only one way to define that," Moore said, "but within mainline Protestant churches and Catholicism, I think there is a little bit more openness."

For example, more-liberal Christians generally subscribe to the belief that evangelism means sharing how your faith is right for you personally, but not insisting that Christianity is the only answer.

"I evangelize by the way I live and work and act. I don't feel that I need to go out and convert Muslims and Jews in order to do the work of the Gospel," said Rosemary Johnston, a Catholic who runs the Interfaith Shelter Network, a seasonal program in which various congregations take turns housing the homeless.

"I respect their religious views and their insights."

The Rev. Wayne Sanders, rector of Good Samaritan Episcopal Church in University City, says he witnesses his faith by being the best Christian possible.

"I think it's more authentic than just saying you've got to believe this way or go to hell," he said. "I don't think Jesus would ever do that."

Johnston and Sanders say this does not make them any less committed as Christians (both are planning to attend at least one night of the mission). But for them, there is a line between sharing their religion and trying to convert people of other faiths.

"I see Jesus as being accepting of all faiths because he was trying to lead people to his father," Sanders said.

Johnston, who thinks evangelism ought to concentrate on unchurched Christians and people who have no religious tradition, rejects the belief that other faiths won't be in heaven. "How can this God who created us all in his image and likeness exclude any person from his heavenly kingdom?" she asked.

Many non-Christians find conversion attempts offensive. San Diego County has a range of religions and they need to accept one another, they say.

"This (acceptance) is very important for us to live together, to build peace and harmony and unity together as a community," said Imam Sharif Battikh, a longtime local Muslim who is president of the Interreligious Council of San Diego.

In Hinduism, religions are equal, said Swami Ishananda, an assistant minister with the San Diego branch of the Vedanta Society of Southern California. "The concept of conversion is a kind of aggression."

Ishananda said: "It isolates the population."

But for evangelical Christians, salvation is only possible through Jesus. To not preach that, and to not reach out to unbelievers, would be a betrayal of their faith.

If you saw someone heading down a road and you knew there was a cliff right around the corner, don't you have a responsibility to warn that person?

SDSU professor Moore uses this analogy to explain the evangelical conviction. "They feel they have a responsibility to save people for eternal life," she said.

Gerald Beavan, a longtime evangelical who attends First
to keep tens of thousands of Christians from standing together—or at least in close proximity—these next four days.

An estimated 200,000 are projected to attend the stadium services (that would be more than twice the attendance at the final four games of the Padres’ most recent home stand).

“This is what is unprecedented about this,” says Monsignor Dennis Mikulanis, pastor of San Rafael Catholic Church in Rancho Bernardo and a member of the mission’s local executive team.

“For years, the relationship between the Catholic Church and evangelicals has not been good. This is helping to break down those barriers.”

Organizers argue that people will be coming out of personal choice and everyone knows what it’s about. Said Mikulanis: “No one should deny the right of Christians to do this.”

But the priest, who has long been active in interfaith issues, makes a distinction between evangelizing and proselytizing.

“Evangelization is letting people know of God’s love for us in and through Jesus Christ,” he said. “We cannot keep silent to that.

“On the other hand,” he said, “proselytizing is sheep stealing.”

Botsford, the Horizon pastor, says it’s not about stealing sheep. “It’s about sharing truth,” he said.

“Everyone wants to make it a divisive point that there’s only one way (to heaven),” Botsford said. “But at least there’s a way.”

---
The road to Easter
Hospice chaplain's calling is comforting the dying and their families

H is 12 years old, his name is Chad and he is dying. He lays breathing quietly under his oxygen mask, slipping away in a room muted in the late-afternoon light, comforted by his foster father and a Catholic nun.

But it is Chad's life, not his death, that Sister Maureen Kelley dwells on.

She tells him about how loved he is by the couple who have cared for him since he was two days old. She reminds him about his sisters who played with him. And about his summer camping trips.

She leans over and touches his fingers. "You've got beautiful hands, Chad." Before she leaves, she strokes his hair. "Sweet, sweet boy," she whispers.

Kelley is a chaplain at San Diego Hospice and Palliative Care, and her day is drawing to a close. On April 2, the 60-year-old nun sat with a mother who is losing her newborn baby and prayed with a young father with terminal cancer. She listened to a Quaker's wish to make it to the groundbreaking of a pet project. And she assured Chad's legal guardian, Richard White, that it is OK to be mad at God now and then.

This is a time of year when Christians think about death. It is, after all, Holy Week on the western church calendar, the days set aside to commemorate the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus.

But for Kelley, every week is a kind of holy week. And she can do this job because Good Friday is followed by Easter. "Death is not the end," is the way she puts it.

It is a promise spoken on that first Good Friday. Dying on the cross, Jesus tells the man hanging beside him, "Today you will be with me in Paradise."

Kelley grew up around death. Her father ran a funeral home in Berkeley, and the family lived upstairs. She was the oldest child, and when she was mad at her brother and sister, she would hide their toys in the empty caskets.

She went to Catholic schools and entered a religious order right out of high school, expecting to become a nun. But six months into it, her mother died and her sister became ill. She returned home to care for her family.

She got a degree in theology and a job at a bank, working her way up to area credit administrator. But in the mid-1980s, after seeing a 38-year-old co-worker collapse and die, she decided she needed to make a change. The job put food on the table, she says, but it didn't sustain her.

Enrolling in the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, Kelley got a master's degree and took a job with Catholic Charities in Oakland. It was while she was at Catholic Charities that she met a nun from the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, a religious order known for its work in health care, education and social service.

She was impressed—and drawn once again to a religious vocation. "That's where I belonged," she says.

On April 1, 1995, she began the application process. April Fool's Day to some; to her, it is her late mother's birthday.

Two years ago, her journey brought her to Hillcrest to work as a chaplain at San Diego Hospice, which helps terminally ill patients and their families deal with the medical, emotional and spiritual issues that come with impending death.

She lives with 11 other nuns in an apartment complex a half mile away at Scripps Mercy Hospital. Last December, Kelley took her final vows. The silver ring on her wedding finger, symbolizing her lifelong commitment, still shines with newness.

In her ministry at the hospice, she has found that there is something about dying that brings out the meaningfulness of life. "People are more real, and hopefully, so are the people around them," she says. "You're not so concerned with the things that are really trivial in life. You're more focused on the really important things."

And every moment counts. She tells about a man who went home after hospice got his symptoms under control, and he was able to live for three more weeks. In that time, his daughter's boyfriend asked him for permission to marry his daughter. It was a precious opportunity to take care of the business of life.

In his final moments, Jesus beckoned to his mother and a disciple. "Woman, here is your son," the Bible says he told his mother. To the disciple, he said, "Here is your mother." It was his way of asking his friend to take care of his mother after he was gone. "And from that hour," the Gospel of John reports, "the disciple took her into his own home."
She looks like a favorite maiden aunt. The gray in her hair has taken over, her black shoes are sensible and flat, her red jumper with blue flowers is comfortable and loose-fitting. And her laugh is as inviting as a cool drink on a warm day.

When she enters Peter Kelly’s room on this particular day, one of the first things the chaplain does is admire the photos of his 7-year-old son, Matthew, who lives in North County.

“That’s my pride and joy,” Kelly says. She scoots a chair right up next to his bed and holds her hands in her lap.

“Is our goal to get you closer to where he’s living?”

Kelly grimaces. “Our goal right now is not to nauseate. I’ll take that over anything.”

She nods, and the conversation continues. He’s trying to be more patient, he tells her. He’s also trying to be more thankful for little things, like being able to get up and use the bathroom.

“My biggest fear is what if this is it? What if we die and there’s nothing more? You’re asleep and it’s dark. And that’s it.”

Before she can say anything, he presses on, telling her about going to church recently and hearing a sermon about heaven. It relieved some of his fears, but he’s still not ready to go. He worries that even the slightest infection “could take me out.”

Kelley asks him if he prays. He does. She asks him what he’s told Matthew. He’s told him the truth.

They end their visit with a prayer, for him and for courage.

“Let the hallway, there is grief in her voice. “He’s only 34,” she says. “Pretty young to be facing all this.”

Jesus, according to some estimates, was only 33.

Dr. David Sine, director of the pediatric program at San Diego Hospice, is adamant about the value of chaplains.

“There are times when I’ve learned the medical treatment is limited,” he says. “Having somebody who can take care of the spiritual suffering is huge.”

He once had a 16-year-old patient whose pain could not be vanquished. No matter what the physician tried, the boy was still hurting. He called in a chaplain.

“It totally worked,” Dr. Sine says. “He ended up dying very peacefully.”

Kelley is part of a team of 12 chaplains, and when she’s at work, she doesn’t tell people she’s a nun—unless they ask.

“I just introduce myself as Maureen,” she says. “I’m there to serve them in their tradition and not in mine, and I’m not there to convert them.”

In her cramped office, which she shares with security, there is a picture depicting Jesus in the lotus position. “Sometimes people are ashamed to tell you they are Christian, but they pray in an Eastern way,” Kelley explains. “Take this to them and I say, ‘You mean like this?’”

She isn’t into deciding who will go to heaven—and who won’t. “I leave all that up to God,” she says. She adds a little later: “I don’t come from a tradition like that. I respect every person’s right to make their own choices.”

If people don’t believe in an afterlife, she gets them to talk about how they want to be remembered in this life.

And while her own faith tells her that “something beautiful awaits” these patients, it’s still not easy to watch. There are two infants at San Diego Hospice’s inpatient care center on this particular day. How could this be happening to someone so young?

It is part of the mystery that we must learn to live with, Kelley says. “There is no explaining this. There are questions I have for God when I die.”

Jesus had questions, too. “And about three o’clock Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?’” the Bible says. “That is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’”

The chaplains have another job at the hospice: They are the party people. Kelley has helped put on weddings, birthday parties and graduation ceremonies. “If they need to celebrate the Fourth of July and it’s only April, that’s OK,” she laughs. “I consider death to be a part of life,” says Kelley. “I see my role as to help people have the best experience they’re going to have.”

In her visits, she makes dying a part of the conversation.

“What do you think happens after you die?” she asks Dave Neptune, an 85-year-old Quaker who has cancer.

“Boy I don’t know,” he says, his voice drifting off. “I don’t have any firm feelings about it.”

She asks him what he’s been praying about. The war, he answers. He’s been a life-long peace activist. Then, his voice cracks. “And I guess for my strength.”

She leans over and takes his hand. His voice steadies and they sit together silently for a few moments.

“Have you any concerns about your family?” she asks softly.

“They’re pretty together family,” he says. His voice steadies, and he’s off talking about how proud he is of them and how he’s looking forward to being discharged the next day so he can be at home with his wife of 62 years. It is a common misconception that people go to the
hospice facility just to die; many are stabilized enough that they can leave for more familiar surroundings.

Neptune also talks about a project close to his heart. It's a building that will be constructed with bales of straw and shared by four organizations. Construction is expected later this year.

He would like to be there for the groundbreaking. But then he chuckles softly. "I can't really say," he adds.

Before long, Kelley is with young Chad, born severely retarded a dozen years ago, with cerebral palsy and other afflictions. Sitting with the only dad that Chad has known, they share stories of life and a long hug.

Chad died last week. It was his Good Friday, on the way to Easter. "Father," Jesus said in the Gospel of Luke, "into your hands I commend my spirit."

---