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Interview Summary

Carol Pryor, a member of the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America (JPCOCA), discusses her background and education; the creation of and her involvement with the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America in the early 1980s; the January 1983 meeting with Congressman Moakley regarding El Salvador; Moakley’s reaction to the issues brought to his attention by JPCOCA and his pursuit of these issues through his key aide, Jim McGovern; and the activities of the Jamaica Plain Committee during the 1980s to help the cause of Salvadoran refugees. In conclusion, Ms. Pryor expresses how Congressman Moakley’s actions far exceeded the hopes of the Jamaica Plain Committee and how much she enjoyed the experience of helping the Salvadoran people.
Subject Headings

Community organization
El Salvador
Human rights
Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America
McGovern, James P., 1959-
Moakley, John Joseph, 1927-2001
Pryor, Carol
Social action

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CHRISTIAN ENGLER: Where are you from originally?

CAROL PRYOR: I was born in Chicago.

ENGLER: And what made you want to come to Massachusetts or brought you down here?

PRYOR: I had been living in Washington, DC. I was married at the time and my husband and I, for various reasons, wanted to leave Washington; his family was from the Massachusetts area, so we ended up moving up here.

ENGLER: Where did you receive your education?

PRYOR: I did my undergraduate education at University of California at Berkeley. And I have a master’s degree in history from Boston University and a master’s in education from Boston University and a master’s in public health from Boston University.

ENGLER: What type of work were you doing when you got involved with the Central American issue?

PRYOR: I was working at a computer company, managing technical documentation groups.

ENGLER: That’s quite a digression from grassroots activism. What made you get involved with that?
PRYOR: Really the question is more, what made me get into computers? I had originally intended to study history and be a history professor, but realized that the job market made that unlikely, and I had a child to support, and so I fell into doing computer work. But it never reflected my real interests, so while I was working there and since, I’ve always tried to maintain some activities focused on social justice and social action.

ENGLER: And did you feel that with your knowledge in computers and the work that you were doing with that, did you feel that it was maybe a hands-on approach to social justice like maybe a practical approach, teaching people or is that what you had in mind?

PRYOR: No, I just went into the field because I needed to earn a living. It didn’t feel like it had much connection to social justice issues at all.

ENGLER: And how did you hear about the Jamaica Plain Committee?

PRYOR: My memory of it—and of course it’s a long time ago—was that in the early eighties Ginny Zanger1 and perhaps some other people wanted to plan a program in Jamaica Plain about Central America. I don’t actually remember how I heard about it, but I worked with her on organizing a program at the Agassiz School in Jamaica Plain. My memory of what happened was that after that, a few people out of the event who were interested in continuing to do some work on the issues started to get together and constituted themselves as the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America [JPCOCA], all Jamaica Plain residents.

ENGLER: So did they go out in that general area and—were you enlightened already on this matter before they approached you or did they draw you in?

PRYOR: I don’t remember actually. It’s been so long ago how I heard about the original event, but I certainly would have been aware of the issues in El Salvador and opposed to what our government was doing at the time.

1 OH-005 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Ginny Zanger, one of the founders of the Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America.
ENGLER: Have you always been a political neophyte in a way, just always interested in politics? Is it something that’s been rooted in your family? Is it something that came to you through school?

PRYOR: I think it had more to do with my college years and where I went to college and the experiences at the time. I started at the University of California at Berkeley in 1964. I didn’t go there for political reasons, but walked into the middle of the height of political activity around the Vietnam War, about which I knew very little at the time. But the four years at Berkeley were kind of the height of the student movement. And like many people growing up in the sixties and probably particularly being at Berkeley, I was very influenced by that time and by those experiences. So since then I have always had an orientation towards progressive political issues and tried to find various ways to remain involved.

ENGLER: And I guess that really does answer the question; you’ve seen injustice in your experiences through your schooling and that obviously carried over into your personal life when you left school. That’s in essence what made you want to be connected with Central America, that you just—because Ginny Zanger said that she didn’t want to see another Vietnam happen. Was that essentially the catalyst for you as well in that right or just in general?

PRYOR: I think I was casting about for a way to be involved, not so much around that specific issue but a way to be involved. I think as long as I was working in the computer industry I was always trying to figure out what I really wanted to be doing, where I could make contributions and how I could fit in. I think I was interested at the time in trying to learn Spanish, which I never really successfully did. And so it was—I won’t say it was so much that specific issue. I met people in the neighborhood who were active around this issue and certainly supported their position on it and was looking for some local ways to be active around progressive issues.

ENGLER: So basically it was not just El Salvador in particular, because—not El Salvador, not the Middle East, not any other hot spots in the world. It was just a sense of wanting to contribute for betterment of humanity, in a way.
PRYOR: I think that’s true, yes. I can’t say that at the time—I’m trying to remember. I don’t know. It may have been in some directions that I thought I was interested in going in there in that period. Also, I was interested in cross-cultural issues. And, as I said, I was trying to learn Spanish, and this seemed to fit in a variety of ways. So it wasn’t completely random.

ENGLER: Right. Okay.

PRYOR: On the other hand, you mention Ginny; she’s been a bilingual teacher and spent time in Latin America, and they had a much closer connection to the culture and those specific issues, probably than I did coming into it.

ENGLER: And what was your role within this committee? What were your tasks? What were the things that you contributed with these various members?

PRYOR: Well, it actually wasn’t a large group. I would say there were probably four or five of us who were the core of it. And we always tried to tailor our activities to what we were able to do, given our resources and time and who we were. My memory of it was that we did a variety of things and everybody participated. We held various local meetings on the issue. I remember one in which we had a woman who had just come back from El Salvador talk about her experiences there. We had petitions opposing U.S. policy and we would work to get people to sign that. It was basically a variety of education publicizing the issue; local events of all sorts. We went to local events and passed out material, that sort of thing. But the event that led up to our meeting with Congressman Moakley was that as part of this work we got some material from a group called CISPES, Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador. CISPES still exists. That’s C-I-S-P-E-S. And they urged people to lobby their congressmen and had a list of issues to go and see them about. So we had some petitions that we had developed to bring with us to Congressman Moakley. And we put together a lobbying committee to go and see him in response to this mailing from CISPES to talk about the issues that they had listed.
As far as the work that I did in particular, I mean we all did, it wasn’t a big organization. It wasn’t as if it was specialized. But some of what I tended to gravitate towards is writing, because that’s what I did as a career and where I could contribute most. So at different points I did write an Op-Ed article that was printed in the *Boston Globe*. I discovered that I put together a little briefing paper for the lobbying committee before we went to lobby. I helped to put together a lot of little leaflets and flyers, so those sort of things.

**ENGLER:** Really? That’s interesting. You’ve said earlier that you listened to a woman who did a trip down to El Salvador; what were some of the things that, if you remember, some of the things that she related to you?

**PRYOR:** At this meeting? Where she presented? I actually at this point don’t remember it; it’s a really long time.

**ENGLER:** That’s okay. That’s totally okay. Do you still maintain contact with some of the members of this organization?

**PRYOR:** Yes, I do. One of my very good friends I met through that experience. She actually lived on my block and I hadn’t met her before, but she’s a very friendly and outgoing person. And one day we met and we were starting to talk, and I told her about this committee and asked if she wanted to come, and she actually wanted to join. I think she had moved maybe relatively recently from the South End. She also was very progressive politically, and I think she saw this as a good way to follow out that interest. She’d also spent some time in South America, to get involved. So we remained very close friends, and I also see a couple of the other people less regularly. But I am in touch with them.

**ENGLER:** So basically, as a grassroots organization your overall aims were just basically publicity, making the issues known, hopefully through this trying to rectify some of the ills that were going on down there.

**PRYOR:** That’s right.
ENGLER: So you wouldn’t say—it was more publicity oriented more than it was legislative or policy oriented or religious.

PRYOR: It wasn’t a religious group. None of us had religious affiliations. As far as whether it was education versus legislative lobbying, I don’t think we had that set of an agenda. Basically we would meet and plan out our next events based on what seemed to make sense at the time. So as it turned out, we did do lobbying with Congressman Moakley at one point because of the CISPES mailing. So that wasn’t out of our reach, but we were not—we were really just a local neighborhood group. We were not a large organization by any means. We were not a large membership organization.

In some ways, the fact that Congressman Moakley took up the cause of the people of El Salvador and specifically around an issue of status of Salvadoran refugees in the United States, was really quite amazing.² It wasn’t as if we were a major influence group who could exert any kind of particular leverage. We had organized in the neighborhood, and we did have petitions and we came to see him.

Our delegation included Felix Arroyo, who’s now on the city council in Boston, a long time advocate; and Ed Crotty,³ who had been very active in immigration issues and worked for an immigration organization; Miguel Satut, who was at that time was the head of Centro Presente—no, not Centro Presente, excuse me—Oficina Hispana, I believe, which was an organization that worked with Hispanic peoples. So we came with people in the community who were knowledgeable and had been active around these issues. But we were not a group that had contributed money or had a huge constituency to try to apply pressure.

² Starting in 1983, Congressman Moakley introduced legislation to protect Salvadorans in the U.S. using the “Extended Voluntary Departure” provision that allowed a temporary stay of deportation and work authorization. Moakley was finally able to pass legislation that granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) to Salvadorans in the Immigration Act of 1990 (PL. 101-649). TPS grants temporary legal residency and work authorization to immigrants fleeing civil wars, natural disasters or other conditions in their home country for a set period of time. In El Salvador’s case, TPS has been extended several times since 1990. The TPS designation has been used by other countries experiencing civil unrest and is administered by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). (See http://www.uscis.gov.)

³ OH-006 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Edmund Crotty, one of the founders of JPCOCA.
ENGLER: So you weren’t like a, as you said before, a major grassroots organization that could put pressure on a political figure. Were you surprised by Moakley’s actions?

PRYOR: We were very surprised, very surprised by what happened and very heartened in him in a lot of ways. We went to see Congressman Moakley; we had prepared for the lobbying effort with this committee together, had written a little briefing about it. We asked somebody who did lobbying in his work to get us some training.

ENGLER: Really?

PRYOR: All I actually remember was him [the lobbyist] telling us to dress conservatively and not wear jeans, but I think—I don’t know if he or somebody else said congressmen always like to have their pictures taken, so we brought a camera and in fact did take a picture. I still have a copy of the article that was published in our local paper, the *Jamaica Plain Gazette*, which we wrote and had his picture in it [attachment A].

When we went to see him, we had no idea what kind of response we would get. Congressman Moakley at the time wasn’t really particularly involved in issues with Latin America. He’s really known as a meat-and-potatoes politician, a real—somebody really oriented toward constituency issues and bringing in funding and projects for his district. But he wasn’t known for being involved in foreign policy issues, particularly. So I remember—I have in my materials the list of issues that we went over. I’d have to look them up. But I remember as we went over them—the ones that had more to do with specific foreign policy activities, he said, “Oh, well I just follow Congressman Studds4 on that.” Gerry Studds at that time was a very progressive congressman. That wasn’t the worst thing, but he didn’t really seem like he was going to take any kind of leadership position.

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And when we got to discuss the issue of Extended Voluntary Departure status for Salvadorans, which was one of the issues—basically what that meant was it would’ve allowed Salvadoran refugees in the United States who had fled the civil war there to remain in the United States legally until the violence in their home country subsided. And we were asking him to try to push that measure in the Congress. There was not a crew to go up to support it; it wasn’t as if we were going and asking him to support existing legislation that had already been put forward. But we raised this issue. And when we got to that point, Congressman Moakley said, “Well wait. Let me talk to my aide.” And his aide was Jim McGovern⁵ who is now the congressman from Worcester, but I think had fairly recently started with Moakley—this would have been 1983. And I think Jim would have been quite young at the time—his early twenties—he had just started with Moakley. Congressman Moakley called him to ask if anybody was doing something around this issue of Extended Voluntary Departure Status, and Jim said no. And Moakley said, “Ok, well, we’ll look into it.”

And I remember we, after the meeting, the lobbying meeting, we went and got some coffee. The people we were involved with were really excited and pleased that he said, “Get in touch with Jim in a couple of days and we’ll see what we can do about this.” But that response went far beyond our expectations, to be honest. In some ways—I wish I had known him better to really ask him what caused him to pick up on this issue. I don’t know if he just—constituencies came in and he wanted to find a way to respond to issues that they had brought to him, if his own Catholic background and the involvement of the Catholic Church made a difference, or that he had some particular sympathy for the plight of refugees—so many Irish had come to this country and certainly he had been—was a part of that community. I don’t know. We don’t know. Maybe Jim could say more. But he really responded to this issue in a way that was quite surprising to us.

**ENGLER:** So you didn’t find any blockages, “No, Mr. Moakley can’t meet with you. He can’t talk with you,” et cetera, et cetera. It really—you were able to have an open line to discourse?

⁵ James P. McGovern (1959- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts’ Third Congressional District in the U.S. House of Representatives since 1997. He was a member of Moakley’s congressional staff from 1982 to 1996.
PRYOR: Well we had arranged this appointment to come in as a constituency group, and he set the appointment and I don’t think that was so unusual. But once we met with him and raised this issue, and he decided to follow it up, our contact was really Jim. And I think Jim also was a real driving force behind this. But it took almost eight years, I think, for the bill to pass. I do have materials about that [contact John Joseph Moakley Archive for information about access to supporting materials]. And Moakley never gave up on it. He sent out a Dear Colleague letter. He wrote to—I have the materials—but whether it was the attorney general or the secretary of state, he gathered support in the Congress over a period of years. He stayed with this issue and ultimately did get the legislation passed.

I didn’t remember this, but Jim told a story of it finally coming down to head-to-head with—I think it was Senator [Alan] Simpson at that point who didn’t want this to pass. I think he said to Moakley, “You know, I’ll hold up a bill for the Irish immigration if you insist.” And Moakley basically said, “That’s your decision, but the Salvadorans are getting shot and killed now and the Irish aren’t. And if that’s what it is, they’ll just have to wait.” And at that point, Simpson gave in and conceded on it. So it was quite remarkable. Clearly Jim played a strong role in this, too. I’m sure he’s the one who did a lot of the legwork to help keep up this effort.

But of course the other thing that became so remarkable about the whole thing was that once he got involved in this issue, Congressman Moakley’s interests in the whole issue of what was happening in El Salvador and Latin America expanded. And when he died, every article and every obituary about him talked about how this meat-and-potatoes politician had become an unlikely leader around Central America issues. So he investigated the murder of the four churchwomen—no, excuse me, it was the murder of the Jesuit priests.6 He went down and investigated. He tried to stop funding for the School of the Americas. He met with [Fidel] Castro several times and tried to end the trade embargo. He tried to cut U.S. aid to El Salvador and to the right-wing government during the civil war. It ended up becoming a major focus for

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6 In December of 1989, Speaker of the House Thomas S. Foley appointed Moakley as chairman of a committee to investigate violence in El Salvador, specifically the November 16, 1989, murder of six Jesuit priests, their housekeeper and her daughter at the University of Central America in San Salvador. The committee is commonly referred to as the Speaker’s Task Force on El Salvador or the Moakley Commission. The Moakley Commission investigation revealed that the Salvadoran military was responsible for the murders.
him, and he was quite esteemed by many people in Central America and El Salvador, so it turned into a quite remarkable development.

ENGLER: Something that no one, I would gather, truly expected?

PRYOR: Certainly that we didn’t expect—I mean, not possibly have imagined it would develop in this way.

ENGLER: As a committee, though you say you weren’t really a large committee, sometimes one person can do a lot of big things. Were you well received by other Boston political figures or was it just Moakley and Mr. McGovern that you—?

PRYOR: No, I don’t remember that we went to see anybody else. It’s not like we were exclusively a lobbying group.

ENGLER: Right.

PRYOR: It happened that in this particular context we did go lobby and were asked to see our congressman. I don’t actually remember doing much lobbying beyond that. I have in my record letters that I sent to Senator Kennedy asking him to support the bill, which he did. I don’t remember that he was the kind of leader on it that Moakley was, although Senator Kennedy’s done some wonderful things, too. So I can’t compare a response to other politicians. I can compare the response I’ve had more recently around our recent invasion of Iraq in a great deal of lobbying that we did both with Senator Kerry and Congressman Lynch around this issue. They were nowhere near as receptive, I must say.

ENGLER: Really? That’s interesting.

7 Edward Moore “Ted” Kennedy (1932- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts in the United States Senate since 1962.
8 John Kerry (1943- ), a Democrat, has represented Massachusetts in the U.S. Senate since 1985.
PRYOR: Well, Kerry refused to oppose the resolution, even though his office was just inundated with calls. He has his own explanation of his position on that issue. At the time, Congressman Lynch—we had a meeting set up with an aide, but when we got there somehow they didn’t know about it. Somebody met with us—we asked for the letters in response that we never got. He later did change his position about supporting the resolution in Iraq, and I do give him credit for that. But at least in our initial work with him, we had nothing like the response that we got from Congressman Moakley. I just feel that he was very oriented toward his constituents. And if he could find a way to help them with something they wanted to accomplish, he would do that.

ENGLER: In a letter of Congressman Moakley’s, feelings were very mutual that he had for the people of El Salvador.

PRYOR: Yes.

ENGLER: It’s almost like that he, as you even said, that maybe perhaps with the Irish struggle or with his background, that he had a great affinity for the people. In the research that I’ve done, there’s never really been concrete certainty or, This is the reason why he did such-and-such. It just seemed like he was a very people-oriented person and hated to see people suffer. There was a lot of controversy around this issue, too, that I think a lot of political figures really wouldn’t want to touch. Has that really, in that sense, elevated his character? Obviously I would say yes, in your eyes, just because—just something that no one would really want to touch and here he is putting his foot out there.

PRYOR: Well, I don’t know, but I had the feeling that he got drawn into it. Initially, I almost thought he may have picked on the refugee issue as the one to follow, perhaps because something in it spoke to him, but maybe also because in a way it was a less political way to get involved as opposed to attacking U.S. policy directly. But then over the course of time and his involvement, he seemed to get more and more drawn in, in wanting to take on this issue head-on. As I said, almost every obituary said it was quite surprising that he became a leader in this area;
it didn’t fit with the rest of his image. I think—I’m sure that Jim, from a personal level, would have the best perspective on how he actually got drawn into this.

I know after Congressman Moakley died, we held an event that Jim came to and spoke at to honor Moakley and his persistence. And Jim talked about a number of things but one of them was that in doing these works—and how Moakley felt reconnected to his church and religion and spirituality. This is all secondhand. I can’t say directly. I don’t know what else to say.

**ENGLER:** That’s okay.

**PRYOR:** I don’t know exactly what drew him in. I mean it also was the [President Ronald] Reagan years and it would’ve ultimately been a political front to him. Reagan was doing a lot of damage domestically and elsewhere. The Democrats and Tip O’Neill\(^{10}\) were better placed to resist, perhaps than we are now. There may have been a domestic political ply to it, but it’s hard to see that it was an issue that he actually would’ve gained a lot from in terms of domestic play. I mean it wasn’t as if his district—its mission—that his district would’ve been particularly interested in.

**ENGLER:** Did you know—being that you were trying to help the people of El Salvador, did you ever meet any people from El Salvador and just talk about the issue, not necessarily politically, but just in general about things that had gone on?

**PRYOR:** I think that there were people in our group that did. I was hindered because I didn’t speak Spanish, among other things, and I was also very shy. So it was harder for me. I know Ginny Zanger and Fran.\(^{11}\) Ginny and Fran Price, who was involved who had spent time in Peru, had more intimate relations with the Latino community than I did personally. At one point, we tried to do a story for the *Boston Globe Magazine*—this was a few years later—about the situation with the Salvadorans. I did do some interviews with people at that time. I can’t

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\(^{11}\) OH-007 in the Moakley Oral History Project is an interview with Fran Price, one of the founders of JPCOCA.
remember the details of it now. Ultimately Fran Price did finish it, the article, and it was published in the *Globe Magazine* [attachment B].

**ENGLER:** Do you find that writing is your voice, in a way, as you’re saying that you didn’t really speak Spanish or—did you find that really was a good outlet for you to get whatever was what you were feeling out in the open? Has that always been a good tool for you?

**PRYOR:** Yeah, I mean in a sense I did, and have written for a living, both when I was studying history and when I did computer documentation and now micro or policy analysis in the health care field.

There were a lot of wonderful things that Congressman Moakley did, really wonderful. We had one little story that made us laugh, because over the years Congressman Moakley would always tell about how a nun had come to see him talk about the plight of Salvadoran refugees and that’s how he got involved in the issue. And we just laughed at it; we don’t know if it just made a better story or—because we really feel and thought it was our group that had made the initial contact. Somebody figured out later that in fact, I think Ginny Zanger had gone with a nun to see Moakley at the post office in Jamaica Plain. He had his constituency meetings there to discuss the issues. So, I think from somewhat after we met with him there my have been a meeting with the nun. But we found it somewhat amusing that this is how the way the story transpired or got told.

**ENGLER:** That could have been an affirmation of what was sort of the extra push. That’s interesting.

**PRYOR:** Yeah, I mean, we didn’t care. It wasn’t like we felt bad about it. It was just something that we laughed about.

**ENGLER:** Well, Moakley’s a very colorful politician, anyway. And there are stories of him always trying to maybe color certain aspects of it. So that’s why it’s important that we get these perspectives that you have to offer.
PRYOR: Well, I’m sure he told it in a way that worked best for him. That’s great. That was perfectly all right. We weren’t looking for any particular credit.

ENGLER: You were basically—as a group, you just wanted something to be done, and for these people who were going through these horrible experiences, to basically get the help that they needed. Did you find that a lot of people—I don’t know if it was McGovern, but I think he made the comment that, really the Reagan administration had started the ball rolling—maybe not directly, but indirectly started the ball rolling that where this whole mess got started down in El Salvador. And all of a sudden, that mess wasn’t going to get cleaned up. Did you know anything really about the administration’s involvement in El Salvador at the time?

PRYOR: Well, we knew that they were supporting the wrong side, that they were sending a lot of funding to the government of El Salvador to oppress the groups that were struggling down there, so we certainly knew that Reagan, Reagan’s policy in this respect, was from our perspective, very negative.

ENGLER: And with all of this, this is the sort—have you been politically active? Are you still in there? Obviously you are with Iraq?

PRYOR: Well, over the years I’ve been certainly involved. As I’ve said, I’ve always tried to maintain some level of activity. I was involved with Tax Equity Alliance of Massachusetts, doing some precinct work around fair tax campaigns and progressive income tax. More recently I’ve been working with a neighborhood group in Roslindale, called Roslindale Neighbors for Peace and Justice, that got formed after September eleventh and the terrorist attacks in New York. They have been opposing the military policies of the [President George W.] Bush administration and have opposed the invasion of Iraq and lobbying and educating—very similar to what Jamaica Plain Committee on Central America did around the issues related to Iraq and our current so-called War on Terrorism.
ENGLER: And in summation of everything that you said, what would you—just the whole experience with the people and your involvement—people get rather jaded with politicians right now—is that the glimmer of light that you reflect upon in times when you see these things and that there are other people out there that were concerned about global issues that were going on out there? What’s your overall assessment of your whole experience with Moakley and the Committee on Central America and the people that you met?

PRYOR: For me it was a wonderful experience. As I said, I met wonderful people, confident people, people who knew a lot more than I did about doing community organizing. We had—we felt that we had made a contribution, that things got at least a little bit better because of work that we had done. We were, as I said, very heartened by Moakley’s response and Jim’s response. It made us feel like sometimes politicians could rise above just immediate self-interest and local issues, and really care about issues of wider significance. So, it was remarkable and surprising and a wonderful, wonderful surprise for us. It’s hard to be hopeful at the moment, given the current state of things in this country, how things have become much darker than they did in the eighties. But at least it gives you some inspiration to keep going and to try to do whatever small thing you can do to help, in the hope that it makes some small effect that you didn’t expect.

ENGLER: That’s good.

END OF INTERVIEW