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CATEGORY: ARGENTINA: NOW

CONCEPTS: HUMAN RIGHTS, Government, Women

ACTIVITY: A MINIDRAMA ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE "DESAPARECIDOS."

Argentina has just achieved an elected civilian government after years of a harsh military dictatorship. Opposition to the dictatorship was strong and took many forms, including guerrilla attacks but also including demonstrations, strikes, clandestine publications, cultural activities, protest music, media criticism. In response to the opposition, the military embarked on what they themselves termed a "dirty war," arresting, killing and torturing thousands of people. Most of these arrests were unofficial, leading to the term "desaparecido" or disappeared person. One of the most courageous and striking results of this rash of disappeared persons were the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, a group of mothers and grandmothers who protested daily in downtown Buenos Aires demanding information on the whereabouts of their family members. This minidrama is representative of a tragic moment in Argentine history and the response of some Argentine women.

OBJECTIVES: The minidrama teaches about the "desaparecidos" of Argentina and can be used to bring about discussion of human rights in Latin America.

MATERIALS: Copies of the minidrama
Large sheets of cardboard

PROCEDURE: Explain the concept of "desaparecido" to the students. After having several of the students prepare and present the minidrama, you could discuss the following:

1. Should a government allow opposition? How much and what kind of opposition should it allow?
2. Do people not directly affected by repression have any responsibility in a situation like Argentina. What can or should people in Argentina do? What can or should people in the United States do?
3. What causes repression of the extreme type we see in this minidrama?

VOCABULARY: "desaparecidos," military dictatorship, repression.

RELATED ACTIVITIES: "Desaparecidos" are common in many Latin American countries. Have students research specific countries to find out the human rights situation in each. The list of human rights groups in the appendix of this notebook will provide sources for this information.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo
A Minidrama

Characters: Señora Sánchez
Señora Pascuali
Señora Jiménez
Señora Schmidt
A reporter from New York
Narrator
Man on the street

Props: Protest signs saying "Where is my son?" "Return our Children!" etc.

Setting: A downtown plaza in Buenos Aires in July. Since this is winter in Argentina, the characters might wear coats to show the cold weather.

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[Señora Sánchez and Señora Pascuali are walking back and forth with their signs.]

Narrator: Until 1983, Argentina spent nearly twenty years governed by a military dictatorship. During this time, repression was very strong and the government created secret police forces which kidnapped people opposed to the dictatorship. These people were called the "disappeared" because when they were arrested the government refused to give any information about them and many were never seen again. Many of these people were young. It is estimated that at least 10,000 people disappeared.

A group of mothers of the disappeared decided to do something about their sons and daughters. They began to demonstrate everyday at the downtown Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires. They were asking for information about their children. They became known all over the world as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo.

[Sra. Jiménez and Sra. Schmidt approach also carrying protest signs.]

Sra. Jiménez: Hello, friends! I want to introduce you to Señora Schmidt. She has decided to join us. Since this is her first day she is a little frightened. Please give her your help and friendship.

Sra. Sánchez: Welcome, Señora Schmidt. We thank you for joining us. It isn't easy and we of all people know what this means to you and your family.

Sra. Pascuali: Will you tell us why you have come? I know it's difficult, but talking helps. My son Renato, disappeared over a year ago and if it hadn't been for the support of other mothers I don't know what I would have done.

Sra. Schmidt: Thank you for your welcome. Yes, I'll tell you what happened. I decided to come and demonstrate so that people would know about my daughter.

Her name is María Teresa. She's a lovely girl, nineteen years old. Here's a picture of her. [She shows a picture to the other mothers.] Two weeks ago, on Friday night, we were all at home in bed. My husband, myself, María Teresa, and Antonio, our youngest. He's fourteen. In the middle of the night about ten men who said they were police broke into our apartment. They had machine guns. They searched the house and took some books and papers from María's room. One man showed me a book about hospitals for the poor - you see, María was studying to be a hospital administrator. He said, "See the Communist filth your daughter is reading!"

And then they left, taking María. My husband tried to stop them but he was hit with the butt of a gun. We have had no news of María since. We have gone to the police but they say they never went to our home. Lawyers won't help us; they seem afraid. Demonstrating here now seems our only chance.

Sra. Jiménez: It's a sad story that we have all suffered. Our only hope is that by being here together in public we may save some of our children and prevent more disappearances.

[A man with a notepad and camera approaches the four women.]

Reporter: Excuse me, ladies. I'm a reporter from the United States. Do you mind answering a few questions?

[The women nod]

Reporter: [Looking at Sra. Pascuali.] Will you tell me why you are protesting?

Sra. Pascuali: Yes, of course. My son Renato, Renato Pascuali, p-a-s-c-u-a-l-i, disappeared over a year ago. One day he went to his classes at the University and he never returned.

Reporter: Are you sure he didn't just run away? Sometimes young people think they need to get out on their own.

Sra. Pascuali: Many students saw what happened and his friends have told us. He was walking to the bus stop to come home and a black limousine drove up. A group of men with guns pulled him inside, and the car drove away. That was the last time he was seen. The car was the kind the secret government groups use to kidnap people so we know who took him.

Reporter: If the police arrested him he must have been doing something wrong. Was he involved in terrorism?

Sra. Pascuali: It's true that my son was against the military government. He used to be active in student politics before repression got so bad. We also suspect he may have helped make and distribute flyers against the military. But, if he broke the law, why don't they bring him to trial? If he is a terrorist, why don't they prove it?

[A belligerent man approaches the group. He tries to push the women away from the reporter.]

Man: Don't listen to these women. They're crazy. Or worse. They are spreading lies about this government which has finally given us some peace. Subversives! Communists!

Sra. Jiménez: Please leave us alone! We are only mothers looking for our sons and daughters.

[The man storms away.]

Reporter: What do you think you accomplish by demonstrating?

Sra. Jiménez: Since the police and the courts refuse to recognize the disappearances of our children we have no other choice. To keep silent would be to condemn our sons and daughters to certain death. Maybe if we can embarrass the government and make the truth come out we can save at least some of them. We also want to make it difficult for the military to keep on kidnapping people. We must save other mothers from our grief.

Reporter: How do you know they aren't all dead?

Sra. Sánchez: I can answer that. My son, daughter-in-law and grandson all disappeared two years ago. No one saw what happened exactly. Two weeks later my son's body was returned to us. The police said he was shot in a terrorist attack. My daughter-in-law and grandchild have never returned. And then, just two months ago, a woman came to see me. She said her sister had been released from a jail in the South. She wouldn't give her name but she said her sister had seen my daughter-in-law. She was sick but still alive. So you see, with bits and pieces of information we know that there still are hundreds in the jails.

Reporter: Aren't you in danger of disappearing, too?

Sra. Sánchez: There are too many of us now and we are too visible. If all the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo disappeared, it would make headlines all over the world. Besides, we have nothing to lose. We love our children and have to try to save them even if we risk our own lives.

Reporter: Well, thank you for answering my questions. I wish you the best of luck.

Sra. Schmidt: And thank you. If you tell our story to the people in the United States maybe they can understand and help us end this nightmare.

[Reporter walks away.]

Sra. Jiménez: My friends, it's getting dark. And colder! Time to go home. I hope to see you all well and safe here again tomorrow.

Sra. Pascuali: Yes, and God-willing we may have some good news.

[All embrace and take their signs and walk away in different directions.]

Narrator: In 1983, public pressure was so great against the military government that they finally returned the government to the civilians. Some of the people responsible for the kidnappings, including high-ranking military officials, are now being tried by the new democratic government. Slowly but surely, some families are finding out exactly what happened to their loved-ones. Because no official records were kept of the "disappeared" people, many other families will never know.

THE END