

Needless deaths: Rachel Corrie, Shaden Abu Hijleh

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [May 31, 2003](#) issue

I have two files on my computer desktop labeled “Rachel” and “Shaden.” They remind me of the deaths of an American woman and a Palestinian woman. One contains stories and editorials about Rachel Corrie, a 23-year-old native of Olympia, Washington, who was crushed to death on March 16 by an Israeli bulldozer. Rachel died as she was protesting the demolition of a Palestinian home in Rafah, Gaza. The other file contains clippings about Shaden Abu Hijleh, a 62-year-old Palestinian grandmother who was shot by Israeli soldiers on October 11, 2002, as she sat with members of her family on her front porch in Nablus, a city in northern Palestine.

Shaden, a well-known peace activist, environmentalist and former school teacher, was making plans to travel to Chicago to visit her son Rami and meet his new American wife. On the day of her death, Nablus was under one of its extended curfews, and the streets were quiet. Shaden was sitting with her husband, Jamal, a physician, and son Saed, a professor of social geography at Najah University in Nablus. An Israeli jeep drove slowly down the street and stopped in front of the house. One of the soldiers took out his weapon and fired more than 15 hollow-point bullets (illegal under international law), killing Shaden and wounding both her husband and her son. The Israeli army says it continues to investigate her death.

Shaden is one of more than 2,000 Palestinians killed by Israeli-occupying forces during the current intifada. Her death might have passed unnoticed outside of Palestine and Israel except for the fact that she had four adult children who have all received degrees from the University of Iowa, a link that has prompted an Iowa congressman to take an interest in the situation. There is also the fact that her sons Rami, who lives in a Chicago suburb, and Raed, who lives in Dubai, are American citizens.

Shaden’s daughter Lana lives in Jerusalem, where she is chief engineer with a United Nations program of assistance to Palestinians. Her children have been unable to visit

their grandparents for five months because curfews and road closures prevent them from traveling the short distance between Jerusalem and Nablus. The family has established a Web site to honor their mother, and to link to others who have suffered because of the Israeli occupation (www.remembershaden.org).

Rachel Corrie was a volunteer with the International Solidarity Movement (ISM) in the refugee camp of Rafah, Gaza. In the 1980s her family helped start an alternative elementary school that focused on the environment, social justice and peace. In the fifth grade, Rachel and her classmates held a news conference inside the state capitol to call attention to world hunger. The week before she died, she called from Gaza to provide a last minute briefing for her mother, who was in Washington, D.C., to lobby for two causes: the human rights of Palestinians and the need for protection for international peace volunteers like Rachel.

On the day she died, Rachel Corrie wore a bright orange vest that identified her as an ISM volunteer. She stood in front of a home that had been targeted for demolition by the Israeli army. (The demolition was illegal under international law.) Witnesses report that she was clearly visible to the bulldozer driver and had raised her arms to ask him to stop. Witnesses also say the bulldozer ran over her body twice before it retreated. The Israel army called her death “an unfortunate accident.” Palestinians have built memorials for Rachel: the Rachel Corrie Children and Youth Cultural Center, and the Rachel Corrie Center for Women Empowerment, a part of the Gaza Community Mental Health Program. The Corrie family’s Web site is www.rachelcorrie.org.

A Washington state legislature resolution on Rachel’s death concludes “that [we] uphold the principles of free speech and the rights of all citizens to peaceable protest for whatever cause they choose,” and it asked “the President of the United States or Congress to conduct an investigation into the circumstances of Rachel’s death and share the results of that investigation with the people of the United States.”

Congressman Brian Baird (D., Wash.) introduced legislation calling for an investigation into her death, but only 30 members of Congress have cosigned the resolution. Philip Weiss, columnist for the *New York Observer*, writes that one of the bill’s cosigners is Georgia’s John Lewis, who participated in nonviolent protest during the civil rights movement. Weiss reports that according to general opinion, Baird’s bill is doomed. “The *Jewish Forward* says the legislation will never reach the floor.”

Weiss notes, however, that supporters of the Baird bill include several Jewish peace organizations that see “the 36-year occupation as a disaster for Israeli society.”

My desktop files on Rachel and Shaden include e-mails from a network of citizens linked to one another by grief, anger and a determination to build a legacy for peace from their deaths. Recalling that the U.S. went to war against Iraq with a “coalition of the willing,” it seems only appropriate to refer to this peace network as a “coalition of the unwilling”—those who are unwilling to remain silent while innocent civilians are killed. To join this coalition, start by asking your members of Congress why Rachel Corrie and Shaden Abu Hijleh had to die, and then ask them what they intend to do about it.