

Opinion: Civility starts with Congress

By Jackie Speier

The news that Rep. Gabrielle Giffords had been shot in the head hit me in the stomach – complete nausea. My grief over a fallen colleague and those who died in the gun assault brought back the sensations of a jungle runway 32 years ago, when I lay in a pool of my own blood, covered with ants, expecting to die.

I pray that Giffords will be able to read this soon or that I might have the chance to read it to her. I have much to say.

As a legal aide to Rep. Leo Ryan, D-San Mateo, in 1978, I held idealistic thoughts of what could be done in the name of justice. In November 1978, I joined Ryan on a fact-finding mission to Jonestown, Guyana. We were responding to rumors – ultimately determined to be fact – that relatives of the congressman's Bay Area constituents were being held against their will by a cult leader, the Rev. Jim Jones. Many members of Jones' Peoples Temple wanted to return with us to the United States. The outcome has been well documented in news accounts, books and movies. We were about to board our plane back home when a truck full of Jones' gunmen burst through the thick jungle cover. Shots rang out. I hid behind the wheel of the plane and played dead. Someone shot me five times at point-blank range.

I called the congressman's name. There was no answer. Later I was told he had been riddled with 45 bullets.

My next life started during those 22 hours on my back on the runway, unable to move and barely able to think of anything other than this was how my dreams were to end at the age of 28.

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