



Forensic Files

Human Rights Center seeks answers for adoptees separated from families decades ago

Not so long ago, daily life in El Salvador was dangerous and chaotic. During the armed conflict from 1980 to 1992, families were torn apart, children kidnapped or sent away to escape danger. Those separated from their parents were often funneled to corrupt adoption agencies seeking profit from placing children in homes, sometimes thousands of miles away. Fortunately, Boalt's Human Rights Center (HRC) is part of an effort to demand answers and accountability through the use of forensic science.

The center's DNA Reunification Project has

GENE POOL: Eduardo Gaii Checco, center rear, is greeted by his extended family after a 30-year separation ended with the help of HRC's DNA Reunification Project.

FOREFRONT

found compelling evidence that the Salvadoran government was responsible for abducting children from villages during the conflict. The same evidence is aiding transnational adoptees in their quest to establish kinship with family members in El Salvador.

“It’s rewarding to apply science to an important social matter,” says Cristián Orrego, who joined HRC as Director of Forensic Projects in

November 2011 and is a founding member of the volunteer organization, Alliance of Forensic Scientists for Human Rights and Humanitarian Investigations. “Bringing science to documentation of human rights violations yields evidence that can be very persuasive in court.”

HRC works closely with the Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Association for the Search for Disappeared Children), a San Salvador nonprofit created to find the children—now young adults—who

were forcibly separated from their families or given up under duress during the civil war. An enormous challenge in the process is completing the DNA database of those families who lost children, launched in 2006 under the leadership of Father Jon Cortina, founder of Pro-Búsqueda, and HRC Faculty Director Eric Stover.

“Many family members are difficult to reach or have since passed away,” explains Orrego. “Since Pro-Búsqueda was established in 1994,

we have documentation of 898 families separated. So far, 373 of those cases have been found or resolved. There are still 525 left. We need every resource, every technological tool available, to continue this effort.”

Political obstacles have prevented Pro-Búsqueda from examining all of the adoption records. “There is a lot of evidence,” says Orrego. “But those records are going to be embarrassing. There were networks of fly-by-night adoption agencies shut down at the time of the 1992 Chapultepec Peace Accords because they weren’t operating properly. Judges and lawyers who should have been looking at those proceedings more carefully don’t want that information revealed.”

HRC is working to help Pro-Búsqueda develop its ability to use the DNA database to reach more transnational adoptees. “Cristián is Chilean by birth, and he has a close understanding of the turmoil in Latin America,” says HRC Executive Director Camille Crittenden. “Eric has experience examining mass crimes. They bring rigorous scientific methods and great dedication to investigating these crimes.”

The end result, as Orrego knows well, warrants the effort. “There was a young man adopted by a family in Italy,” he says. “He took the initiative to contact Pro-Búsqueda, but they couldn’t pinpoint his biological family. Then, through a hit in the DNA database, a link was made. Last year, the young man and his family of origin were reunited.”

Sometimes, such happy endings are possible. Using science, leadership, and commitment, HRC hopes for many more. —Ben Peterson

For further information, visit www.law.berkeley.edu/HRCweb/el_salvador.html.



FEELS SO GOOD: Eduardo Gaii Checco, left, was reunited with his brother after separation from his family of origin in 1982.