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## **Massacre Survivor Returns to Find Sorrow -- And Strength**

By Mary Jo McConahay

Rabinal, Guatemala -- Last in a two-part series.

In the early 1980s, nearly 400 Maya Ache Indians in Guatemala, most of them women and children, were killed by soldiers and paramilitary groups in the town of Rio Negro.

The campaign of terror began after the Mayans resisted eviction to make way for the building of the \$1.2 billion Chixoy Dam along a river of the same name. They steadfastly refused to move to the cramped houses at the resettlement site provided by the Guatemalan power utility, INDE.

Last month, a survivor named Denese Joy Becker returned to Rio Negro after 18 years of living in the United States. Chronicle Foreign Service correspondent Mary Jo McConahay accompanied Becker on her trip home.

Denese Joy Becker, a mother of two who lives in Algona, Iowa, had begun to worry whether the vivid memories she carried were the imaginings of a crazed mind. She had no one she might ask, no one to compare memories of an idyllic childhood in a village called Rio Negro that ended in unspeakable scenes: "I knew I was a survivor of something, because I remembered things, and I remembered my name -- Dominga Sic Ruiz."

Becker, who was adopted at age 11 from a Guatemala City orphanage by a Baptist minister and his wife, was raised in the small town of Thompson, Iowa. In March, with the help of an Internet-savvy cousin, Becker discovered she was a survivor of one of the worst massacres in the history of Guatemala's 36-year civil war, which ended in 1996.

#### ASHAMED OF AWFUL PAST

In the Midwest, among blonde, blue-eyed children, the Maya Indian girl felt shy and "almost ashamed" of an awful past that she couldn't share. Becker, now 27, knew she had been adopted in Guatemala, but over the years she forgot her native Maya Achi language and Spanish. She had nightmares even in the security of a caring family.

She later fell in love with Blane Becker, a Kmart department manager six years her senior, and went to live in Algona. Still, the nightmares continued. "Sometimes I thought I was losing it," she said.

As sons Sturling, 7, and Skylar, 4, grew older, Becker felt more compelled to return to Guatemala. "I looked at them and realized you have to know yourself well enough to teach them your own personal history, which is part of their background too," she said. But Becker, who describes herself as "terribly shy," was unable to discuss her desire to reconnect with the past, and funds were tight; a trip seemed impossible.

Two years ago, at a family reunion in Michigan, Becker confided her desire -- "even just to know if I was celebrating my birthday on the the right day" -- to Mary Purvis, 41, a relative of her adoptive father.

"Denese would seem stuck-up at the reunions, keeping to herself, feeding her children," Purvis recalled. "It finally occurred to me the reunions were hard for her; this was not her real family. Here we are hugging each other while she's over there in pain."

Purvis searched the Internet until she found a Web site for Stefan Schmitt, a founding member of the forensic team that worked at Rio Negro and who now teaches at Florida State University. Schmitt corroborated details that Becker recalled.

#### MASSACRE AT RIO NEGRO

Rio Negro was the only one of 15 villages that refused to move without adequate compensation to make way for the flooding behind the proposed Chixoy Dam, which was partly financed in the 1970s and 1980s by the World Bank.

In February 1982, the able-bodied men of Rio Negro were summoned to a market town and slaughtered by members of the Civil Patrol, acting in concert with the army. Then on March 13, 1982, patrollers from the town and soldiers in uniform killed the women, children and elderly who remained.

The village -- part of a thousand- year-old Achi Maya culture in the valley -- became one of 440 nationwide that was considered ``subversive" and wiped out by the army during its war against leftist guerrillas.

By 1996, when peace accords were signed, some 200,000 people had died in the conflict, mostly unarmed Maya Indians, in a government campaign that was later labeled "genocide" by a U.N.-sponsored Truth Commission.

News about the discovery of an American survivor of Rio Negro flowed among the academics, activists and others concerned with U.S. policy in Central America. The announcement interested Amnesty International and the Chixoy Dam Reparations Campaign. And others wondered if she might be a witness in legal cases against former military dictators Romeo Lucas Garcia and Efraim Rios Montt.

Becker, who works as a manicurist and recently took a part-time waitress job, seemed overwhelmed by the expectations swirling around her. She had never heard of these campaigns and cases. "I just want to see my family," she said after her arrival last month in Guatemala.

## MEMORIES OF THE KILLING

She hoped to meet relatives who might tell her what she was like as a child, perhaps find someone with a picture of her father or mother. She wanted to confirm flashes of memory -- soldiers swimming across a river and surrounding a church where she played dead among still bodies.

It happened, she would later find out, when soldiers protecting the dam project attacked the village in 1979, purportedly to find thieves. One of Becker's clearest memories was the March day three years later when she was 9 years old, the day her mother was killed.

“It was early in the morning and my mom was breast-feeding,” Becker recalled. Her father had been slain in a month earlier with 76 other men from Rio Negro in the town of Xococ and hastily buried there. Days later, a sister was born.

“It was very peaceful, very beautiful, and I was sitting next to her,” she said. “All of a sudden I heard shouting. I looked up and saw soldiers had surrounded us all and they were grabbing people, dragging people, putting a noose around their necks.”

In the midst of crying villagers, Becker said her mother told her to grab a cloth. ``She tied the baby onto my back and turned me around and squared me up and kind of took me by the shoulders and I looked up at her. `Run,' she said."

For four months, the little girl tried to keep herself and the baby alive, eating berries and wrapping the infant in leaves for warmth. When the baby died, Becker buried her at the base of a tree. In the next months, as starving survivors -- including an aunt -- found each other in the forest, they passed the girl from place to place clandestinely and finally to a convent, where nuns secretly delivered her to the orphanage in the capital, Guatemala City.

#### BECKER RETURNS

When Becker's rented jeep pulled into Rabinal, a town near Rio Negro some five hours from the capital, her former community was ready. Now living in small, wooden houses in a refugee camp in the shadow of a military garrison, they brought loudspeakers, a microphone and marimba tapes into the main square.

When Becker stepped into the light, they saw a Maya Indian like them, but whose skin showed no sign of a life in the sun; a woman of their small stature, yet wearing perfect make-up and blue jeans instead of a long woven skirt.

But Becker was a stranger only for a moment. Someone called her name, ``Dominga," and the crowd broke into cries, with aunts, uncles and cousins presenting themselves in a language she could not understand.

``We thought she was dead," said her father's 52-year-old sister, Dorotea Iboy Sic. When a hard rain began to fall, the crowd moved under a yellow colonnade; Becker, pressed on all sides, touched a woman's cheek and whispered, ``They're just like me."

But tensions of that long war have not disappeared, as Becker discovered almost immediately.

On her second day in Rabinal, the Beckers, Purvis, and a couple of dozen displaced Rio Negro residents walked to a cement monument for the town's dead at the border of a graveyard. Becker gazed at the names of the 77 women and 106 children, and a painting confirming of her own memory of that day -- villagers joined at the necks by a long rope, led by armed men who would shoot them just over the rise, after raping the women and making them dance.

“There's a verse in the Bible that says God sees what happened and will take his vengeance,” Becker offered.

Many villagers, however, felt differently.

“We can't wait for God. They took the cows of the people, and the widows have nothing. We must fight here and now,” said Carlos Chen, 53, whose wife, son, daughter and sister died at Rio Negro.

“There were pregnant women, and those babies never saw light,” added Pedrina Burrero, 36. “You can be their voice.”

## TEARS TURN TO ANGER

Walking the long, thin single row where the Rio Negro villagers' remains lay buried, Becker shook with tears, her only words, "I didn't do anything." But when she heard that a locally well-known oreja, or military collaborator, was standing at the edge of the crowd, her tears turned to anger.

"You're causing problems here -- leave people alone," she told the shocked man, as villagers melted away, clearly worried by the scene.

"I'm just here observing. Will you be staying?" he asked. "I'll be returning and returning and returning," Becker replied, and then spit at his feet.

One afternoon, searching through residence ledgers in the municipal office, Becker found the hand-written entry for her father, Rosendo, along with his picture. Moved and elated, she stood for several minutes stroking the photo, then arranged to have it copied. This was, she said later, the most important moment of her journey. "It brought me peace," she said.

But that night Becker became furious when she learned that one of the ex-patrollers present at the massacre had demanded that town hall clerks tell him what she was doing. She also discovered that another patroller -- named by witnesses in a trial about the massacre but never arrested -- is on the city council, a member of the same party as President Alfonso Portillo.

"I'm an adult now and I can do something about it. Seeing the perpetrators everywhere -- it just burns me to have them free," Becker said.

"She is bringing an American view of the world to this situation," said Schmitt, the forensic expert, who had come to Rabinal to take DNA samples from Becker and relatives to corroborate their blood relationship. "She grew up in a country where she has rights and is aware of them."

The samples never left Schmitt's backpack for days to ensure an unbroken chain of evidence. Schmitt said establishing family ties was a "humanitarian" act, but proof of relationship to the victims could also be evidence in a legal proceeding.

As a witness and victim -- and as an American citizen with the right to sue in U.S. courts -- Becker's appearance has not escaped the notice of Guatemalans attempting to push legal cases against perpetrators of the violence.

#### WANTING JUSTICE

After days of talking with family members and others, Becker said she had moved from her concern about family ``to also seeing I have rights," and ``wanting justice."

But she had no intention of soon changing her life in Algona, Iowa. ``I'll appreciate the United States more when I go home. My life is there, my job is there, my other family, my children. America has been good to me."

If she could help make things better for her Guatemalan family, she would. If she could ``just get a hold of the town of Algona -- getting people there to understand what happened here -- I'd be doing good."

Meanwhile, during her final days in Rabinal, Becker often slipped into the market in the town square to buy yellow jocote fruit, or an orange mango, to eat the rich traditional corn and chicken stew called pinol from a gourd bowl. Sometimes she sifted through the lengths of fabric worn by Achi women, holding it to her face, as if to impress upon her mind again the scents of her childhood.

“I had to put myself in the place where these things really happened,” she said.