Welcome to the premier issue of Background Magazine. We will serve as a resource for policy makers, academicians, and professionals who appreciate the power of visual narratives to bring issues of international policy into sharp focus. Publishing the best current visual and written narrative journalism, Background will bring new perspectives and considerations to the discussion and formulation of national and international policy. With a focus on visual representations of the experiences of individuals around the world, academics, policy makers, engaged citizens, and public officials will find stories in the pages of Background that help define and shape how they think about world events and issues. We at Background invite you to engage with the stories that will inform the policy debates of tomorrow.

Thank you for looking,

Victor J. Blue, Editor in Chief
The Lost

Can Guatemala’s disappeared be found?

Story and Photographs by Victor J. Blue
“You’re talking about looking for a needle in a haystack. A very big haystack.”

Fredy Peccerelli

The Well

Above: A steel structure stretches above Ossuary 2 at the La Verbena exhumation site. The structure allows anthropologists and workers to descend into the 45-foot deep hole, and to remove the remains of the bodies inside. Left: Forensic anthropologists work in the bottom of the ossuary. These pits were dug to serve as a depository for remains interred in the cemetery at La Verbena. Bodies are buried in walled niches for years, then removed and dumped into the wells. During the war years, many of the victims of disappearances are believed to have been dumped in the wells to prevent their identification. Previous spread: Angeles Garnica tries in vain to piece together a broken skull of an unidentified person.
Dressed in sky-blue hospital scrubs and making notes on a clipboard, Jorge Mario Barrios methodically catalogs each trauma suffered by the human remains on the metal examining table in front of him.

FAFG case # 1200-2776. Recovered from Osario 2, La Verbena cemetery.

Name unknown, buried as XX.

Sex: Male, between 33-57 years of age.

Skeletor: semi-complete, displaying multiple traumas, all perimortem- at the time of death. Displaying a “Puma” logo. He joined the organization in 1985. The FAFG was established 19 years ago to exhume and investigate the sites of human rights violations committed during the civil war in Guatemala. Since it’s inception, the organization has completed over 1,300 investigations and recovered the remains of more than 5,900 people, victims of Guatemala’s civil war. That was before La Verbena.

Guatemala bled its way through a civil war that lasted from 1960 until the signing of a Peace Accord in 1996. From the late 70s until the mid-1980s, a series of military dictators led a government committed to a culture of violence and human rights violations. It is the site of the largest exhumation yet undertaken by the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation, the FAFG, and the first major one in the capital itself.

Fredy Peccerelli is the half Guatemalan, half New Yorker director of the FAFG. He joined the organization in 1995. The FAFG had already been operating in Guatemala for nearly 10 years, exhuming massacre sites in the highlands. But nothing had been done to look for the victims of forced disappearance in the capital. Peccerelli told him he wasn’t sure, let me make a few phone calls. They went the next day to La Verbena, the municipal cemetery in Guatemala City, to see what they could find.

In the office of the cemetery they were shown the log books for the war years. Fredy and Clyde looked at each other and dove in. “We reached for ‘81, we opened them and the next thing you know you see many, many XX, many of them in groups, many of them shot to the head, many of them very young, and immediately we knew: this is not normal. You know, some of them with their hands chopped off, with their finger prints or their faces mangled- it all seemed to be a strategy to disappear people. So Clyde turns to me and he goes ‘We just solved a thousand homicides.’” From there it took 7 years to get the project off the ground. The phenomena of forced disappearance, used throughout Latin America in these years, reached its most focused and effective iteration here. And now, 15 years after the war officially ended, Fredy and his organization are trying to find those disappeared. The exhumation at La Verbena, along with the construction of an internationally accredited DNA laboratory and the revelations of the historic police archives, represents the first real chance that some of the 45,000 disappeared may be found.

In 2004 Peccerelli was up from New York and Clyde asked, “Fredy, what are we doing about the disappeared?” “The FAFG had already been operating in Guatemala for nearly 10 years, exhuming massacre sites in the highlands. But nothing had been done to look for the victims of forced disappearance in the capital. Peccerelli told him he wasn’t sure, let me make a few phone calls. They went the next day to La Verbena, the municipal cemetery in Guatemala City, to see what they could find.”

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Background

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The anthropologists and the remains. All of it funded by the USAID and various European governments.

A native New Yorker, Peccerelli felt driven by the effort in the U.S. to identify the victims of 9/11. Closely following the work from afar, he was struck by the enormity of the effort to identify what were often tiny fragments of bone. “I decided that if they went to all that effort looking for those 3000 people, those people that were disappeared in Guatemala needed the opportunity of someone making a real effort, for the first time, to look for their bodies.”

Nearly a year after starting the dig, there have still been no identifications. As the months wear on, Peccerelli is beginning to feel the pressure. “There are no guarantees here.”

“You’re talking really about looking for a needle in a haystack—a very big haystack.”

In the bottom of Ossuary 2, the earth walls rise above, out of your line of sight. The air is wet and so thick you can feel it running in and out of your lungs. It smells like turned earth, like rotting wood. Two fans buzz uselessly overhead, and two work lamps hang down to light the floor.

The pile of remains, the color of old coffee grounds, rises slowly from the trench around the edge where they stand. The forensic archaeologists of the FAFG, dressed in white Tyvek suits, wear respirators over their faces and climbing harnesses strapped across their waists. They rappel 45–feet down to the bottom three times a day. The pit deepens as they remove more bones. They have no idea how deep it will go.

On the dirt above their heads four numbers and a letter are spray painted in fading white on the dirt walls. 1, 2, 3, and 4 are the different rigs for the buckets that lift the remains to the surface. The N tells them which way is North. They work fast. Finger length cockroaches scatter as they dig through the remains. They scramble delicately over the mound, the breaking bones underneath their feet crack like thick dried autumn leaves. They brush away the dirt, peel back the remaining scraps of out of fashion burial outfits. As their eyes adjust to the darkness, the bones start to appear, like an optical illusion coming into focus. They recognize ribs, and a shoulder blade. A tea colored skull with a wisp of black hair draped over it emerges from the dirt. Ramiro, in his yellow

He could be anybody.”
Jorge Mario Barrios

“The Analysis” Jorge Mario Barrios analyzes an unidentified skeleton FAFG Case # 1200-2776. Below: Jessica Osorio takes a DNA sample from a family member looking for her mother at La Verbena. The campaign to collect DNA from family members is key to making positive identifications.

He could be anybody.”
Jorge Mario Barrios
THE POLICE

Left: Susanna Sanchez analyzes a skull before a banner of faces of the disappeared as a pair of Guatemalan National Civil Police look on at the La Verbena site. The National Police were one of the government agencies most responsible for the forced disappearances of the war years. A report compiled by the Catholic Church counted 200,000 dead and 45,000 disappeared, almost all the victims of state violence.

Previous pages, clockwise from Left: Bernabé Ramirez prepares a bag for remains. Vinicio Yoc Aguilar holds onto a safety rope while he stares into Ossuary 2. A rosary found with an unidentified skeleton lies with bones to be discarded. Clothing from a skeleton is catalogued and photographed.
helmet, bends down, finds the edge of a black plastic trash bag, and peers inside and calls out—

“Number please...”
A walkie talkie cracks to life.

“Go ahead.”

“One skeleton, complete, with clothing. Articulated, in black plastic.”
A bucket descends on the black rope containing a clear bag and two yellow tiles with black numbers on them. Ramiro writes the numbers on a small chalkboard. He places it next to the remains and someone tosses him a digital camera. He takes two quick photos, and quickly gathers the skeleton, putting it in the bag with the numbers inside. He calls out to the workers above—“Bucket 4, coming up!”
Kat Valladores, a twenty-something anthropologist, leans against the round dirt wall, her hand on her hip, one knee bent, strikingly feminine in her shapeless suit, mask, and helmet, like a girl at the jukebox on a Saturday night. The only woman in the ossuary, she leans over a tangle of bones sticking up from the pile. She frees a femur, adjusts her headlamp and inspects it in her hands like a connoisseur, like she holds a rare and precious bottle of wine. Valladores

Sara Poroj Vasquez lost her husband to disappearance in 1984. Above, Sara takes a break from cooking tamales on the roof of her home in Zone 18. Below Right: Sara talks with Fredy Peccerelli, head of the FAFG, at La Verbena.
adjusts her headlamp and determines if it’s a right or left. Important, because if it’s a left it will be catalogued separately, sampled for its DNA. If it’s a right it will be lifted out, sorted into large black bags, reburied with scores of other unarticulated bones.

Two more hours below, and it’s time to call it a day. One by one they clip into their harnesses are lifted out by the workers above. Gerson Martinez is the last one in the bottom. They cut the lights before he is up, and he ascends out of the darkness.

Ester Herrarte shuffles across the worn floor tiles of her home in Zone 7, not far from La Verbena. At age 84 and just under 5 feet tall, with short white hair and a daisy patterned shirt she has the calm determination of a Grandma that has seen it all. Her small one story house was built in 1959, as a USAID project a few years after the U.S. overthrow the Guatemalan government. Late afternoon light spills onto the photos and diplomas and memories lining the walls, past the bars installed over the windows years ago, after her oldest son Jorge Alberto Herrarte was abducted from the tiny living room.

Slowly and deliberately, Ester remembers the day. “It was the 15th of May, 1983. From here, I was sitting here on the floor. I was really hot, and we were watching television. They came in, they grabbed him by the arms and legs, between two guys, and they took him. My husband was here, and I was in the kitchen. When I came in, they were dragging him out. I saw it. And I followed behind them, asking why they were taking him, and one of the men shouted at me to go back inside and close the door. It was just at the edge of darkness.”

Edgar, Ester’s middle son of three, brings tea as we sit beside the last place she saw Jorge. She tells me Jorge was a geologist for an oil company in the north of the country, that he studied in Houston. “Because it was very common that those they captured and tortured and killed they dumped in the streets,” Ester tells me, “but he never appeared. And we never heard anything else about him.”

Ester kept searching, checking the morgue, looking for information in this or that government office. She met other family members searching for the same information, they shared what they knew, and the following year they formed the GAM, the Spanish acronym for the Mutual Support Group, Guatemala’s first organization of the families of the disappeared. Ester worked with the other police divisions. Ester and her husband put in a missing persons request, they checked the hospitals. “We want to know the truth because we are looking for justice.”

Julio Solórzano Foppa

moved from Mexico to Guatemala two years ago to pursue the case against those responsible for the disappearance of his mother in 1981. Above: Don Julio makes tea in his home. Below: With a portrait of his mother, Alaida Foppa, a prominent intellectual.
ESTER HERRARTE
lost her son to forced disappearance on May 15, 1983 when police intelligence agents took him from her living room.
This is the last place we can hope to find him.”

Ester Herrarte

Waiting
Ester’s son has been missing for more than 27 years. She still holds out hope that she will one day find his remains. Above: Ester washes the dishes after lunch with her other son, Edgar. Left: Ester reads a magazine at her dining room table. Right: A market near her home provides an opportunity to get out, see friends and buy groceries for the week. After years spent as an activist in FAMDEGUA, an organization of families of the disappeared, at 84 Ester rarely makes it to rallies and demonstrations now.
Before it was for one reason that could happen, anything. We are in danger that some leader? No she tells me, “I didn’t feel like he was in danger at La Verbena and she suffered a lot of aggression, as the killings. “Those days were trying to raise awareness of GAM, then with FAMDEGUA, construction. In the spanish of the agents ransacked her home, to lunch, answer phones. The women in polo shirts and khakis were tortured them wantonly, and dump their bodies in the street. An activist for the GAM, she brings along two other activists, they meet with Fredy who coordinated efforts between military and police intelligence units, if you snatched people you wanted out of the picture from their homes, their jobs and schools, or even directly off the street, you introduced a degree of chaos and uncertainty. You could deny that the victims were in your custody, you could torture them wantonly, and dump their bodies in the street.

Across town a low concrete building next to a lot filled with wrecked cars胡子 with weekday activity. Men and women in polo shirts and khakis with laminated badges rush to lunch, answer phones. The building houses the historical archives of the National Police, the former security forces blamed for many of the disappearances in Guatemala City. Discovered in 2005, the Guatemalan government had denied the existence archives for years. Alberto Fuentes is the director of the effort to catalog, sort, and scan some of the more than 80 million documents. After 5 years of work, much of the material has been grouped, preserved, and boxed. We walk through three of the last rooms to be catalogued. Round piles of papers stack up overhead, spill over the floor. The pale yellowed pages, damp, trying to keep them in files with bent corners, stained covers and strange markings in faded ink. Died extra extradordinary, outside the rule of law. It means to be erased. To never be heard from again.

Later in the evening there’s an email waiting for me. It’s from Edna in polo shirts and khakis with laminated badges rush to lunch, answer phones. The women in polo shirts and khakis were tortured them wantonly, and dump their bodies in the street.

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Sara Portov Vasquez arrives early one morning at La Ver bern. As an activist for the GAM, she works organizing exhumations in the highlands of Guatemal, where the majority of the 679 documented massacres from the war years took place. She brings along two other activists, they meet with Fredy for a minute, talk about ways to expand the effort to collect DNA samples from surviving family members. This morning is an official visit, but she comes by regularly to check on the progress. Her own husband Jorge Humberto Granados Hernandez was disappeared on May 9, 1984. Since then she has worked to find him and other victims of the war, organizing exhumations around the country. But La Verbena is different. “I am sure he is here” Jorge was a baker in Guatemal City, and was a clandestine activist with ORPA, one of the revolutionary movements of the 80’s. Sara was only vaguely aware of his activities, even though he had told her that if he disappeared, she should not wait for him and not come looking. The night he was taken, police intelligence agents ransacked her home, searching for evidence of her and her husbands collaboration with subversives. She recalled a trove of guerrilla documents her husband had under a tinctor in the tiny kitchen of their cramped apartment. The space too small for the agents to squeeze into or search effectively. They kidnapped her as well, interrogating her through the night and into the morning. She survived by convincing them she had been abandoned by her husband. They let her go, and the next morning she burned the un-discovered documents. Sara spent the intervening years working with the GAM, clamoring for information and an end to the repression. After the war ended she stayed on, and now travels around the country helping with exhu mations in the interior. She tells me there hasn’t been an opportunity to stop the search. “We’ve never believed in any government in the last 25 years.” But searching for the truth doesn’t pay well. She gets up early on the weekends and heads to the central plaza to sell street food. Her and her family save newspapers to recy cle. They save their eggshells all year long to sell for about fifty cents a piece at Easter. It was a long time until she felt ready to move on. “Ten years later I got a new home, but I didn’t want to start over for fear that he might still return.” Eventually she met someone, and her friends told her it was time. These days she is alone again. Her second husband died of cancer four months ago.

J ulio Solozábar Foppa was the first person to provide a DNA sample to the FAEGF in its campaign to identify the disappeared at La Verbena. His mother Alaida Foppa was Guatemalan born and a promi nent Latin American poet, journalist, and filmmaker. She brought along two other activists, they meet with Fredy who coordinated efforts between military and police intelligence units, if you snatched people you wanted out of the picture from their homes, their jobs and schools, or even directly off the street, you introduced a degree of chaos and uncertainty. You could deny that the victims were in your custody, you could torture them wantonly, and dump their bodies in the street. An activist for the GAM, she brings along two other activists, they meet with Fredy for a minute, talk about ways to expand the effort to collect DNA samples from surviving family members. This morning is an official visit, but she comes by regularly to check on the progress. Her own husband Jorge Humberto Granados Hernandez was disappeared on May 9, 1984. Since then she has worked to find him and other victims of the war, organizing exhumations around the country. But La Verbena is different. “I am sure he is here” Jorge was a baker in Guatemal City, and was a clandestine activist with ORPA, one of the revolutionary movements of the 80’s. Sara was only vaguely aware of his activities, even though he had told her that if he disappeared, she should not wait for him and not come looking. The night he was taken, police intelligence agents ransacked her home, searching for evidence of her and her husbands collaboration with subversives. She recalled a trove of guerrilla documents her husband had under a tinctor in the tiny kitchen of their cramped apartment. The space too small for the agents to squeeze into or search effectively. They kidnapped her as well, interrogating her through the night and into the morning. She survived by convincing them she had been abandoned by her husband. They let her go, and the next morning she burned the un-discovered documents. Sara spent the intervening years working with the GAM, clamoring for information and an end to the repression. After the war ended she stayed on, and now travels around the country helping with exhumations in the interior. She tells me there hasn’t been an opportunity to stop the search. “We’ve never believed in any government in the last 25 years.” But searching for the truth doesn’t pay well. She gets up early on the weekends and heads to the central plaza to sell street food. Her and her family save newspapers to recy clo. They save their eggshells all year long to sell for about fifty cents a piece at Easter. It was a long time until she felt ready to move on. “Ten years later I got a new home, but I didn’t want to start over for fear that he might still return.” Eventually she met someone, and her friends told her it was time. These days she is alone again. Her second husband died of cancer four months ago.
cause it was like an anesthetic. I drank a lot. In 1984 I stopped drinking, and since then fortunately I am without a drink. It was terrible."

On a warm weekend afternoon, Don Julio makes a cup of tea in the light filled kitchen of his home in a quiet neighborhood in Zone 3. Birds scream and bark in the garden outside, and a poster of a festival in honor of his mother hangs on the wall. He is divorced, his children grown. Although Guatemalteco by birth, he doesn’t suffer from the psychological tics of his peers, left over from the war years. "As you can very easily understand—this country has lived in fear for many years. And the fear is still there. I have only been living here the last 2 years, so I don’t have that in me. So I recognize it in everybody else. People don’t even know that they have it in them… Part of the reason for the fear right now is that some of the killers, those responsible for the massacres, are still in power.”

One sunny morning in La Verbena, workers scramble around the edge of the pit, rigging lines and sending buckets up and down. Nearby, Angeles Garnica and Joel Dominguez, two young anthropologists, stand over a folding table covered with dozens of bones. They are working with a set of broken and scattered skulls exhumed near each other, seeing if it’s possible to piece any of them back together. Joel stands on one side of the table, with the broken remnant of an upper jaw and face in his hand. Angeles is on the other side with a forehead and the rounded loops of eye sockets in hers. They try to close the space between them, bringing their hands together until the pieces don’t fit, then backing off and trying a different way. They look like first graders working on a gruesome puzzle. They finally have to give up and move on to another one. Once sorted out, a DNA sample will be taken from each of the skulls and each left femur found in the bone wells to ensure they are not counting anyone over and over: no one has more than one left femur. Sampled, sorted and catalogued, the rest of the loose bones are collected into thick black oversize garbage bags.

Vinicio Yoc Aguilar is a contract laborer at the site. Short and stout and dressed in disposable scrubs, he drags one of the bags over the concrete floor to a nearby trap door. It’s another well, this one dug by the anthropologists to receive all of the loose bones that won’t ever be articulated. He opens the door and squints into the blackness. He drags the bag over the opening and with an audible rush of cool air it disappears into the dark. He leans forward, bent over the opening, staring at nothing. It seems like minutes pass, an eternity before he hears the crackling thud of the bones as they settle into the next of their final resting places.

"This is the machine of terror.”

Alberto Fuentes