

July 3, 2003

Film release *** Mark your calendar *** Tuesday, July 8th

"Discovering Dominga" will air across the USA on PBS's POV (Point of View) series on July 8th (www.pbs.org/pov, 212 989-8121). Check local listings for exact time.

Discovering Dominga is based on the life of Denese Becker, who now lives in Iowa, USA, who was born and raised as Dominga Sic Ruiz, a Mayan-Achi girl from the isolated rural village of Rio Negro, in Guatemala. In the early 1980s, her family and community were victims of massacres and genocide carried out by the US-backed military regime of Guatemala, and of the Chixoy Hydro-electric Dam project, a mega-development business conceived and funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank that flooded the river valley where Rio Negro was located. At the age of 11, Dominga - the only survivor from her family - was adopted by a couple in the USA.

Below you will find a summary of the Dominga Foundation, set up by Denese Becker and her cousin Mary Purvis, and "Dominga and Denese, and the story of Rio Negro", an article written in 2000 just after Denese first re-connected with other massacre survivors from Rio Negro.

If you want on/ off this elist: info@rightsaction.org

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DOMINGA AND DENESE, AND THE STORY OF RIO NEGRO
-- By Grahame Russell, May 2000

"Hey Carlos," I said, glancing at the list of incoming emails, "there is one for you." We had come early to my office of Rights Action, an NGO that supports community development and human rights work in Mexico and Central America. "What does it say?", Carlos asked of the email, written in English. "To whom it may concern, My name is Denese Becker and I am a survivor of the Rio Negro massacre."

I stopped, surprised, and read again what I had just read to Carlos. An English name, through and through. Perfectly written English. The email was sent from Algona, Iowa last night. Intriguing, to say the least. Carlos is as perplexed as I am.

Carlos is a Mayan-Achi man from the rural village of Rio Negro in Guatemala. We had invited him to the US and Canada on a speaking tour to tell about how the Guatemalan Army and civil defense forces had wiped out his entire village, massacring over half the townspeople. They did this in large part because the villagers had opposed being forcibly resettled due to the Chixoy dam project that the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank were funding, via the Guatemalan

military regime to the tune of \$290,000,000.

The destruction of Carlos' community and people -- including his pregnant wife and two infant children -- happened in 1982. Now, 18 years later, Carlos was in Washington, still trying to get some acknowledgment of what happened, still trying to get proper compensation and reparations for the Rio Negro massacre survivors.

And this morning, sitting before my computer, we were about to discover that we had just located one more massacre survivor. Or rather one more survivor had found Carlos, trying to reconnect with her home community and family.

With Carlos' consent, we called the number, not realizing until too late that we were probably waking them up. The man who answered passed the phone to a woman's sleepy voice: "Hello?" "Hi, this is Grahame Russell, and I am calling in response to an email that you sent us, trying to get in touch with Carlos Chen -- well, he is standing here with me." Silence. "Umm, listen, I realize now that I have called you quite early, should we call back at some other time?" "No," a quiet, almost timid voice said, "don't hang up."

The woman, a survivor of the Rio Negro massacre, explained to me that Denese was not her original name and that she had come to the US as a child orphan, adopted. I asked her if she spoke Achi [the language of the Rio Negro people] or Spanish. "No", she quietly answered "I have forgotten it all." I would translate the ensuing conversation between these long separated community members.

Carlos wanted to know her name. When Carlos heard the name "Dominga Sic Ruiz", his eyes lit up, and he almost burst into tears. He was pacing around our small office. Since 1993, he has been working tirelessly to repair the destroyed and violated strands of his community. Dominga was one more piece, who had been whisked far away (fortunately to safety, love and security).

Carlos clearly remembered her as child. She was a ten year-old survivor of and witness to the terrible March 13, 1982 massacre of 107 children and 70 women in the village of Rio Negro, carried out by soldiers and civil defense patrollers.

"He remembers me?", she quietly and urgently asks. "Yes", I tell her and feel the silence and the weight of her history -- known and unknown

-- and 18 years of separation and distance. Smiling, tears in his eyes, Carlos tells me that everyone in the community used to call her "la gringa", because she was lighter skinned than most of the townspeople. When I told her this, she barely whispered "Yes, I AM lighter skinned."

For the first time in 18 years, she was communicating with someone, albeit via translation, who knew of her childhood; someone who knew more about her than she knows, or at least remembers. In fact, she remembers so little of her childhood; she needs and wants to learn so much.

I know more about her community -- all the atrocities that occurred; how many were brutally and mercilessly massacred -- than she does. I find myself catching my breath, holding back tears. After so much crime, suffering and loss, a far flung survivor is trying to reach back to reconnect and heal herself, which is to reconnect and heal her community.

"Does Carlos know why I am lighter skinned? Is my mother or father light-skinned?" "Your mother, who came from the nearby town of Pajales, was lighter skinned. ... But we only called you la gringa for fun," Carlos says, and I translate.

We make one futile attempt to have Carlos get on the phone and speak Achi to her -- she tries, but she can't remember. As a nine or ten year old, she spoke fluent Achi, with snatches of Spanish. Now, 18 years later, it is deeply buried. If she pursues this reconnection, she may well rediscover her spoken Achi.

When she pursues this reconnection, she will discover many sad and probably overwhelming things.

"Does Carlos know my family?" "Oh yes," he replies, and he proceeds to name three uncles and two aunts on her father's side, who live in Pacux, the same resettlement community where Carlos lives with his new wife and two children.

Another silence. "Does he know of my parents?" Yes, Carlos knows. "Your mother was killed that day in March, 1982, when you escaped, and your father was killed in Xococ," a neighboring village. Again, the deep silence. My heart sunk, as I told her this, though she had suspected that her mother had been killed that day.

"Listen," I finally said, "this must be incredibly overwhelming for you -- I mean I find it hard myself, so I can't imagine what you must be going through, and if you want us to call some other time ...". "No," she cut in, quiet and firm, "I just No, I want to find out, I am planning to go back there -- I want to go back, I want to see Rio Negro."

Before the massacres of 1981 and 1982 [there were five in all, committed by soldiers and civil defense patrollers, leaving over 440 people dead], Rio Negro was an isolated Mayan community: no electricity; huts with thatched roofs; small farming plots and

communal lands; chicken and cows; mango and coconut trees; plenty of fish in the river; and ancient religious sites and burial grounds. It had been home to the Rio Negro Achi people for over 700 years.

Today, more than half the former village -- including all burial grounds and religious sites -- lie under water, due to the Chixoy Dam flood basin, and all the remaining huts were destroyed by the soldiers and patrollers. In the last 4 years, a few families have gone back to live, to re-build from scratch.

This will be a hard home to go back to.

We talk some more. She asks how it was that she was saved? She doesn't remember. She wants to know who saved her and how. Carlos knows. After the Rio Negro massacre, all survivors fled into the mountains, living in packs, hiding and sleeping by day, moving and foraging by night. No where to go, no food, no quarter -- the Army and patrollers were after them. Their community was destroyed and the Chixoy river basin had been filled in. The Chixoy dam "development" project was nearing "successful" completion.

In the mountains, on the run, the elderly and the young died first, of hunger, disease and exhaustion. Whenever they could, the men would sneak an elderly person or a child out -- walk down into the town of Rabinal at night, drop off a person at a friendly home. That person, putting his or her own life at risk, would then sneak the Rio Negro massacre survivor out of Rabinal.

Carlos told Denese that he knows the man that got her out of the mountains, to the home of a woman in Rabinal, who then took her to the Sisters of St. Vincent of Paul, who had a small convent in Rabinal. It was the Sisters who snuck her out of Rabinal and to an orphanage. From there, she was taught Spanish, and then adopted and taken to the US, the very country whose government was funding, training, arming and sometime participating directly with the Guatemalan Army that was destroying her country, including her hometown.

Carlos concludes by saying that the Army later assassinated Francisco Cuxum, the man that carried her out of the mountain. Another long silence; more resolve to continue learning her own story.

After 40 minutes, we say good bye. She has promised to send a letter to our office ["Will you translate it for me, as I can't write it in Spanish."] with a photo of herself, that Carlos will take to the surviving uncles and aunts. "I want to do everything I can to help them recover their land."

We promise to keep in touch. I told her that if and when she were ready to go to Guatemala, it would be our pleasure and honor to support her, and serve as her guide during her re-introduction to her

home country, to her surviving family members and to her home village, Rio Negro.

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DOMINGA FOUNDATION

February 2003

WHO IS DOMINGA?

Dominga Sic Ruiz was born in 1972 in the peaceful, Mayan-Achi Indigenous village of Rio Negro tucked in the mountains of Guatemala. At the age of nine-years-old her life took a sudden, brutal and tragic turn.

On February 13, 1982 her Father and over 70 other men of her village were brutally massacred by the Guatemalan Army with the help of paramilitary soldiers. One month later, on March 13th the same men pounced on the sleepy village of Rio Negro in the wee hours of the morning. They gathered everyone they could find (mostly women, children and elderly). In the midst of all the confusion, Dominga's Mother helped her escape, with her newborn baby sister strapped on her back, Indigenous-style. The last time Dominga saw her, there was a noose around her Mother's neck.

Dominga's Mother died that day, along with 176 others, in one of Guatemala's most horrible massacres. Then, the little 9-year-old child spent weeks hiding in the mountains near her village, trying to keep her weeks-old baby sister alive by squeezing berry juice into her mouth. By the time she found some other relatives, also hiding in the mountains from the Guatemalan Army, the baby was too weak to live. They buried her under a big tree while Dominga crouched helplessly nearby, wailing. In order to prevent her from dying too, Dominga's relatives eventually smuggled her to a convent in Rabinal. The nuns soon took her to an orphanage in Guatemala City where she was adopted by a couple from Algona, Iowa when she was eleven.

DOMINGA BECOMES DENESE

The brave little orphan had to overcome huge obstacles. By no choice of her own, she was torn away from her Achi-speaking people, placed in a Spanish-speaking orphanage, then adopted and brought to an English-speaking country. The food was different, the clothes were different, the smells were different. At age 11 she was put into second grade, with blonde-hair, blue-eyed children who jabbered to each other in an unknown tongue.

But Denese excelled. She quickly learned English and began to skip up the grade scale and ended up graduating high school early and going on to college. She began to feel like "an American" somewhere during her high school years. Denese eventually married and had two sons.

However, Denese was plagued by memories she wasn't sure were real or imagined. She was haunted by recurring nightmares and would wake up in a cold sweat, shaking violently. In the year 2000, with the help of her "American" family, and her local church, Denese and her husband planned a trip back to Guatemala. This would be her first time back since she was adopted in 1984.

AMAZING REUNION

Just weeks before her trip back to Guatemala, Denese found out she had living aunts, uncles and cousins that had been searching for her for years. Practically the whole village came out to greet her when she returned. Her indigenous family wept with bitter-sweet joy at seeing their little Dominga alive.

The joyful week of getting reacquainted with her Achi family, was tainted with discoveries of the past, as Denese learned who had killed her parents and why. Guatemala wanted to build the Chixoy Dam (funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank). Several villages were "in the way" of this dam project, including Rio Negro. The Achi people refused to move. They had lived there for over 700 years. Their ancestors were buried there. The Guatemalan government was behind a determined plan of genocide against the Achi people in order to build the dam.

As a new chapter opened up in Denese's life, she has had to face yet another major life adjustment. Her marriage broke up. Denese shares custody of their two sons with her ex-husband. She barely makes ends meet with her job as a manicurist.

DISCOVERING DOMINGA

An incredible documentary film has been made about Denese's life. It will air on nationwide television sometime this summer. Watch your local listings for Discovering Dominga.

HOW CAN YOU HELP?

There are several on-going projects that Denese would like to put time and money in to that would directly benefit her Achi family and community in Guatemala.

PROJECTS

- * Seeking proper compensation for the land, homes and livestock the people of Rio Negro lost during the years of violence and forced displacement.
- * Seeking justice against the military and civil patrollers that raped, tortured and murdered her family and community members.
- * Education. Many Achi children only have opportunity to go through 6th grade, but land has been purchased to build a "middle school" (7th-9th grades). The school needs to be built, teachers hired, and then students sponsored as they further their education.

- * Legal aid for the Achi people.
- * Fertilizer and seed for farmers to grow more productive crops.
- * Micro-loans to help women begin their own small business.

Although there are many other projects, these are some of the main ones Denese wants to focus on at this time. She needs your help in order to accomplish that.

CONTACT INFORMATION

For tax-deductible donations, make check or money order payable to "Rights Action" (write "Dominga Foundation" on the memo-line), and mail

to: Rights Action, 1830 Connecticut Ave., NW, Washington DC, 20009.

For non tax-deductible donations, please send your donation to the Dominga Foundation at: P.O. Box 482, Algona IA, 50511.

To schedule a speaking engagement for Denese, contact Mary Purvis: 651 Willow Street, Mason MI, 48854, (517) 676-8750, mustangmary56@hotmail.com.

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