

February 19, 2004

Update about the Guatemalan-US Mayan-Achi woman Dominga Sic Ruiz / Denese Becker.

Please re-distribute this information. If you want on/ off this list: info@rightsaction.org <mailto:info@rightsaction.org>

We present here a "Recap of the Year 2003", written by Denese's cousin Mary Purvis, who is accompanying Denese/ Dominga at every step of her re-discovery and re-discovery. See article, down below, that provides background to Denese/ Dominga.

Please contact Denese and Mary directly at: domingasic@hotmail.com <mailto:domingasic@hotmail.com>.

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RECAP OF THE YEAR 2003: Denese Becker, aka Dominga Sic Ruiz

The year 2003 was a very busy and exciting year for Denese and those close to her. The biggest event was the release of the documentary film DISCOVERING DOMINGA. Out of over 600 films submitted, only 12 were selected for PBS's Point of View series for 2003 and Discovering Dominga was one of the 12 chosen. It aired nationwide in the United States on July 8, 2003.

Following its release in the U.S. it aired on HBO in Guatemala and based on feedback it had quite a positive impact. Also, Discovering Dominga was shown in Guatemala City at the Icaro Festival in November right before the presidential elections... perhaps it had some impact on the outcome of those elections!?

Discovering Dominga has won many awards including "Best Documentary" in the Bermuda International Film Festival and at the Los Angeles Latino International Film Festival. It was an "Official Selection" at the Chicago Latino Film Festival; Cine Las Americas (Austin, Texas); Amnesty International Film Festival, (Los Angeles, at the Directors Guild of America); United Nations Association Film Festival; International

Festival of Human Rights, (Barcelona, Spain); Amnesty International Film Festival (Seattle, WA); Festival of New Latin American Cinema, (Havana, Cuba); and many others. In addition, film Producer, Patricia Flynn received the PJ Owens Independent Spirit Award for Discovering Dominga.

The film has also had many community screenings in California, Iowa, New York, Washington D.C., Michigan, Texas, and more. Many organizations, including Amnesty International, Smithsonian Museum of the American Indian (New York), Humanities Iowa and Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (GHRC), have sponsored these events.

Denese has had numerous speaking engagements including:

- a.. Feb. 16-23 speaking tour in Illinois and Michigan with Jesus Tecu Osorio sponsored by Rights Action
- b.. April 23-24 premiere at the University of Iowa in Iowa City
- c.. June 20-24 speaking tour in Iowa with Humanities Iowa
- d.. Oct. 6 Iowa State University in Ames, IA
- e.. Dec. 1 Buena Vista University in Storm Lake, IA

Denese took two trips to Guatemala in 2003. She went in August with a mission team that held Vacation Bible School in Pacux and Rio Negro in addition to meeting with community leaders to find out what some of their needs are so we can hopefully serve them in the future.

Her second trip was the first week in November. Her adoptive father, Brian Burck was able to go back with Denese for the first time since he and Linda (her mother) adopted her back in 1984. He was a wonderful support as the film was shown to Denese's Achi family in Pacux and Rabinal in addition to being at the Icaro Festival in Guatemala City. During this trip Denese also gave additional testimony in the genocide case that is upcoming.

The year 2003 was wrapped up with a wonderful New Years visit from me, cousin Mary (from Michigan). We were able to recap the past year and make plans for the upcoming 2004. It was a wonderful time of visiting,

laughing,
crying, eating and planning for the future.

We intend to send monthly newsletters (approximately) keeping you up to date on what Denese is doing. Feel free to write if you have comments or questions. God bless and keep you all.

Sincerely,

Denese Becker (aka Dominga Sic Ruiz), and Mary H. Purvis (the cousin)

[This email was prepared by Mary Purvis, Denese's cousin. If you want onto Denese's e-list: domingasic@hotmail.com <<mailto:domingasic@hotmail.com>>. If you would like to invite Denese to come and present her film and make public presentations, please contact Mary Purvis (domingasic@hotmail.com <<mailto:domingasic@hotmail.com>>) or Rights Action.]

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BACKGROUND:

ìDominga and Denese, and the story of Rio Negroî, 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, Õ. 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. Ö 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 Ö". "No," she cut in, quiet and firm, "I just Ö . 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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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.

* Seeking compensation for the lives, land, homes and livestock the people of Rio Negro lost during the years of violence and forced displacement (to

make way for the Chixoy Dam project, funded by the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank).

* 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.

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:

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

CANADA: Rights Action, 509 St. Clair Av, W, box73527, Toronto, M6C-1C0.

To schedule a speaking engagement for Denese, contact Mary Purvis: 517-676-8750, domingasic@hotmail.com <<mailto:domingasic@hotmail.com>>.

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