

## **CAMINOS Accompanier Returns, Remembers, Readjusts**

*By Rick Clifford*

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*"Good morning America. How are ya? Say don't you know me, I'm you're native son."*

- Arlo Guthrie

I start with a quote from an American folk singer because it reminds me of a simpler time when life moved more slowly and people had time to talk - much like the place in Guatemala I had just left behind. Of course, being a "native son" who had lived with people most Americans ignore daily, I wondered if those Estadounidenses would recognize me and my new way of seeing US culture. The waste, fast pace, and the enormous energy required to keep it all afloat came into 20/20 focus when I wore the lens of a rural Guatemalan.

I re-entered the USA via Miami International Airport just as a thunderstorm was whisking its way across the Florida Peninsula on the 30th of July. Security was tighter than ever as all passengers were required to remove their shoes before passing through the metal detectors. You should have heard people gripe and moan as we stood in line. So spoiled, so self-absorbed, so easily flustered. Many flights were delayed, and the departure gates were packed with passengers calling loved ones on cell phones as they stood in long queues for airport food and \$4.00 ice cream cones.

My culture shock was preceded by War-on-Terrorism-shock when the US Immigrations official put a magnifying glass to my passport and began a humorless game of 20-questions with me. Although it was true that my passport had fallen in some water, I was assured by the folks at the US Embassy that my passport was in serviceable condition. The Grand Inquisitor was impressed that I worked as a teacher in bilingual education - he too was a Spanish/English speaker. We struck up a bilingual conversation and he eventually let me through. I had just enough time to down a cold beer before my connecting flight departed.

Once I was completely free of airports, I continued my reacclimation process in friendlier surroundings. Fortunately, I spent most of the first two weeks with family. However, on my third day in America I attended my 20-year high school reunion and had a good time talking to high school friends and people I had hardly spoken to in high school. Julie Meyer, fresh in from Las Vegas and on her 5th mixed drink, wobbled towards me holding her 1983 yearbook. "Rick Clifford, what happened to you?" she asked disappointedly. "I expected to see you here in a suite and tie!"

Well, I had to laugh because in that moment I knew I had dodged a dead end job that society had prepared for me. Just because I placed first in the regional Mr. FBLA (Future Business Leader of America) contest in high school, she must have thought I was going to grow up to be a cog in the corporate matrix. Instead I had become a teacher and a human rights accompanier living and working with eight of the 150 Guatemalan witnesses who have risked everything to put Efraim Rios Montt and Romeo Lucas Garcia behind bars for their war crimes, genocide, and crimes against humanity.

Of course, my stories of Guatemala raised a few eyebrows among classmates; a few dairy farmers empathized with the Guatemalan coffee growers dilemma. They too are suffering from lower commodity prices as production costs continue to rise. Of course, most people wanted to talk about the good ol' days and many of us stayed until 2a.m. Unfortunately, my dad had organized a morning talk at the local Catholic church the next morning. Parishioners were encouraged to attend my slide show after Mass was finished. It was no surprise that less than a dozen showed up for the talk. Fortunately, one of the attendees was a reporter for the local newspaper. He wrote a full-page story on my experiences in Guatemala and a favorable editorial lauding the efforts of those who fight for peace without using a gun.

Since arriving in Colorado in mid-August life has returned to much the way it was in 2002. I am still a teacher; I still live in the same house; I have the same phone number. However, I now go to [www.prensalibre.com](http://www.prensalibre.com) - The Free Press, to read about the latest happenings in Guatemala. So far the news has been less than uplifting. The Guatemalan Congress agreed to allow the US military to station itself inside Guatemala to fight the War on Drugs. It seems the Guatemalan police are incapable of

stopping the drug dealers connected to Guatemalan politicians. On August 31 I read that Oscar Berger, the political frontrunner and the candidate most capable of defeating Rios Montt, was recovering from prostate surgery from his hospital bed at Sloane Kettering in New York City. What next?

The newspaper is often full of bad news these days, but I wanted to end on an optimistic note. In early July mothers from the town of Ilocom greeted the forensic anthropologists from Guatemala City who had come to examine the remains of some of the children who had died in 1982 after the military had executed 55 of the town's men, forced the people from their homes, stolen their livestock, burned their homes to the ground, and forced them to work at the plantation called Santa Delfina. Ten mothers found the courage to identify the spot where they had buried a child who never got the chance to know this world. The evidence gathered from this exhumation may help the lawyers prove to the world that Rios Montt and Lucas Garcia are guilty of genocide. Regardless of the final outcome of the genocide case and/or the Guatemalan presidential elections in November, let's make sure that the courage shown by the ten mothers from Ilocom is never forgotten.