

PRAXIS

ANGELA FILLINGIM WAS six months old when she left El Salvador for America. At the time, in 1985, her native country was embroiled in a brutal 12-year civil war: Hundreds of children were snatched by soldiers or given up for adoption by families on the run. Fillingim, now 21, spent the next two decades with her adopted family in Berkeley, not knowing who her birth mother was or what happened to her.

Now a joint project between the Berkeley Human Rights Center and the Asociación Pro-Búsqueda de Niñas y Niños Desaparecidos (Search for Missing Children) in El Salvador is helping to mend some of these broken links. A database of DNA samples, taken from family members in El Salvador and children adopted internationally, allows researchers to more accurately match children such as Fillingim with their biological families.

More than a decade after the war ended, there are still 475 outstanding requests by Salvadoran families searching for missing children. Last summer, Liz Barnert, a fellow with the Human Rights Center, spent two months gathering DNA samples in rural El Salvador. "A lot of people don't have telephones, so it's very logistically challenging to coordinate the



Missing links

Reconnecting families broken by war

DNA collection efforts and drive out to people," she says. "A lot of people don't have addresses and so we'd drive down dirt roads for hours ... We had to trek through multiple cornfields to find people and collect their DNA." The samples were collected by swabbing cells from inside the cheek.

Barnert says her team came up against emotional obstacles, too. "There is still some degree of a culture of terror in El Salvador," she says. "People were afraid of giving their DNA samples, afraid of signing their name, because 15 years ago that would have been an extremely dangerous thing to do." Eric Stover, director of the Human Rights Center, explained that during the war, death squads routinely swept the countryside killing sus-

Birthrights: Angela Fillingim hopes to meet her biological mother and brother in El Salvador next spring.

pected subversives. Families were too frightened to report disappearances because they feared being seen as rebel sympathizers.

The DNA database, compiled on weekends by a California Department of Justice lab in Richmond, was transported down to El Salvador this summer and given to Pro-Búsqueda, which will continue collecting samples for future research. The Human Rights Project is also coordinating DNA identification of missing persons and skeletal remains in Argentina, Guatemala, Rwanda, the former Yugoslavia, and Iraq.

In El Salvador, researchers already

Have you seen this DNA? With hopes of finding a lost child, a Salvadoran villager provides Human Rights Center director Eric Stover with a DNA sample.

have facilitated 158 reunions. Fillingim is one of the lucky ones. Last December she received an e-mail from Barnert with news that the team had located the woman they think is her birth mother. She still awaits DNA confirmation. If the two are a match, Fillingim will travel to El Salvador next year to meet her.

"There are a lot of unknowns," Fillingim says. "It's just a bit scary, I guess, to meet someone who's your mother that you've never known. You have a biological relationship, but that doesn't necessarily mean you have a personal one."

—Carrie Ching

It's a common misconception that heredity is passed through blood—think of the terms "mixed blood," "royal blood," and "bloodline." Ironically, no heredity is coded in red blood cells—in fact, they are the only cells in your body that don't have DNA, because they don't have nuclei.

