Association’s Work In Argentina Featured in NOVA’s Season Premier

The story of how scientists are aiding in the identification of human skeletal remains of Argentina’s “desaparecidos” will open the NOVA television season on 14 October.

The “desaparecidos” or “disappeared” are the victims—probably numbering about 12,000—killed during military rule in Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

The Association's involvement with the identification process began in June 1984 when the AAAS sent a delegation of scientists to Argentina at the request of the Argentina National Commission on "Disappeared" Persons. The delegation observed the medical and scientific investigation of the human remains of the “disappeared” and made recommendations to the Commission.

In September 1984, the Commission recommended that the government begin a concerted effort to identify and determine the cause of death of the “disappeared.” As a first step, the Commission suggested that teams of scientists should be trained in the archeological techniques used to open graves and remove skeletal remains. The AAAS agreed to assist in the training. Twenty participants, ranging from practicing scientists to undergraduate students in archeology and anthropology, attended the workshop held at the University of Buenos Aires Medical School.

The training was directed by Clyde C. Snow, a forensic anthropologist from Oklahoma, who led students in the excavation of ten graves. Joining Snow in the training were John J. Fitzpatrick, a radiologist from Cook County (Illinois) Hospital; Robert H. Kirschner, a pathologist and deputy medical examiner for Cook County; and Lowell Levine, a forensic odontologist from Nassau County, New York. Besides trying to establish identity, Snow and his teammates instructed the students on how to determine the cause of death.

The NOVA program, “The Search for the Disappeared,” will feature Snow, Eric Stover, staff officer for the AAAS Committee on Scientific Freedom and Responsibility, and several Argentine scientists. Both Snow and Stover have been heavily involved with the Association’s work in Argentina from the beginning and they worked closely with NOVA writers and producers both before and during the filming of the program.

In addition to forensic science, “The Search for the Disappeared” documents the progress of geneticist Mary Clare King and physician Ana Maria Di Lonardo. King, also a member of the 1984 AAAS delegation to Argentina, and Di Lonardo, chief of immunology at the Hospital Durand in Buenos Aires, have used paternity testing methods to establish an “index of grandpaternity.” Using blood samples from children and surviving grandparents, King and Di Lonardo are trying to confirm grandparentship of children, about 120 of whom were born in detention. Many of these children are now living with families of the same military personnel responsible for the disappearance of their parents.

In a follow-on to the work done in Argentina, the AAAS recently received an indication of the worldwide scope of the application of forensic science in the documentation of human rights abuses. Philippine President Corazon Aquino’s Committee on Human Rights has invited the team of forensic scientists to come to the Philippines to present a series of seminars on forensic techniques and procedures for identifying human skeletal remains. The trip is being planned for early December.

“The Search for the Disappeared” will air on NOVA, 14 October at 8:00 p.m. on PBS (check local listing).

Joan Wrathall
Office of Communications

AAAS Travelers

The Bangladesh Association for the Advancement of Science has invited AAAS to send a representative to their 12th Annual Science Conference. The conference will be held at the Jahangirnagar University Campus 25 miles outside Dhaka City. The
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