



Innovative Field School in the Andes Revisits Peru's Dirty War

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After spending three weeks in the Peruvian Andes meeting with survivors from Peru's long and bloody internal conflict, Kaniqua Robinson returned home to the US with a better understanding of the damage done to the families of Peruvians who went missing and died. It will, she thinks, help her own work in Florida, where she is researching the [Dozier Boys School scandal](#).

Ms Robinson was one of ten students from eight countries who recently attended a field school run by the [Peruvian Forensic Anthropology Team \(EPAF\)](#). Classes were held in the regions of Huancavelica and Ayacucho, which bore the brunt of the conflict between 1980 and 2000. Over 70,000 Peruvians died and 15,000 disappeared.

This was the fifth time EPAF has offered the course to international students. Jose Pablo Baraybar, the director of EPAF, explained that his goal is to share EPAF's vision, acquired over years of working with mass graves and bereaved families.

"Transition is more than accounting for the dead," said Mr Baraybar in a phone interview. "It means empowering those who survived. They have to write their own history, find ways to memorialize their losses, and rejoin society. Too often, these solutions are imposed by others."

EPAF has unique experience of the transition challenge. The organization was set up in 2001 by Mr Baraybar, a well-known forensic scientist, to exhume graves, identify victims, and return the remains to families. EPAF achieved international recognition after exhuming 92 bodies at the village of Putis in 2008. The Advocacy Project (AP) attended and [publicized the exhumation](#).



Relatives watch while bodies are exhumed at Putis

Exhumations certainly feature on the current curriculum, and students at the Field School visited the former army base of Los Cabitos, where the military killed detainees and disposed of bodies in a furnace. Students also accompanied three daughters who still grieve for their disappeared father to another old base at Canaria, and marked out two possible gravesites. T.J. Bradley, [who is working at EPAF as a Peace Fellow this summer](#) described the family's testimony as "wrenching."



This once was a person: EPAF exhumed 92 sets of remains from the Putis grave

But it has become harder for EPAF to conduct exhumations, as Peruvians seek to put the conflict behind them, and this has forced EPAF to focus more on the needs of the relatives who have survived. Most are indigenous and already outside the mainstream of Peruvian life.

Empowerment comes in different forms. It starts with helping survivors to remember and record their own version of history. Field School students attended a Day of Memory in the town of Hualla consisting of a mass, a memorial walk, and meals. EPAF has also made imaginative use of art in recalling the past, and over the next few weeks Peace Fellow Bradley will help several communities recall

their past through [an advocacy quilt](#).

EPAF also hopes to use restorative justice in bringing together communities that turned on each other in the war. [Sacsamarca](#) was one of the first to openly declare against the Shining Path guerrillas, and the guerrillas retaliated by pressing townspeople from the neighboring community of Hualla into the fight. This created great bitterness which lasts to this day and even damages economic relations. Hualla produces 32 varieties of organic corn and Sacsamarca has started alpaca husbandry, but neither can sell their products.

EPAF's message played well with students at the Field School, most of whom are working on transition in their own countries. In addition to Ms Robinson from the US, students included a medical doctor from the organization [SOS Disparus](#) in Algeria; a member of the newly-formed Mexican Forensic Anthropology Team (EMAF); an archaeologist and anthropologist from Brazil who sit on a newly-formed forensic group that deals with disappearances from the dictatorship (GAAF); a history student from Belgium, and a Canadian lawyer. EPAF's field school was made possible by support from the [Sigrid Rausing Trust](#).

Of the 45 students who have attended past EPAF schools, several have returned to Peru and one is even publishing a book. Encouraged, EPAF is now looking to expand and the next school will be held later this year in Somaliland, where thousands disappeared during the rule of Siad Barre in the 1980s. EPAF is also considering taking its message to international bodies like the [UN working group on disappearances](#), which has had little success in identifying the disappeared and may welcome the chance to broaden its scope.

"Of course we need to dignify the dead through proper burial and commemoration," said Mr Baraybar, returning to his theme. "But we also need to respect the rights of their living relatives."

- Visit the [EPAF website](#)
- [Read the blogs](#) of Peace Fellow T.J. Bradley
- Watch AP's video on the [2008 Putis exhumation](#).