

Biography of the Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense (EAAF)

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Introduction

At the beginning of 2020, the news that the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) had been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize was announced and quickly spread in Argentina and among professional and scientific networks around the world. The candidacy of this non-governmental organization was made by Karina Batthyány, executive secretary of the Latin American Council of Social Sciences, and Alejandro Villar, Rector of the National University of Quilmes (Argentina), who argued in the application the importance of the EAAF's trajectory for 35 years applying science to the search for truth and collaboration with justice, searching for missing persons and providing answers to their families.

The impact of EAAF's work is global in scale. Currently they have worked in more than 60 countries with “victims of enforced disappearances; ethnic, political, institutional, gender-based and religious violence; contemporary disappearances; drug trafficking; human trafficking, organized crime, immigration processes; wars and armed conflicts; accidents and catastrophes” (CLACSO, 2020).

The EAAF celebrated its 36th anniversary this year. They began as a group of students and today there are 70 professionals from different forensic disciplines that make up the organization and who are simultaneously providing services in different countries at the request of governments, non-governmental organizations and family organizations.

This biography is based principally on an interview with EAAF founder and President³, Luis Fondebrider. A biography of the EAAF seemed like an easy win for the authors. Both have worked with EAAF members and the second author has known the President and two of the founders for more than 20 years. Another of the EAAF founders used to be the boss of both authors. Yet, here is the catch: The EAAF is *always busy*. They are always working. Their publication list is not long compared with those of academics, but where would they find time for that? As noted on an Argentine government website, the EAAF is characterized by their low profile, more focused on *el hacer que el decir* (actions, rather than words) (<https://www.senado.gob.ar/upload/17743.pdf>). Their evangelism comes in the form of mentorship and tutoring: applied accompaniment, which translates to constant flights around the world and an overwhelming caseload, mixed with a more recent dedication to research. Despite the strong personal and professional ties with key figures of the EAAF and their unwavering will to please, it is really very difficult to hold their attention for a sustained interview and follow-up clarifications. This is not, of course, a criticism. The EAAF has their focus clearly on cases and the families of the disappeared, rather than friendly chats for biographies in an academic journal. In this biography we will review the origins of the EAAF, its legacy and their main challenges.

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3. During the review of this biography for publication, Luis was hired to be the Director of the Forensic Unit of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC). This biography reflects the opinions and experience of the EAAF and should in no way be misconstrued as representing the opinion or position of the ICRC.

Origins

Beginning in 1984, democracy had returned to Argentina after the civic-military government that had ruled for seven years. At that time, the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo (a non-governmental human rights organization that was looking for their children born in captivity or who were disappeared along with their parents), were looking for support around the world to try to reunify the disappeared children with their grandparents. This is how they came into contact with Eric Stover, a researcher at the American Association for Advancement of Science (AAFS) in Washington, DC, who responded to the request and who was a delegate along with a commission of six forensic science professionals who traveled to Buenos Aires to assess the situation.

One of the six investigators was Clyde Snow, who from his first visit was tied to the process of the Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo and the recently created National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP). When visiting Argentina, Snow decided to meet with judges and prosecutors who were already conducting exhumations and “the first thing he noted was the precariousness and carelessness in the excavation methods and treatment of the remains in the first exhumations of clandestine graves” (CLACSO, 2020). During that first visit, Snow also decided to meet with a group of Argentine students in a hotel, to whom he explained his proposal to exhume bodies and later identify them so that they could be returned to their families, to bring the necessary evidence to trial, and to contribute to the clarification of the circumstances of death of these missing persons. These students took some time to think about Snow’s proposal, and the next day they agreed. Thus, the EAAF was conceived one night in a hotel room in Buenos Aires.⁴

This group of students, who had not had any type of experience in forensic anthropology, made the decision to dedicate themselves to a relatively new discipline in the world at that time. They spent two years in training and working among the graves and morgues under the guidance of Snow.

The EAAF was born following quite particular social and political circumstances in the Republic of Argentina during the civic-military government, and which resulted in the disappearance of between 10,000 and 30,000 people. The lack of precision of the number reflects the secrecy of the disappearances and the challenge of the search. Social pressure and the interest of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo to find their loved ones also prompted the creation of the EAAF, allowing this team to be a pioneer in Latin America and the world in applying forensic anthropology to investigations of serious, largescale Human Rights violations,

4. Some might object to this analogy as distasteful, but we believe that Snow would have liked it.

always having families as the axis of the investigative and scientific process.

Families of the disappeared, however, were divided about the best way to move forward and whether or not they supported exhumations, as described at length by Rosenblatt (2015:83–122). In addition to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, were the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, which later split into two groups: The *Linea Fundadora* (Founding Line), which supported exhumations, and the *Asociación Madres* was generally against them. This made the work of the EAAF challenging at first, their legitimacy very much grounded in representing family interests via exhumations of those disappeared by state forces. Ultimately, the EAAF has managed to balance divergent interests and as Rosenblatt (2015) notes, “[t]he responsiveness to the different views of families is the hallmark of an approach to exhumation that the Argentine team was just beginning to articulate and that would eventually become their most recognizable signature” (p. 90). One of the milestones in Argentina that allowed the development of forensic anthropology was the testimony of Snow at the trial of the members of the military juntas, where his role as expert witness demonstrated the injuries of the bodies that had been exhumed from different clandestine graves, bringing to light the importance of this discipline to demonstrate, through scientific evidence, the circumstances of the death of the disappeared.

Although the group had been working since those early days, in May 1987 the EAAF was officially born. Its founding members were Morris Tindball-Binz, Patricia Bernardi, Mercedes Doretti, Luis Fondebrider, Darío Olmo, and Alejandro Incháurregui, with Clyde Snow as an honorary member. To commemorate the event, instead of bronzing the first pair of shoes, they did so with their first trowel⁵.

Political environment in Argentina during a “troubled childhood”

At the end of the 80s, the political climate in the Republic of Argentina was quite vibrant, characterized by a period of transition from a civil-military government to a democracy that was still weak at the time. Human Rights protests were common and widespread among the civilian population.

In 1986 and 1987, the Argentine government passed two laws, severely restricting investigations and prosecutions of those responsible for crimes during the military government (Crawford 1990; Roehrig 2009). The young group of students questioned the need to continue with the work they had been doing since the initial exhumations. However, several human rights organizations pushed for the continuation of the work of the EAAF, emphasizing the continuing need to search for

5. Some details added for dramatic effect.

the disappeared, provide answers to relatives and provide conclusive evidence of what happened in the past.

Due to this unstable climate of political excitement of the time, many organizations of relatives of disappeared persons and human rights defenders did not trust the forensic institutions of the Argentine state. They saw in the EAAF an independent alternative that applied multidisciplinary scientific rigor. The EAAF quickly gained the trust of organizations such as the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, with which they have worked together now for 36 years, searching for and identifying the disappeared.

The EAAF in the world

The EAAF was the first child of several forensic anthropology teams in Latin America. Bearing the responsibility of the eldest, they accompanied and supported the growth of other teams, in Guatemala, Chile, Uruguay, and Peru. As in all families, there was a mixture of love, friendship, arguments, and antagonisms. During this youth, it was sometimes difficult to manage things between sibling organizations. Each one had a vision of how things *should* be, but still, you have to respect the decisions of others and how they handle their work in their respective quarters. The EAAF has the luxury of being very well recognized and many groups call them for assistance, but you have to find a balance with the existing capacity in the country. In the end, as for many families, they found how to live together and collaborate, all dedicating themselves to the work of bringing people responsible for decades of systematic violence in their countries to justice and providing answers to the families of disappeared persons.

In forensic anthropological practice, it is normal to have both moments of pride and frustration, so teams and

personnel are always involved in complex situations. According to Luis, what has generated the most pride for the team is being able to provide answers and deliver human remains to the families who have been looking for their disappeared loved ones, as well as being able to contribute to justice during investigations by providing scientific evidence within judicial processes. In Argentina, the EAAF uses the mantra of *truth, justice, reparation and memory*; applying science to these social processes is another of the great sources of pride for the EAAF. On the other hand, there are frustrations over the slowness of the processes, especially when States are very bureaucratic. You can see both sides in their work: the EAAF alone has achieved 850 identifications of missing persons from the period of the military government. This constitutes 24 identifications per year (not counting their work in other countries). However, it is difficult not to think about the minimum 9,000 who remain missing and unidentified in Argentina.

In 2020, already 36 years old, the EAAF has matured, the product of decades of work in complex political contexts. We asked Fondebrider about the debate that exists among members of the Anthropology section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, and the position one should take in the face of social problems such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA. He pointed out that the EAAF had been involved from its first day in a sociopolitical environment where state forensics had collaborated—passively or actively—in crimes of the state. Luis says “getting involved is not being partial”, forensic anthropology comes from the same anthropology as a science that studies and seeks to understand the human being in all its social, historical, biological and linguistic dimensions. Getting involved in social movements such as Black Lives Matters is not taking sides with one side or the other, but rather speaking out on what is right or wrong.

The EAAF today

EAAF's growth has been progressive and its expansion has been notable. Of that group of six apprentice students who carried out exhumations and analyzed the bones recovered from cemeteries and morgues of Buenos Aires and throughout Argentina, today it is a team of 70 people in four offices: Buenos Aires, Mexico City, New York, and a forensic genetics laboratory in Córdoba, Argentina. They are professionals from various disciplines: anthropology, archaeology, biology, medicine, genetics, physics, architecture, computing, and geography.

The EAAF continues to be an alternative for those families that require an expert team when they doubt the official governmental system. In some countries, this is important because people might have reason to believe



FIG. 1—A young EAAF: Morris Tidball Binz, Dario Olmo, Luis Fondebrider, Patricia Bernardi, and Alejandro Inchaurregui. Absent from the image: Mercedes (Mimi) Doretti.



FIG. 2—EAAF founders Morris Tidball-Binz (now UN Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions) and Luis Fondebrider (now head of Forensic Unit of the International Committee of the Red Cross). Note to young readers: The item in Morris' hand is what was known as a telephone.

that governments are, in fact, responsible for disappearances and other crimes. The EAAF has been called on to act as subject matter experts by judges and prosecutors in multiple countries. The EAAF also acts at the request of various entities that have developed a search for missing persons and identification of bodies in different contexts, such as the United Nations International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, the International Criminal Court, the International Committee of the Red Cross, the Committee on Missing Persons in Cyprus, and others.

Something that has characterized the EAAF is that it has gone beyond the scientific processes of searching for missing persons and identifying bodies. They have carried out work in training of forensic personnel from different countries, they have worked on complex problems such as femicide and the search for disappeared migrants within the framework of the Border Project in the US and Central America, they have participated in processes of the application of new technologies for searches and applied them to complex cases such as the missing students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, as well as the use of information management technology (e.g., EAAF & CEDEHM 2021). In this way, the EAAF not only seeks to solve cases and alleviate the pain of families,

but also advance science and its application, while also supporting the local development of expertise. This last aspect is fundamental: we will always lack experts to investigate. A strong tendency to promote oneself as the only solution or the best solution is evident in many non-governmental organizations. In the eyes of the EAAF, the only sustainable solution is local development, especially in countries that do not have much external support from wealthy countries for geopolitical reasons. Thus, the EAAF has had a strong focus on south–south support.

In 2015, this south–south approach was made clear in a talk by Fondebrider at the University of Toronto in Canada. A professor asked how her students could get involved helping the EAAF with their work in Argentina. Fondebrider replied by saying that it seemed more necessary for her students to help the population of Indigenous women in Canada (where there is a rate of disappearance and homicide six times higher than other groups of women in the country, Department of Justice Canada, 2017).

Challenges of the EAAF and Latin American forensic anthropology

According to Fondebrider, the main challenge in the region is to be able to link new professions of forensic sciences such as biology, physics, geology, genetics, and others, and to apply it to the search for missing persons and human identification. Today, teams are increasingly linking different areas of forensic sciences to generate multidisciplinary work that generates comprehensive responses, a greater impact on investigations, and to produce better results.

Another of the significant challenges is the creation of public policies to make investigations more effective. The EAAF wants to see itself beyond just being that group of scientists who exhume bodies; it wants to see itself as a technical reference organization that can offer advice on forensic issues. At the Latin American level, it is considered that greater solidarity among the profession is needed, leaving behind private interests. Also, Fondebrider considers leading a discussion on the implementation of a quality control system of particular importance. Despite many references in the world to international standards (e.g., L'Abbé & Steyn, 2012; Traithpechanapai et al. 2016), a protocol at the international level as highlighted by Thompson et al. (2018) and as promoted by Skinner et al. (2003), for example, is currently not very realistic. There are many ways to do things that lead to the same result. From Fondebrider's standpoint, the basic minimum must be established and then consensus must be sought. In Latin America, it is important to talk about the standardization of processes, although they should not be universal; each institution should create its own protocols and processes that are not imposed and that are contextualized.

The EAAF and the Nobel Peace Prize nomination

The Nobel Peace Prize nomination is just the latest of the accolades bestowed upon the EAAF. In 2007, founding member Mercedes “Mimi” Doretti received the MacArthur Genius award. Science is always contributing to society. The EAAF is doing a job that would otherwise have never happened, thanks to the organizations of victim relatives. In the end, the EAAF did not win the Nobel Peace Prize (Fondebrider predicted as much), but they consider that the nomination is a great recognition of the many people who work on the team and with the team. The nomination will clearly generate a visibility of the discipline at a global level that has to be used intelligently in order to reach other more complex spaces where decisions are made and where public policies are created.

Thinking of the Future

We do not know how to qualify the life stages of organizations, but the EAAF is far from senescence. We asked Fondebrider for his advice to the new generation of forensic scientists. He replied by highlighting the importance of social responsibility and of assuming that responsibility. We must not withdraw from or ignore social processes in which we are immersed. We should engage in more dialogue with other actors in science, know the scope and limits of our discipline and understand that it can be made better by others.

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