

Mission of Mercy

by Ben Fenwick

Jose Sosof Coo, a young Tzutujil Mayan Indian from Guatemala, is not one given to despair, despite the fact that in the closing days of 1990 he received two bullet wounds to his spine, changing his life forever. He is cheerful, smart and even playfully mischievous, much like any other 17-year-old. Those who know him call it courage.

Before that fateful day on December 2, when he and 36 others from the village of Santiago Atitlan were gunned down in a renegade action by Guatemalan soldiers, Jose never had been outside his village. In his narrowly circumscribed life, he found more use for speaking his native Tzutujil Indian tongue than the Spanish that is his country's official language.

These days, Jose is learning English, mastering the guitar and keyboard and tackling rudimentary computer skills; he spends considerable time drawing and painting. Although confined to his wheelchair for much of the day, he has acquired custom-made leg braces and amazes his therapists with his progress as he struggles to use his walker.

But however limited, Jose has *life* instead of probable death had he never met Clyde Snow, an OU adjunct professor of anthropology. Life as a paraplegic is more than he would have had if he had not been helped by a crack team of physicians at the OU Health Sciences Center. His future is brighter than it would have been if Chris Houk, an OU nursing school graduate-cum-human rights volunteer had not answered the call when a young Guatemalan boy needed her help.

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Sister Mary Margaret McGaw, CSJ, The Sooner Catholic

The road back home for Jose Sosof, right with father Juan, has been long and perilous.

**He was no one special — just another victim of terrorism
in a country that counts them by the hundreds.
The world would never even have known his name
had he not come to the attention of some Sooners
who take human rights abuses very personally.**

Santiago Atitlan is a town of about 30,000 in the Mayan highlands of Guatemala on the shore of Lake Atitlan. The lushly forested, mountainous area is the home of the original Mayan peoples; nearby are their ancient capitals of Iximche and Utatlan. The people of the Santiago Atitlan, who call themselves Atitecos, have retained language and customs from the ancient times through the Spanish conquest and into today.

In 1980, the Guatemalan army situated a garrison roughly a mile outside town to stop guerrilla activity in the region. The soldiers, usually led by the upper-class "ladinos" of Guatemalan society, referred to the Atitecos as "la naturales" or "the naturals," synonymous with "the animals." Soon shootings, "disappearances" of men, women and children and even torture of the Atitecos became regular occurrences. The first massacre occurred in 1981; 16 people were killed; then the resident priest was murdered.

Terrified of the modern-day conquistadors, the Atitecos hid in their homes during the dusk-to-dawn curfew, only to wake to news of the day's latest atrocity. Although the town's official records of the dead and disappeared were burned mysteriously in the mid-1980s, estimates range as high as 1,700.

But nothing lasts forever, not even fear. By 1990, the Atitecos began to confront the continued threat from both the army and the guerrillas who lived and walked among them. They determined to act with the next incident.

They did not have long to wait. On the evening before the massacre, five drunken soldiers from the garrison brutally harrassed and abused the townspeople, wounding an unarmed, 19-year-old man. As news of the shooting spread, the tower bell of the 500-year-old church was rung in the prearranged signal for the people to gather in the town plaza.

Asleep in the dirt-floored hut where he lived with his father Juan, his mother Louisa, his two sisters, a

brother and grandmother, Jose was awakened by the bell. He had never been an activist; nevertheless, he dressed and went to the plaza with the others.

After a decade of resentment and frustration at the army's abuse, the people had had enough. By Jose's account, the crowd, led by the town's mayor and mayor-elect, first went to the victim's home to verify the events of the night. Then the Atitecos marched under a full moon to the garrison to



Villagers of Santiago Atitlan bury their dead after the December 2 massacre.

demand an explanation for the shooting.

Mayor-elect Salvador Ramirez insisted that no one carry rocks, sticks, machetes or do anything that would provoke violence. To indicate further the peaceful nature of the march, men took off their white T-shirts as they walked and attached them to sticks as peace banners. Jose was near the front of the marching group, which is said to have numbered between 2,000 and 4,000 men, women and children.

Reaching the gates of the garrison about 1:30 a.m., Jose recalls, Ramirez called out a greeting to the commander. In answer, the soldiers began firing their automatic weapons, at first into the air, then into the crowd. The unarmed Atitecos, Jose among them, started screaming, running and

throwing themselves on the ground.

Bullets hit all around Jose, kicking up dirt in his face. Suddenly he felt a heavy blow in his hip. At first he thought someone just had tripped over him. Reaching back, he felt the warmth and found his fingers splashed with blood. He couldn't feel his legs; he knew he was paralyzed.

The wounded and dying surrounded him. He tried to crawl away, but another bullet struck him in the back. He could feel his heart beginning to slow.

Among the people running and screaming was a cousin who recognized Jose. Jose told him to advise his family that he was dying. Crying and afraid that the soldiers would see that Jose was not dead and come back to finish the job, his cousin put Jose on his back and took him to a grove of trees away from the shooting. He left Jose there and ran for help.

Jose lay alone for half an hour, writhing and twisting in agony. He stuffed handfuls of dirt, twigs and rocks into his mouth and tried to bite back the pain. He was the last of the wounded to be discovered when the ambulances finally came.

The dead and some of the wounded were transported to the municipal building in Santiago Atitlan. The rest, including Jose, were taken to the shore of the lake where they waited unattended for hours for the ambulance boats from Solola. But the boats didn't come until dawn. The army, whose doctors had refused medical assistance, would not lift the curfew, and the boat operators feared the soldiers would shoot them for running after dark.

On December 5, OU adjunct professor Clyde Snow came to Guatemala. Snow is no stranger to violent death or the ways of military governments in Central and South America. A specialist in human skeletal identification, Snow became world-renowned in 1985 when he headed a forensics team in Brazil that identified the remains of Nazi war criminal Josef



Clyde Snow, right, exhumes a skeleton of the Mayan Indians slaughtered by renegade soldiers in Guatemala.

Mengele. More recently he has captivated the media by identifying the remains purported to be those of the Old West outlaws Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, confirming the legend of their deaths in a shootout in Bolivia.

But earlier Snow had traveled to Argentina to work in the massive effort to identify the thousands of people tortured and killed by the "death squads" during that country's rule by a military dictatorship. Other regimes in countries such as Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador and Brazil have come to feel the sting from Snow's revelations.

Similar work brought Snow to Guatemala. "I was there on a fact-finding mission along with a couple of people from Amnesty International and America's Watch. We were investigating some killings that had occurred in the highlands," Snow explains.

"When we got there, we were asked (by Amnesty) to take a detour to Santiago Atitlan because there had been a massacre."

According to the findings of several human rights groups, some 440 such documented massacres had occurred over the years in Guatemala; the perpetrators had no reason to expect reprisals for one more. But the involve-

ment of Snow, since appointed a U.S. delegate to the United Nations Human Rights Commission, made Santiago Atitlan different.

His was not the only visit that was fortuitous, however. In the neighboring town of Panajachel, a meeting was being held that had attracted some prominent international journalists. On the morning after the shooting, they already were photographing bodies, interviewing the wounded and taking statements from many of the 2,000 or more witnesses.

When Snow arrived, he found, in typical fashion, that the bodies already were buried.

"My interest, of course, was in the forensic investigation," he says. "But we found that the bodies had not been autopsied. The local medical examiner was one of two surgeons taking care of the wounded and was unable to do the autopsies." Snow's team went to Solola, where the wounded had been taken, arriving four days after the massacre. He talked to the doctors at the hospital

and interviewed some of the wounded.

"Jose was lying in bed with a tube through his nose," Snow recalls. "We asked the prognosis for the patients. The physician in charge said that most would heal, with the exception of Jose. They said, 'We don't have the resources to take care of those kinds of cases.'"

The doctors predicted Jose's already-critical condition would deteriorate. He had had extensive complications from his wounds, and the antibiotics were not keeping pace with the infection ravaging his body.

"Anyway, we put that in our report," Snow says grimly. "That would have been the end of it had I not, just by accident, run into Father John Vesey at the airport two weeks later when I was leaving Guatemala to come back to Oklahoma."

The Catholic mission in Santiago Atitlan has been supported by the Oklahoma Catholic Archdiocese since the early 1960s and often is staffed by Oklahomans. One of the mission's priests is Father Tom McSherry, a 1978 OU graduate, who later would bring mother Louisa and a newborn sister to Oklahoma City for Jose's spinal fusion surgery.

Among the Atitecos, the mission workers wrestle with the conditions of poverty, trying to introduce health practices, education, advanced agricultural techniques and other benefits to the populace. But work at the mission has been thwarted continually by the conflict in Guatemala. And Americans are not immune to the death squads. In 1981, Father Stanley Rother, a native of Okarche, Oklahoma, was gunned down as he slept in the church. He had known his name was on a death list but had chosen to stay, saying, "A shepherd cannot run from his flock." And so, the mission survives.

Snow learned of Santiago Atitlan's Oklahoma connection over a cup of coffee with Father Vesey, a vicar and human rights coordinator for the Diocese of Solola. Their conversation led to a discussion of the massacre. Vesey asked Snow if he knew of Jose's condition. Snow replied he did and added, "Maybe there's somebody in Oklahoma who could do something for him."

At home for Christmas, Snow called anyone he thought could help, but to no avail. The Oklahoma archbishop was out of town, and others offered little hope. Then someone mentioned Chris Houk. Snow soon knew he had found the right person.

"When I talked to Chris, that was it. It was like walking into a casino, just happening to pick a machine that's functioning right, putting in a nickel and out comes a whole bushel of nickels. That's what happened after that phone call," Snow says.

Chris Houk earned her B.S. in nursing in 1966 and also pursued graduate study in social work at OU and is the wife of 1959 OU medical school graduate and Oklahoma City Clinic physician Paul C. Houk, an OUHSC clinical professor of medicine. She is a longtime volunteer in human rights circles.

Houk had received a phone call on December 3 through a network of human rights volunteers in Guatemala, trying to alert the Oklahoma Archdiocese and others who would be concerned about the massacre. That call activated an ongoing infrastructure of state and national volunteers to be ready to help if needed.

"On the morning of December 20, we had a big ice storm, and phones were down all over the city. I was home

"It was a team effort from the beginning never just a one- or two-person effort . . . Clyde calls this our 'Pan-Oklahoma grassroots humanitarian project.'"



Forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow, left, Chris Houk and Father John Vesey prepare to transfer Jose to the plane.

baking Christmas cookies when Dr. Snow called. I was so shocked . . . I knew who he was, his stature," Houk says.

"He simply asked if we might consider facilitating medical treatment for this boy. I agreed."

By the time a meeting was arranged, Houk had assembled a medical team to advise the hastily formed relief committee on what needed to be done. (At first, it was thought that two boys would be brought to Oklahoma, but the condition of the other improved.) This team was led by Oklahoma City pediatric urologist and Oklahoma City Clinic president Bill Barnes and William Herndon, a pediatric orthopedic surgeon; both also have OUHSC faculty appointments. Countless other medi-

cal personnel in both private practice and on the OUHSC teaching staff also became involved.

"The hospitals at the Oklahoma Health Center agreed to receive and treat Jose," Houk says. "It was a team effort from the beginning, never just a one- or two-person effort, or even three or four. Clyde proudly calls this our 'Pan-Oklahoma grassroots humanitarian project.'"

Both Presbyterian and Children's hospitals took part in Jose's treatment, as well as other health center facilities.

First, it was thought members of the team might travel to Guatemala to care for Jose there. But in the meantime, Jose had been transferred to a different hospital, and there were some who expressed fear for his safety from reprisals. The decision was made to bring Jose to Oklahoma.

"The most difficult challenge in the operation was our transporting Jose here. He could not fly commercially because of his critical condition," Houk says. "He could sit up less than 15 minutes at a time."

Two Oklahoma corporations initially agreed to transport Jose to Oklahoma aboard a corporate jet. But on closer examination, the insurance liabilities were too great for the companies.

Houk sought the advice and assistance of Tulsa physician Robert G. Tompkins, the medical director of the William K. Warren Medical Research Center, Inc. Tompkins, himself quite active in the support effort for the mission in Santiago Atitlan, immediately sought the help of a prominent Tulsan (who prefers to remain anonymous). *Continued*

"He said he'd call me back, and he did. He wrote me the check for \$15,000," Tompkins says, musing that "a Jewish philanthropist wrote a check to a Catholic organization to bring an Evangelical Indian boy to a Presbyterian hospital. I think that underlines the ecumenical nature of this effort."

Jose was transported by chartered plane on February 25, 1991. Riding with him were Snow, Houk and Father Vesey, as well as Jose's father, Juan, who has not left his son's side since the shooting. They were met at the airport by a fully equipped Red Cross ambulance manned by Oklahoma City chapter executive director Tim Sartorius and driven by volunteer Jim Harlow, son of OU Foundation board chairman James G. Harlow and his wife Jane.

The young Guatemalan was brought to the Oklahoma Health Center and admitted to Presbyterian Hospital for immediate evaluation and treatment. But his odyssey did not end there.

When he had been brought back to sufficient health, Jose underwent fusion of the

shattered vertebrae in his spine. Months of grueling physical therapy followed to help Jose regain as much of his independence as possible and to prepare him for his return home.

But there was also time for the Indian youth to see and do things he never would have had the opportunity to do in Guatemala. He saw the State Fair of Oklahoma—a glorious experience by Guatemalan standards—attended the Red Earth Festival and Indian powwows, sampled Oklahoma barbecue, visited museums, traveled and met many interesting people. He and his father were accompanied by a constant companion, Monongo Furiko, a native Oklahoman whom Houk had asked to serve as their translator.

A fund for Jose's expenses began with a \$3,000 seed grant from the Carol Elizabeth Young Foundation; much of the ongoing support was raised by the Benedictine Peace House in Oklahoma City, through the efforts of coordinator Jennie Wood. Since his discharge from the hospital, he and his father have lived at the Catholic Archdiocesan Pastoral Center while Jose continued his therapy as an outpatient.

But even as Jose was growing into his new way of life, preparations had to be made for his eventual return to Santiago Atitlan—a prospect which held much apprehension for those involved in his case. Houk described the overwhelming responsibility that was shouldered when the decision was made to bring Jose to the United States.

"We had to maintain a very fragile balance in the decision-making process, rejecting any temptation toward paternalism," Houk says. "It was, after all, Jose's life, and he and his father were active participants in everything that was done. Those of us who became involved in this didn't just think it sounded like a 'nice thing to do;' it was the right thing to do. And we knew there was risk involved."

The risk, according to Snow, lies in the potential threat that their help could bring to the rest of Jose's family, still living in Guatemala, as well as to others in the village. Even as recently as August 1991, those who spoke out against the army's actions still were facing reprisals.

"While we were investigating down there, the brother and the brother-in-law of a victim of another massacre came to us with statements regarding the incident. The following month they were found shot dead in a ditch," Snow recounts.

Houk decided to seek the help of one of OU's most famous graduates, former Speaker of the House of Representatives Carl Albert. She already had informed him of the massacre, and they had kept in touch on the subject.

"Human rights are to the world today what freedom and democracy was to our country 200 years ago," Albert told her.

"Carl Albert was the central catalyst for drawing together the people both within the state and out-of-state," Houk says. "He is a friend to Hispanic people. In fact, Spanish is his second language. He wrote a very substantive, exacting letter to David Boren and the other members of the Oklahoma congressional delegation expressing his concerns about this boy and about the massacre."



Dr. Robert Tompkins, left, and Chris Houk visit Jose's family on an Oklahoma pilgrimage to Santiago Atitlan.

Albert's letter led to another, written by U.S. Senator David L. Boren, a 1968 OU law graduate who chairs the Senate Intelligence Committee, to Jose Serrano, the president of Guatemala.

"I write to you because, quite frankly, I fear for the safety of Jose and his family," Boren wrote. "I hope that your government will take steps necessary to ensure that the killings of 2 December

are thoroughly investigated, and that Jose Sosof and his family will be safe when they are reunited in Guatemala."

Jose received additional support from U.S. Representative Mike Synar, '72 B.A., '76 L.L.D., who met in Washington, D.C., with Jose, Snow, Houk, Juan and others involved in the effort. Synar agreed to act as congressional coordinator for Jose's case. With

the Oklahomans' congressional support, human rights organizations, such as Physicians for Human Rights, America's Watch and Amnesty International, will continue to monitor the situation in Guatemala.

In short, Jose's return this year to Guatemala was paved as smoothly as could be. Still, those who have worked so closely with Jose have plenty of apprehensions on his behalf.

"He's going back to live in a house with dirt floors," Tompkins explains. "He can't go out and grow corn. He can't do truck repairs. He can't do simple work. There isn't any need for small appliance repairs in his village. What is he going to do?"

His American friends have established an ongoing fund to assist the Sosof family. In addition, the plan is to give Jose clerical duties at the village mission, hopefully putting his newly-acquired English and computer skills to use. But finding a vocation is only one of the adjustments Jose must make.

Furiko, who as Jose's translator came to know him perhaps better than anyone in Oklahoma, is concerned about the "culture shock" the boy will experience.

"Coming here was like coming to another planet for him," Furiko explains. "He wants to be with his family, but it's going to take time for him to readjust. But he's a gutsy kid and has a real healthy attitude."

The concerns of his new friends in Oklahoma have to be that — just concerns, Houk says. The decision to return to Guatemala was made by both Jose and his father, a decision that must be given its dignity.

"We've always consulted as a team, but the primary decisions always were made by Jose and his father," Houk insists. "We are not a group of people who want to go on making decisions for others." *Continued*

ABOVE LEFT: OU alumnus Father Tom McSherry, here with several of his younger parishioners, is one of the priests assigned to the Catholic mission supported by the Oklahoma Archdiocese in Santiago Atitlan, Guatemala. BELOW: Clutching the quintessentially American can of Coke, a weak and helpless Jose, right, is shown with his father on the flight to Oklahoma City.

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Jose, his father, Houk and Furiko were invited to Houston December 6-8, 1991, as guests at the awarding of the Carter-Menil Human Rights Prize, given posthumously this year to the six Jesuit priests who were murdered in 1989 in El Salvador. The Carter-Menil ceremonies were held jointly with those of the Rothco Chapel Awards, given to four Central American activist groups and a Columbian newspaper.

Prominent at the Houston ceremonies was former President Jimmy Carter, who had been contacted previously by Speaker Albert on Jose’s behalf. Jose heard both Carter and South African leader Nelson Mandela speak on the trials suffered in the struggle for human rights.

Human rights, Mandela told the Houston audience, are the same for those in South Africa as for those in South America. “Our common humanity transcends the oceans and all national boundaries,” Mandela said. “Let it never be asked of any one of us: What did we do when we knew another was oppressed?”

A red-letter day for Jose and the entire team who brought the Guatemalan boy from near-death to semi-independence. Jose tries on his new leg braces, under the watchful eyes of physical therapists at Oklahoma Memorial Hospital.

As Carter and Mandela were leaving the chapel to go to an outside stage where a crowd of 2,000 people waited, they stopped to ask about Jose’s presence there. When told that he was the survivor of the Santiago Atitlan massacre, they asked him to join them on the stage.

At that moment, one year after being shot and left writhing in pain in that grove of trees, Jose was given public recognition for his suffering by two of the world’s most respected human rights leaders.

Also present at the ceremony, as a Rothco Award recipient, was Romero DeLeon Carpio, the human rights procurator of Guatemala, who had led the investigation of those who had fired the shots at the massacre of Santiago

Atitlan. Through his efforts, three people were indicted, tried and imprisoned for the shootings.

Carpio credited the stand made at Santiago Atitlan as a possible beginning of a change for his country.

“What happened there . . . really is positive for human rights and for Guatemala. It was the first time that an official policy came to work against the army and the government in Guatemala,” Carpio said.

In fact, the day after the massacre, the town organized a petition drive. More than 15,000 thumbprints and signatures were collected and presented to the Guatemalan legislature, demanding that the Army garrison be removed. On December 20, the army abandoned its base at Santiago Atitlan.

No one fantasizes that the army has given up, however; the Atitecos know that the struggle to keep the soldiers out of their town is far from over—but it is a beginning.

“What is positive is what happened after the massacre,” Carpio said. “It is a hopeful start to the end of impunity in Guatemala.”

