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Scientist who identified 9/11 victims helps UNT on Chile case

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For Rhonda Roby, Sept. 11 doesn't just come around once a year. It's a constant reminder that her work is to help families struck by tragedy find peace.

Dr. Roby, one of the nation's top DNA scientists, led the team that identified victims of the World Trade Center terrorist attacks on 9/11.

Now she's working at the University of North Texas' Center for Human Identification on another project with a Sept. 11 tie.

Last month, Dr. Roby and her UNT colleagues received a contract to investigate one of the most infamous crimes of the last half-century: the disappearance and deaths of thousands of people in Chile, including several Americans, shortly after a military coup on Sept. 11, 1973.

Based in Fort Worth, the UNT center was created after the state Legislature mandated a DNA missing persons' database in 2001. Since then, it has become the country's primary program for identifying missing people.

While the bulk of the work done by the UNT center is in Texas, its reputation extends well beyond the state's borders, leading to contracts such as the one with Chile.

"They determined that we had the best shot at getting the answers that these families have waited for – in some cases up to 30 years," said Art Eisenberg, director of UNT's Center for Human Identification.

Dr. Roby is no stranger to high-profile cases. In the mid-1990s, she led a team that identified the remains of Russia's Czar Nicholas II and his wife, Alexandra. She conducted DNA analysis to identify Branch Davidians who died in the 1993 fire near Waco.

But Dr. Roby prefers to focus on her dealings with ordinary families. She recalled one such meeting, which took place after she first arrived in Chile for a preliminary audit of the former dictatorship's victims two years ago.

While supervising the excavation of a mass grave, Dr. Roby walked by a family member of a *desaparecido* (missing person), who stood watching the exhumation.

"Thank you for helping," the man said.

"It's nothing," Dr. Roby said, in Spanish.

After a few more steps, she stopped and walked back to the man.

"I want to thank you very much for talking to me," she said, "and I'm going to do everything I can do to help identify these remains."

At that moment, Dr. Roby said, the meaning of her work crystallized for her. Why she put in the hours she did. Why she became immersed in lives ravaged by tragic events and violent death. And why she decided to learn Spanish in her 40s.

"For every set of remains, there's a family behind it," she says. Meeting with families "reminds me why I work the hours that I do and why this work is so important."

Early interest

Rhonda Roby, 45, grew up in Oklahoma, where her parents still live.

As a teen in the late 1970s, she began following a famous case involving three girls who had been raped and murdered at a Girl Scout camp east of Tulsa.

"I was a Girl Scout at the time, and I got very interested," she said.

She called the forensic scientist working on the case, Ann Reed, and arranged for the scientist to visit her school. After that, Dr. Roby said, she began telling everyone that she wanted to be a forensic scientist when she grew up.

She went on to earn a master of public health in forensic, behavioral and environmental health sciences at the University of California at Berkley in 1989.

As she started her career, DNA was just beginning to revolutionize forensic science.

In 1991, Dr. Roby began working for the Department of Defense on a new project using mitochondrial DNA analysis to identify the remains of service members, many of whom had been listed as missing in action since the Korean War or Vietnam War.

She still remembers her first case, Navy pilot John Frederick Barr, and how grateful the family was to get a confirmed identification of the officer's remains.

"I think that mission for identifying soldiers is extremely important," she says. "That's something I'm very proud of."

After 9/11, Dr. Roby moved to New York to help the medical examiner's office identify remains. She was asked to lead a team of scientists in processing DNA samples. Overall, the team tested 21,000 specimens. "It was the world's largest forensic case ever," she said.

Dr. Roby spent three years on the project and worked incredibly long hours.

"As forensic scientists, we are intensely focused on getting this work done and doing it right. But when I'm away from the lab and I think about what I'm doing, I get emotional. I think about how I'm really working for the families," she said.

"Some said, 'I don't need you to tell me this is my son. I know he's dead.' Others said they really wanted something to bury."

Able to communicate

Many families she met were related to Spanish-speaking workers at Windows on the World, the large restaurant on the top floor of the North Tower.

Frustrated by her inability to talk to them, Dr. Roby decided to learn Spanish. In 2004, she moved to Spain to work on her doctorate at the University of Granada.

In 2006, she was contacted by the Chilean government, which wanted to reinvestigate the killings that took place after a 1973 military coup that brought about the repressive dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet, a Chilean general.

After 17 years of military rule ended in 1990, efforts were made to identify the estimated 3,000 people who died during the Pinochet dictatorship. But the identifications weren't done by forensic scientists, and many proved to be inaccurate.

In 2006, the country's new president, a torture victim under the Pinochet regime, decided to reopen the process. Dr. Roby was brought in to oversee an audit of previous cases. Dr. Roby's group recommended making another effort to identify all the victims.

Dr. Roby proposed several labs in the United States and Europe. The Chilean government chose the UNT Center for Human Identification.

The \$1.3 million contract was signed on Aug. 8, Dr. Eisenberg said, and the center has already begun the job.

Meanwhile, Dr. Roby is scheduled to receive her doctorate today, the seventh anniversary of the attack on the World Trade Center and the 35th anniversary of the violent military coup in Chile.

Her boss, Dr. Eisenberg, says he hopes to offer her a faculty position so she can pass on her skills and compassion to UNT students.

"What she brings to the table mentally, physically and more importantly what's in her heart, you can't put a price tag on it," he said.