

## LOCAL NEWS /NEW YORK

# Syracuse orphan finds his long-lost family

**El Salvadoran native reunited with relatives who had been looking for the boy they lost in civil war.**

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Christopher Roulin spent 20 years searching for his biological relatives. It took him nearly half a lifetime, two visits to El Salvador and the resolve to relive an erratic and painful past. Two months ago, some closure came for Roulin, 38, who moved to Syracuse after being orphaned in El Salvador's civil war in 1980.

"I think about my family every day and hope they are well," Roulin said after meeting his biological grandmother, aunts, uncles and cousins in El Salvador. "I finally have closure to questions that have been in the back of my mind for many years."

Roulin grew up in Syracuse and now lives in Denver with his 7-year-old son, Jonah. His adoptive mother, Tina Castle, still lives in Syracuse in the house where she raised him.

In 1979, Roulin was living in Tenancingo with his parents and three siblings as the conflict between El Salvador's military-led government and a coalition of left-wing militias ravaged small towns. He still remembers the day when, at age 7, he walked outside and found his father dead on the side of a dirt road; he'd been attacked by national guards and left to die.

"When we went back, it was weird because I remembered exactly where we lived, and I found the spot where I'd found my dad," Roulin said. "So much time had gone by, and I still remembered the exact spot."

Family members fled the unrest and his mother died in



CHRISTOPHER ROULIN'S cousins, aunts, uncles and grandmother attended the reunification in Cuscatlan, about 25 miles from San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador. Roulin (fourth from left) was adopted from an orphanage when he was 7 and moved to Syracuse.

1980 of natural causes (which Roulin called grief), orphaning him and his three younger siblings.

Castle lived in Syracuse, as a recently divorced single mother who wanted a bigger family. She decided to adopt 7-year-old Roulin, then called Porfidio Lopez.

Roulin remembers vomiting the entire plane ride to the United States. He was traumatized and used to living in a war zone so he refused to eat for the first three days he was here, worried Castle was trying to poison him.

"It was a little bit of a shock at first. I didn't know who she was. I didn't know what kind of intentions she had," Roulin said.

At first Roulin didn't speak very much. He took classes in English as a second language at school but never practiced at



CHRISTOPHER ROULIN was reunited with his grandmother, Felicitia de Paz, Jan. 14. Roulin had been looking for his biological family, from whom he became separated at 18 during El Salvador's civil war. The organization Pro-Busqueda (which means in search of) made the visit possible.

home, Castle said. And then one day he just started speaking English and never spoke a word of Spanish again.

Roulin tried to re-learn the language later in life and couldn't. A doctor told him it

was a symptom of his trauma.

"There was so much pain behind it. Part of the reason I don't speak Spanish is because I don't want to remember it," he said. "There are so many walls up that I blocked it all

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— Christopher Roulin

out. I believe I blocked everything else out too."

With the exception of the language block, Castle said Roulin showed few signs of a traumatized youth. He did well in school, played soccer (one of his few happy memories from El Salvador) and became treasurer of his class. When Roulin turned 18, Castle suggested a trip to El Salvador to try and track down members of his biological family.

The two joined a church group to make the trip in 1993, just as the civil war was ending. Castle hired a private attorney to find Roulin's family. He couldn't track them down, but he discovered something disconcerting: Roulin's adoption had been forged. Many children taken in by the orphanage matrons had actually been kidnapped.

"I was scared to death," Castle said. "He always said his father was shot and his mother died, but he was just a little boy so I didn't know for sure. There were thousands of children kidnapped during the war. I didn't know if he was one of them."

Attorneys confirmed through death certificates that both of Roulin's parents had died but couldn't locate any living relatives.

"I think we both left that trip pretty disappointed," Castle said.

Then, in 2010, Castle received an email from a college student at the University of California, Berkeley, working with Pro-Busqueda, an organization aimed at reuniting families separated during the war. Roulin's grandmother had contacted the agency looking for her grandson. The agency made the connection both parties had long been waiting for.

Twenty years after that first trip, it was time to book a flight back to El Salvador.

Roulin met his 85-year-old grandmother, aunt and cousins in Cuscatlan, where most of the family moved during the war. Family members were packed into a small shack, which had no running water or electricity, but an abundance of home-cooked food and friendly chatter.

Most family members wept, but laughter also rang out as they swapped anecdotes about Roulin's mischievous habits as a boy, Castle said.

Olivia Holdsworth, 22, works with Pro-Busqueda as a translator and attended Roulin's reunification. The organization has existed for 16 years.

Holdsworth said 881 people have registered missing-persons cases with Pro-Busqueda and 363 have been resolved, including 52 in the United States. "Resolved" doesn't necessarily mean a reunification, Holdsworth said. It could mean the missing person is confirmed dead or sometimes the person is located but shies away from meeting long-lost relatives.

"For me it was just a matter of, I needed to know who these people are," Roulin said. "At first I didn't know how to feel about it. But there's a lot of gratification, a lot of closure in knowing that you do have a family and that they're doing fine is the number one thing, that they're well."