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Obsessive Pursuit

Years after her brother was murdered in Chile's "dirty war," a diminutive former professor went after the killer

BY LISA LAMBERT

Zita Cabello-Barrueto sat in a chilly convent near the bottom of the world, yearning for justice. The only other person in the almost bare room was a nun who wouldn't look her in the eye.

From her home in Foster City, Cabello-Barrueto had returned to her native Chile in search of witnesses to her brother's long-ago murder. She thought a nun at this convent in the Andean foothills knew about the killer. But the nun didn't want to talk.

Cabello-Barrueto, a shy, middle-aged former UC Santa Cruz professor, had taken the unusual step of suing over the slaying of her beloved older sibling Winston Cabello during Chile's 1973 "dirty war." She believed a Chilean soldier had slashed Winston to death following a military coup directed by Gen. Augusto Pinochet, who deposed Chile's democratically elected Socialist leader, Salvador Allende.

The soldier, Armando Fernandez Larios, was thought to have been a member of a mobile execution squad that traveled around Chile killing Pinochet's political opponents. Chileans called it "the Caravan of Death." Winston had been a regional economic planner for Allende in northern Chile, where the government wanted to nationalize copper mines. Then 28, Winston was killed with a *corvo*, a wickedly curved knife traditionally carried by Chilean military men.

Shortly after the coup, Cabello-Barrueto and her husband fled to the Bay Area. Haunted by her brother's death, however, Cabello-Barrueto had returned to Chile over and over in later years to hunt for information on Winston. Standing barely 5 feet tall, with delicate facial features and a soft voice, she was hardly intimidating, but she was relentless and effective. She knocked on the doors of ex-Pinochet bureaucrats, former military officials, and anyone else she felt could help advance her lawsuit against Fernandez Larios. In the process she transformed herself from a mild-mannered teacher of Latin American studies into a cross between Columbo and Capt. Ahab, her disorganized, low-key style masking a steely determination.

In 2001, Cabello-Barrueto's investigation took her to the convent in Temuco, a small city in southern Chile's picturesque lake district. She wanted to prove in court that Fernandez Larios tortured and killed other Chileans besides her brother, and she knew the nun's testimony would help. When she had phoned from the United States, the nun had been reluctant to speak with her. It was a reaction Cabello-Barrueto was used to. Many Chileans simply didn't want to

remember the violence and repression that convulsed their country more than a quarter-century earlier, and plenty of witnesses already had turned Cabello-Barrueto down. With her gentle persistence, though, she persuaded others to at least meet her, and the nun finally agreed to do so.

Fulvia Fuentealba was an austere and imposing figure: 6 feet tall and wearing a long gray tunic and a cross at her throat. Though only in her late teens in 1973, she had been arrested for her political sympathies. According to another witness, Fernandez Larios interrogated her, at first exhibiting remarkable politeness. But when Fuentealba sat down without his permission, he exploded, beating her until she lay bleeding on the floor. Fernandez Larios then loaded four of her friends into a jeep, leaving no room for her. He and some other soldiers drove the friends to a field and allegedly shot them to death.

For some reason, the soldiers didn't return for Fuentealba.

But the nun didn't want to talk about it. A trial, she complained, might upset her sick mother. Her superiors wouldn't let her testify. Besides, it all happened long ago, and she was too busy now working with children and poor people.

Cabello-Barrueto was direct with her. "Your best friend died and you are probably the only witness," she said. "You are becoming an accomplice."

Fuentealba didn't want to hear that. Cabello-Barrueto quickly switched tactics, appealing to the nun's sense of justice.

"I don't care about justice," Fuentealba retorted. She'd already made her peace with God.

Her attitude stunned Cabello-Barrueto. Justice was the most important thing in her life. She had given up her UC job over her obsessive pursuit of Fernandez Larios. Friends were distancing themselves from her, some even abandoning her altogether.

In the end, the diminutive academic ran Fernandez Larios to ground. With the help of a San Francisco legal center, she forced him to appear in an American courtroom on charges of torture, kidnapping, extrajudicial killings, and crimes against humanity. And in October, a jury handed down an unprecedented verdict.

But that day was still far in the future. Here in this frigid convent, another door had been slammed in her face. The tight-lipped nun called Cabello-Barrueto a cab.

On Sept. 11, 1973, the Chilean capital of Santiago turned into a war zone. Under orders from Gen. Pinochet, soldiers stormed the historic presidential palace where Allende was holed up with his Cabinet. Allende went into a side room and

blew his brains out. According to *A Nation of Enemies*, a book on the Chilean military by Pamela Constable and Arturo Valenzuela, one of the soldiers at the palace that day was Fernandez Larrios.

Where Zita Cabello-Barrueto lived, 400 miles to the north in Copiapo, the day was peaceful. "Everything was happening in Santiago, not in Copiapo," she remembers. "It was a regional city. We weren't having a civil war."

There were no palaces in Copiapo, a dusty copper-mining town in the Atacama Desert, the driest in the world. The settlement was a collection of boxy, one-story houses surrounded by miles and miles of sand, so isolated that virtually everything had to be imported by truck.

Then 26, Cabello-Barrueto was a teacher at the Copiapo branch of the State Technical University. She favored short skirts and wore her hair past her shoulders. Riding to school aboard the 8 a.m. bus that day, she heard news of the coup. Too distracted to work, she began walking home.

A white van resembling an ambulance zoomed past her. She recognized her older brother, the tall and angular Winston, and her husband, baby-faced Pautrizio Barrueto, inside their official government vehicle. Winston was the economic planning director for the regional government and Pautrizio, nicknamed Pato, was his assistant.

"Winston had been with his hand on every major decision in the province," Pato explains.

The men told Zita they'd been at the airport, which makes her laugh now. "They went over there thinking they would have a flying lesson," she says. But the military had grounded all planes.

Zita got in the van, and they all rode to Zita and Pato's one-bedroom house for lunch. Winston talked about a miner who'd offered to show him a back road leading out of the country. But Winston said he didn't think escaping was necessary, and Zita didn't contradict him.

The three had developed a special friendship while studying at the University of Chile's rigorous School of Economics in Santiago. In college, Winston had looked after Zita, known for her forgetfulness, by reminding her of exams and reserving books for her in the library. He'd also encouraged her to become a dancer in a folkloric group for which he played guitar. Only two years apart, Zita and Winston had grown up close in a family with two older brothers and a younger sister.

At a folkloric performance, Zita met Pato, Winston's friend. Pato noticed that she danced "with an air of elegance and propriety." Their first official date was to Winston's wedding, when he married a woman named Veronica.

Winston, Zita, and Pato dreamed of building a new Chile. They refused to join a political party, but supported Allende. "We felt we were good people, probably better than we really were," Zita says. "As economists, we had the knowledge to figure out how the fruits of the economy would reach the margins of society. You figure out how to transform the society in a peaceful way. For us, what better way to spend your life, your knowledge, your education?"

But society was transforming in a way they'd never foreseen.

Zita told herself the military government would last six months before new elections were held (in fact, Pinochet remained Chile's dictator for nearly two decades). After the coup leaders took total control of the media, Zita, Winston, and Pato were desperate for information. On Sept. 12, Winston was summoned to meet with the new government. He thought he could learn some basic facts from the Pinochet functionaries about what was going on in Santiago.

"There was shooting and killing in Santiago, but we didn't know then," Pato says. "We didn't even know if Allende was alive."

The violence that saturated Santiago soon began seeping into Copiapo. Winston was arrested at the meeting by the town's new acting *incandente*, or mayor, a military officer named Oscar Haag. Winston was never formally charged with a crime, but Haag considered him a threat to the Pinochet government. This made him a political prisoner. Because no one in Copiapo knew what to do with political prisoners, Winston was thrown into jail with common criminals. A convict offered to help him escape, but again Winston didn't think that was necessary.

That night, Pato and Zita took Winston a sleeping bag and then returned home. Zita made herself a cup of tea, and they stood in the kitchen talking. The possibility of a coup had loomed for a while. In an attempt to socialize the country, Allende had launched a series of economic reforms that had triggered long bread lines and incapacitating strikes. The United States, Chile's main trading partner, feared Allende wanted to turn the country communist and worked to subvert him.

Zita once asked her older brother during those months of turmoil what might happen under a coup. "In this country," she remembers him saying, "they're going to detain people. And they're going to kill them all, because it's too expensive to have them in jail." Now, Zita worried deeply about Winston.

"Do you think they are going to kill him?" she asked Pato.

Her husband didn't answer. Zita dropped her cup of tea, which shattered on the floor.

Life slowly twisted into a new shape over the next few weeks. Zita missed the announcement that all Allende supporters were fired from the Technical University. She showed up at work and kept her job by arguing that economics was not a political field. Her points persuaded the administrators to appoint her

chair of the social sciences department, a blessing now that Winston was in jail and she was the sole provider for her baby son Felipe, and was also helping support her sister-in-law Veronica and two nieces.

Pato put on his best suit and went to the office of *Incandente* Haag to plead for Winston's release. Even though the secretary wouldn't let him past the lobby, he went to the mayor's office again and again. On his fifth attempt, the secretary had Pato arrested.

"I looked around and saw so many people I knew," Pato recalls. He liked to kid around to make points and get people talking. But a jail full of newly detained political prisoners was no place to be a comedian. "I asked what time the meeting was going to start. One of my friends said, 'Shut up, motherfucker.'"

By then Winston had been transferred to the local military garrison. "Winston had more physical access to the military prosecutor [who oversaw political detainees]," Pato says. "He obtained permission to have a birthday party, to get a television installed. He realized the military didn't know how to have prisoners."

Zita was now supporting a household of nine people, since Pato had offered their home as refuge to other prisoners' wives. Three or four people slept in each bed. She made lunches and walked the food every day to the prison and the garrison for the two men who'd been taken from her. She was exhausted.

On Oct. 14, Zita left the prison in tears after visiting Pato. The guards were rough on her and wouldn't let her kiss her husband goodbye. When she arrived at the garrison, Winston hugged her and tried to give her a sense of hope. "Even if someone cuts all the flowers," she remembers him saying, "they can't keep spring from returning."

He also had good news: He was being released to a small town where he'd check in with an officer each day under a type of house arrest called "town detention." Pato would also be given town detention after the military prosecutor interrogated him.

And just as Winston said, on the morning of Oct. 16 Pato was brought to the garrison to meet the prosecutor. He was made to stand in front of a wall and wait all day. At 5:30 that afternoon, the prosecutor emerged from an office, stressed and hurried.

"You're not going to be questioned today because there's a delegation coming from Santiago," the man told him.

Though Pato didn't know it at the time, the "delegation" was the Caravan of Death. He was returned to a long dormitory at the prison. Winston was being

held there now, too. Pato went to sleep on the bottom of a bunk bed. Across the room, Winston slept on the bottom of another.

Around midnight, the door opened and Pato awoke to see a soldier "in full combat uniform and a machine gun hanging from his side." The trooper read a list of 13 names. Winston's was on it.

The image of that soldier burned into Pato's mind. "I remember his smile: so cruel, so arrogant," he says. "His demeanor was so aggressive; testosterone all over."

Pato watched as his best friend dressed, putting on his suit over his pajamas. The soldier grew impatient and yelled at him to hurry up. Winston, who was very particular about his clothes, didn't have time to tie his shoes. Pato saw him shuffle off into the night. Then he fell back asleep.

He never saw Winston again.

In Santiago, the military imprisoned possible dissidents in stadiums almost as soon as the coup began. The Caravan of Death then extended the roundups and purges beyond Santiago's borders. Led by Gen. Sergio Arellano Stark, the squad flew up and down the long, stiletto-shaped country in Puma helicopters. When the outfit landed, Stark reviewed prisoners' files and put red checks next to names of those who might threaten the regime. They were killed. In less than a month, Stark's soldiers tortured and slaughtered more than 70 civilians.

The night Winston was taken away, a drunken jail guard, Adolfo Gonzalez, showed up at his house and told his wife, Veronica, that he was dead. Veronica sent Gonzalez home; why should she believe this boozy fool? But the guard insisted he was telling the truth. Her gave her the name of a garrison employee who'd confirm everything.

The next morning, Zita heard rumors that Winston had died. She tried to visit the garrison, but military people she hadn't seen before told her they didn't have prisoners there. She wasn't sure what was happening. Veronica then talked to the man who worked at the garrison. Winston, he said, was gone.

Zita refused to believe it. She'd spoken to a lawyer who visited the garrison frequently and he'd said no one had died. He invited her and Veronica to his office, promising to explain everything. He asked them to bring a newspaper, which would detail the sentences the prisoners received.

The women forgot the newspaper, so while Zita waited for the lawyer, Veronica ran off to get a copy. The man arrived before she returned. The next few minutes changed Zita's life forever.

"He said, 'You haven't brought a newspaper,'" Zita recalls. "Then we saw Veronica, and we saw her face."

At that moment, Zita knew her brother had been killed. The newspaper reported that 13 Copiapo prisoners were shot while escaping. Their families were forbidden from burying or even seeing the bodies.

"Why did you lie to me?" Zita asked the lawyer. Furious, she grabbed him and started to shake him. But all he could say to her was, "I'm sorry." The attorney, she later learned, was a military intelligence agent.

Zita's world went dark. "Even my trust in good people -- I lost it," she says. "There was nothing left for you to do, because your life doesn't belong to you anymore. What's the meaning of hope? They can kill you at any time."

With her older brother and close friend dead, Zita understood anything could happen in Chile. Her father, who'd often played guitar with Winston, put down his instrument and never played again. Her mother and younger sister Karin asked their priest to say a Mass for Winston, but he refused, saying it was too risky politically. Even speaking Winston's name was painful, so the family slipped into silence over his death.

Zita didn't know if Pato was alive or dead. Adolfo Gonzalez, the jailer who'd told Veronica about Winston's death, now informed Zita that Pato was OK but would soon be transferred to a concentration camp. Zita went to the incandente's office, begging and pleading her way into a five-minute meeting with Oscar Haag.

Once inside his office she turned into a lioness.

"I made him sit," she says. "I told him he was a liar. I was not there for an explanation. I said, 'Send me to an island, but I want to go with my husband.'"

Haag acceded. He allowed her to select a village, and sent Pato there for town detention. Zita went with him. Then they finally got a major break. Another older brother of Zita, Manuel, was studying at UC Berkeley and could send his sister and brother-in-law U.S. visas. If they were willing to take the risk, they could get out of Chile. They were willing.

Before they left, though, one of Zita's former co-workers at the technical college who was now in the government's tourism office, Ximena de la Barra, invited them to lunch. Zita was perplexed. What did this woman want to talk about?

In the middle of the meal Pato got up to go to the restroom. The woman turned to Zita.

"Do you know how Winston died?" she asked. "Fernandez Larios killed him."

It was the first time Zita had heard that name, the first time she knew more than the official account. De la Barra was a friend of Fernandez Larios' psychiatrist, to whom Fernandez Larios had supposedly confessed everything.

"It was a game for them," Zita remembers de la Barra saying.

De la Barra said Winston was driven in a truck to a field and ordered to get out so he could be shot while running away.

But, she said, Winston defied Fernandez Larios, refusing to get out of the truck. The soldier then stabbed him repeatedly with a *corvo*, a long, double-edged knife with a talonlike blade, de la Barra said. A *corvo* doesn't slice into someone so much as tear through his body tissue and internal organs with its hook. Zita vowed her family would never know these devastating details.

In 1974, less than a year after the coup, Zita and Pato sneaked away from the town where Pato was in detention. They took 2-year-old Felipe, their visas, and one suitcase. If there had been computer databases or a Homeland Security Department in place at the time, anyone would have been able to see that Pato wasn't supposed to leave Chile. But there was no way of checking. And since the United States, which had supported the coup, was providing the visas, the little family didn't raise suspicions. Zita's parents and sister Karin watched as the three walked up the stairs to the plane and flew away to Oakland. Zita took her secret with her.

"I remember seeing Felipe waving us goodbye," Karin says. "Then it was like, 'Phew.'"

Zita and Pato had escaped the murderous purges of Pinochet's Chile. (About 3,200 people were killed or disappeared under the Pinochet regime; another 150,000 to 200,000 were jailed for political reasons.) But things were hardly easy in the Bay Area.

The two young economists who set out to change the world wound up as janitors in an Oakland bank building. They moved on to paint houses, learned English, and had another baby, Roberto.

In 1978, Zita's parents and two other siblings, Karin and Aldo, followed them to the Bay Area. "They were working cleaning houses, painting," Karin recalls. "You name it. We used to laugh about it. We knew somehow it would get better."

Still, Zita thought about the one brother who would never join them. She had a recurring dream about climbing stairs at the School of Economics, only to have the staircase fall away. In the background, Winston's voice asked her what she was doing with her life.

"Get out of this," he told her.

Zita thought Winston was telling her to make something of herself, just as he had when they were university students. Zita awoke from one of the dreams and told Pato she was going back to school. He could do whatever he wanted, she said, but she was going to improve their lives.

She decided to simultaneously pursue a master's degree in public health and a Ph.D. in developmental economics at UC Berkeley. The ambitious educational program presented challenges in every area of her life: money, language, schedules, feelings. Just getting accepted was a battle. She had no letters of recommendation; after all, she'd been working as a cleaning woman.

By 1989, though, Zita had received her Ph.D. and become a professor at UC Santa Cruz, teaching developmental economics and Latin American studies. In the meantime Pato had opened a day-care center in San Mateo, a job he loved.

Their sons grew up with stories about their missing uncle. Still, none of Zita's siblings ever said his name, and only Zita knew how Winston had died.

In 1990, Chile finally held free elections and Pinochet peacefully gave up his long reign. The entire country began looking for answers to the mysteries of those who had disappeared or were killed under the aging general.

That year, families searched the Atacama Desert for the bodies of the 13 men killed in Copiapo. Zita's brother Aldo, who now owns the Baby World chain in the Bay Area, kept in touch with the group and got a call as it was close to finding the mass grave. He flew to Chile, and there, during the excavation, part of Zita's secret was confirmed. Winston's neck had been slashed. The family knew for certain he was killed with a *corvo*.

Back in Foster City, where the Barruetos were now living, Zita grew frustrated. The new Chilean president, Patricio Aylwin, was heading a national commission to investigate human rights violations under Pinochet. Zita thought the commission should do more than seek and record the truth. She wanted it to deliver justice.

"The more I read about the genocide, I said there's nothing happening in Chile that hasn't happened before," she says. "We're always trying to forget the past in the name of peace."

Ever the academic, she researched her quandary by making a low-budget documentary, *Never Again Shall We Say Never Again*. Her assistants were her son Felipe and two recent college graduates who knew how to work a video camera. Dedicated to Winston, the 1995 film explored Chileans' opinions about how those who commit genocide should be punished. It was intended primarily to help Zita find answers, not entertain theatergoers.

A friend from Chile called Zita to suggest an interview subject, a former Pinochet soldier now living in the United States. Zita went numb when she heard the man's name: Armando Fernandez Larios.

"He could be a neighbor," she recalls herself thinking. "It was scary that he could be in this country."

Fernandez Larios had become an even more notorious figure. In 1976 he'd entered the U.S. and gathered information on Orlando Letelier, Allende's former ambassador to the United States, who was then living in Washington, D.C. The material was given to an assassin who killed Letelier and his American assistant with a car bomb. Chile refused to extradite Fernandez Larios to the U.S. for prosecution. In the 1980s, Fernandez Larios' story appeared in U.S. newspapers as well as in a book, *Death in Washington*. But Zita hadn't heard his name since her lunch with Ximena de la Barra.

Fernandez Larios later fell out of favor with his military. He cut a deal with the U.S. Justice Department, much of which remains secret. In exchange for providing information on the assassin and Chilean intelligence operations, he'd go to a federal prison for seven years and would never be deported to Chile. Argentina wanted to extradite Fernandez Larios for his alleged involvement in another political hit, but the plea agreement protected him from that as well.

A federal judge in New York released Fernandez Larios after five months in prison. That short stay, coupled with time he spent in Chilean military hospitals, counted as time served. Fernandez Larios settled in Miami and found work in an auto-body repair shop.

Zita made her documentary without interviewing him, but she was uneasy knowing he lived in her new country. She wrestled with what to do with the information about him and Winston, and decided to let it lie for the time being.

Her frustration stayed with her. Her documentary had told some truths, but it had not brought about justice. Then another political earthquake hit Chile.

In 1998, on the 25th anniversary of Winston's death, Pinochet was arrested in England. He was detained on a warrant from the Spanish government, which wanted to know what had happened to some Spanish citizens who'd disappeared in Chile during his reign.

The ripple effects of Pinochet's arrest spread to San Francisco, where the Center for Justice and Accountability, a nonprofit group that prosecutes human rights abusers through the U.S. courts, joined an international search for those who might provide evidence against the former dictator. Zita heard about the center's work and brought it information on Winston.

Pinochet was found mentally unfit to stand trial, but the CJA had a new case to work on. The Cabello family had decided to sue Fernandez Larios.

The law center connected Zita and her relatives with two attorneys, Leo Cunningham of Walnut Creek and Bob Kerrigan of Miami.

Cunningham is a polished, genteel litigator whose firm normally defends corporations and their executives, but also takes on some pro bono cases each year. Though he could barely distinguish between Chile and Argentina at the time, Cunningham found Zita's story compelling and decided to offer his services. Kerrigan, who's spearheaded other human rights lawsuits, wanted to see "the atrocities of the Pinochet regime" tried in court. He eventually spent \$100,000 of his firm's money on Zita's case.

The Cabellos' lawsuit relied on an obscure 1789 law, the Alien Tort Claims Act, which allows noncitizens to be sued for wrongdoings, or torts. Its original intent was to prosecute pirates on the high seas, but in the 1970s a federal judge declared that it also applied to human rights cases.

One major problem for the Cabellos' lawyers was how to directly connect Fernandez Larios with Winston's murder. Most of the eyewitnesses to the killing - i.e., the other 12 Copiapo prisoners -- were also executed.

The legal team thus decided to sue Fernandez Larios for crimes against humanity, originally defined at the Nuremberg trials of former Nazis as those carried out by a government against its people. This, according to Cunningham, would put Fernandez Larios' actions in Copiapo in the context of violence he allegedly perpetrated throughout the country.

Zita, meantime, obtained a copy of the *Tomos*, or *Tomes*, a voluminous 1998 investigation of Pinochet and the Caravan of Death conducted by a Chilean jurist. Judge Juan Guzman had found Fernandez Larios guilty in absentia of 19 counts of kidnapping. But because of Fernandez Larios' plea agreement with the Justice Department, the U.S. wouldn't extradite him. The *Tomos* take up more than 20,000 pages and contain a lot of fragmentary information that is often incorrect. Many people, for instance, gave false names and addresses when they testified.

"They didn't want to be found," Zita says. "They knew someone would read this. They were right."

Zita spread the pages out on her dining room table and in her guest bedroom. She marked each appearance of Fernandez Larios' name with a Post-it and wrote down the name and address of anyone who might have been involved with the Caravan or the killings of the Copiapo men. She painstakingly transferred the information to her computer and typed a long memo for her lawyers summarizing her findings.

Cunningham had brought on a Chilean lawyer to help build the case, but most witnesses -- especially ex-military people -- didn't want to talk.

"The subject matter was difficult," he says. "It's gut-wrenching to revisit these roles. You don't have an upside. These army people didn't want to describe on the record what they'd witnessed."

Zita reviewed her memo at a meeting with the lawyers. At the end they concluded there was only one person familiar enough with the case to find witnesses and persuade them to testify: Zita.

In the beginning, Zita thought it'd take her six weeks to line up witnesses. It took her nearly five years, with a total of 10 trips to Chile, to get all the information she needed.

She had to find those who could prove Fernandez Larios was a member of the Caravan of Death and had gone to Copiapo, linking him to Winston. She also had to prove he'd tortured and killed other people in Chile. This meant talking to his colleagues, men with blood on their own hands, as well as his victims.

In 1999, she flew to Chile and began knocking on doors.

"My mom likes to laugh at herself a lot," says Felipe, now a 31-year-old professional dancer. "She likes to laugh at the fact that when she began this process she didn't know what she was doing."

That's an understatement. Zita had no strategy for finding witnesses or persuading them to talk. She had addresses that were out of date, names that didn't exist.

She'd tried to set up her interviews from California, but that didn't work.

"You cannot plan these things in advance," Zita says. "Nobody said no. No one really went out of their way. That's who we are as Chileans. We say we're going to do it, but we don't mean it."

It was easier just to show up and play things by ear. Zita presented her case simply to those she met: She was looking for the truth, and she knew they had a piece of it. She often introduced herself in a brief, almost abrupt way, announcing, "I'm Zita" -- no last name, no title, no job description.

Most of the time, doors were closed in her face. People wanted to leave the past in the past. They didn't want to dredge up old memories; ex-military types still felt loyalty for the old regime. The Pinochet repression was over, but Zita found that people were still afraid to talk.

For example, she located a priest who'd witnessed 14 killings. He'd embraced the victims, heard their final confessions, and accepted messages for their families that he'd never delivered. Zita argued that he needed to speak up about what he saw, but he didn't have the courage to help her, she says.

"He said, 'Not even Jesus says the truth all the time,'" Zita remembers. She answered back with, "Maybe Jesus didn't have the opportunity to tell the truth like I'm giving to you."

She couldn't sway him. Finally the priest said, "I'll pray for you to be a success." Zita said she'd pray for him to change his mind. But he never did.

At night, alone in hotel rooms, Zita typed e-mails to her family, called friends in Chile such as Winston's widow, Veronica, or simply cried. She tried to fight the images bubbling up in her mind from what she had heard during the day. One soldier told her of putting naked prisoners in a drained swimming pool where frogs liked to nest. To keep the prisoners from talking, the soldier stuffed their mouths with frogs. To him, it was a funny memory, an anecdote. To Zita, it was chilling.

"Sometimes she'd just feel awful. Sometimes she'd be excited. The swing was huge from one e-mail to the next," recalls her son Roberto, a program representative at the Lawrence Hall of Science in Berkeley.

Most of the e-mails Roberto received described getting interviews. "It was, 'He didn't want to talk, he was tentative, then he talked until 1 a.m.,'" he says. "It was all these small battles."

It was a lonely, emotionally devastating time. But Zita kept moving forward, propelled by an iron will and fierce intelligence.

"She has the best of both worlds: the passion and her love for knowledge and truth," her sister Karin says.

Zita, who's prone to think hard about questions, doesn't fully understand what kept her going. She's found only one concrete answer: The day her brother died, her life was damaged forever.

"I've been trying to transform that," Zita says, "to give meaning to what happened."

In a way, she couldn't win. If she didn't persuade someone to talk, she lost that information. If she did persuade him to talk, she had to listen.

One day she knocked on the door of retired *Incandente* Oscar Haag, who was hosting a tea party at the time. Haag trembled with nervousness when Zita explained who she was. She told him he'd once granted her a favor and now she needed another. They sat in his den, and he poured her a Coke.

She was struck by how different he was, stripped of his almost God-like authority in the post-Pinochet era. "In 1973, he looked like a huge, powerful man who could do anything," she says. Now he was just an old man shaking with fear.

It was almost unbearable, sitting in this comfortable home, talking quietly with a man she believed had helped orchestrate her brother's death.

"The more he talked, the more I wanted to stop listening," she says. "It was so horribly painful. I had to remind myself, 'Zita, this is not you asking the questions.'"

She employed the same trick in almost all of her interviews: She mentally erased herself. She became an objective outsider, calmly asking questions as if they didn't pertain to the most emotional events of her life. She buried her reactions to the answers she got. And it worked. People told her things they'd never said to anyone else.

"They were unburdening themselves," says Felipe, who sat in on some of the interviews. "They also wanted to understand what happened."

When Zita left Haag's house, she noticed roses in his garden, her favorites. The old man graciously cut her one. It was as if they were longtime friends, she and this man who'd had such a horrendous impact on her family. He died before the trial, but some of what he told her that day wound up in her lawsuit.

Felipe had a performance schedule that allowed him to see his mother in action in Chile. Her relentlessness always impressed him.

He remembers, for example, how she pursued Juan Morales, a former prison guard who declined to give her any information, even though he told Judge Guzman he'd seen Fernandez Larios with files on the Copiapo prisoners. But Zita wouldn't let go of Morales.

With Felipe in tow, she went into a Copiapo store to ask about Morales' new address. His wife happened to be shopping there at the time. Zita approached the woman, but she shied away. So Zita followed her home and came back later and got Morales to talk. He told her he'd seen Fernandez Larios repeatedly kick a defenseless prisoner in the head, and later testified in her suit.

Another time, Zita wanted to get inside the Copiapo jail. But instead of waiting outside with everyone else, she sauntered in behind a truck as it pulled through the prison gate.

"She plays the naive ingénue very well," Felipe says.

On the other hand, she wasn't much good at organizational details, says Felipe, who lovingly calls his mother "the absent-minded professor." For each trip to Chile, Zita carefully made up a list of phone numbers for interview subjects -- and promptly misplaced it. By the time she was ready to go home, her lists were crumpled and torn almost beyond recognition.

As the years wore on, Zita lost the emotional support of friends, including one of her best friends, a Chilean woman named Gloria who said her endless questions on sensitive matters was suicidal.

"I realized she abandoned me," Zita says. "She reflected what many Chileans think: It's not worth it, staying in the past. I said, 'We're doing this for the future.'"

Some friends simply thought she was torturing herself. They stopped returning her calls and getting together with her when she was in Chile.

"People wanted to help me, and they'd say, 'Why don't you stop doing that?'" Zita says. "I wanted to hear, 'We'll make it less painful.' I've lost everybody now, except my family."

Even her family couldn't always be there. She spent many nights in Chile alone, facing her defeats. She invited her brother Aldo along on her trips, but he liked to be "behind the scenes" and didn't go. Pato and Roberto couldn't get time off from work.

Zita was undeterred. She gave up her job at UC Santa Cruz so she could concentrate even more on her case.

"When I say I'm going to do something, I will do the best, anything that it takes," she says. "It took so much from me, but I already said I'm going to do this." Leo Cunningham says: "There should be a word for how much Zita cares about this."

She says she split the cost of her trips with her other attorney, Bob Kerrigan, and racked up enough miles on American Airlines to give Pato a ticket for a Chilean vacation.

In ways both big and small, her detective work paid off.

One breakthrough involved Enrique Vidal, a Copiapo garrison guard. Zita often left letters for potential witnesses, explaining her case, and she tried leaving one for Vidal at his Santiago condominium. The building security guard assumed she was Vidal's friend and gave her Vidal's home phone number. She left a message, not expecting to hear back.

At midnight, her hotel telephone rang. She scrambled to answer. It was Vidal.

"I didn't know what to say, because he was such an important guy," Zita says.

The ex-guard remembered Winston, and it turned out he'd attended the national military academy with Fernandez Larios. He said he'd seen the soldier the night the Caravan of Death arrived in Copiapo, when he and Haag went to the soccer field where the helicopters landed.

"He knew so much," Zita says. Better yet, he was willing to give sworn testimony in her suit.

Kerrigan had rented a large hotel suite in Santiago where they videotaped what various witnesses had to say. Zita sat at the table for each deposition, listening, asking questions, learning even more details. It had taken her years of hounding witnesses and collecting documents, but she'd built her case. She finally was ready for court.

The trial was to be held in Miami, where Fernandez Larios lived. And by last September, the city was buzzing with news of the case. Newspapers editorialized about it, and the large Latino community, especially Cuban-Americans, debated it.

Cunningham worried that Miami's political environment was unreceptive, even hostile. Many people there had fled Castro's Cuba, and they hated communists or anything like them. Such people might not automatically view Pinochet and his henchmen -- who stamped out left-wingers -- as villains. If they got on his jury, it could be disastrous.

"The political philosophy is so shaped by the Cuban situation that that affects everything in Miami," Cunningham says. "That's where Latin American dictators go to die."

Zita's story also showed up on CNN, in a number of major U.S. newspapers, and in Chile's main paper, *El Mercurio*. If Winston's death had once been a secret whispered among prisoners, it was now an international topic of conversation.

The Center for Justice and Accountability provided a cluster of condos in Miami for the Cabello family. When each day's testimony ended, the Cabellos ate together and swam in the ocean nearby. "It was like one of those ridiculous real-life shows," says Karin.

After the pretrial phases, the jury had three weeks to understand the complex case and make a decision.

On the trial's first day, news reporters swarmed the courthouse. Because Zita had been misquoted in an article already, her lawyers asked her not to speak to them. Her sons assigned themselves "Zita duty" during the trial; one of Roberto's main chores was running physical interference for Zita with people she didn't want to meet, including reporters.

Roberto also had to protect her from the one person she didn't want to confront: Fernandez Larios.

In a photo taken at the trial, Fernandez Larios, 54, looks hefty in a double-breasted gray suit. He wears glasses and has a few strands of hair combed over his bald spot. To Cunningham, he came across as a typical Miami businessman.

Fernandez Larios only looked around the courtroom once, about midway through the trial, says Felipe. He surveyed the audience, appearing imperious and commanding. The rest of the time, he sat at the defense table, not looking at or otherwise acknowledging the Cabello family.

The Cabellos, however, watched him like hawks.

Felipe can say at what point in the trial he took notes, how urgently he wrote, and when he put his pen down to play with a paper clip. Pato studied Fernandez Larios, wondering if this was the same cruel-looking soldier he'd seen in the jail doorway in Copiapo. When Karin left the courtroom one day, she accidentally bumped into the former soldier. She looked into his eyes, wanting to say, "You killed my brother. Here I am." But she held her tongue.

"He was very cold," Karin says about the moment. "You could see his bad energy."

The defense case was simple: Fernandez Larios was the least powerful member of the Caravan. When he accompanied Gen. Stark on the helicopter, the argument ran, his role was similar to that of a secretary; he didn't order or participate in interrogations or killings. He'd been there, but he hadn't done anything.

The Cabellos' lawyers faced problems both legal and political.

First, they had to prove Fernandez Larios had committed crimes against humanity, not an easy task and something an American jury had never been asked to consider before, according to the CJA. Second, they wanted to keep the focus on Winston rather than Zita.

"We didn't want the case to be Zita versus Fernandez Larios," Cunningham explains. "Zita never pitched herself as a victim. We preferred the jury view Winston as the victim."

And there were those Miami anti-communist politics to consider. The case could easily become a debate about Pinochet, something too large for a single lawsuit. The attorneys decided to avoid certain politically charged topics, such as Fernandez Larios' involvement in the Letelier assassination. They also didn't want Zita's own politics to become an issue.

"We were concerned if the jury registered us or Zita as politically motivated, they wouldn't be able to do the right thing," Cunningham says. "We were afraid the defense would make something out of the fact Zita has deeply held beliefs that are political."

As the trial progressed, Zita, despite giving so much to the case, backed away. The legal truth, she decided, was different from the historical one, less complete and smaller in scope. She had done her best to compile the historical truth, and

was content to let the lawyers unfold the legal one. For much of the proceeding, she simply sat quietly, holding Roberto's hand.

Despite her son's protectiveness, the day came when Zita had to take the witness stand herself, sitting only a few feet from the man she believed killed her brother. As Zita spoke, she could feel Fernandez Larios gazing at her intently, but she refused to look at him.

Her lawyers were afraid that the defense attorney, Steven Davis, would try to portray Zita as a crusader looking for a scapegoat.

Instead, Davis tried mostly to poke holes in her research.

She hadn't, for example, gotten the general who led the Caravan of Death, Arellano Stark, to talk to her. In his cross-examination, Davis attempted to get Zita to answer with a simple yes or no whether she'd talked to other people, says Felipe.

But Zita insisted on explaining that she contacted many more people than had actually talked to her. Instead of appearing as if she had pursued witnesses selectively, she came out looking thorough.

"She tried to talk to everyone," says Felipe.

The taped depositions of the witnesses rounded up by Zita, says Cunningham, were particularly effective with the jury. Cunningham and Kerrigan used excerpts from them to paint a chillingly vivid picture of the last days of Winston and the other Copiapo prisoners.

The excerpts started with Enrique Vidal, the former garrison guard, saying he'd greeted the Caravan men when their Pumas landed. According to Vidal, Fernandez Larios was carrying a macelike weapon with nails protruding from it. Vidal asked him about the device, and the soldier said it was for "tickling the little pigeons," which Vidal understood to mean torturing the prisoners. Other depositions recalled Fernandez Larios torturing people throughout the country.

Especially emotional testimony came from the local coroner, Victor Bravo Monroy, who issued death certificates for the Copiapo prisoners, many of whom he'd met. Bravo Monroy described wounds on the men's corpses, drawing his hand across his throat to indicate that Winston had been slashed to death. Some of the victims, he testified, had tried to shield their faces from gunshots, and ended up with bullet wounds in their hands.

Then, apparently overcome by the brutality of the executions, he suddenly stopped.

"Why didn't they just kill them?" he said softly, as if to himself. "So bloody."

Bravo Monroy clearly was shocked, and his testimony moved the jurors, Cunningham says.

Eventually, the Cabellos' lawyers called Fernandez Larios to testify. At first, Cunningham says, he seemed agitated and flustered. But when the ex-soldier calmed down, "he seemed more calculating." Fernandez Larios said all the right things, but they "didn't ring true," the attorney says. In the end, he says, Larios "was not likable" and failed to win over the jury.

After three weeks, Cunningham presented his closing argument. He recapitulated what the Caravan of Death had done, and pointed out that the people who would have been in the best position to testify against Fernandez Larios weren't alive to do so. He spoke with power and eloquence.

On Oct. 15, 2003, the jury found Fernandez Larios liable for kidnapping, extrajudicial murders, and crimes against humanity. Though the plaintiffs had never said how much they thought Fernandez Larios should pay, the jurors awarded them \$4 million: \$3 million for Veronica and her daughters, \$1 million for Zita and her siblings.

Whether the family will ever collect that kind of money from an auto-body repairman is an open question. Defense attorney Davis, who declined an interview for this article, has said his client doesn't have any money. Kerrigan says that's probably true, although he says the CJA hopes to make sure by researching Fernandez Larios' assets and income. In any event, Davis has promised to appeal the verdict.

Despite the courtroom victory, Zita wasn't finished with her research.

"The trial for many people was a grieving period, it was closure," Zita says. "But for me it was not closure."

Right after the trial ended, she called Adolfo Gonzalez, the jail guard who'd informed her and Veronica about their husbands. He'd been afraid to testify, but said if she won the suit, he'd give her enough information that she could write a book.

When she called Gonzalez to remind him of his promise, he recalled seeing Fernandez Larios with the 13 prisoners as they left the garrison, and watching the soldier beat two of them. His testimony would have undercut the defense's argument that Fernandez Larios wasn't involved, and linked him to Winston. But Gonzalez didn't know what happened once the truck left that night.

No one, it seems, can prove beyond a doubt Ximena de la Barra's story about Fernandez Larios stabbing Winston with a *corvo*.

Since that interview, Zita's life has gone somewhat blurry. Roberto says his mother spent so much time preparing for the trial that she didn't prepare for after the trial.

She wants to contact the families of other dirty-war victims she's uncovered information about, but dreads the possibility of bringing even more pain into their lives. She also has begun outlining a book about Winston's murder, her pursuit of his killer, and the trial of Fernandez Larios.

"There are a lot of regrets right now," she says. "I don't see the story like other people see it. I can't abandon my journey."

But at long last, she and the rest of the Cabello family have started openly discussing Winston with each other and other Chileans.

"In Chile, it's important," says Aldo. "Everyone was told [Winston] was bad and needed to be killed. Now it shows he was a young professional trying to do his work."

There has been another bonus, too: Friends who stopped supporting Zita have returned to her life. Her friend Gloria wrote her, saying she thanked God Zita worked so hard and showed that men like Fernandez Larios aren't immune from justice. Zita also met Orlando Letelier's widow, another woman forced by Fernandez Larios to bear an irrevocable loss.

"She just hugged me," Zita says about their meeting. "She said, 'I'm so happy you could do it, because I couldn't.'"

Zita hasn't returned to teaching. Most days, she uses her old house-painting skills to brighten her own home. File boxes containing the *Tomos* are tucked under the bed in her guest room. Copies of her documentary are stacked in the hall closet. When roses blossom in her garden, Zita cuts them and displays them in the living room. They stand regal and tall in their vases.

"My life has been shaped by this event," Zita says of Winston's murder 31 years ago. "Never underestimate the power of hope. There's nothing you can't do. I showed everybody: Yes, it's possible."