



## Interview with Estela Barnes de Carlotto

President of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo\*

*Estela Barnes de Carlotto is an Argentinian human rights activist and president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. One of her daughters, Laura Estela Carlotto, was abducted while pregnant in Buenos Aires at the end of 1977. The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo association was founded that same year, with the aim of recovering children kidnapped during the dictatorship, some of whom were born to abducted mothers. The Grandmothers seek both their grandchildren and their own children. They estimate that around 500 kidnapped grandchildren have been illegally adopted into other families.*

*This interview highlights the human cost of forced disappearance for the families left behind, who know neither the fate nor the whereabouts of their loved ones. Drawing on her vast experience of leading and advocating for these families, Estela gives us valuable insight into the role that relatives can play in developing mechanisms to trace missing people.*



\* This interview was conducted on 30 August 2017 in Geneva, Switzerland, by Vincent Bernard, Editor-in-Chief of the Review, and Ximena Londoño, Legal Adviser at the International Committee of the Red Cross.

***You have been the president of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo – a group of women who joined forces in the 1970s to search for their missing grandchildren – for over twenty-five years. How did this association come about? What do the Grandmothers do nowadays?***

The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo association was formed in response to the actions of the new civic–military dictatorship, established on 24 March 1976. I say “new” even though there had been dictatorships in Argentina since 1930, when I was born. Civilian and military groups had successively overthrown the constitutionally elected president and seized control of the country to impose their ideology and their plans, completely illegally. In 1976, however, it was different: the coup was part of a larger movement seeking independence and the construction of a great Latin American nation.

Our children – university students and even secondary-school pupils – were highly politicized and would often be demonstrating and forming groups. We mothers couldn’t understand why we had never done anything like that; we’d been passive, never showing any sign of discontent. Through their activism, our children opened our eyes to the reality of the situation. However, we soon realized that people who opposed the dictatorship – adults and children as young as 14 and 15 years old – were being kidnapped and killed. Our generation could no longer stand by and say nothing: we took to the streets. One by one, as we saw what was happening and reached the devastating conclusion that our children weren’t going to come home or get in touch, we realized we couldn’t remain passive any more. We began to take action. One day, for example, I said to my husband, “You stay home – I’m going out.” I went to speak to lawyers, politicians and soldiers, trying to find out where my daughter was. Nobody could tell me her whereabouts. I believed they had already killed her, but she was actually still alive. Later, we found out that she had been held for nine months.

By the time I began my search, there was already a group of grandmothers meeting in my hometown, La Plata. They had come together a few months earlier, following the disappearance of their loved ones. I approached them and was welcomed with open arms: “Great! A teacher!”, they said. I never looked back and we have been together ever since. The amazing thing is that we are such a diverse group of women. We didn’t join forces because we all think the same or because we wanted to create a club or play games. “What happened to you?”, asked one grandmother to another. “They kidnapped my son and he never came back”, came the reply. “Mine didn’t come back either, but my daughter...”, said another. “So what shall we do?”, they wondered aloud. “Right – tomorrow let’s go and speak to a judge. Let’s write a letter. Let’s put an announcement in the newspaper.” There were two of us, then three, then five. More and more of us found ourselves in the same position. And that’s how this association began. We founded it officially on 22 October 1977. So we’re just about to celebrate our 40th anniversary.

Of course, back then we didn't really know what we were doing. We were a group of housewives, teachers, dentists, psychologists, and so on – a real mix. And suddenly we had to become detectives, searching in the dark, banging on closed doors and taking great risks. That's how these walks around Plaza de Mayo square started. The dictatorship had declared a state of siege and outlawed gatherings of more than three people anywhere in the country. Well, we used to gather in the square to talk. So when they said to us, "You can't be here – move along, move along", we started to move and walk around the square. This became a historical act: that's how we began. We had been learning all we could, gathering information and using our common sense to help us keep moving forward. We were constantly moving forward.

***Your daughter, Laura, was about three months pregnant when she disappeared in 1977. You met your grandson for the first time in 2014. How did it feel to find out that you had a grandson? How has your life changed since meeting him?***

Being with other women in the same situation, facing the same pain and seeking the same answers, helped us all to feel supported, understood and like we weren't alone. We shared this huge burden of suffering and we wanted to tackle it not with tears and resignation but with healthy protest, motivated by this great love for the grandchildren we didn't know and the children who had never returned. From 1979 onwards, we started meeting some of the newly found grandchildren and even if they weren't your own, you would share in the joy this brought. We shared everything, we supported each other and we counselled each other; we became like a family, united around this difficult and desperate task of searching for our missing loved ones. Of course, we all dreamt of meeting our own grandchild and would try and gather any scrap of information we could about where they could be, near or far. Some of us even went to see fortune-tellers, just in case they could give us some kind of clue. We were at a loss as to what else we could do besides our everyday investigations.

Meanwhile, we set about formally establishing our association and young people started approaching us of their own accord, asking if they were perhaps one of the missing grandchildren we were looking for. By that point, the National Genetic Data Bank had been set up to identify people, along with our investigation teams. I kept searching for my grandson, together with the other women, and for all the other grandchildren who were still missing. Then I got a call on 5 August 2014 from a State judge who had already helped to return some of our grandchildren. It didn't occur to me that she was going to tell me she had found my grandchild. But she had: she had found him through the National Genetic Data Bank. I could not believe it. The judge was very careful in the way she delivered the news; it was powerful news, after all. She said, "Estela, I have some wonderful news for you: we have found your grandson, Guido." The director of the National Genetic Data Bank was also there to confirm this was

true. I was absolutely overjoyed. At the same time, it was as if they were telling me something too remote to even comprehend. I told my children, my family and my fellow grandmothers. It caused a lot of commotion, not only in our association but also throughout the city, even worldwide, because the news spread to many other countries. Guido had voluntarily come forward for identification, harbouring his own suspicions. When they told him that he was indeed the child of a mother who had disappeared and then told him that I was his grandmother – someone he had seen on the television, in the media – he immediately decided to come and meet me. That was when my life changed. Completely.

How did I feel in that moment? Meeting my grandson was like seeing my daughter Laura again: he had her DNA, her blood. He also had her tastes and her habits, but this was going to take him longer to discover because he had been brought up in the countryside, leading a very solitary life. But he was a musician, a talented musician. It was strange him wanting to be a musician when he had grown up in the countryside. He had no idea where this musical inclination came from. He didn't realize that it had actually come from his biological father and from other musical members of our family. It was amazing to finally meet him. I hugged him and told him, "I've been searching for you for so long." Of course, he didn't know me at all so I had to be patient. It's been three years since we first met; we celebrated the anniversary together. We're getting to know each other more and more, and although he lives quite far away, we can see each other as much as we like. My family is whole again and this brings me so much joy. It gives me the strength to keep searching for those grandchildren who remain missing, on behalf of all those grandmothers whose arms are still empty. Our endeavour has a life force of its own and the reason it lives on is because we know that those grandchildren are out there somewhere.

***You have done amazing work and it must be incredible to feel that your family is whole again. From the perspective of your grandson, and all the other grandchildren who have been found so far, this must be a very overwhelming experience: discovering for the first time, as an adult, that you have been living with a different identity all your life. What support have the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Argentinian government given to these grandchildren?***

Our grandchildren are already in their forties: men and women who have already started their own families. There are two ways in which they might discover their true identity: either they voluntarily come forward, motivated by their own doubts, to find out if they are children of parents who disappeared; or else someone in their local community suspects something and gets in touch with us and then our outreach teams go and investigate. In the latter case, we would invite the young person in question to come and find out if the suspicions are true. Sometimes that person turns our invitation down, because they don't want to know. They're afraid of finding out and so reject the notion outright. It's a

fear of the unknown. But because what happened was a crime against humanity – babies were stolen during a dictatorship – it is imperative to uncover the facts, to determine the victims and the perpetrators, regardless of whether or not this individual wants to find out. That's when the law gets involved: a judge summons the person in order to explain the situation and inform them that with a simple test, a drop of blood, we can clarify their origins and tell them whether or not the people who brought them up are, in fact, their biological parents. Of course, this route takes longer than the first. Sometimes, even when a person finds out that they are being searched for, they are resistant to the idea of meeting their biological family. A lot of psychological work needs to be done, both with the individual and with the biological family. There are different processes. There are similarities and differences in each case. We have a lot of experience in this area now, and we know how to proceed without causing any harm.

You asked what the government is doing too. Well, during the dictatorship, we faced the risk of being abducted ourselves. We were troublemakers, piercing through the cloak of impunity and secrecy surrounding the abduction of 30,000 young adults and around 500 children. Once democracy was reinstated, we maintained a constant dialogue with the constitutional government. Every time a new president took power, we asked to meet them to discuss the issue. We sought the cooperation of the State; according to the rule of law, it had an obligation to repair the damage done by a terrorist State. So we were heard and we were respected. Sometimes there were things that upset us, like the impunity law passed by the first constitutional government or the pardon granted to the perpetrators, which meant we were living alongside murderers and torturers as if nothing had happened. That pardoning was unbearable. But successive governments opened up dialogue, created new spaces and raised awareness of how the dictatorship had affected us all. With this came an understanding that we had to give these stolen children the right to live with their biological families, with those who had wanted to keep them.

***The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo were pioneers in driving forward the development of genetic technology to trace missing people. How did you, and the community at large, discover the potential of such technology? What role did you play in developing these methods of analyzing DNA for identification purposes?***

Firstly, I just want to point out that when the first few of us grandmothers joined forces back in 1977–78 to search for our missing children and grandchildren – at a time when people were still going missing – we were completely clueless. I was a head teacher, and then there was another teacher, a worker and a housewife... there was another who hadn't even completed primary-level education. We were such a mixed crowd! But we kind of made it up as we went along, venturing into

this uncharted territory and breaking new ground as we figured out what we had to do to get answers and get our loved ones back.

One day, an announcement appeared in a local newspaper in La Plata about a father who refused to recognize his paternity of a child. With a sample of his blood, it had been proven that the child was in fact his. The word “blood” suddenly got me thinking: could we use *our* blood to help identify our grandchildren? We couldn’t use the parents’ blood, because they had disappeared. So we started travelling around the world, going to Spain, Italy, France and Sweden, to ask scientists if this was possible. The response was always “no”. Then, in 1982, we went to the United States and got in touch with an organization called the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and our hope was renewed. In 1983, they invited us to a large international conference; there were scientists there from all over the world, including experts in genetics and forensic anthropology. At this conference, we got the answer we were looking for: using histocompatibility testing, blood samples from the paternal and maternal lines could be used in place of the mother’s blood to determine biological ties.

Thankfully, in 1984, democracy was restored in Argentina. With the government’s support, we invited a group of experts to come and establish what was to become the National Genetic Data Bank. It was set up in a hospital that had a genetic laboratory fully equipped to carry out this work. A trial test was done with blood samples from a grandmother and granddaughter, who had never gone missing, and the results were brilliant. The experts recognized the potential that this discovery held and thanked us for helping to advance this field of genetic science.

The role I played was to be active and persistent, and to travel around the world discussing these issues and observing the work being carried out in laboratories. A dear friend of mine, Mary-Claire King, who lives in Seattle, showed us her way of obtaining data. Together, we’ve travelled to many places to collect and transport blood samples. Previously, it was difficult to transport blood from one country to another: you had to be quick or else the sample wouldn’t be viable. Today, one small drop of blood can be transported in a small container from Europe to Argentina and arrive in perfect condition, allowing us to identify a missing grandchild living abroad. Our task is to continue to raise awareness of this issue, of this project, and to do all we can to prevent this mass abduction of people from ever happening again. This can never happen again, in Argentina, in Latin America or anywhere else in the world. We have been in direct contact with people in Sri Lanka, Turkey, Greece, Italy – in so many places where this is still an issue and where a solution must be found. In Spain, for example, there are elderly people still searching for their missing children forty years on. I really hope they find them. We are giving these people advice and also helping the grandchildren of the victims of Francoism to recover the remains of their grandparents. In this way, we are standing in solidarity with others in the same way that people across the world stood in wonderful solidarity with us.

***Your association has also done a lot in terms of developing laws to respect people's right to identity. Can you explain what "right to identity" means and how you have managed to ensure that this right is protected in Argentina and internationally?***

Our work has three main cornerstones, which we combined into an innovative approach, since we were starting from scratch. First, there's the psychological angle. There were no psychologists or textbooks that could tell us how to help a person come to terms – at whatever age, adult or child – with having lived under a false identity for so many years. How could this person be supported psychologically to recover their true identity and live in freedom, without coming to harm or suffering along the way? This was one of our cornerstones.

Second, there's the legal angle. The lawyers in our association have done amazing work over the past forty years: they've achieved favourable rulings, showing incredible determination in reasoning with judges who simply did not understand – or didn't want to understand – that we were talking about a serious crime. Some judges compared our situation to a divorce: they believed that the murderer and the thief should have visiting rights, that they had the right to see this person whom they had illegitimately brought up. We had to fight to convince them that this was no divorce, that this was actually a crime and that these people were criminals and should be sent to prison. We succeeded in convincing them eventually. The third cornerstone is genetics, which we have already discussed.

Regarding the right to identity, we wanted to capture as far as possible our idea that everyone has the right to live with the family that lovingly brought them into the world, in a home where the mother wants to bring up her own children, to see them grow up and be happy – in short, to give them the best start in life. First of all, we worked with members of the constitutional government who had expert knowledge of the International Convention on the Rights of the Child, in order to introduce three articles into Argentinian legislation. We based these on Articles 7, 8 and 11 of the International Convention, which speak of the right of every child to live with their parents, ideally in their country of origin, and of the need to return the child to their country of origin if they have been taken abroad illicitly, through bilateral agreements between both countries. Apart from strengthening the right to identity, these efforts have also led to the right being incorporated into our Constitution, through acceptance of the International Convention. The government therefore has an obligation to respect it.

We have written a lot about this human right from a psychological point of view. We've discovered that there are even people who were adopted legally by married couples and were never told that they were not their biological parents; the adoptive parents hide the truth, lying by omission. That doesn't happen so much now, because these children start having their suspicions when they see differences between themselves and their adoptive parents. Psychologists say that claiming a child is yours when they aren't places a barrier between you and your

adopted child. It's important to be completely transparent so that these children, even those adopted legally, grow up to be happy and healthy. Our grandchildren grew up plagued by doubts and unknowns, like why they didn't look like their parents, why they had different tastes and different attitudes, why they were punished or mistreated. Some were kept like prisoners, locked up, with no social contact at all.

These children harboured such huge doubts that they came to the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo to get some answers; it turned out that some of them were indeed the very grandchildren we were searching for. The right to identity is an ancestral right, not a modern-day invention. It's said that, within certain tribes, if a child is stolen then this doubt about one's origins haunts the family for generations and generations. That's what is written. I'm no expert, but psychologists and intellectuals have written a lot about the right to identity. We came at it from the perspective of wanting to recover the children of our missing daughters. It's a promise we made to them. When they killed my daughter, Laura, and I went to her grave, I promised her that before I died I would seek justice for everything that had happened to her and her friends, and that I would find her son. Thankfully, I have been able to fulfil that promise, which became a promise to every child to uphold their right to identity and their right to know that their family searched for them and loved them.

### ***Have you worked with other groups outside of Argentina?***

Yes, of course. In 1981, we travelled to Caracas, Venezuela, and met with representatives of all the family associations in Latin America looking for loved ones who had been abducted during the various dictatorships. We also met with an organization called the Latin American Federation of Associations of Relatives of Disappeared Detainees [FEDEFAM]. We were, and continue to be, in touch with every country that has struggled with this issue since then. Together with FEDEFAM, which has consultative status at the United Nations, we proposed a new convention to protect people from forced disappearance. Argentina and France were the first to sign it, and it came into force as the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance a few years ago. The Convention has its roots in FEDEFAM and in all of us who created it. I have personally travelled to Colombia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Peru and Brazil – countries where there have been and continue to be people searching for missing relatives.

We are in constant contact with people in Chile and in the Southern Cone, everywhere affected by Operation Condor, in order to keep seeking answers. Because in some countries, forced disappearance occurs even today. Here in Argentina, you will have seen on the news this month that a young man has gone missing. The case looks like a forced disappearance. In Mexico, in Colombia and elsewhere, we also continue to hear the sad news of people going missing. Just recently, there were reports of forty-three students disappearing in Mexico. I went



to Guadalajara and had the opportunity to meet the students' families, to counsel them on how to stay calm and patient in preparation for protest. We want to share the solidarity that we ourselves received with the rest of Latin America and also with Asia, Europe and other countries where this kind of thing is happening. We try to help whenever we are told about a situation like this and whenever our expertise is sought. What we can do will vary with each case, of course, but above all we can encourage people and give them something to hold onto besides their pain. We can help them to set about seeking answers in a way that is healthy and peaceful but also full of protest. These people have a right to protest about what happened to their relative who never returned.

***In 2017, you celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo. What lessons have you learned in the past four decades and what does the future hold for the Grandmothers?***

The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo association was founded in 1977 by a group of women determined to search for their children and grandchildren, abducted during the civic–military dictatorship that seized power on 24 March 1976. We've been engaged in this painful endeavour for forty years now, and in that time we have learned never to give up, to remain determined. We have learned that every woman has an endless flow of courage to draw on in order to protest, to break new ground, to seize opportunities and to come up with creative strategies.

There are very few of us grandmothers left. Such is life; age catches up with us all. That's why we've invited our recovered grandchildren, as well as young people searching for missing siblings, to join our executive committee. In this way, we can pass on the baton and the search can continue for the 300 or more grandchildren who remain missing to this day.

