

**Testimony of Sara Aguilar**  
**Congressional Briefing: Investigating Forced Disappearances in El Salvador's Civil War**  
**and Implications for the Justice System Today**  
**Washington D.C.**  
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My name is Sara Aguilar. I was born in San Salvador, and moved to Los Angeles when I was three years old. I am a mother, an artist, educator, and documentary filmmaker. My work challenges the representations of Latinas in film and highlights the contributions made by underrepresented groups. As a freelance videographer I work directly with community organizations that seek to uplift our community's health and well-being through art practices.

Rodolfo Mauricio Aguilar was born in Santa Ana. He was the oldest of three siblings and learned responsibility at a very early age. My grandmother moved to the United States when he was only thirteen, leaving him to care for his younger siblings. My grandmother found work in Los Angeles and would send my father, aunt, and uncle money, clothes, and shoes when she could. If she sent my father two pairs of shoes, he would take one pair and wear them until they had holes in them. The other pair, he would give to someone who needed them. As a young boy, he dreamed of being a Jesuit priest, but was denied by the Catholic church because of familial circumstances on my grandfather's side. He was an artist and was granted a scholarship for a piece he titled, "La Muerte Prematura" when he was in high school. He and my mother met at the National University where he was a professor and she was studying philosophy. They were both organized with the student movement and believed in an egalitarian society, where people from all walks of life could have a dignified life. They were married under a mango tree in 1980. My grandmother recalls how excited he was upon learning that we would soon be a father. My mother tells me how my father would tell his colleagues that he would have to leave the meeting at a certain time, so that he could hurry home to bathe and rock me to sleep. He was an amazing

artist, and made me one of my first toys, a wooden puzzle. He would lay out a mat on my maternal grandmother's living room floor, stack his books on top of it, and lay me down next to him where he would simultaneously read and play with me. He was a very proud and loving father. Both my father and mother continued being active in the popular movement after I was born. They formed part of FUERSA (Frente Universitario de Estudiantes Revolucionarios "Salvador Allende") at the National University and were organized with the RN sector of the FMLN. My father would accompany peasants to the National Assembly to assure their voices were heard, he would organize protests, marches, and rallies to demand justice.

My father was disappeared on September 27, 1981. I was fifteen months old. At the time, my mother, father, and I were living with my paternal grandmother's friend in La Sultana, a neighborhood in San Salvador a couple of blocks up from the UCA. My father was a philosophy professor at the National University of El Salvador, and was teaching at the Centro Universitario de Oriente in the city of San Miguel. He had a meeting in San Miguel that morning. He left early, and didn't come back. My mother received a phone call from his colleagues that afternoon asking if he had gone to the meeting. When she explained that he had left early that morning, they said they would go out and see what had happened. They called back late that night with no new information, but promised to call back in the morning. My mother was very worried. My father's colleagues called in the morning and said that they hadn't heard anything of his whereabouts. My mother was frightened, and unsure of what to do next. The lady of the house grew increasingly nervous for the safety of her own family and asked my mother to move out. We moved to my maternal grandmother's house for a couple of weeks, and then again to my great-grandmother's house in a different neighborhood in San Salvador. My whole family was devastated by the news and worried about our safety. My mom began telling friends, so as to

find some answers, but was advised by an attorney friend to remain quiet. During that time, University students and professors in San Miguel were being persecuted, captured, and killed by the National Guard and death squads. Some people say that my father was captured by the National Guard, taken in one of their vehicles, killed and buried somewhere on the side of the road between San Miguel and La Union. At the time, it was impossible for my mother to travel that road to search for his remains, doing so would have put us in great risk of death. To this day, nobody knows what actually happened to the remains of my father.

Eleven months after his disappearance my maternal grandmother's house was ransacked. My grandfather, uncle, and aunt were captured and imprisoned. The next day, two members of the death squad dressed in civilians' clothes found my mother and I at her friend's home. She was detained and tortured. When the International Red Cross found her ten days later, they released her to the women's prison where she remained for ten months. Soon after her release, we left the country.

When the Peace Agreements were signed in 1992, my maternal grandmother went to the archiepiscopate to name my father as a forcibly disappeared person, however there were so many cases and an investigation was never opened. My paternal grandfather's current wife went to look for information regarding my father in Guazapa and Morazán to no avail, because of lack of information about his organization and pseudonym. There was still a lot of fear and hesitation on our family's part.

Salvadorans in the diaspora have a collective trauma that needs to be addressed, and as convenient as it is to acknowledge our painful past, the time has come to put pressure on the government to recognize this huge atrocity. The current state of the country can no longer afford our silence.

There are certain actions that the U.S. and Salvadoran governments can take to bring about truth and reconciliation to our families. We ask that a National Commission be created in El Salvador charged with finding adults who were forcibly disappeared during the Salvadoran Civil War. We want access to military files in El Salvador regarding the forced disappearance of individuals, clandestine/secret jails or torture centers during the civil war. Declassify files in the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency containing information on all operations and activities carried on by the Salvadoran Armed Forces or any security force or paramilitary entity that resulted in extrajudicial action including execution and forced disappearance of individuals, clandestine or secret jails, torture centers, clandestine or secret burial grounds related to all forced disappearances of an estimated 10,000 men and women in El Salvador during the civil war.

My father's legacy lives on through me and my nine-year old daughter. He lived and fought for fair and equitable treatment of El Salvador's poorest people. He lives on in the work that I do and the stories that I document. Today I honor his life by using my voice to speak truth to power. I demand to know what happened to my father. I want to lay his bones to rest and give him the proper burial that he deserves.

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*About the briefing:*

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