

Neris Gonzalez wanted to be sure she wouldn't faint or cry uncontrollably in the courtroom. Her worst fear was that while testifying, she would start imagining that it was 1979 again and she was back in the basement cell in El Salvador. So for more than a year she prepared for the trial with the aid of her Chicago therapist.

Now, as she took the witness stand, she was able to look squarely at the two ex-generals sitting together across the room: the tall, baby-faced Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, whom she remembered grinning in his khaki uniform as he rode through the streets, and the short, somber Jose Guillermo Garcia, old even when he was young.

Both of them were old now, grandfathers with dyed black hair who had come to Florida to retire by the pool. She was a 47-year-old grandmother half a lifetime away from her rural Salvadoran birthplace. She had come to this West Palm Beach courtroom last July to lend her voice to those calling the two former military leaders to account for the crimes committed by their soldiers in El Salvador during the late 1970s and 1980s.

In a steady voice, she answered the questions posed by her lawyer, breathing deeply as the interpreter repeated her responses in English. "We had a fear of going outside," Gonzalez said, with a glance at the generals, who took notes as she spoke. "We didn't know whether we would return."

Her lawyers had considered asking her to leave out the most horrific details of her story, which might have seemed improbable to jurors unfamiliar with El Salvador. But in the end they left it to her.

So she told the jurors about the reign of terror, the soldiers and the abductions. About how one day her friend was captured and they later found her head impaled on a stick. Gonzalez was eight months pregnant with her third child at the time, but she knew it wouldn't be long before they came for her.

They came the day after Christmas. Four men, three in uniform, grabbed her from the local market in broad daylight and brought her to the basement of a National Guard post. Then they took her to a room marked El Matadero, "The Slaughterhouse."

SOME MONTHS AFTER THE JULY TRIAL,

Gonzalez and I sat in the kitchen of her home in Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood. On the wall above us was a painting of the martyred Salvadoran archbishop Oscar Romero, who was killed by a sniper's bullet in 1980. She considers Romero a saint, because in his Sunday masses he used to denounce the military's murder of civilians.

Plants lined the windows of the pristine apart-

ment she shared with her daughter and 10-year-old grandson. Red chili pepper garlands hung from the kitchen walls. Gonzalez wore a floral print blouse with jeans and sneakers, and her long black hair was tied in a dozen braids clipped with butterfly barrettes.

"My daughter did this," Gonzalez said with a smile, as she shook her clinking braids. Carolina, who at 30 is a younger, quieter version of her mother, laughed at her handiwork. They had only recently been reunited after 15 years apart, and they were doing the things that mothers and daughters do.

We had finished several cups of tea by the time Gonzalez began telling me about her native farming village of San Nicolas Lempa in the state of San Vicente, a place where chickens, ducks, turkeys and roosters paraded around her family's adobe house.

The third of 12 children, she left home in 1972 at the age of 16 to marry a man nine years her senior. She gave birth to Carolina a year later, but she and her husband soon separated.

Gonzalez returned home to manage the family store and work for the local church as a catechist, preparing children for their first communion. She wasn't particularly religious, but she was drawn to the pastor, Father Rutilio Grande, a Jesuit who was trying to improve health care and education in San Vicente. The church was alive, he told her, and Jesus lived among the poor.

Soon she was working as a health educator for the church in villages without doctors, and joining people on trips to the capital city of San Salvador to ask government leaders for improvements in health care and the schools.

Carmen Barrera, who lived in the nearby village of Tres Calles, remembers Neris as a "leader whom everyone loved." They served together on a team that taught people to read, and Gonzalez taught her adult pupils to count as well, after she found out that managers were lying to their workers about the weight of the goods they were buying. She became known as the woman who taught peasants to count to 100.

"That's when my problems began," she says.

It was the mid-1970s. She was romantically involved with a university student and pregnant with her second daughter when the nation's violence started in earnest. Throughout the country, political tension between the military and a civilian population agitating for land reform had escalated into organized terrorism and would lead to the beginning of a 12-year civil war that was to claim 75,000 lives.

First, Gonzalez noticed the National Guards-

men posted at the coffee and cotton plantations. Then villagers began finding the mutilated bodies of church leaders, labor organizers, health workers and students lying in the road.

"Every night you would see bodies in the street," she says. "You would open the door and see a body in front of the house. The National Guard wouldn't allow us to bury the bodies, so the dogs and vultures ate them."

"We didn't sleep after that," she says. "We would watch the children sleep."

Father Grande, in his Sunday masses, began denouncing the killings and the political oppression by a military serving the country's wealthy elite. The homily that many believe sealed his fate was delivered in February 1977: "The very violence they create unites us and brings us together even though they beat us down," he told the congregation.

On March 12, 1977, security forces carrying machine guns ambushed Grande's vehicle, killing him, along with an elderly man and a disabled teenage boy.

Archbishop Romero canceled all masses in the archdiocese to hold a memorial service, despite protests from the military government, as well as the papal nuncio and conservative Catholics in San Salvador. "Whoever touches one of my priests has to deal with me," Romero warned.

But Gonzalez thought, "If they killed the head of a church, what is going to happen to us?"

In 1979, she watched on television as the new minister of defense, Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia, and the new head of the National Guard, Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, promised reform. But the terror only escalated.

A close friend from her church was abducted from a bus at a National Guard checkpoint, and the next day neighbors found her decapitated body. On Dec. 26, 1979, the soldiers seized Gonzalez, then 23, in a market near San Nicolas Lempa. Ignoring the shouts of vendors, they pulled her from the food stalls and took her to the basement of a National Guard post in the city of San Vicente.

There, over the next two weeks, the guardsmen asked her again and again why she had taught peasants to count, and whichever way she answered, they stuck pins under her fingernails. They cut her with razor blades, slashed her with a machete, and burned her with cigarettes. They immersed her in freezing water for hours at a time.

At one point she was forced to lie under a metal bed while four men sat on the sides and rocked back and forth trying to crush her unborn child.

Julia Lieblich is a former Tribune religion reporter who is writing a book on the survivors of political terror.

For two weeks guardsmen took turns raping her.

The guardsmen brought her to a room caked with blood, where they made her watch as they tortured other captives. When the men gouged out the eyes of a teenage boy and thrust a machete into his stomach, she fainted.

Gonzalez doesn't remember anything after that, neither her captors bringing her near-lifeless body to the garbage dump or the first months she spent in a clandestine clinic in San Salvador.

She couldn't talk or understand what people said to her, and she has no memory of giving birth to the son who died soon after. Only when she regained full consciousness six months later did she learn that her baby was dead and his father was among the thousands of *desaparecidos*, those who had disappeared.

Barrera didn't see her friend until she returned to the state of San Vicente after her stay at the clinic. "Neris looked very bad and she was always crying," she recalls. "She had scars on her arms where they burned her. She couldn't sleep because every time she was falling asleep, she'd see the same guard who came and tortured her."

Gonzalez wanted to go home to San Nicolas Lempa to see her daughters, but it was too dangerous. She was afraid that National Guardsmen would find out she had survived and come after her and her family. "So she went from community to community and stayed in any house," Barrera says. "Moving around made it harder to find her."

Gonzalez decided to work with an organization that helped Salvadorans rebuild communities destroyed by the war. Barrera thought it was too soon. "But there were no options," she says. "Neris couldn't be in her family home. We thought it was better she stay active."

Gonzalez agreed: Being around her people, she

raised by their grandmothers.

Even the cease-fire more than a decade later brought her little peace. "There was a stillness, but I heard the noise inside my head of the bombing, the rockets, the missiles," she says. And a sound or a smell, like the stench of spoiled meat, could bring her back to that basement in San Vicente.

She testified before the Salvadoran Truth Commission in 1993, but a nationwide amnesty was to prevent her from ever bringing her persecutors or the generals who oversaw them, to a court of law. Some people urged forgiveness, but she couldn't forgive men who didn't acknowledge their crimes.

In 1995, Gonzalez married another survivor,

her country. Religious groups in the U.S. paid for her airfare so she could begin treatment in Chicago in 1997 at the Marjorie Kovler Center for the Treatment of Survivors of Torture. Father Charles Dahm, the pastor of St. Pius in Pilsen, provided housing for her and Montes in an empty convent.

"It was a convent, a church; that was important," Gonzalez says. "This place brought serenity into my life."

Three times a week she attended therapy and she taught local children the catechism. In her spare time, she planted tomatoes and red peppers in the convent back yard and brought in the chickens, ducks and other animals she had loved in El Salvador. "It was a little school for urban



Gonzalez and Carlos Mauricio, co-plaintiff in the suit against two Salvadoran generals, are interviewed outside a court in West Palm Beach, Fla., last year.

"IF THEY KILLED THE HEAD OF A CHURCH, WHAT IS GOING TO HAPPEN TO US."

—NERIS GONZALEZ

says, "was the only way I would feel alive. I had no idea why I'd survived, but I thought maybe God had a mission for me."

She threw herself into environmental work as an unarmed civilian in areas controlled by the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), the leading opposition group that formed in late 1980, a year after her abduction. She helped found a women's cooperative that planted crops on land that had been burned, and worked on a project to make soap from seeds.

On the surface, it looked like a remarkable recovery. But she couldn't remember a full night of sleep. She would stay awake in case the National Guardsmen returned and to avoid the recurring nightmares.

"I used to see images of my dead child," she says. "He came and I followed him." And day after day she missed her daughters, who were being

Jorge Montes, a former Dominican seminarian. Much of the time, Montes says, she seemed happy, with her easy laugh and warm embrace. But she was slow to trust, and the nightmares showed no signs of abating. "Torture has no remedy," he says.

With her husband, Gonzalez finally returned for a visit to San Nicolas Lempa. Her oldest daughter barely knew her, and the younger one did not recognize her at all. Gonzalez began to wonder if, after all this time, she could ever rebuild her life.

"I remember standing on a hill looking at people who had witnessed the massacres and destruction," she says. "I felt as if I were standing on ashes, and I fell into a deep depression."

By the time Scott Wright, a Catholic lay missionary from the United States, met her in 1995, he was sure she needed help she couldn't get in

agriculture," she says. Eventually, she began teaching classes in nutrition and ecological awareness. She called the project ECOVIDA, and Heifer International, a group that promotes sustainable agriculture and supports small farming communities, recognized her with its Women in Livestock Development Award for promoting self-reliance through organic gardening.

"All the kids in the neighborhood came to the convent to see the animals," recalls church secretary Jean Zubek, though some adults complained when Gonzalez brought in two roosters that crowded during Sunday mass. Gonzalez countered, "Most people would rather hear a rooster than gangs shooting guns."

Dahm marveled at the faith of a woman who never asked during her suffering: Where was God? "She knows that God had nothing to do with it," Dahm says. "She's totally on board with the

vision of Christ the liberator. We have to pursue justice no matter what it costs."

GONZALEZ WAS TREATED

at the Kovler Center for a year before she was ready to discuss the abduction and endure the accompanying anxiety and depression. "It's not just reopening a wound," she says, "It's reliving the torture so you can understand it." After sessions, she would be so disoriented, she says, she would walk into the street oblivious of oncoming cars.

One of 27 programs for torture survivors in the United States, Kovler's full-time and volunteer counselors help clients to develop a sense of safety and trust, to re-establish ties with their communities and to regain a sense of self that their captors had tried to destroy. "Many survivors were detained and tortured because they spoke out against regimes," says her therapist, Marianne Joyce. "We help them find their voice again."

Gonzalez saw a massage therapist to help her relax, a psychiatrist who prescribed medicine to help her sleep and Joyce, to whom she could talk about her flashbacks of the basement cell and the nightmares about her dead son.

Working with the children at ECOVIDA was a key to her therapy, she says. So was healing the rift in her family. She has been calling and writing to her youngest daughter, who lives in San Salvador, in hopes of forming a closer bond. When her older daughter, Carolina, separated from her husband two years ago, she came to live with Gonzalez and eventually began her own therapy at Kovler. "We're getting to know each other," Gonzalez says. "We're finally learning to be mother and daughter."

Later, I asked Carolina if she had ever been sad or angry with her mother for not coming home.

Carolina smiled and shook her head no.

"You've never been angry?" I asked, a bit too emphatically.

"That's what my therapist keeps asking me," she says.

In 1998, attorneys from the Lawyers Committee for Human Rights, a New York-based advocacy

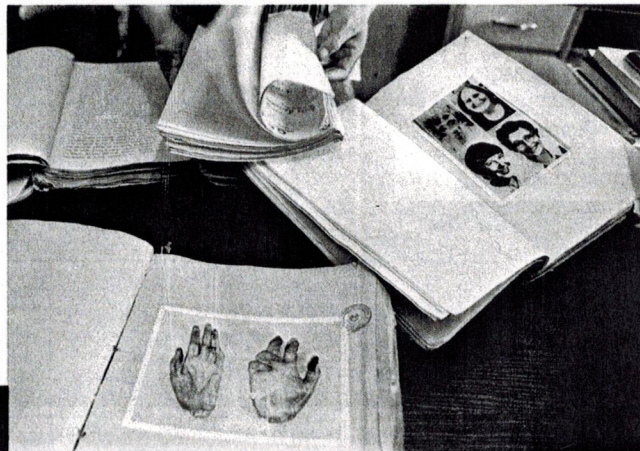
Bosnia and Hector Gramajo of Guatemala, but most had not showed up for their trials.

The relatives of the four North American churchwomen who were raped and killed in El Salvador in 1980, creating international headlines, were the first to bring a case against the two generals, based on the doctrine of command responsibility. The generals, the plaintiffs argued, knew or should have known about crimes committed by troops under their command, but failed to act reasonably to prevent the crimes or punish the offenders.

The San Francisco-based Center for Justice



Evidence in the first suit against the generals included clothes and photos of Dorothy Kazel (above) and three other churchwomen—Ita Ford, Maura Clarke and Jean Donovan—slain in December 1980.



Naturalization Service when applying for asylum.

She also talked to Irene Martinez, the internist at Cook County Hospital who gave Gonzalez an intake physical in 1997. "When I first saw her she was having a lot of flashbacks and hallucinations of the place she was tortured," Martinez recalls. "I found scars of different shapes consistent with her story of different traumas: being burned with cigarettes, being cut with a machete and being cut with razor blades. I didn't have any doubts about her story."

Gonzalez was afraid that testifying would put her family members in danger, and she worried she would fall apart in the courtroom. But she decided to join the suit. "Without the case, my therapy would have been about words, not action," she says. "It would have been talking about me for me." Most survivors, she thought, had to heal without justice. A trial would be for all those Salvadorans who would never see a courtroom.

"Maybe the trial is my mission," she says.

In October 2000, she and her husband slipped into the West Palm Beach courtroom during the case against the generals in the killing of the churchwomen—three nuns and a lay missionary. She wanted to see Vides Casanova take the stand.

I was covering the trial as a journalist, and it would be the first time I met Gonzalez.

The churchwomen's family members were seated in the front rows, two decades of waiting etched on their faces. An elderly nun sat with her head in her hands. Gonzalez sat huddled in her husband's arms.

She had wanted to see the generals to desensitize herself before the second trial, the one to be brought by herself and other torture survivors. But she couldn't stop herself from crying as Vides Casanova spoke.

In a manner more conciliatory than defiant, Vides Casanova testified that he had been aware that the extreme right was killing and torturing citizens, and that the National Guard had the reputation of being the country's most violent military arm. "I did everything humanly possible to correct the human deficiencies, but it's not easy to change things that have been in place 50 to 60 years," he told the jury.

Because El Salvador was in a state of chaos, both generals maintained, they did not have control over the kind of rogue soldiers who would target nuns and missionaries. And the generals said they did not have the resources to investigate crimes.

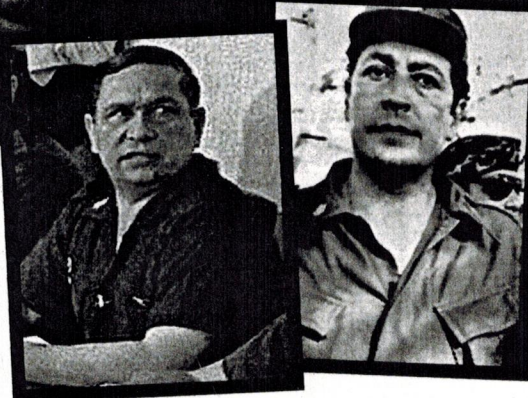
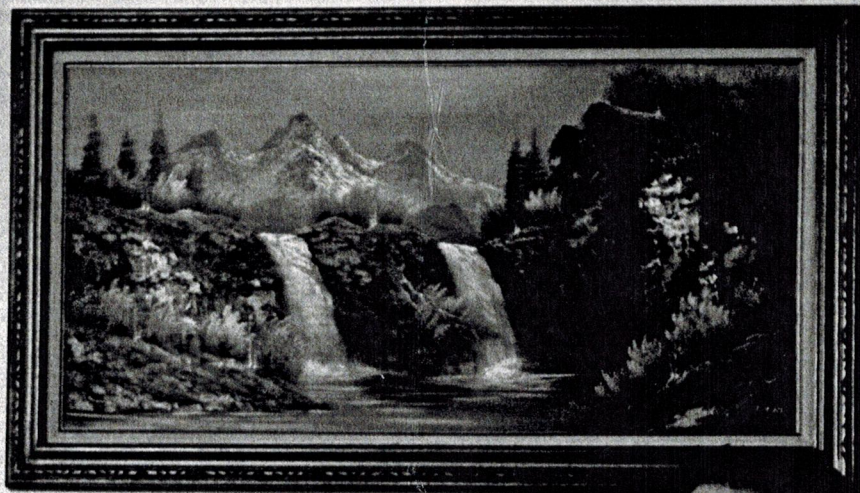
and Accountability asked Gonzalez if she would be part of a second suit against the generals brought by Salvadoran survivors.

The Kovler staff thought that Gonzalez might benefit psychologically from bringing legal action, and Shawn Roberts, then legal director of the Center for Justice and Accountability, had trusted her story on instinct. Still, Roberts felt she should check Gonzalez' account of her torture against the testimony she gave to the Immigration and

"I JUST WANTED TO YELL AT THEM AND SAY THAT EVERYTHING THEY SAID WAS A LIE." —NERIS GONZALEZ

group that supports the prosecution of war crimes, were surprised to find that two of El Salvador's most feared generals had retired to Florida. That meant it was possible to bring a suit in the United States under the Alien Tort Claims Act and the Torture Victims Protection Act, which allows civil claims against foreign human rights violators.

A dozen or so foreign leaders had been tried in U.S. courts so far, including Radovan Karadzic of



In the Florida home of former Gen. Jose Guillermo Garcia (left above, and left insert), he and former Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova defend their actions as military leaders in El Salvador in the late 1970s and '80s, saying they were trying to bring peace and democracy to the country.

Montes tightened his grip around his wife's shoulders to prevent her from lunging out of her seat. "I just wanted to yell at them and say that everything they said was a lie," she says.

The lawyers representing the churchwomen's families presented cable after cable from U.S. officials stating that the generals knew of the atrocities and failed to investigate them. A former U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, Robert White, testified that the military leaders were explicitly told by the U.S. State Department of the atrocities but did nothing to stop them. "I became convinced that the Minister of Defense had no intention of rooting out of the military those men who were notorious, even in El Salvador, for savagery," he said.

But ultimately, the jurors accepted the generals' defense. They found that Garcia and Vides Casanova did not have effective control over the military.

Juror Robert Morrow told me after the verdict that he believed the generals lacked full control, and he understood their position that in war "to make an omelet you have to break an egg." But jury foreman Bruce Schnirel was distraught.

"I felt anguish, just anguish," he says. "I just wish it had been a better case that demonstrated the generals could control their troops. I am scared to death of the negative impact of this, that people will think they can get away with murder."

Some human rights lawyers also worried about the implications for future civil cases that relied on the doctrine of command responsibility. "The outcome is worse than no trial at all," wrote Douglass W. Cassel, director of the Center for International Human Rights at the Northwestern University School of Law.

Nearly two years later, Gonzalez sat on the wit-

ness stand in the second trial of the generals and scanned the wood-paneled courtroom to see the faces of Marianne Joyce, her daughter Carolina and the 10 men and women to whom she wanted to tell the story that she had kept inside for years.

"I hope I have the strength to tell you, ladies and gentleman of the jury, what happened to me," she said, as the generals took notes and avoided her gaze.

Juan Romagoza, a surgeon, had already testified that he was abducted by National Guardsmen, who gave him electric shocks and broke his fingers to prevent him from ever again performing surgery.

Carlos Mauricio, a former agronomy professor

at the University of El Salvador, told the jurors that in 1983, he was taken to a secret chamber where he was tortured for eight days.

After five years of therapy, Gonzalez could speak without fainting. She told the jurors about the rapes, the burns and cuts, and the savage mutilation of the teenage boy in a room covered with blood. And she described how two guardsmen had forced her to lie under a metal bed while they rocked back and forth on her belly.

"I was feeling my own torture, but I was also feeling the torture of my son," she said, as she dabbed at her eyes with a handkerchief. "I was almost dead thinking of my son."

During a brief cross-examination, the generals' attorney, Kurt Klaus Jr., asked Gonzalez what kind of monetary damages she was expecting. She told him she was offended by the question. "My son has no price," she says.

Jury foreman Arnold Esbin, 70, was overwhelmed by her testimony. "It brought tears to my eyes," he would say later. "I saw and felt the pain she felt."

Still, the burden for the lawyers for the three plaintiffs was to show that the generals were in command of the perpetrators. This time, the lawyers presented diplomats and scholars who described a rigid chain of command that gave the generals control of their troops. But the major difference between the first and second trial was the presence of living victims who put a face on the terror.

In an unusual move, after the last witness testified, the jurors asked the judge if they could see Gonzalez's scars. She showed the razor slashes and cigarette burns on her arms. Her lawyers took photographs of the scars on her chest and gave them to the jurors.

"There was no doubt in our minds that she was tortured," Esbin says.

The jury deliberated for four days while Gonzalez and lawyer Shawn Roberts paced. "I can hardly describe the anxiety I felt," Roberts says. She worried about what another loss would mean for future cases and for the plaintiffs' well being. "We had encouraged these brave [people] to bare their souls and their pain, and we didn't know for what result."

On July 23, 2002 the jury signaled that it was ready to announce its verdict. The plaintiffs and their lawyers held hands as they entered the

courtroom. Mauricio squeezed Gonzalez's hand so hard it hurt as the foreman read the verdict.

"Was defendant Garcia responsible for the torture of plaintiff Neris Gonzalez?"

"Yes."

"Was defendant Vides Casanova responsible for the torture of plaintiff Neris Gonzalez?"

"Yes."

On all counts, the jury found the two generals responsible for the atrocities committed by their subordinates and ordered them to pay \$54.6 million to the three plaintiffs.

Jurors and security guards cried openly after



As her daughter watches, Gonzalez plants herbs on her back porch, part of her effort to teach city-dwellers self-reliance through agriculture.

four weeks in court. Carolina wept as she hugged her son. Gonzalez wept and embraced Mauricio.

"For 23 years since the torture, I've been waiting for justice," Gonzalez said. Then she turned to the jurors and whispered, "Thank you, thank you" as she raised her arms in triumph.

In El Salvador, Barrera, now an attorney, was overjoyed. "It brought us a lot of hope that justice can be done. The people of the communities near San Nicolas are waiting for [Gonzalez] to come back someday to celebrate."

A STATUE OF THE VIRGIN MARY

stands outside Jose Guillermo Garcia's beige stucco home in Plantation, Fla. Inside, he and his longtime friend, Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova, 65, are sitting on a couch next to a foot-tall statue of Jesus.

"We pray for Neris Gonzalez," says Garcia, 69. "I hope one day she is convinced that she has

taken the wrong position."

In their knit, short-sleeve shirts, the former generals seem more relaxed than they had been in the courtroom and eager to talk eight months after the trial. They had been vilified, Garcia says, and they wanted to defend their reputation and that of the Salvadoran armed forces.

"Everything has been done to make us look like the bad guys," Garcia says.

The truth, Vides Casanova says to me, was that they had helped reform a military with a tradition of violence and liberated a country in turmoil, with the support of the U.S. government. The generals, in fact, received Legion of Merit awards from the U.S. military for their work in El Salvador. "Democracy has been given to the people," Vides Casanova says. "I was able to deliver a country in peace."

He notes that the former leftist guerrilla group, the FMLN, is now a political party gaining in power.

Despite the generals' claims of a peaceful and democratic El Salvador, however, the U.S. State Department has reported that violent crime and human-rights abuses continue and the judiciary is riddled with corruption.

The lawsuit brought by Gonzalez and her fellow plaintiffs, Garcia says, falsely accused the generals of allowing an environment where torture and other atrocities could occur without punishment—atrocities they say they still have a hard time believing took place.

"If I had known about at least one torture case, I would have acted actively to end it," Garcia says. "I have always tried my best to serve God."

The generals give little credence to the Salvadoran Truth Commission report, cited at the trial, that described thousands of cases of torture and murder of adults and children. And they say Ambassador White was known as "Communist White."

The problem, they say, is that they didn't have the money to investigate the stories of each plaintiff. In the case of Gonzalez, they would have looked at whether a woman could have survived the torture she described. They would have "made a study" of the scars on her arms and chest, and they would have tried to find records of a death certificate for her baby.

I ask them if they think that it is possible that Gonzalez and her mother, who buried the baby in the middle of the night, had been too afraid to apply for such a document. Vides Casanova shakes his head. "If she had really been tortured," he tells me, "she would have admitted anything before being tortured [to protect] her son."

"Admitted what?" I ask.

"I don't know if she was captured," he replies. "We don't have a document. It's possible she might have been tortured." But he says he can't "conceive that a person would have the capacity to do something like that [to a pregnant woman]." And it was impossible to know that the torture occurred if she would not name her torturers.

When I ask how many survivors know the names of their torturers, Garcia replies again that he had not been aware of torture in his country.

The generals say they are appealing the decision on grounds that the statute of limitations had expired.

Meanwhile, the plaintiffs' lawyers say they are

investigating the generals' financial resources.

Garcia laughs when asked if he could come up with \$54 million. "I am willing to give my life, if my life will pay for the debt," he says.

The generals' attorney, Klaus, also says he isn't sure that any of the plaintiffs had told the truth. Call Gonzalez's ex-sister-in-law, he urges me. She will say that "Neris had made it all up," Klaus says.

In a phone conversation, the former sister-in-law, Elizabeth Vasquez, repeats her accusation. "She's a liar and a crook," Vasquez says of Gonzalez. Vasquez says she divorced her husband, one of Gonzalez' 12 siblings, because the family members "are all crooks."

Vasquez claims that Gonzalez was undocumented, though she has been formally granted political asylum in the U.S. She also says Gonzalez was a guerrilla, and that it was guerrillas who committed the torture in El Salvador.

But the Truth Commission reported that Salvadorans attributed 85 percent of cases of torture and other grave human rights abuses "to agents of the State, paramilitary groups allied to them and the death squads." Moreover, Gonzalez was tortured before the 1980 formation of the opposition group, the FMLN.

Roberts says she is used to defendants and attorneys trying to discredit plaintiffs outside the courtroom with claims that they couldn't support in court. If Klaus doubted Gonzalez, Roberts asks, why hadn't he challenged her testimony during what was a very brief cross-examination, or called a single witness to counter it?

Gonzalez seemed more perplexed than upset when told about the accusations by Klaus and the generals. The generals' response came as no surprise. But Klaus, she says, should have learned something about torture during the trial. And she says her sister-in-law, Vasquez, had met her younger brother in the 1990s, and they had gone through a bitter divorce.

"She doesn't know me," Gonzalez says. "What kind of attorney would give her credence?"

Gonzalez pulls up her sleeves as if to ask what more proof was needed. "At least I have scars," she says. "Many survivors have no scars. Psychological torture you cannot see."

Last March, students at the University of Notre Dame lined up to meet Gonzalez after she and Roberts spoke in a program memorializing Archbishop Oscar Romero. Gonzalez hugged each of them and wished them well.

When 26-year-old Matthew Potts, a wholesome-looking former Naval officer, told her that hearing her story had caused him to rethink how to live his life, she put her hands on her heart and smiled delightedly.

"*Que bueno*," she said. "I feel privileged that my life has changed yours."

Looking back on the trial, she says it convinced her that justice is possible. "It took a great weight off me. The trial was the best therapy I ever had."

Her new goal, she says, is to start an urban farm in Pilsen to teach respect for the environment, and her dream is to see more human rights trials in the United States and, one day, in El Salvador. "This victory is not enough; we need more victories."

Even a win, she told us, could not erase the years of trauma. "Torture has indelibly marked me," she says. "I'll never sleep the same. My dreams will never be the same."

Still, Potts had described her as "a veteran of a long struggle who was no less optimistic because of that struggle," and it is difficult for anyone not to marvel at her endurance.

"I think she was born with it," says Roberts. "I think that some people are born with a passion, a will, a life force."

Gonzalez smiles. "I think it's a love of the people, the community, the children. I have faith that gives me strength to overcome whatever obstacles I find. The generals pray to the rich gods. I pray to a just God." □