



## Three Q's >>

**Fredy Peccerelli** and his family fled Guatemala for New York City in 1980 after his father received death threats. He returned as a forensic anthropologist and since 1995 has helped identify some 5000 Guatemalan men, women, and children massacred during the country's 36-year armed conflict. In September, Peccerelli and imprisoned Cuban physician Oscar Elías Biscet received the New York Academy of Sciences' Heinz R. Pagels Human Rights of Scientists award.

### Q: Why dig up a very painful past?

Our work provides evidence to back up the testimonies of individuals who lost their loved ones so that there can be an attempt to bring the killers to justice. It allows us to see the brutalities involved in the killings—for example, 25% of the bodies we have exhumed were children.

### Q: How do you go about your work?

We meet up with family members of victims. We locate the graves and take the bodies to the lab to identify victims and determine the cause of death. We ultimately hand over our findings to the government prosecutor. We are launching our own DNA lab to strengthen the identification process.

### Q: There have been only a handful of trials so far. What keeps you going?

I'm optimistic that there will be more attempts at justice—either in Guatemala or in international courts. I feel very lucky to have escaped the conflict. ... [W]hile I was watching a Yankees game in New York, my fellow citizens were getting massacred. I want to repay the country by documenting the truth about these killings.

## AWARDS

**BRINGING HONOR.** Anthropologist Stephen Houston, who has spent his career deciphering the Mayan glyph system, is one of 25 winners of this year's "genius grants" from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. "There can be no rational sense of deserving" the 5-year, \$500,000 prize, says Houston, a professor at Brown University, who combines linguistics, history, and ethnography to understand the classic Mesoamerican society. Houston compares the impact of deciphering Mayan writings on scholars to the effect decoding hieroglyphs had on Egyptologists. He plans to use the prize money to examine how Mayans viewed their bodies and which actions brought "honor or dishonor" to one's physical self.

A complete list of this year's winners is at [www.macfound.org](http://www.macfound.org).

## TWO CULTURES

**SURF'S UP!** So much for slogging through organic chemistry in some dank basement lab. University of Hawaii, Honolulu, chemist Robert Liu and colleagues have taken their synthetic chemistry to the beach. Liu, who

specializes in photochemical reactions triggered by sunlight, developed a magazine-sized reactor that uses the sun's rays to produce variants of vitamin A. The reactions normally generate excess heat that must be dissipated using cold water. But in a report pub-



lished online last month in *Green Chemistry*, Liu's team described how they built their reactor into a boogie board, which radiates unwanted heat into the Pacific Ocean as researchers ride the waves. Cowabunga, dude! The only problem: Good luck getting students back into the lab.

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## << Politics

**LOCKED OUT.** In a move that has sparked bipartisan outrage in Congress, officials at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have barred a former VA microbiologist from entering one of its hospitals in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The banishment came 2 days after microbiologist Janet Stout testified before the House Science Committee about a controversial VA decision to destroy her large collection of *Legionella* bacteria in 2006. At the hearing, committee members were harshly critical of that step, which Stout says followed a clash with VA officials over her lab's research priorities.

The move "appears to be punishment for Dr. Stout's appearance," representatives Brad Miller (D-NC) and Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) wrote in a 19 September letter to VA officials. They want the agency to hand over all

records relating to an 11 September e-mail from Terry Wolf, director of the VA Pittsburgh Health System, that orders the staff to block Stout's access "without prior approval of my office." Stout left the VA last year, but Wolf writes that she "has been seen on VA premises" and "still receives mail here. Both practices must be terminated immediately."

Stout, who now runs the private Special Pathogens Laboratory in Pittsburgh, says she is mystified by the effort to bar her from a public hospital "where people come and go freely." She periodically visits the building to consult with former colleagues on projects but hasn't yet tested the ban. "I don't know if they are trying to intimidate me or create fear among my former colleagues," she says. VA officials didn't return calls from *Science*.