

## RAGUA'S NORTHWEST CONNECTION

20 years later, killing seen as a turning point

# UW grad's death brought global notice to civil war

BY TOM PAULSON  
P-I reporter

LEON, Nicaragua – On a street corner here in one of the oldest cities in the Western Hemisphere, situated among the volcanoes, the rum refineries and some of Nicaragua's leading intellectuals, is a coffee shop called Puerto Café Ben Linder.

The cafe may represent one of Seattle's more notable connections with this nation. Ben Linder was a 27-year-old University of Washington engineering graduate who was killed on April 28, 1987, by U.S.-backed Contras while he was building a small hydroelectric dam for a rural community in the north.

The Contras regarded Linder as a Sandinista sympathizer. Though the rebels contended his death was an accident, colleagues in Nicaragua said he and two peasants working with him had been targeted and executed by the Contras.

"Ben's death was no accident or aberration. It was an expression of U.S. policy," his father, John Linder, told the Seattle P-I at the time of his son's death.

Linder, whose dam-building efforts were sponsored by a Bellingham-based group called the Nicaragua Appropriate Technology Project, was believed to have



UPI / 1986

**UW graduate student Ben Linder, 27, in Nicaragua to build a hydroelectric dam, was killed on April 28, 1987, by U.S.-backed Contras. He was believed to be the first U.S. citizen to die in Nicaragua's civil war.**

been the first U.S. citizen killed in the civil war. His death got worldwide media attention.

The Reagan administration and other supporters of the Contras contended Linder had "put himself in harm's way" and carried a weapon, making himself a legitimate target. But the many photos of Linder dressing up as a clown to juggle or ride his unicycle and entertain Nicaraguan children made such claims a hard sell.

"Benjamin Linder was no revolutionary firebrand, spewing rhetoric and itching to carry a rifle through the jungles of Central America," CBS News' correspondent Dan Rather said at the time. "He was a slight, soft-spoken, thoughtful young man ... an American who was killed with weapons paid for with American tax dollars."

Just before Linder's death, the Iran-Contra Affair had emerged. It was revealed that the Reagan administration had been secretly and illegally selling weapons to Iran and using the proceeds to fund the Contra rebels. Linder's death is still remembered by many here as a critical turning point in the civil war – the point at which the deaths of tens of thousands of Nicaraguans became politically intolerable to a majority of Americans. A year later, a ceasefire was brokered.