

THE CLARION

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When Jose Lasa, a Panamanian Brevard College student, returned home for Christmas vacation, he arrived in the midst of a country in turmoil and transition.

Not only had his country been invaded by American troops, but the dictator Manuel Noriega was hiding out in the Vatican embassy, less than two blocks from Jose's house.

And just getting home was a story in itself.

With his country embroiled in the midst of an American invasion, Jose was forced to spend his holidays with Panamanian friends in Miami while he awaited the reopening of the Panama City airport. While other BC students were home celebrating the holidays, Jose had to celebrate Christmas, New Year's Eve and his brother's Dec. 22 birthday away from his family and country.

But Jose says he didn't mind staying in America because, "Noriega was not there." After two weeks of waiting, Jose finally arrived home in Panama on Jan. 1.

Jose says it was risky business living so close to the Papal Nuncio, where Noriega had been granted political asylum. He says the area was combed through by the U.S. military and that his neighborhood was very sensitive. When he came and went from home, "everything of mine was checked, my car, ID, everything!" he says.

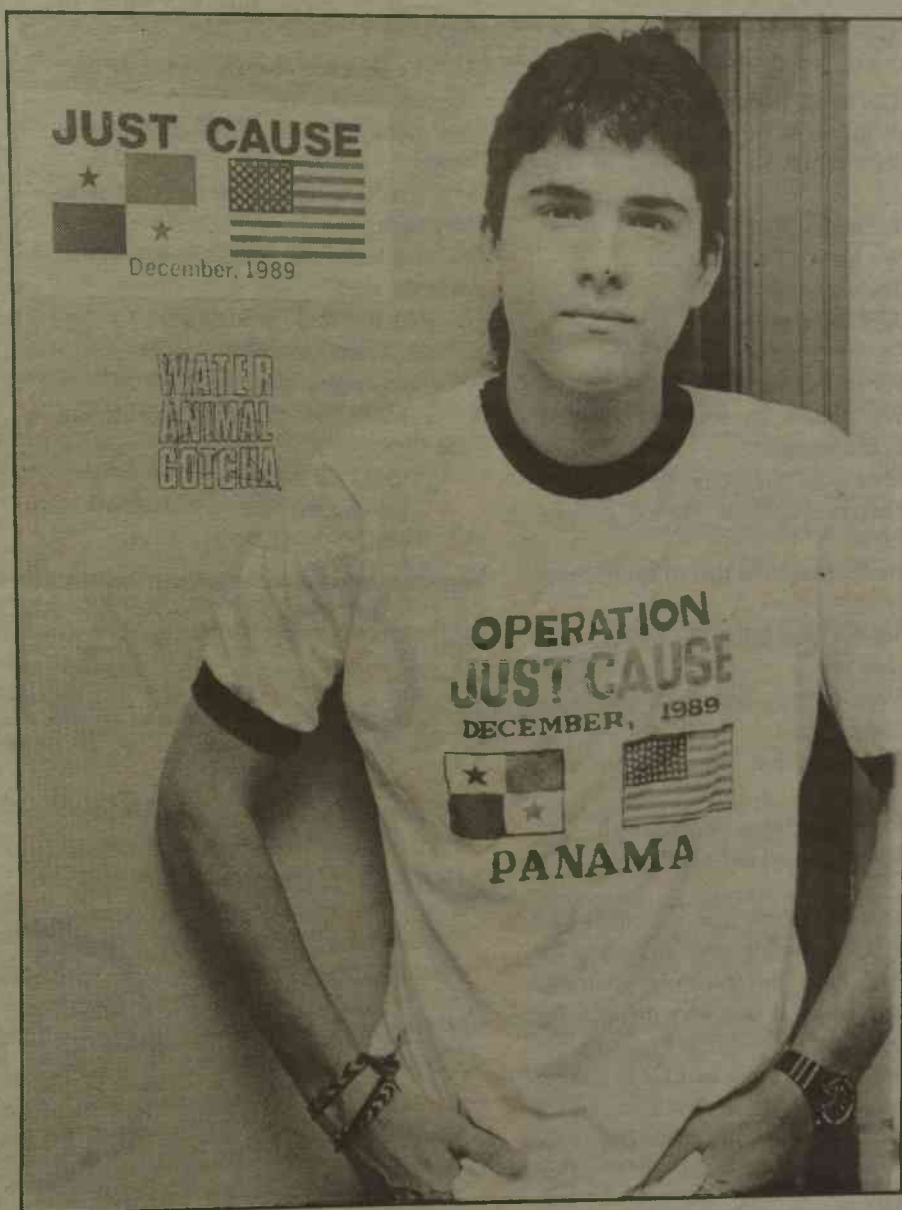
During the time before Noriega surrendered to U.S. authorities, there were some tense and violent times in Panama City. In one incident, Jose and some friends came across a car driven by a man they assumed to be a journalist. When Jose's friends began yelling protests against Noriega, they realized the man in the car wasn't pointing a camera but an assault rifle.

"We took off, man!" Jose recalls with a nervous laugh. "It was so scary."

Another time, Jose and four men were standing innocently on a corner. Suddenly, a tear gas bomb exploded nearby. Jose and his friends ran for safety. Later, when he returned to look at the bomb, Jose says he read the inscription on the canister and had to laugh. "...it was made in Pittsburgh!" he says.

On the day when Noriega surrendered, Jose was in the crowd that loudly protested outside the Vatican embassy in Panama City. Later, after learning that Noriega had surrendered, Jose says his fellow countrymen celebrated as though they were at a carnival.

Jose says that after Noriega



With signs of the times on door and shirt, BC student Jose Lasa is glad to be back "home" to Taylor basement after a harrowing Christmas Vacation adventure to his native Panama. (photo by Laura Clark)

Christmas vacation put BC's Jose Lasa in...

the Eye of the Storm

surrendered, tensions eased and Panamanians set their sights on the rebuilding of their society. A new president was named, and the dictatorship no longer exists in Panama.

Jose thinks the American military presence in his homeland is important to the country's economic future, and he says he hopes the Americans will stay until the new Panamanian government is stabilized. "Everybody there loves the American army," he says.

When it comes to the future of Manuel Noriega, Jose is not so charitable. He is glad his old dictator must face U.S. justice for his crimes.

Jose says Panamanian justice would be swift and terrible. "He should be tied to a piece of wood and driven through the streets of Panama; he would not make it through the first block."

Jose, a native Panamanian, describes his country as a beautiful place with a single dictator who brutally dominated its citizens. Jose says he can never forget the demonstration he attended as a 15-year-old when he saw old ladies being beaten. With a grim smile, Jose says, "That will happen no more."

When asked how he felt when he learned of Noriega's surrender, Jose reflected, and said, "Free at last!"

New SU could be ready by March

Construction on the new Coltrane Student Union is clipping right along, according to BC administration reports.

President Greer says that the construction chief of Triad Construction Co. has promised that the building will be completed by mid-March. If that happens, says Director of Financial Affairs Dale Wiener, then the decoration phase can begin immediately after that, and the SU could be ready for occupancy by late March or April.

Currently, the paving and sidewalk work is underway. Wiener says the new lot will be reserved for SU employees, faculty and staff. Also, he announces that when everything is completed this spring, that the road between the SU and the cafeteria will be repaved.

This week, the sidewalk between West Beam and the SU is closed for construction, and is projected to reopen no later than Feb. 3.

What's happening

this weekend

Sports, entertainment, special events scheduled at Brevard College for the weekend of Feb. 2-4, according to the official BC Campus Events Schedule.

Friday, Feb. 2

Video: "Witness" -- Taylor Lobby, 7-9 p.m.

Sports: Women's Basketball at Peace College in Raleigh, 7 p.m.

Men's Basketball at Louisburg College in Louisburg, N.C.

7:30 p.m.

Special Interest: BC Jazz Ensemble at Grove Park Inn Jazz Festival in Asheville, 7 p.m.

Saturday, Feb. 3

Sports: Doubleheader Men's and Women's Basketball at Chowan College, Murfreesboro, N.C.

Indoor Track: Clemson Invitational, 10 a.m.

Sunday, Feb. 4

Twister Tournament, sponsored by the SGA, 7-9:30. Location TBA.