

## Fernando Parrado and his ties to ISU Rugby

On October 13, 1972 “Nando” Parrado was a member of the Stella Maris College’s Old Christians Rugby Club from Montevideo, Uruguay, which were on their way to Santiago, Chile to play in a rugby match. Forty-five players, supporters and family members departed on [Uruguayan Air Force Flight 571](#) in the infamous story of crash, death and survival at 18,000 foot mountains of the Andes. Twelve died in the initial crash, another 8 in an ensuing avalanche days later and the remaining 9 perished from their injuries. After 72 days only 16 survivors of that flight can share their story with others.



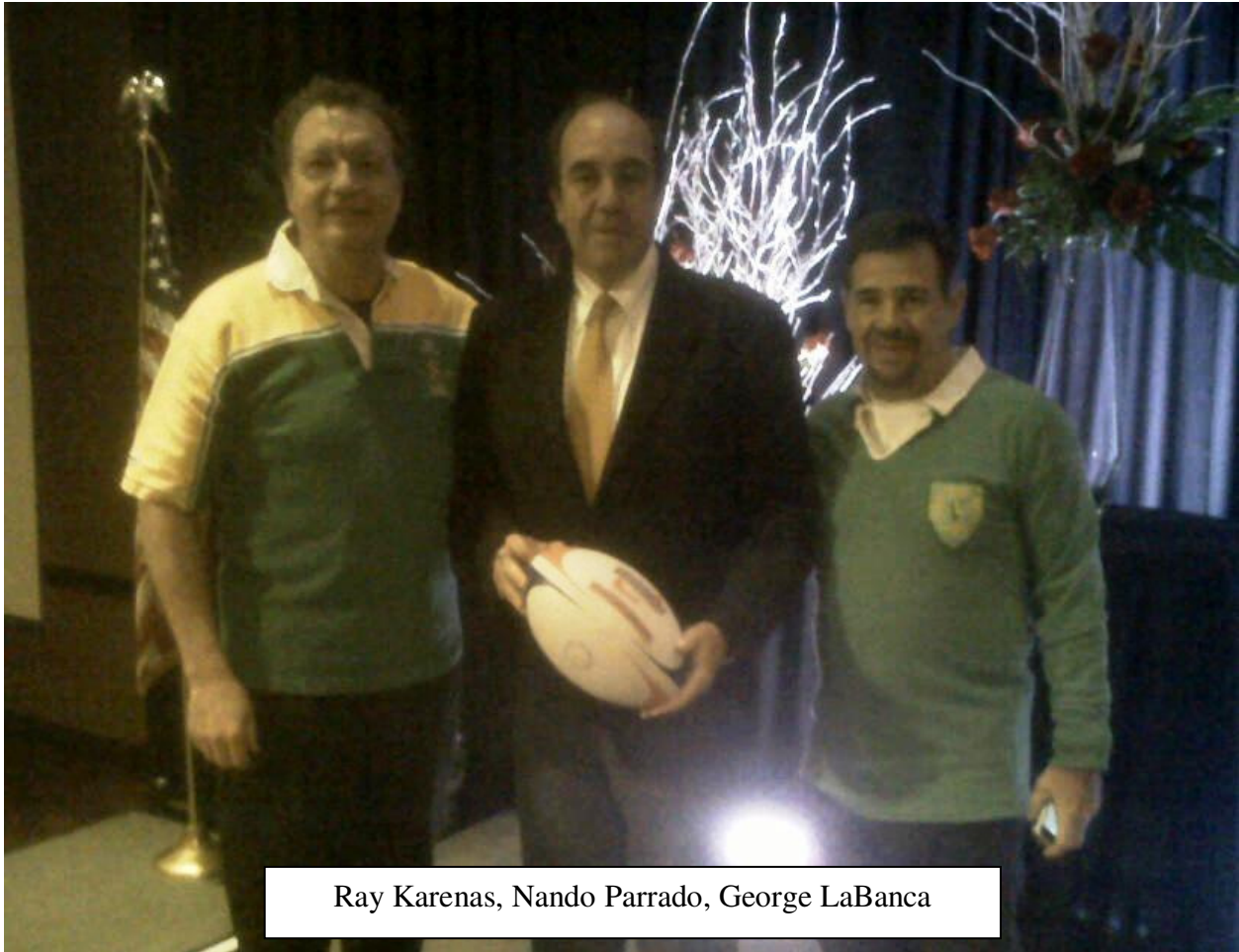
Nando and Roberto Canessa trekked for nine days through the mountains until finding a stream that led to a valley and inevitably being found by a Chilean huaso who was able to ride back to a local town to summon help.

The Illinois State University Rugby Football Club had set its program and agenda to celebrate 40 years of existence with activities from Thursday thru Saturday, April 28-30, 2011 in Normal, IL. ISU rugby founder Augie Demma informed alumni chair Ray Karenas that on April 28<sup>th</sup> the American Red Cross (ARC) of the Heartland based in Bloomington, IL was to host a fundraising dinner at the Marriott Hotel with “Nando” Parrado as the [keynote speaker](#). Ray searched and easily found Nando’s website, email and sent him a note describing the ISU Alumni’s activities. He informed him of the group’s youth training that same evening and that the old boys would be raising a pint or two much later in the evening after training. Ray mentioned that, as rugby brethren, when in a new locale rugby brothers should share a pint. Nando replied “I have your cell phone number”.

George LaBanca and Ray, alumni coordinators for the reunion event, were also staying at the Marriott Hotel which was the reunion hotel headquarters. George and Ray had prepared a note as

part of a package which included the commemorative program book, a rugby ball, and two beer cozies. They were going to leave the gift package at the hotel desk for Nando. It was Thursday just before 5pm and they were heading off to host the training session for the ISU Men's RFC, Women's RFC and local High School side, Bloomington Tornado's. Their elevator was heading down when it stopped on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor and who else but Nando enters. He was heading down to the banquet hall to meet his handler and go over final notes and instructions before the 7pm dinner. As Nando enters the elevator he eyes the package with the rugby ball, sees a handwritten note addressed to him, looks up at the two guys and then says to Ray "Are you Ray?" Incredible timing! They all shake hands and in three seconds the ball is out of the package and they start passing it around, while still in the elevator. When the doors open at the ground floor they are met by Dave Magers, who is a board member of ARC of the Heartland.

George and Ray now realize that this is not their agenda, it is ARC's and Nando's. They graciously allow Dave to go into his routine explaining to Nando what is about to happen and where he should be, etc. Nando actually listens to Dave for a few minutes but then just as graciously touches him on the shoulder and says, "I must interrupt you for a few moments as I have met some rugby brothers". With that he motions all of us to follow him toward the banquet room. Knowing that George and Ray have to leave shortly to set up the training session for approximately 80 participants, they ask Nando if they can get a quick picture of him together with them. They find a nice location in the Marriott hallway with an ISU logo on one of the walls. The cell phone cameras are now in Dave's hands and just before the first picture is snapped, Nando says, "Let's go inside the banquet room, it will be a much nicer background". So off they go and upon entering the 800 seat room they can see hotel catering staff bustling about setting up. It's a huge room with a fairly small stage all very nicely decorated with flowers and lights. Now Nando has a bit more room and he, George and Ray can flip some longer passes all the while listening to each others' stories. Dave is now silent as his thunder is taken away. He watches as the three toss the ball up on stage and he actually mentions, "You know, I am 56 years old and after hearing you guys talk I want to learn to play rugby". The three ruggers, Nando, George and Ray were now sharing stories and tidbits and it really hit home when Nando says, "Rugby saved my life!" He was taken aback and his eyes were moistened and gleaning...happy and sad! So now George and Ray tell him that they have to go, how about that picture. Again, Dave is now the camera man and takes a few shots.



Ray Karenas, Nando Parrado, George LaBanca

They shake hands, wish each other well and George and Ray are shaking their heads in disbelief as they hustle toward the parking lot and head to the training session.

The training session for the kids was a great success with Benny Kenyon, Fred Thomas, Rory O'Rourke, Hailey White, Christy McFarland and Ray Karenas setting up individual drill stations for the kids to rotate thru. Many hours later, after having a few pints with the 1970's ISU Old Boys at Schooners in Bloomington, George and Ray head back to the hotel. They open the door to the room and wouldn't you know it, the ball they had left with Nando is now sitting on the desk. It has a notation "**With a Big Rugby Hug!!! Nando ALIVE**" Incredible evening and the start of a great alumni event. It was a week-end we won't remember with friends we can't forget!

The week-end culminated with a dinner banquet attended by 260 guests introducing the next class of [Hall of Fame](#) inductees. The fundraising efforts of the alumni totaled more than \$10,000 to the Alumni Foundation to be used by both Men's and Women's Rugby Club Sides.