



MEET LUIS CANALES

HIS 9,500-MILE TREK



Luis Canales '17 CWSL shares his story of traveling four times from Honduras to seek asylum in the US at the Center for Migration Studies Conference in New York City.

Luis Canales '17 CWSL walks the halls of the Villanova University Charles Widger School of Law wearing symbols of his deepest values, common to many Villanovans—faith and country. Around his neck, he wears a silver cross. On his lapel is a pin with two flags: the United Nations and the United States.

Canales also carries in his backpack a symbol of his journey to Villanova: the worn-out, black, white and blue Adidas sneakers that he wore on his path from gang target in Honduras to asylum-seeker to US citizen.

Today, along with his classmates, Canales is transitioning from accomplished law student to proud alumnus and practicing lawyer. A perilous road is behind him, and his legal degree's academic rigor and ethical principles have prepared him to navigate the path ahead.

"My sole purpose in getting an education is to give back in a better way. I want to continue the path God has set and see how far I get," Canales says. "We cannot always help en masse, but we can always do it on a personal level. One to another, we can create change."

SPEAKING TRUTH TO POWER

Mornings started early for the Canales family in their humble, white mud-and-wood home in Siguatepeque, Honduras, whether

The injustice incensed young Canales. He voiced his opposition in school, where gangs recruited new members. Word rippled back to the gang leadership.

"I was voicing defiance, and they took it personally," Canales says.

Gang members waited for Canales outside of school and tried to cajole him into joining. He refused. Canales continued speaking out, this time to the municipal government. He did not realize that his words were carried over the radio to homes across his area.

As soon as they heard him, the gang members decided they would kill Canales.

At school, the gang members brandished knives. They attacked him when he left for home. Canales avoided them on backstreets or ran toward the police station to scare them away.

One morning, Canales encountered a gang member, who gave chase. Speeding on their bikes, the boys neared where the road divided. The gang member stopped, aimed a homemade gun and fired a bullet. Canales fell from his bike and crashed to the gravel road, where he lay unconscious.

Both the assailant and the target thought Canales had been killed. Fifteen minutes later, Canales woke up to find people surrounding him. He was bloody, and his head throbbed from the impact. He had

LED to VILLANOVA LAW

BY SHAWN PROCTOR

they were at the mill grinding corn for the day or at school. Just as clay bound their home, faith bound their family. Luis, the 12th of 14 children, once dreamed of becoming a priest. He was turned away from the seminary due to limited space, but the depth of his faith remained.

"I knew God had other plans for me," he says.

Honduras had long been beset by violent street gangs who extorted from citizens and businesses. However, Canales only realized the full extent of their violence when he began interning on a news show at a local radio station.

not been shot, but rocks from the road had raked his chest, chin and shoulder, and punctured his right elbow and left knee. The injuries would take more than a month to heal. The scars—physical and emotional—remain to this day.

"When gang members target someone, they attack everyone with the person," Canales says.

If the gang broke into the family's home, for example, they could kill his brothers and sisters, parents and even Canales' 1-year-old son.

Sixteen years old and terrified of the next ambush, Canales decided to do the only thing he could: flee north.



“Faith is to believe what you do not see; the reward of this faith is to see what you believe.”

—ST. AUGUSTINE

FLIGHT FROM DANGER

Canales had saved 2,000 lempiras—about 50 to 75 American dollars at the time—and he traveled by bus from Honduras to Guatemala to Mexico, avoiding the border guards who would have detained him as a minor and sent him back.

At one point, Mexican police removed Canales from a small bus and threatened to send him home if he did not give them his money and belongings. He handed over all that he had. Starving and penniless, by raft and by foot, Canales persisted in his trek north.

“I left everything behind, but I had no choice. I had to keep going. I had to get to safety,” he says.

In Tapachula, Mexico, like so many destitute immigrants, he sneaked aboard a massive cargo train, stretching more than 100 cars long. He used his belt to secure himself between the train cars or to the roof, to prevent himself from falling. On two occasions, he saw others lose their balance and end up underneath the train, killed by the metal wheels.



Canales visits with his extended family in Omoa, Honduras.

thing without giving something in return. He herded goats on an estate in Monterrey in order to earn money.

From Piedras Negras, Mexico, Canales crossed the border to the United States, where American immigration officials apprehended him and sent him to a shelter for three months. He knew of no relatives in the US. The officials said Canales could voluntarily leave the US and return home, or be deported, which would bar him from crossing the border again for more than five years. He chose to leave on his own.

It was the first of three unsuccessful attempts, each of which forced Canales back to Siguatepeque. After the final journey to the US, he was held in the same shelter and provided the name of a relative who lived in Scranton, Pa. Officials released him to the family member in February 2005, while he applied for asylum.

He had already traveled almost 7,500 miles in the same shoes, through incredible hardships. Yet Canales knew the journey ahead would be just as difficult.

FAITH REWARDED

The asylum case was active in the courts for five-and-a-half years, with Canales unable to start a life while he was in limbo. He learned English by translating immigration documents and newspaper articles.

It was a time thick with hope and despair. One day, Canales wandered into the National Shrine of St. John Neumann in Philadelphia, and he prayed. “I promised God and St. John Neumann that if I was

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granted asylum in the United States, I would become a lawyer. I would come to Philadelphia and study there to help other people like me. All of those things came true. Not right away, but they did happen,” he says.

His final immigration hearing in 2010 was the most terrifying moment of his journey. Canales broke down during his testimony, recounting the peril he faced in Honduras. His words were so powerful

that the government’s lawyer asked the judge to grant asylum.

“My life was in their hands,” Canales says. “I remember the lawyer told me, ‘Congratulations and good luck.’”

By this point, he had met and fallen in love with a young woman in Scranton. Maryori was a member of the same Catholic youth group and also from Honduras. Canales proposed atop the Empire State Building, and they were married in 2010. Later, he received a green card and became a US citizen on Aug. 1, 2014.

“To me, being a United States citizen is a dream come true—one of the most amazing things that can ever happen. Some people take being a citizen for granted, and before 2014 I would think, ‘What would I do to trade places with them?’”

Maryori says that they had been dating for a year before she learned about his experiences in Honduras. She has seen firsthand how the trauma that might break other people mentally only strengthened her husband’s resolve. “He was always a natural leader, always motivating people in the community to do good for others. Helping makes him feel like he is accomplishing something. It heals some of the scars.”

BECOMING A VILLANOVAN

Canales graduated with honors from Marywood University in Scranton and, remembering his vow, he researched law schools, trying to find one that spoke to his sense of purpose and his journey.

“When I was looking at law schools, I read their missions. Reading Villanova’s mission—knowing all the work they’ve done and that it was founded for immigrants—I knew I must go to this university,” Canales says.

He applied to Villanova and was placed on the waitlist. Undeterred, Canales began law school in western Massachusetts and applied again to Villanova the following year. He was accepted.



Canales at United Nations headquarters before speaking at the UN Summit for Refugees and Migrants

Recently, Canales learned that one of his former CARES clients was granted asylum.

Tuan Samahon, JD, professor of Law at Villanova, says personal experiences give Canales empathy for his clients and insight into immigration law. “He understands, as only a former asylum-seeker could, what is at stake in an asylum proceeding. He appreciates the enormous difficulty of trying to document and prove one’s case across international borders. And he understands the human cost of an asylum system that might improperly adjudicate the rights of an applicant who lacks any legal representation.”

In 2016, Canales spoke at the United Nations Summit for Refugees and Migrants. He brought along the shoes that carried him from Honduras to the United States four times. It was the proudest moment of his journey to become a US citizen.



Canales; Villanova Law Professor Michele Pistone, JD; Paw Say Ku, a refugee from Myanmar; and Donald Kerwin Jr., executive director of the Center for Migration Studies, at the CMS Conference in New York City

“It was amazing to be holding those shoes and having the opportunity to speak to the world, after not having had any shoes to wear to school as a boy,” he says.

“Luis is a fighter who will make tremendous contributions as a US citizen,” Pistone says. “His ability to transcend cultures and differences will make him a capable lawyer and leader, able to use his strong oratory skills to gain support from communities.”

ALWAYS IGNITING CHANGE

Even when Canales graduates in May, he knows there will be challenges: helping his wife finish her Social Work degree; repaying their student loans; launching a legal career that will keep his promise to God, country and family.

Every time doubt arises, when the journey seems too hard, Canales remembers the many who had a hand in helping him and all of those who are reaching out, in turn, for help.

“There are people who are waiting for me to become a lawyer, for someone like me to be their voice,” he says. “That’s my goal all of the time. Everyone has potential, if they are only given an opportunity. I know that if I am in a better position, I will be able to better help other people.” ■



Canales with his wife, Maryori, and his son, Luis Jr., who came to the US in 2015