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 not been shot, but rocks from the road had nacked 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.

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.

Meet Luis Canales

Luis Canales ’17 CWSSL 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.
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, he knew he could not stay in Mexico.

“I had to get to safety,” he says.

In Tapachula, Mexico, like so many destitute immigrants, he was held in the same shelter and provided the name of a relative who was in Monterrey in order to earn money. He had already traveled almost 7,500 miles in the same shoes, through incredible hardships. Yet Canales knew the journey ahead was 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 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 as Canales. The two bonded over their shared experiences with 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.

“My sole purpose in getting an education is to give back in a better way, and see how far I get.”

—LUIS CANALES ’17 CWSL

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

Unan Samson, 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.”

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 goal,” he says. “That’s my goal all of the time. Everyone has potential, if they are only given an opportunity. If I am in a better position, I will be able to better help other people.”

It was difficult to see people fall to their deaths, he says. It was difficult to make the trip, leaving his family and home, to be robbed and starved. But, for Canales, there was no path back.

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

—ST. AUGUSTINE

Canales visits with his extended family in Omoa, Honduras.