

Former Political Prisoner Finds Welcome in Wabash County

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As he stepped to the microphone, recently released political prisoner Denis Garcia said through the help of a translator, "Those days in April, you could breathe death in the streets of Managua."

What he was discussing were protests in Nicaragua on April 18, 2018, which ultimately would change his life forever.

Garcia is one of the 222 political prisoners of the government of Nicaragua who were flown on Feb. 9 to Dulles International Airport in Washington, D.C., following their incarceration in Nicaraguan jails.

According to a recent release from the U.S. State Department, the release of these individuals, "who had been imprisoned by the government of Nicaragua for exercising their fundamental freedoms and have endured lengthy unjust detentions... marks a constructive step towards addressing human rights abuses in the country and opens the door to further dialogue between the U.S. and Nicaragua regarding issues of concern."

Garcia is currently in Wabash County due to the fact he made a local connection in the form of Prof. Jeffrey Osborne of Manchester University during a prior medical practicum trip in 2018 by Manchester students and staff to Nicaragua.

Garcia, who before his imprisonment was a veterinarian in Nicaragua, said he was part of the uprising of students from the Nicaraguan Universidad Nacional Agraria, where Garcia taught. He spoke to an assembled group at Manchester University Thursday afternoon about his experience.

Garcia spoke of his life before 2018, where he served as a veterinarian with his own practice in Nicaragua. Garcia said that as a part of his ongoing mission to help those in his country, he started going on trips to rural areas in his country to help with animals. It was during one of these trips that he met Osborne and the students of Manchester University in 2018.

"We helped a lot of animals," Garcia said through translator Camilo Velasquez, a 2007 graduate of Manchester University who is also now a political asylee in the U.S. from Nicaragua. "There were about 10 communities we served. It was hard work, but I was happy to do it, with love, with passion."

During Garcia's work with students from Manchester University, he met and became friends with Osborne.

"A friendship was born in Nicaragua," Garcia said. "That is where I met one of the people I admire the most, Jeff Osborne. No one knows my story better than Jeff."

Garcia said he started his own practice with the help of God and his family, and that he had a lot of pride being able to start his own business from scratch.

"I was someone in life," Garcia said of his time before the uprising. "Now what do I give for my country?"

Garcia said that he saw the injustices being perpetuated on citizens in Nicaragua by President Daniel Ortega and could not stand by and allow it to continue.

“I could have stayed in my clinic and not gotten involved,” he said, but noted that he couldn’t do that.

Following his involvement in the protests Garcia was targeted by the government, who, he said, twice attempted to kill him. In one incident, he said, his car was forced into a barrier by agents of the government, which resulted in a significant hospital stay, where his hand was seriously damaged as was one of his legs. A passenger in his vehicle carries a large scar across his face as a result of the incident. Ultimately when these attempts failed, Garcia said he was placed in prison on a fabricated weapons charge.

“Because they were unable to kill me, they sent me to prison,” Garcia said. “Daniel Ortega is willing to use any government office to oppress the people.”

Garcia said he was placed in a 4-meter-by-4-meter cell with 21 other prisoners and spent three years and four months in prison for speaking up for his fellow Nicaraguans.

“Your country is not just a piece of land, the country is our soul,” Garcia said.

During this presentation Thursday afternoon, Garcia showed photos that were taken of him in his cell using an illegal phone smuggled to him in his cell.

“Having a phone (in jail) is illegal,” Garcia said. “But you need to find ways to communicate with your family. It is worth any sacrifice.”

Velasquez said that the prisoners did not know they would be coming to the U.S. He said they simply woke up one morning and were taken to an airport, where they had to sign papers saying they would never return and then boarded a plane. Initially they had no idea where they were going until a State Department official came over the intercom to inform them they were being transported to the U.S.

In addition to being transported to the U.S. all of the 222 were stripped of their citizenship by the government of Nicaragua, leaving them stateless. Following this, the nations of Spain, Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Panama, and Columbia have offered citizenship to the 222 as well as 94 other Nicaraguans whose citizenship has been stripped by their government.

On Thursday, the Group of Human Rights Experts on Nicaragua released a report that decried the actions of Nicaragua in removing these individuals’ citizenship.

“These violations and abuses are being perpetuated in a widespread and systematic manner for political reasons, constituting the crimes against humanity of murder, imprisonment, torture, including sexual violence, deportation, and politically motivated persecution,” independent expert Jan Simon said in the release. “The Nicaraguan population lives in fear of the actions that the government itself may take against them.”

Since December 2018, at least 3,144 civil society organizations have been shut down, and virtually all independent media and human rights organizations operate from abroad, the release further states.

The release goes on to state: The situation continues to worsen. In February 2023, Nicaraguan authorities deprived 222 individuals of various profiles of their nationality and expelled them from the

country, accusing them of being “traitors to the homeland.” The same month, the Court of Appeals of Managua declared another 94 persons residing in Nicaragua and abroad traitors to the homeland and resolved to impose the loss of nationality and order the confiscation of their assets in the favor of the state.

Velasquez said that property confiscation is one of the primary goals of Ortega and the Nicaraguan government and that removing statehood makes that process easier for the Nicaraguan authorities.

Velasquez, who himself is a journalist said as of Thursday, Nicaragua has no newspapers and only one or two independent radio stations that are not allowed to discuss politics. There are also no independent TV stations as the government controls all media in the country.

During Velasquez’ portion of the presentation, he noted that some 300,000 Nicaraguans have been exiled as part of the government’s crack-down on dissenters, including Garcia and Velasquez.

“We are young, educated and we have in common that we want a better country for our children,” Velasquez said.

Velasquez said the protests in 2018 followed a fire on April 16 at the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve, where over 30 percent of the reserve caught fire. This led to an initial protest of 50 students who were beaten up by government officials and followers of Ortega, which led to further protests that continued to erupt during the spring of 2018.

Following the discussion, Garcia told those in attendance that he is currently working on getting an immigration attorney to help him through the asylum process with the U.S. government. The 222 brought to the U.S. have been told by the State Department that their applications will be fast-tracked and that efforts will be made to help them complete the necessary requirements for asylum.

Osborne had previously spoken with the Plain Dealer about Garcia’s situation. He said that when Garcia got to the U.S. he contacted Osborne, and Osborne has given Garcia a place to stay while he is in the U.S. and as he seeks to solidify his asylum paperwork. Sadly, Garcia’s wife and children, as well as other members of his family, remain in Nicaragua.