

FEATURED

Nicaraguan exile finds his way to northeast Indiana

Mark Rudolph | For The Journal Gazette

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Manchester University professor Jeff Osborne, left, holds up a Nicaraguan flag in North Manchester with Denis Garcia, a veterinarian in his country who became a

Denis Garcia, a veterinarian, was riding home in a taxi on Oct. 12, 2019, after he and a friend met with a former political prisoner, someone he trusted, in a public park in Nindiri, Masaya, Nicaragua.

The taxi was stopped at a temporary roadblock by Nicaraguan police, which surrounded the vehicle. Garcia, his friend, and the taxi driver were ordered out of the car with AK-47s pointed at their heads, Garcia recalled during a March interview with a translator helping relay the story.

The men were hit in the head with rifle butts and forced face down onto the highway. The police tied the men's hands tied behind their backs and kicked them in the ribs to further subdue them. A news crew filmed the arrest.

One of the police officers withdrew a black plastic bag from the taxi, the same bag the former political prisoner had given Garcia's friend, and extracted what appeared to be four red hair spray canisters. Police claimed the items were evidence that Garcia was a "couper," or coup plotter.

At his later trial, the evidence presented in court bore no relation to the items pulled from the taxi, and the judge denounced the video of the arrest as fake, Garcia said.

Initially, Garcia was taken to El Nuevo Chipote, also referred to as the torture prison. He was kept in isolation for 15 days until he was charged with use, fabrication and possession of an explosive weapon.

He was transferred to the more dangerous La Modelo Prison outside Managua. There he shared a 43-square-foot concrete cell with 26 common inmates – those imprisoned for nonpolitical reasons. The court took 600 days to sentence Garcia to 5 1/2 years, along with the option to pay a large fine or serve 300 additional days. He was released with 221 other political prisoners Feb. 9.

Garcia had strong connections in North Manchester, where the 34-year-old is residing with Jeff and Maria Osborne and has humanitarian parole status. Last month, Garcia talked about his struggle with the aid of a translator at Manchester University Science Centre. He plans a poetry recital and another presentation at the university later in the year.

“Speaking as one who was expelled from my country,” says Camilo Velasquez, an exiled Nicaraguan sports journalist now living in South Bend, “Denis’s struggle shows how he and others have sacrificed for the greater good of our country, representing everyone who has lost a family member.”

During an interview, Garcia described life in La Modelo, where political prisoners were kept apart from one another, although many of the common prisoners were also opponents of the Nicaraguan regime.

Prisoners received two buckets of unsanitary water each day to take care of all their needs, including bathing and preparing meals. A hole in the floor served as a toilet. Sewage water dripped down from the floor above. Drugs were rampant. Disease and illness were pervasive. Gangs ruled the inmates.

Garcia was allowed brief visits from his family twice a month so they could bring him food. That was the food he ate.

On Feb. 9, after three years and four months of incarceration, Garcia heard word spread throughout the prison that the political prisoners were being transferred and he was ordered to leave with what few items he could carry. Garcia said he was bused to the Managua airport and escorted to a U.S. State Department plane with the 221 other political exiles.

All prisoners were forced to sign a one-line document confirming they were voluntarily leaving to the U.S., Garcia said. If anyone refused to sign, they were threatened with return to a maximum-security prison.

Garcia said he was told he would be reunited with his family in two months. So he signed. He was not, however, allowed a phone call to tell his family goodbye.

After takeoff, Garcia learned he was headed to Washington, D.C., where upon landing, he was told the Nicaraguan government had stripped citizenship from all the deported prisoners, cutting them off from their home, country and families.

Until Nicaragua exploded into civil unrest, Garcia's focus was mostly on his home life with his wife and their three children. A graduate of National Agrarian University, he ran a veterinary clinic and worked at the university. He also founded the Karebarro literary group and published their magazine.

Garcia's work in Amak in the Bosawas Biosphere Reserve – the second-largest rainforest in the Americas – brought him in contact with Manchester University President Dave McFadden.

Jeff Osborne, a Manchester professor, led the 2018 Medical Practicum, an annual three-week work-study program in Nicaragua, where the practicum participants have helped more than 3,000 animals in 10 villages.

Amak is a village accessible by 12-hour trek over bad roads, then six hours by motorized dugout canoe. Over the past 10 years, 56 health care providers and 131 students have made the difficult journey to participate in the practicum. The relationships Garcia forged with Manchester participants created the support network he enjoys today in northeast Indiana.

It was in April 2018 that Garcia's life changed. Demonstrations began in Managua after the government's mishandling of the wildfires in one of the most protected areas of the Indio Maiz Biological Reserve, according to the North American Congress on Latin America, an independent nonprofit organization.

When the Sandinista government led by Daniel Ortega announced a pension reform that increased taxes, curtailed benefits and revealed that the National Institute of Social Security was teetering on bankruptcy, public anger erupted. Pensioners and students took to the streets in protest.

The government called up its Sandinista Youth and other paramilitary groups to confront the protesters, resulting in violence that independent news media broadcast for the world to witness. The government immediately began to repress independent media. Today, there is practically no independent media left in the country, according to Reporters Without Borders, an international

nonprofit organization.

Students at the main universities joined the increasingly violent protests. More student killings ignited heavy fighting in 10 cities, as reported by Diario Metro Nicaragua. Garcia's National Agrarian University joined the cause. Hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands injured, according to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.

"Many of the deaths," Garcia said, "were shot in the head or neck or chest, showing they were hit by snipers."

Ortega called for dialogue on May 16, 2018. The Inter-American Commission for Human Rights participated. The talks were live-streamed, and a truce was agreed.

But within a week, the talks were suspended as violence continued to escalate. Protests reached their peak a month later.

In June, the government announced its Operation Cleanup, the same term Somoza's National Guard used in 1978 against the Sandinista guerrillas, as reported in La Prensa Magazine. By using surveillance tactics, infiltrators and social media, the government targeted opponents of the regime.

Garcia said he learned from his police contacts that his name was on the enemies list. In the absence of medical help at the National Agrarian University, he had used his veterinary skills to treat student victims of violence because hospitals were refusing to treat them, per orders from the Ministry of Health.

Garcia said he experienced an attempt on his life when his car was run off the road by a municipal truck and rammed into a concrete pillar. He suffered major injuries.

After recovering, Garcia decided he had to make his way to Costa Rica. He remained there for four months until he learned from a fellow opponent of the regime who had contacts with the police that he was "left for dead." He decided to risk returning home to his family, and despite close calls at several checkpoints, he succeeded.

Garcia lived under the radar until October 2019, when he agreed to meet with someone he considered a trusted friend for a brief conversation in a public park. They discussed restarting the movement and stopping rampant extrajudicial punishment, but Garcia said his confidence was betrayed.

He was arrested, imprisoned, and later exiled to his current residence with his U.S. sponsors, the Osbornes.

“There is an unusually high concentration of people in northeast Indiana who have been to Nicaragua with the Medical Practicum over 24 years,” James Osborne said. “This is an incredibly safe, caretaking place for Denis to begin in the U.S.”

Today, Garcia is learning English, communicating with his family via WhatsApp, teaching Spanish, staying fit and remaining in touch with Nicaraguan exiles working for reunification with family, friends and country.

In late March, Garcia learned the Nicaraguan government refused passports for his children. Family reunification remains a main concern of the exiled former prisoners.

“I want the sacrifice and struggle of my people to serve the world so countries with democracy can avoid a dictatorship,” Garcia said. “Every day that Daniel Ortega is in power, there will be more political prisoners, with death, exile, or prison for everyone who opposes his regime.”

Nicaragua political history full of unrest

At a glance

Nicaragua political history full of unrest

Slightly larger than Pennsylvania, Nicaragua is bordered by the Atlantic and Pacific oceans and has a population of 6.4 million.

By nominal gross domestic product, the nation is the second poorest in the Americas, behind only Haiti. Nicaragua declared its independence from Spain in 1838.

In 1938, the commander of the pro-U.S. National Guard, Anastasio Somoza Garcia, seized control and ran the country as a military dictatorship until his assassination in 1956. His sons ruled until 1979, when the Sandinistas, a self-declared Marxist group, deposed the Somoza regime.

During the civil war of the 1980s, the Sandinista opposition groups, the pro-U.S. Contras, received support from the Reagan administration in the infamous Iran/Contra affair.

In 1984, Daniel Ortega won election. In 1990, Ortega was voted out, but in 2007 his Sandinista party was returned to power. After his reelection in 2011, Ortega changed the constitution to abolish term limits.

International observers were not allowed to monitor the ensuing 2016 election. La Prensa newspaper reported that more than 70% of eligible voters refused to vote in protest. Ortega won his third and fourth terms with more than 70% of the vote. The United States called the 2021 election “a pantomime election, neither free nor fair.”

Leaders of the main opposition parties were among the 222 exiles of Feb. 9, including religious, business, media and academic leaders.

– Mark Rudolph, For The Journal Gazette