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RUNNING FOR AYOTZINAPA: A FATHER’S MARATHON TO FIND HIS MISSING SON
The father of one of the 43 college students missing in Mexico has found in sports a way to protest in silence

By Gustavo Martínez Contreras

People find a world of reasons to run marathons: to fight cancer, to raise money for a charity, to fulfill a promise. But Antonio Tizapa runs for the reason that has dictated his every waking moment for more than two years: finding his son.

It was in 2014 when he last heard from his son, Jorge Antonio, then 21. Jorge was one of 43 students from the Ayotzinapa rural teachers' college who were forcibly disappeared by Mexican police on 26 September 2014. The students were last seen being taken into custody and many fear them dead. But not their parents.

Since then, Tizapa’s modest Brooklyn apartment has turned into the headquarters of a relentless campaign demanding, cajoling, praying for political action that might lead to the safe return of his son and his classmates.

An undocumented immigrant with limited English and no political connections, Tizapa runs in marathons around the New York area because of the press attention they bring and because he has no other options.

“When I run I have in my mind the words of my son, the memories of his childhood. That’s something that gives me strength,” Tizapa says. “Those memories are a way of feeling that anger, that helplessness. But above all, I also feel the love I have for my son. And I’m doing it all for him. Those are the feelings behind every race I run.”

The walls of his small room are covered with the dozens of bibs, diplomas and medals he has earned in the different races across the five boroughs. Trophies and plaques rise from the same bedside table that holds a frame with photos of his wife and children, a family he has not seen since he migrated to the United States in 2000. For Tizapa, these images seem like a lifetime ago.

Back then, Tizapa says he saw running as a way to stay healthy and get to know New York after he moved here to find work to send money back to the family. In phone calls to Mexico, Tizapa would tell his son stories of the places he saw in his races.

THE NIGHT THAT SHOOK MEXICO

That all changed the night Jorge Antonio went missing. On the evening of the September 26, 2014, about 120 students from the Raúl Isidro Burgos Rural Teachers College of Ayotzinapa were trying to make their way to a yearly protest in Mexico City, a remembrance for hundreds of students massacred by the army on 2 October 1968.

The Ayotzinapa students commandeered buses and tried to reach the city of Chilpancingo, but federal police closed the routes to the city. The students then headed to the nearby city
of Iguala, where María de los Ángeles Pineda Villa, the mayor’s wife, held a ceremony and an after party to celebrate her public works and help propel her campaign to succeed her husband.

Word of the caravan of buses loaded with students nearing the city soon reached her husband, who ordered the chief of police to stop them by any means necessary. The local police force ambushed the five buses, shooting and killing six people and wounding 20 more.

Initially, the local human rights organization Tlachinollan reported 55 students missing, but that figure decreased when survivors came forward to share their account of what happened that night. Versions conflict, but they all corroborate on one thing: the police detained 43 students and turned them over to Guerreros Unidos, a local cartel with ties to the mayor’s wife.

To this day, Tizapa doesn’t know exactly what happened to his son.

UNDOCUMENTED AND UNAFRAID

His uncertainty is aggravated by his legal status in the United States. Tizapa is one of the 11 million undocumented immigrants living here.

With no connections and with the current political climate against undocumented immigrants, Tizapa has continued to come out of the shadows to launch a fight against a seemingly insurmountable challenge. Many may think that his unlawful immigration status could attract the attention of authorities, especially as he becomes more visible with his monthly protests outside the Mexican consulate in New York City.

“There’s no more fear inside me. The Mexican government took our children, but it also took away all of our fear,” says Tizapa. “I have been told, ‘be careful, Tizapa.’ But they took away my life, so I got nothing else to lose. I’m not afraid, and the other parents aren’t afraid either.”

He has thought about going back home to his wife and children as they go through this ordeal. But back home he has very few job prospects. Painful as it has been, he and his wife Hilda decided it was better that he stay here.

THE VOICES IN HIS HEAD

Tizapa is always on the phone. Nowadays, he is mostly calling activists and runners to rally them up to protests, to an upcoming race. But just a little more than two years ago, his phone was his only connection to his people in Mexico.

“We’ve always been in touch through telephone. When cell phones showed up, our communication changed greatly. We were in constant communication. We started sharing our images from here and there,” he says. “With one or two clicks, we were close. That’s how we have communicated all this time.”
Away from home, Tizapa could only hear his children grow thanks to the phone calls that would shorten the distance momentarily. Now, the memories of those conversations with Jorge Antonio are one of the few things he can hold onto while the uncertainty of his son’s whereabouts feeds his anguish.

“I remember his words and the beautiful moments he and I shared over the phone,” Tizapa says. “When he was seven or eight-years-old, he would go to bed and I would stay on the line listening to him falling asleep.”

In 2000, Antonio Tizapa left Tixtla, to migrate to the United States like four million Mexicans had over the previous decade. He crossed the border illegally and got to New York where his brother had been living for several years. He settled in south Brooklyn and began working as plumber in a construction company and sending money to Hilda and their three children. When he left, Jorge Antonio was only a seven-year old boy.

“I am like many poor Mexicans of my generation. We didn’t come here just because we wanted to,” Tizapa says. “We had to leave our country and our lives to come here and find a job to send money back home to provide for our families.”

NUMBER NOT FOUND

That plan marched accordingly until the night of 26 September 2014. The same phone that connected him to his family delivered the first indications of trouble when his daughter Carole sent him a text message.

“She only said, ‘Dad, there are problems in Ayotzinapa. Contact my brother,’” Tizapa remembers. “I called him but he didn’t pick up. I later sent him a text message and he didn’t reply either. I didn’t know what was happening.”

The distance didn’t help. Initial reports in Mexico were confusing, and whatever information Tizapa got here made the situation even more disconcerting. But in the end one thing became palpable: his son had gone missing along with his 42 classmates.

“It’s very painful. And I feel very bad for my wife, because she’s the one living this directly, although she’s not alone. The 43 families are very united,” he says. “But I am all alone here and I’m in deep pain. As the days go by, I still cannot believe this is happening. And ask why is this happening to me, to my wife, to my son.”

More than two years after his last phone conversation with his son Jorge Antonio, Tizapa now finds himself constantly on the phone talking about his missing child. He has barely finished an interview at a community radio station in the Bronx, when he is answering the call of a reporter who wants to do a story on him for a local Spanish newspaper. Helped by local activists, Tizapa has taken his fight to the press.

And although he is becoming more visible thanks to this coverage, justice doesn’t seem anywhere near. The whereabouts of the 43 students remains a mystery even as Mexican
journalists continue to report on the government involvement in obstructing the investigations. In April of this year, an independent group of investigators named by the Inter American Commission on Human Rights found that the government inquest was late, or negligent, to the communications that helped track the last location the telephone of his son recorded the afternoon of October 4, several days after the police took them away. A busy but hopeful Tizapa refuses to believe his son and his classmates are dead. Instead, he lets meals go cold as he takes phone call after phone call except the one he’s waiting for.

“I haven’t changed my phone number. Hopefully tomorrow or the day after I get his message telling me, ‘Hey, I’m back home.’ I don’t know, but I don’t lose hope that that will happen,” Tizapa says.

“MY SON IS YOUR SON, AND YOUR SON IS MY SON”

When Tizapa first heard the news, he was in shock. He continued calling and texting his son, but a reply never came.

“I was very happy because he was attending a school he loved,” he says. “But today all of this is like a nightmare. And when I go to bed I expect it to be all over in the morning, but then I wake up and realize this is real.”

Slowly, he started reaching out to activists in New York City. One of them, Francisco Ramírez, was the first one to learn that the father of one of the Ayotzinapa 43, lived in Brooklyn.

“He came to one of the protests we held outside the Mexican consulate, because this was enraging. And when I found out who he was, I offered him my support,” he said. “But back then Tizapa was still in shock. You could see it in his face. He was like floating, like he could not understand what was happening.”

Meeting activists like Ramírez was a turning point in Tizapa’s political awakening. He began attending rallies and little by little his voice went from a timid chant to a full roar in rallies and marches that he organized across the city.

It was only a matter of time before he went back to running, an activity he had picked up in New York a few years to stay healthy.

"I found in sports a way to protest in silence," Tizapa says. “I know that I am all alone here, but through sports many people have joined me. They’re my moral support. And this is our way to protest with no need to turn violent."

Tizapa knows his protest is unconventional, even perhaps futile to many. But he says that he will not stop running because it is a way to take his fight on a stage other than the political one, where the other parents in Mexico keep fighting.
“We’re coming to the sports scenario to increase the pressure on the Mexican government, to show them that I’m not going to stop, that the parents are not going to stop, that society is not going to stop,” he says.

He runs because it keeps the attention and gives him a sense of purpose. As sense that he is exerting himself for his son.

“When I’m running all I have in my mind are the words of my son. I remember him in his childhood,” he says. “And that’s something that gives me strength to continue. This is a way to channel that anger, that helplessness, but overall that love I have for my son. That’s what keeps me running.”

So far, Tizapa has run in several races, including the 2015 New York City Marathon, where he wore a white shirt with the photo of his son, a big number 43 and the message: “My son is your son, and your son is my son.”

“We wanted to take our fight to a bigger stage,” Tizapa says. “We want to send a message to the Mexican government that Mexican athletes abroad are aware of what’s happening in our country. And I believe that what we have done will impact positively the fight of all the (Ayotzinapa) parents and it will also impact negatively the Mexican government and all the lies they have been saying all along.”

On November 6th, Tizapa ran his second New York City Marathon, this time joined by at least 20 runners that wore green shirts with the team name on the front: Running for Ayotzinapa.

Preparing for this race was not an easy task. His schedule is packed with training sessions, his day job as a plumber and the many speaking engagements and rallies he attends to take his message.

He’s also increasingly loud. When Tizapa isn’t running, he is marching. He complements his silent protests leading demonstrations outside the Mexican Consulate in New York City or talking to students about the situation in Mexico.

“We’re taking the message wherever is possible,” he says. “We have gone to universities and other places where we have found solidarity. We just don’t want to stop pressing the Mexican government.”

On 26 September, Tizapa and Amado Tlatempa, a cousin of two other missing students, marched at the front of a demonstration with some 250 people that walked from the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations to the tourists and the lights of Times Square.

There, they ran into a few Colombians who were celebrating the signing of the peace agreement that had been broadcast hours earlier. Still in a festive mood, the Colombians joined the count to 43 that has become traditional in actions for the Ayotzinapa students.
“It is not easy... These 24 months of tireless fighting are something that I don’t wish anybody, even if they’re from the government,” Tizapa says at the end of the rally, as tears ran down his face.

SETBACKS AMID PROGRESS

But for every win there are numerous obstacles.

In August, he crashed the screening of the documentary Mirar Morir (“Watching them Die”) at the Columbia University’s Institute of Latin American Studies.

Filmmakers Coizta and Temoris Grecko skyped in from Mexico to have a conversation with local artist Andrea Arroyo and author and political scientist Denise Dresser, who was flown in exclusively for this event.

Tizapa arrived with 15 supporters. Organizers told him, a father of one the 43 who were the focus of the film, that he couldn’t go in because the room was to capacity and they didn’t want to interrupt the screening. It was a frustrating moment. After some tense discussion, the organizers sat Tizapa in the first row.

He was given a couple minutes to say a few words and organizers later escorted him out of the room and continued with the event.

When Dresser came out of the event, the soft-spoken Tizapa approached her.

“Standing here outside and with you in there talking... it hurts so much because I don’t understand why they took me out,” he told Dresser. “Hearing your voices, yours and others’, but mine wasn’t heard. That hurts deeply.”

Dresser listened to Tizapa, hugged him, and then attempted to calm down the people that came with him.

RUNNING FOR AYOTZINAPA

Tizapa devotes whatever time he has left between rallies and work to training. He runs the 3.5- mile Prospect Park circuit in 26 minutes.

“Sometimes I don’t have time to practice,” he says. “I leave work to go straight to a protest and time just goes by. That’s why I was not at a hundred percent in last year’s marathon.”

Ignoring the stopwatch, Tizapa led a dozen runners and several volunteers to stage protests throughout the course. While the athletes wore shirts with messages in support of the Ayotzinapa 43, volunteers held large portraits of the students at different points of the race.
With the finish line just a few yards away, Tizapa felt his legs could not take another step. The image of Jorge Antonio emerged from the cheering crowd -- a volunteer holding the placard urged him on. He made it to the finish line.

“That was an incredible sensation,” he says. “Finishing the race with my son.”
It was an unusual gesture for a Mexican athlete. Unlike what has historically been the case in the United States, sports in Mexico are rarely used as a platform for protest.

“I love sports and realized that our professional athletes have not uttered a word about us,” Tizapa says “At least, we have not heard anything from those soccer players and other professional athletes that we have in Mexico. That’s why I felt the need to do this and here I am.”

He’s not alone. His team that went from just a few runners to twenty wearing the green “Running for Ayotzinapa” shirts in the 2016 New York City marathon included many fellow Mexican immigrants.

“They’re people that love running and have shown their solidarity to wear the message of our fight,” he says. “Running a marathon is not easy. It requires a lot of discipline and willpower. We have all of that plus a big heart and this rage towards the Mexican government.”

But in the end, as was the case for every runner of his team, Tizapa faced this year’s contest alone. Despite starting with a very strong pace, by mile 20 cramps were tightening his legs. For a moment, he thought he was not going to be able to finish.

“It was lack of training, but everything else I do has absorbed me. I apologize for not finishing within the time I had promised, but that’s secondary,” Tizapa says. “I was able to finish and continue the fight to find my son. And just like the people that ran with me today, and those who cheered from the side of the road, I know that my son was with me pushing to the end.”