

## **Jesús Cabrera Jaramillo: My Mother, the Tireless Fighter**

*Interview Translated by Susana Solis*

*Jesús Cabrera Jaramillo is the eldest son of Alma Rosa Jaramillo, an attorney who brought cases on behalf of communities displaced by the Bloque Central Bolívar (BCB), a violent paramilitary group under the command of Jiménez Naranjo (alias “Macaco”). Alma Rosa Jaramillo’s legal work drew her into confrontation with the BCB and in June 2001, she was killed by members of the BCB. Jesús Cabrera Jaramillo was 18 years old at the time of his mother’s death. In 2010, CJA and pro-bono counsel from Wilson, Sonsini, Goodrich & Rosati filed suit on behalf of Jesús Cabrera Jaramillo as the representative of his mother’s estate. As CJA’s client, Jesús Cabrera Jaramillo hopes to bring justice to his mother’s memory in our case against Macaco, who is accused of mass human rights abuses. In this interview, Jesús Cabrera Jaramillo talks about his childhood, his mother, and their struggle for justice.*

### **Tell us about yourself and your childhood.**

I was born a little over 30 years ago in the coastal and historic city of Cartagena de Indias in Bolivar, Colombia — a city with much history, fairy tales and secret love affairs just as described in the story of Florentino Ariza and Fermina Daza told in the book *Love in The Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. Since I was little, I was raised in a matriarchy by my grandmother (mother of six daughters and only three sons) and my mother.

My mother was always working for rural communities in several municipalities in the Colombian Caribbean coast and, although we shared very little time at home, I learned that sometimes sacrifices are necessary and that the common good should be above personal interests. That’s why I spent many of my school vacations running and traveling around different places in the departments of Bolivar and Sucre; this allowed me to see differences, needs, efforts and solutions which without politicking, can improve the quality of life of a community.

### **What are your hobbies/interests?**

I was once very interested in sports, and although I never played soccer (the most popular sport in Colombia) because I don’t even know how to kick a ball, I got to practice basketball and swimming. In the process of overcoming the death of my mother and helping raise my brother, I did not lose my interest in sports, but they were no longer a priority.

Now my interests have changed. Many would think that after studying and working to pay for my college education (for as long as I could) and my brother’s college education with the help of my grandmother, I would dedicate this time of my life just to me. To the contrary, I keep trying to contribute a little bit to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged communities by visiting the most vulnerable areas in my town and denouncing the most serious problems in such areas through an audiovisual material published on [Facebook](#). Also, every holiday season a group of friends and I gather about 600 gifts for children in underserved communities.

I think that the citizens of Cartagena need to take ownership of their city. And, if they have been forgotten by their political leaders, they must wake up from their social lethargy so that they can be empowered with the tools necessary to build their city.

**I understand you've been trying to continue your mother's work. Can you tell us a little bit about that?**

The idea to continue working for the communities as my mother had done was born a few years ago. While it is true that my mother was killed in southern Bolivar, I can't demonize an entire population as murderers, these people that still remember my mother with great respect -- the people she fought for, the people she gave her life for. To the contrary, I must continue valuing and helping the *campesinos* from Bolivar.

A few years ago I came up with the idea of creating the Alma Rosa Foundation, a non-profit organization which, after a selection process, would help students in southern Bolivar to access higher education in Cartagena de Indias (capital of Bolivar) so that they could return to their hometown and develop mechanisms to improve the quality of life for its inhabitants. Unfortunately, for more than four years the idea has been only on paper as it has not been possible to carry it out. The legal requirements, the demanding registration processes from the Colombian authorities, the human resources, among other things, require an amount of money that does not exist in my pockets. Unfortunately, the private companies that support these types of initiatives require that they have been established for a certain time. All of these obstacles have made the Alma Rosa Foundation just another idea in the mind of a man who dreams of a better country.

**Can you tell us about what it was like growing up?**

Like I said before, I was born in the city of Cartagena de Indias. My parents got separated and I stayed with my mother. When I was just a month old, I was already in the arms of a single mother in a small town called La Unión (in the department of Sucre), where she used to work. When my grandmother realized my mother's great efforts to provide me with excellent care and education, she offered to look after me while my mom was at work.

Perhaps a home of 2100 square meters makes a lonely child to ride on the roads of his imagination, converting each tree in a building, each branch into a sword, to climb to the top of the tree to get sweetest plum, loquat or tamarind for grandma. On weekends the most sacred duty was to watch: *Capulina* (a Mexican comedy show), *Maya The Bee* (a cartoon based on a German comic book series), *The Smurfs*, *Little Pony*, *Jem*, *GI Joe*, *Automan*, *Manimal*, *Dukes of Hazard*, *Bonanza*, *Air Wolf*, *Fantastic Car*, and many more shows that made me "park" every Saturday in front of the TV from seven in the morning until three in the afternoon. At that time my mother was a judge in a municipality near the city of Cartagena and we used to spend more time together. Then she left to southern Bolivar and I stayed with my grandmother. Although in 1999 we lived together in southern Bolívar, things were never the same as they once were for the little boy in the home of 2100 square meters. There was more violence and unrest in that area. I returned to Cartagena and started going to college, but in 2001 my mother passed away and that was the end of the good memories.

**What is your favorite memory of your mother?**

I have many memories of my mother. I could not pick one favorite but I'll share a few. The funniest family memory I have is of a Mother's Day celebration when all the women in the

family made a costume contest. My mom, who was pretty chubby, dared to wear a mesh and a tutu and started jumping around and cavorting. We all burst into laughter!

On work-related memories, there is the story of a priest from the Program for Peace and Development who was kidnapped (along with my mom) by ELN guerrillas in a village called Morales to send a message to the authorities. Although my mom got released, she decided to stay, like a mother with her cubs, to ensure the safety and integrity of the priest.

I could spend an entire afternoon sharing stories, like the day she gave me my first guitar, my birthday party with the baseball theme, or the proud look in her eyes every time I achieved success... so many things that stayed in my memory, but I long for the things that we were yet to experience.

### **What kind of woman was she?**

My mom was an extraterrestrial. She never saw the cup half empty even if there was only a sip left. A person who fearlessly told the truth in their face to anyone: mayor, judge, police chief, priest, civic leader, shopkeeper or *chalupero* (canoe rider). She was a tireless fighter for just causes who put aside a successful career in the State's judicial system to listen to and solve the problems of disadvantaged communities. A warrior who sacrificed many of her kids' birthdays, Christmas, and Mother's Day celebrations, to stay with the *campesinos* of southern Bolivar and work with them under the guiding wing of the Program for Peace and Development in the Middle Magdalena (a region of Colombia which is spread across four departments of Colombia, including Bolivar).

My mom was the joy of the house, with a powerful laugh that could be heard even in the house next door. She would always find a joke in the shadows and hid a soothing kisses under my pillow for stormy nights.

### **What is the most powerful thing that she taught you?**

The most valuable thing my mother taught me is that material things don't really belong to us, but to those who can give them a better use. She taught me that you can't enjoy being surrounded with beautiful things or luxuries knowing they can be most useful to people who really need them.

In 1999 I was a city boy in a village of southern Bolivar who only ate what I liked, and if I was served a nice lunch or dinner that I simply didn't feel like eating, something else would be cooked just for me. Around that time, many people who were displaced due to the paramilitary violence started to arrive to Morales (in southern Bolivar) seeking refuge in the village school. When they arrived, many donations were sent to the village for the refugees, so my mom asked me to help her organize and categorize the donations and create a market-like place to distribute them. That is where I learned to be thankful for a plate of rice and lentils or reheated soup. I used to complain about my food when there were people who had no food! That's when I learned to be grateful for how much or how little I had and to share it with those who need it more than I. That was the most valuable lesson I learned from my mother.

### **How did you first learn about CJA?**

That was a few years ago. The truth is that I did not hear about CJA. It was CJA that heard about me through the Lawyers Collective José Alvear Restrepo who told them about my mom's case. Then CJA contacted Pedro Mahecha who has been my lawyer for over 10 years in Colombia, and he told us about CJA. Then, after reaching family consensus, we decided to work with the CJA until the last instances.

### **Why did you decide to bring this case against Macaco?**

On May 13, 2008, the Colombian government decided to extradite to the United States the Colombian paramilitary leaders for the crime of drug trafficking. At that time the victims had reported 123,787 crimes committed by the paramilitary, but only 5,831 had been recognized officially and only 41% (2,391) of those were confessed by the 15 extradited leaders. Then there were many difficulties for them to give their statements in the United States among many other obstacles. Unfortunately, this year thousands of paramilitary members will be released thanks to the "great" Law of Justice and Peace. The government has partially compensated the victims, but it has denied them their right to know the truth.

We are going after Macaco not just for Alma Rosa (my mom), but for the thousands of Alma Rosas lying in graves in Colombia or those whose limbs were food for fish in a Colombian river. We are going after Macaco because he has to pay for the thousands of crimes he committed. We are going after Macaco to show the government of that time that it doesn't matter if they sent the commanders of their parallel army out of the country because we've learned that justice has no borders.

### **How has the experience with CJA been so far?**

It is very gratifying to see a whole group of renowned men and women lifting stones to find evidence, signs, or clues that can help in this case. Although we have overcome the barriers of communication and documentation I could not answer this question as a client of the CJA because I do not feel like one. CJA has been more than a legal support for me. Through this case I discovered that I have a couple of aunties outside of Colombia like Kathy Roberts and Almudena Bernabeu with whom -- beyond the legal matters of the case -- I've shared things about my life and fun moments, and even though I'm not of fan of Kathy's NFL team (I'm a fan of the Steelers) and Almudena travels a lot, I know that they will always, always be there for me.

Like in every process, there has been a series of complications, but the rewards have been greater. I can feel CJA's desire to fight till the end regardless of the consequences to honor the life of a colleague who they didn't get to know. That's why CJA has my infinite appreciation and I will be grateful for the rest of my life.

### **What are you hoping will happen?**

A few close friends and family in Colombia see my case as a legal event that could bring interesting economic dividends because of the reparations side of it, but for me this case goes far beyond that. It is a pioneer case for many victims who seek justice and truth, to hold accountable the 15 individuals convicted in the United States for drug trafficking who are thinking they can get away with all the massacres they committed in Colombia. Alma Rosa is not dead. She lives not only in our family but also in the women and men of CJA who — with great tenacity and determination — sacrifice time, effort, and money for this difficult and complicated case. I do

not expect to just win a case, but I hope it serves to tell an entire country not to fall asleep, that a victory is possible, that we can demand truth, justice and reparation.

**Is there anything else that you would like to add or say?**

Thank you! Thanks to all of those who in some way or another have contributed a bit for things to go on the right track. Special thanks to Almudena, Kathy, Yukyam Lam, Pedro Mahecha, the people at Wilson Sonsini Goodrich & Rosati and many others I haven't met because I know they're thinking of us, they're thinking of Alma Rosa, her children and her family. Many, many thanks!

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