

Al Letson: From the Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX, this is Reveal. I'm Al Letson and today we bring you the conclusion of our three-part series, After Ayotzinapa, about the disappearance of 43 Mexican college students.

We left off last week in the spring of 2016, a year and a half after the students disappeared. Omar Gómez Trejo is a man without a country. He had to flee his native Mexico after he and a group of international investigators held a press conference accusing some of the country's most powerful officials of covering up what really happened to those students.

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Al Letson: The Organization of American States had formed a group of independent investigators known as the GIEI because the parents did not believe the government's version of events. The government claimed a local gang was behind the attack, but Omar and the independent investigators found evidence of a much broader conspiracy.

They suspected the government had planted and concealed evidence and coerced confessions to cover up for state and federal officials who were connected to the attacks. They concluded that the government was trying to make it look like a local crime and close the case quickly. When the independent investigators released their findings about the suspected conspiracy...

Speaker 4: [Spanish].

Al Letson: Mexican officials were furious and experts left in fear returning to their countries. They convinced Omar to leave too. Omar ends up going to Honduras and working on another human rights case for the UN, but he's struggling. He can't get the Ayotzinapa case out of his mind and neither can Jim Cavallaro from the Organization of American States. He wants to keep the case open, but from Washington DC. So on a trip to Honduras, Jim tracks down Omar and they go out to dinner.

Omar Gómez Trejo: So I get to dinner with Jim and he says, "What are you doing here?" And I say, "Nothing. I'm sick of Honduras. I just quit my job. If I can't stay in Mexico, I'm going to get a little piece of beach in Panama, open up a little bar." And Jim's like, "Are you crazy? Resign, take a little vacation, do whatever you want. But I want you in Washington by the 1st of April." Okay.

Al Letson: Reveal's Anayansi Diaz-Cortes and our partner, Kate Doyle, from the National Security Archive, uncover information that points to new leads in the case. But first, we pick up the story with Omar's move to Washington and how that ends up putting him on a path back to Mexico.

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortes:** Omar, Kate and I are standing in front of a cream-colored brick building in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, DC. We look up at the windows of a small apartment. It's where Omar lived when he first got here in 2016.

Omar Gómez Trejo: After I left Mexico, I dragged around two suitcases, a couple of books, my camera, my Mexican wrestler mask, things that were symbolic for me.

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortes:** It was a bare-bones existence, but Omar remembers he was just excited to be working on the case again. Jim Cavallaro had put together a small team that Omar joined.

Omar Gómez Trejo: And then I get to Washington and they hadn't done anything about the case, nothing.

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortes:** And so, Omar decides to dig into the case. He starts combing through the Mexican government's case files, hundreds of reports and interviews. He's looking for key facts, witnesses, contradictions. It takes over Omar's life and his apartment.

Omar Gómez Trejo: My apartment was covered in papers. I would scribble things on them. I would say to my friends, "Okay, go in. Don't look at the walls."

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortes:** His friends think he's kind of losing it. His head in clouds of smoke from chain-smoking. When he takes what he learned back to his coworkers at the Organization of American States, they don't take him seriously. They tell him...

Omar Gómez Trejo: Come on, Omar, you are not a CSI. This is not your job.

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortes:** For a few months, Omar, plods along like this working pretty much alone. Then he's invited to dinner by one of his old bosses in the Ayotzinapa case, former Guatemalan attorney general, Claudia Paz y Paz. She has dinner plans with her good friend, Kate Doyle, who's in town visiting.

Kate Doyle: And she said, "Oh, I've invited Omar. Remember Omar? Our secretary." I was like, "Oh yeah, Omar. Right. Okay."

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortes:** We learned in the last episode how Kate, who investigates human rights crimes got involved in Ayotzinapa after being contacted by the lawyers of the parents of the missing students. At this point, Kate had only met Omar once. They all had dinner at a Mexican restaurant near Omar's home. Kate told me the story over Zoom a few months ago.

Kate Doyle: And there he was, just as nice and smart and fun. And he smoked cigarettes, which I did too at the time. And he's loves his mescal or tequila. He's fun to be it.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Then they talk business. Omar about how he's been reading the Mexican government's enormous file about Ayotzinapa.

Kate Doyle: Oh my God! What did we not talk about on this case? It all started with the intercepted text.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: The intercepted text we told you about in our last hour that the DEA tracked between members of the drug cartel, Guerreros Unidos. In the days before, during and after the attacks on the students, text messages were going back and forth between gang members in Iguala, where the students disappeared and the suburbs of Chicago where heroin was being delivered in passenger buses. Kate and Omar feel these texts could help identify the attackers.

Kate Doyle: We meet with the Justice Department. We meet with members of Congress. We meet with the State Department. We call the US attorney personally; all kinds of creative ways that we could try to push on that door to get information from the US government about what they knew.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: And then, explosive news. Omar discovers that his phone had been hacked with an Israeli spyware called Pegasus. He says the Mexican government had been spying on him and the international experts when they were investigating the case.

Omar Gómez Trejo: My phone was like a switchboard for all of our calls. I spoke to victims. I spoke to sources. I spoke to everybody. So it had all our information. And all that information, the government now had about the case.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: And back in Mexico, the government starts an all-out campaign to discredit the work Omar and the international experts had done; the report that exposed a giant cover-up by Mexican politicians, police and members of the military. The government goes back to touting its original explanation of the attack on the students. The so called [Spanish] or historical truth.

The parents of the missing boys don't believe them and do everything they can to keep the case in the public eye. They march, speak to the press, and try to meet with government officials. But they're turned down. Cristina Bautista, known as Doña Cristi lost her son, Benjamín in the attack. In April 2017, she and other families try to force a meeting with Mexico's secretary of the interior by just showing up at his office. When they get there, she says, the building is closed off by a metal fence.

Cristi Bautista: They began to launch tear gas at us.

Protesters: [crosstalk].

Cristi Bautista: Oh, I remember very well. And when I looked around, a young protester that was with us was badly hurt, drooling, crying on the ground in pain until he

fainted. Then I saw some girls that had Coca-Cola and I knew that Coke helped with the pain.

So I asked them, "Please, please, can I have your Coke?" And I ran to him and poured Coke on his face and mouth and he woke up. It was terrible. All we wanted was to demand a meeting with officials, but they greeted us with tear gas.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Omar follows the news in Mexico from DC. It's painful to watch the case collapse without being able to do anything about it. But by summer of 2017, he's met someone he can confide in; a young lawyer from Texas named Helen.

Omar Gómez Trejo: And we would spend entire nights talking about life, about stuff. And Helen would ask me a lot about the Ayotzinapa case. Helen became a part of a process of healing to say things, to let them go, to talk through stuff. I don't think I had ever talked with anyone the way I talked to Helen in those days.

Helen: We met in August. We started dating in December. And within three weeks, we lived together. And two weeks after that, I don't know. I think we'd just woken up. And I turned to him and I said, "Hey, do you want to get married?" And he said, "Yes."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: And in Mexico, things are shifting too.

Speaker 9: Viva Mexico!

Crowd: Viva!

Speaker 9: Viva Mexico!

Crowd: Viva!

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Presidential elections are coming up in 2018 and a leftist candidate, Andrés Manuel López Obrador, known in Mexico as AMLO, is leading in the polls. Doña Cristi remembers going to one of AMLO's rallies in the area where the students were attacked.

Cristi Bautista: Andrés Manuel López Obrador was on the stage, totally blocked off and security would not let us through. Then he saw us and he told security, "Let them through." And I remember I spoke, "Andrés Manuel López Obrador, if you become president, what are you going to do for our case?" I think the question touched his heart. He teared up and said, "Because if I become president, we will find out what happened that night."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: In July 2018, AMLO wins in a landslide.

Speaker 10: On the streets of Mexico City, a celebrated victory more than a decade in the making.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Andrés Manuel
López Obrador:** In December, he's sworn in.
[Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** With a new government in Mexico, Omar starts toying with the idea of moving back home. Kate remembers when he first brought it up.

Kate Doyle: He would joke to me, "Well, yeah, I'm going to become a house husband. I'm going to get a dog. I think I'll just cook dinners and be home with an apron on." That kind of thing.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** And in early 2019, Omar and Helen moved to Mexico. She gets a job as an immigrant rights attorney. And a few months later, the new president announces he's going to reopen the Ayotzinapa investigation.

Kate Doyle: I said, "So how's it going, house husband?" And he's like, "Well, it's good. It's good." And I said, "So tell me what's going on with the case and what do you think?" And he said, "Well, they're looking for a special prosecutor. And they've asked a couple of people and they have said, 'No,' basically they don't want to do it."

And he said, "I think I'm going to put my name in for it." And I said, "Wait, wait, wait, what? You're going to put your name in for special prosecutor, but don't you have to be a lawyer to do that?" And he was like, "I am a lawyer." And I said, "Wait, you're a lawyer? I didn't know you were a lawyer."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Helen:** Omar's wife, Helen, is all for it.

A week later, he got the call to go in and have the interview. He came back from the interview and he's like, "I'm never going to get this job. It went horribly. This is a disaster." He spent the whole weekend depressed. And then at like 8:30 AM on Monday, he got the call.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** It's a head-spinning turn. After fleeing Mexico and spending almost three years in exile for challenging the government's original investigation into the attack on the students, Omar will soon be the chief prosecutor of a new investigation.

Al Letson: Coming into his new position, Omar is determined to uncover the facts of the attack. But soon, he finds out he's surrounded by people who still don't want the truth to get out. This is Reveal's serial investigation, After Ayotzinapa.

Speaker 12: [Spanish].

Al Letson: Chapter three: All Souls. [Commercial break]

Al Letson: From the Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX, this is Reveal. I'm Al Letson. In June 2019, Omar Gómez Trejo is sworn in as the chief prosecutor for [Spanish] Ayotzinapa, the case of the 43 missing students. It's big news in Mexico.

Speaker 13: Omar Gómez Trejo [Spanish].

Speaker 14: [Spanish].

Speaker 13: Omar Gómez Trejo [Spanish].

Al Letson: A few months into his new position, Omar reconnects with Kate Doyle and starts communicating on a regular basis with her and Anayansi Diaz-Cortes sharing his insider's perspective on what it's like to lead this case. In order to keep his identity secret while reporting this story, Kate and Anayansi always refer to Omar as the DJ, instead of his real name. On trips to Mexico, they meet him in person, usually at his home.

Kate Doyle: Hi, Omar?

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Al Letson: As special prosecutor, Omar now has the power to indict government officials who he suspects sabotaged the original investigation. He can follow up on leads that could expose who the attackers were and what they did with the students. During their visit, Omar and his wife, Helen, tell Anayansi and Kate that doing this job means adjusting almost every aspect of their daily life to keep them safe.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: There are phones in the fridge. Helen, why do you make DJ put his phone in the fridge?

Helen: Because the fridge doesn't block the signal, but it does block the mic. That's what Edward Snowden taught us like 10 years ago.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Is your phone in the fridge, DJ?

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: "It lives there." Omar tells me. He and Helen have gotten used to being super careful. They even make jokes about it.

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Helen: He likes the phone to be fresh.

Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés:
Omar Gómez Trejo: And then he gets serious.
I always assume that people are listening in on me even now without a cell phone.

Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés: And the threats go way beyond eavesdropping. So they've installed double-thick windows and security cameras in the apartment. A police car is always parked out front. Omar says his early days as prosecutor are brutal because the prosecutor's office, known as the [Spanish], is filled with many of the same people who had hidden the truth about the case. He says one day he was given a file with some very sensitive information about people who worked for the previous administration.

Omar Gómez Trejo: I put the file on my desk and at one point, I get up and go talk to someone in the office about something. And when I come back, the file isn't there.

Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés: He goes to building security and they get the surveillance video. It shows someone from his staff entering his office, picking up the folder and walking out with it.

Omar Gómez Trejo: And so I go to him, I confront him. He denies it. And my folder is sitting right there in his desk. I grab my file, go talk to his superiors, they don't want to do anything about it. That's when I realized I have to take much more drastic measures and I begin firing people.

Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés: By the time he's finished cleaning house, Omar has fired most of the people working in his department, dozens of them. The odds were stacked so high against him, Omar says, his bosses in the Mexican government had bets out that he would not last more than three months. And in that first week, Omar was put to the test.

Just days before his appointment was publicly announced, a disturbing video was posted anonymously on YouTube. And we should warn you, the next few minutes of this story contain descriptions of torture that may be difficult for some listeners to hear.

Speaker 30: [Spanish].

Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés: The video's about a minute long. It shows a man in a chair blindfolded with a plastic bag pulled tight over his head about to be electroshocked. The man is Carlos Canto. He was a middle school teacher in Iguala, the town where the students were attacked. He also owned a local bar there.

He was one of dozens of people rounded up in government sweeps in the weeks after the boys went missing. Carlos ended up confessing, but the video is proof that it was forced. When the video was released, the new government

under President Andrés Manuel López Obrador set him free and helped him and his family start a new life in a different part of Mexico.

After that, he kept a low profile, never speaking to the press. Over the course of almost two years, Kate and I worked to contact him. We reached out to the UN Human Rights office in Mexico and they connected us to Carlos's sister. After several months, she arranges for us to talk to him. And eventually, we fly to the place where he's resettled to meet him in person.

Carlos Canto Salgado: My name is Carlos Canto Salgado. I'm 39 years old, and married with two kids. This interview is important for me because I want to tell the truth.

Kate Doyle: Carlos is tall, looks athletic. He sits on a couch in his living room and plunges into his story almost like he's been saving it up for this moment. On October 22nd, 2014, a little under a month after the students disappeared...

Carlos Canto Salgado: It was about 3:00 AM when we heard sounds at the door. "Open! Hurry!" He's a federal police, the navy. And they say they had an arrest order for me. I had no idea why. They stand me up, handcuff me.

Kate Doyle: They make him wait outside while they search his home and take some random things; a bag of clothes, a wad of plastic grocery bags.

Carlos Canto Salgado: One official turns to me, "This is for the little trip we are about to take you on." [Spanish].

Kate Doyle: He says they wrap a shirt around his head, so he can't see, push him into a car and drive off.

Carlos Canto Salgado: [Spanish].

Kate Doyle: Carlos says they lead him to a deserted place on the outskirts of town and make him sit on the ground. A marine sits down next to him and starts interrogating him.

Carlos Canto Salgado: The marine said to me, "How difficult do you want to make this?" And he asked me, "Where are the students?"

"I don't know where the students are." He slaps me across the face.

"Please forgive me. I don't know where the students are. I'm a teacher. You guys are confused."

"You want to do this the hard way?" He slaps me again. So, "I have no idea where the students are. I don't know."

Kate Doyle: This is when he says they take his punishment to a new level.

Carlos Canto Salgado:

One official brought out a shopping bag filled up with plastic grocery bags. What do they want with the bags? They handcuff me with my arms above my head. One officer sat on my legs and the other one on my chest. Question after question. The moment I answer, "I don't know," I felt the first bag go over my head.

And believe me, it's something I can't describe what it feels like to have a bag over your head, to be deprived of air. I could not move. In complete desperation, my heart was racing at 1,000 miles per hour. I was trying to break the bag. Anything to let a bit of air in.

Kate Doyle:

Carlos says when it was nearly dawn, they stop and give him some clean clothes. They put him in a car and drive to Mexico City. He was blindfolded almost the whole time he was questioned there, but later found out he was on a military base.

Carlos Canto Salgado:
Kate Doyle:

[Spanish].

Carlos says he was tortured multiple times and kept on denying the accusations. During one session, an officer walks up to him and takes off his blindfold.

Carlos Canto Salgado:

The light hurts my eyes. He grabs his cell phone. He shows me a photo of my wife on his phone. "Do you want to see or hear what we are going to do to her? We have her right here." They start asking me about safe houses, firearms, drugs, money, all these things I knew nothing about. Because I fear what they do to my wife, I told them, "I know about a house in such and such place." I just made it up.

Kate Doyle:

He's allowed to clean up. And soon, some official-looking people show up, government bureaucrats. He says they hand him a document. It's his confession. He agrees to sign it even though he's not allowed to read it. Carlos spends the next five years of his life in prison. He's never given a trial.

Carlos Canto Salgado:

I believe in God. I think you seek him out in your darkest times. I begin to pray to ask God, "What about me? Why did you forget me?" I think I asked him with such passion that only two or three days passed when I heard someone shout, "Teacher, a video of your torture was leaked and it's on the news." And I'm like, "Nah, don't mess around."

"Yes, [Profe], a video of your torture came out and we saw a part of it." And yes, it was true. They turned on the TV and during the news break, there it was.

Speaker 15:

[Spanish] Carlos Canto [Spanish].

Carlos Canto Salgado:

I felt such a sense of relief. And I gave thanks to God. Here you are.

Kate Doyle: Carlos is set free and put on a bus home. He manages to buy a cell phone to call his family. And during the bus ride, he decides to Google his name. This next part is hard to listen to.

Carlos Canto Salgado: I went online to look for the video. I said, "I want to watch it." When I finally watch it, oof! [Spanish] I felt like everything was closing. I struggled to breathe. I think I even cry on the bus the first time I saw what they were doing to me.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: The leaked video of Carlos and his release are huge news during Omar's early days as prosecutor, but it wasn't the only one. In his investigation, Omar eventually gets ahold of more than 50 videos showing torture by government authorities. He wants to keep them confidential, but someone leaks a very explosive one.

It includes Tomás Zerón, the lead investigator for the previous government who's accused of stage-managing the cover-up. He's the architect of the so-called [Spanish], the disproved theory that the 43 boys taken away by municipal police and a local gang were shot and incinerated at a garbage dump.

In the video, Zerón's in a long, dark coat with his hands in his pockets, pacing back and forth in a room with other interrogators. He's talking to a half naked man sitting in a chair. The man's head is covered, his hands cuffed behind his back.

Tomás Zerón: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: "Let's get started" Zerón tells him, "tell me everything you know about the students." And a moment later...

Tomás Zerón: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: "The first time you BS me, I will kill you." For Omar, indicting Zerón becomes a top priority. And he systematically gathers evidence. By February 2020, Omar thinks he has what he needs for an indictment. He wants Tomás Zerón to face trial on charges that he ordered the torture of suspects to force them to confess, then put them in prison for years without trials. Finally, Omar goes before the judge with his evidence.

Omar Gómez Trejo: Yeah, it was a very symbolic day. I remember the specific moment in which after almost three hours, the judge said, "I'm granting you the arrest warrant against Tomás Zerón on for the following crimes." I went out to lunch with my team and we had baby back ribs and two beers. And we had an arrest warrant under one arm.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: But when the day came for Omar to serve the arrest warrant, Zerón was gone. He'd fled the country. First, it was believed to Canada. Omar had Interpol put

out a red notice for his arrest. And then there was word that Zerón fled again to Israel, which Kate started investigating to try and confirm.

Kate Doyle:

The reason it made sense that he would be in Israel is that Tomás Zerón is the person from the previous Mexican government who purchased that spyware, Pegasus, from an Israeli firm. That spyware, Pegasus, was used by Zerón to infect the phones and surveil, not just the five international experts, but their executive secretary, Omar Gómez.

So Zerón already had an established relationship with powerful Israelis. So I called a reporter that I knew from the New York Times named Ronen Bergman, who works primarily on national security and intelligence issues from Israel. And he said he would try to track Zerón down. Within about a week or two, I got a WhatsApp text from Ronen. He asked me if I was online.

And when I said, "Yes," all of a sudden, a photo appeared on my telephone that was of a guy standing in a very small kitchen, in a T-shirt with a scruffy face and a big goofy grin. And Ronen asked me, "Is this him?" And I really had to stare at this picture for a couple of beats because I've ever seen Thomas sit on with a grin on his face like that. But I said, "Yeah, that's him." And the photo immediately vanished from my phone. And Ronen said, "He's here."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:**

While Kate was doing her research, Omar and his team filed a formal request with the Israeli government to send Zerón back to Mexico, so he could face charges of forced disappearance, torture and obstruction of justice. That was two years ago. So far, nothing has happened.

Al Letson:

As important as Tomás Zerón is to the investigation, there are many others. More than 50 people have been charged with crimes related to the missing students. These include local and state police, federal officials, and an officer in the military. In a moment, what Omar and his team are learning about the night of the attack and what was done with the students. You're listening to Reveal. [Commercial break]

From the Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX, this is Reveal. I'm Al Letson. As special prosecutor for the new Ayotzinapa investigation, Omar Gómez Trejo has two objectives. One is to figure out who was involved in the previous government's cover-up, people like Tomás Zerón, but more importantly, finding out what really happened on September 26th, 2014, so families can finally learn where their sons are now. In our last episode, we heard a theory from a DEA agent who was convinced the students had stumbled onto a drug smuggling operation between Iguala, Mexico and a suburb of Chicago.

Mark Giuffre:

More than 2,000 kilograms of heroin came to Chicago in a one-year period of time, which is an unprecedented, mind-boggling amount.

Al Letson: Mark Giuffre was following the drug traffickers and discovered they were using passenger buses, like the ones the students commandeered, to smuggle heroin and cash. His guess, the students had taken a bus filled with hidden drugs.

Mark Giuffre: These students hijacked the wrong bus. They hijacked the wrong bus!

Al Letson: Kate Doyle and Reveal's Anayansi Diaz-Cortes wondered what Omar thought of this theory.

Kate Doyle: So you have said the buses... Forget about the buses. Okay [crosstalk]. All right, let me just-

Al Letson: So on a visit to Omar's home in March 2020, they decide to bring up what Mark Giuffre had told them.

Kate Doyle: ... He said, "When we finally got our hands on buses that were in Aurora, Illinois carrying the drugs after they had rounded people up, after they had informants, one of them was the engineer that designed the hiding place. He brought out his blueprints and it was in the bumpers. And they went back to the buses and opened them up." So I just thought it was interesting and important to say to you because...

Omar Gómez Trejo: That was the same way as they send money back to Mexico?

Kate Doyle: Exactly.

Omar Gómez Trejo: The same way, okay.

Kate Doyle: All right. The same hiding place.

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Al Letson: "Turn that off." Omar says to Anayansi. He's intrigued. Up to now, this idea has been more like a conspiracy theory to him and his team. Then Kate and Anayansi remind him about the text messages the DEA had intercepted between the drug smugglers. And that as part of their reporting, they've been trying to get the US government to release them.

In fact, Reveal is in a lawsuit with the government over this. After their meeting, Omar follows up on this lead and petitions the DEA, from his end, for the same information. Beyond figuring out who was involved in attacking the buses and why, Omar and his team launch a new series of searches looking for the remains of the students. Anayansi explains.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: In order to do searches, Omar has to cultivate sources first; people who know what happened to the students. He has leads from the enormous case file he read when he was living in Washington. And he interviews people with ties to

the drug cartel who are in prison. In his first year as special prosecutor, he goes on a couple dozen searches.

Kate Doyle: It must have been so frustrating to carry out 20 [ICO] searches with no results.

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: "It can be really frustrating," Omar tells Kate. You leave in the morning with high hopes. Then mid-sentence, he switches to English.

Omar Gómez Trejo: Probably today is the day, is not day. And you're going back to your house, to your office to say, "We'll just keep looking."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Then he tells us about this day in November 2019. It started off like most mornings with Omar waking up before 5:00 AM greeting his bodyguards then sliding into his bulletproof SUV. But instead of going to the office, they head toward Iguala and pick up one of the sources he's been talking to. This man was allegedly involved in the attack.

Omar Gómez Trejo: And the source from there takes us to La Barranca La Carnicería. Do you know what Barranca de La Carnicería is in English? It's the Butcher's Ravine. It gives you chills, right? It's on the way to the Cocula garbage dump. But there's a detour about a kilometer below, which is through a ravine. So the source guides us there. And then he says, "Hey, [Fiscal] here, over here." And then the forensic expert and says, "Yes, that's a human bone."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: The source says, "Don't look for graves. The remains were just scattered under the trees and bushes." A few months later, six pieces of bone are carefully packed into a diplomatic briefcase and Omar boards a plane to Innsbruck, Austria. He hand delivers them to the scientist at the same DNA lab that identified the first student in 2014, Alexander Mora Venancio.

Omar Gómez Trejo: For me, it's very hard to take a diplomatic pouch with a bunch of remains that could be the students or could be anybody else. They were on the plane with me. In a way, the trip was encouraging because we could potentially identify more people.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: But the results take weeks upon weeks. And the waiting is tough on Omar. Then after three months...

Helen: Hello. Hello. Today is Friday, June 19th, 2020. It's 10:00 PM.

Omar Gómez Trejo: 10:00 PM.

Helen: And we're out here on the back terrace drinking some wine. What happened today, [Spanish]?

Omar Gómez Trejo: Today we receive information from the Innsbruck University that one of the DNA profiles match with one of the students. I'm very emotional now, very touchy because this represents the new era of the investigation of this case.

Helen: Can you talk a little bit about what it means too that you have identified one of the students, but...

Omar Gómez Trejo: I'm not ready. I can't talk about it and I'm not ready yet.

Helen: We're not ready for that one yet. Okay. Yeah. I'm really proud of you.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Days later, Omar's meeting with the family of Christian Alfonso Rodríguez Telumbre. He's the student whose remains were just identified. Luz María's Christian's mother.

Luz María: And they started to tell us that they found a bone fragment. Well, two little pieces of bone.

Omar Gómez Trejo: You're notifying the family of about this little bone saying it was found in such and such a place with so-and-so characteristics. And all this work was done.

Luz María: It was part of his right foot. I was out of it in a bad, bad, bad place. And then I snapped out of it and said, "It's a very small fragment. A human being can live without a foot." And he tells me that's true. It's like they were telling me that he was dead.

Omar Gómez Trejo: What do you say to that? Nothing.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Eventually, over 100 pieces of bone are found at the Butcher's Ravine. And another student is identified, Jhosivani Guerrero de la Cruz. That brings the total number of students identified to three. Parents tell us they have faith in Omar's investigation, but they're frustrated too. It's all taking too long.

And at the end of the day, most of them still don't have answers. All this time, I can't help but think about Doña Cristi who lost her son, Benjamín. We talk on the phone from time to time. And last year, she invited us to visit her. Kate and I rent a van and drive eight hours from Mexico City to her village.

Kate Doyle: I've got a tiny bit of signal here.

Speaker 19: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: [Spanish]. We're so deep in the mountains, there's no GPS signal. You feel like you're driving into the clouds. The dirt road ends at Alpuyecancingo de las Montañas. [Spanish]. Doña Cristi.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: We arrive as Doña Cristi's in the kitchen talking to her mother in her native Nahuatl, a language spoken across Mexico.

Cristi Bautista: [crosstalk].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: This week is [Spanish], all Souls' known as [Spanish] or Day of the Dead. In these parts, it's a deeply spiritual and sacred celebration.

Speaker 20: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Doña Cristi's daughters, Laura and Mairani, are preparing the altar. They're hanging sugar reds in the shape of donkeys, deer and angels on the altar. They explain to me that they're for their [Spanish], they're dead. And they'll carry the [Spanish] or offering back to the other side.

Meanwhile, Doña Cristi is shelling corn to make atole, a corn-based drink. We talk about the family. I learned that Laura helped raise her little brother, Benjamín, when her mom went to the US to work for a few years. The family needed the money for basic things like firewood and grain.

Laura: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: "It was hell," Laura says.

Laura: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: [Benja] cried a lot as a baby and she had to console him.

Laura: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: As he grew up, he was different from most boys in the village. He was self-confident and fashionable.

Mairani: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Mairani says he was the only kid in town who dared to wear pink. And he was a super talented dancer. When Laura got married, Benja walked her to the church.

Speaker 23: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: In this video, you see them dancing together, Benja in a pink, buttoned-down shirt.

Laura: [Spanish].

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: "He always hugged me," Laura tells us. Even though she's not a hugger and never hugged him back.

Laura: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Now, she wishes she could hug him.

Laura: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The altar is ready. It's time to put on it the food and photos of loved ones who have passed away.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Doña Cristi is directing her daughters, telling them where the food and drinks should go. She begins to move a nearby photo of Benjamín toward the altar.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Laura's eyes pierce Doña Cristi with rage and pain. And barely audible, she responds.

Laura: [Spanish]?

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Are you saying my brother is dead?

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Cristi pulls back apologetically, "No, I was just saying, I thought he should be there to remember him." But she pulls the photo away. Later, Laura tells us...

Laura: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** He's alive. He's going to return.

Laura: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** I can tell her younger sister, Mairani, doesn't see things that way, but she doesn't say anything. [crosstalk]. It's midnight, when the dead are supposed to come to feast. "The dogs know," Cristi and her daughters tell me.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** They can see the spirits and they're welcoming them.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The next day, before we leave, Kate and I sit down with Doña Cristi in Benjamín's room and struggle to pose our questions. How do you ask a mother about her missing child? If I learned anything from the families in these two

years, it's that waiting for a loved one who has vanished can feel like dying slowly.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** I try to ask without hurting her, after all these years, how do you go on?
[Spanish].

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** "Whatever happens, I need the truth." Despite all this time, she's going to keep looking for him. She tells me...

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Still, like other mothers I've spoken to, she finds ways to keep the memory of Benjamín alive. She tells Kate and me about a dream she had.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** In a grand city, there's this house with an open door. And she walks in. A woman in a [Spanish], a shawl, greets her.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** "I want to ask you for a favor. In the middle of the room, there's someone sleeping who's covered with a blanket." She tells me, "They left me to take care of him."

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** He lost his memory. Can you watch him?

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Yes. Who is it?

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Then he gets up. My son.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish]. Then he say, "Mommy, [Spanish]."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** You found me look at how they hit me.

Cristi Bautista: [Spanish].

Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Cristi Bautista: That's why I'm pretending I can't remember.
[Spanish].

Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Cristi Bautista: "But I heard your voice, Mommy." And I just hugged him.
[Spanish].

Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Cristi Bautista: And I tell him, "Benja, let's go." But when I turn back to him...
[Spanish].

Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Cristi Bautista: I woke up and didn't see him. But for a moment, I felt joy. I got to see my son.
[Spanish].

Al Letson: This coming year, Omar Gómez Trejo's investigation could reveal new information about who was behind the attack and what happened to the missing boys. Trials are set to begin for some of the people accused of taking part in the ambush, disappearances and government cover-up. The case for sending Tomás Zerón back to Mexico is now in the hands of Israeli prosecutors.

Meanwhile, Vice President Kamala Harris has publicly pledged to help Omar's team get new information about the drug smugglers who are hiding heroin on buses between Iguala and the US. As for the remains of the students, searches are happening every two weeks. To see cell phone videos of the attack and documents related to the investigation, visit revealnews.org/disappeared.

Our partners at Adonde Media are developing a Spanish language version of the series. To hear a trailer and sign up to receive episodes in your inbox, visit adondemedia.com/ayotzinapa or search Después de Ayotzinapa on your podcast app. Our lead producer is Anayansi Diaz-Cortes. Kate Doyle with the National Security Archive is our partner and co-producer for this series. Taki Telonidis edited the show.

We have production help from Reveal's David Rodriguez and Bruce Gil. Thanks to Tom Blanton, Megan DeTura and Claire Dorfman from the National Security Archive, and to Laura Starecheski, Lisa Pollak, John Gibler and Ariana Rosas.

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They had help from Claire [C Note] Mullen, Kathryn Styer Martinez, Steven Rascón and Jess Alvarenga. Our digital producer is Sarah Mirk. Our CEO is

Kaizar Campwala. Sumi Aggarwal is our editor in chief. Our executive producer is Kevin Sullivan. Our theme music is by Camerado Lightning.

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Speaker 12: [Spanish].

Al Letson: If you like what we do and you want to help, well, it's pretty simple. Just write us a review on Apple Podcasts. It's easy and only takes a few seconds. Just open the Apple Podcasts app on your phone, search for Reveal, then scroll down to where you see, Write a review.

And there, tell them how much you love the host. Your review makes it easier for listeners to find us and well, it really does make a difference. And if you do it, you will get a personal thank you from me, right now. Thank... Not him. You. Yes, you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. All right.

Speaker 40: From PRX.