



*Jonathan Rodriguez approaches the finish line at the 2019 Triton Classic where he finished 28th overall with a time of 27:31.6. Photo by Erik Jepsen/University Communications*

## Endless Gratitude: How Jonathan Rodriguez’s Life Changed in One Night

January 10, 2010 is a day that hits home for Jonathan Rodriguez, a distance runner on the University of California San Diego cross country and track and field teams. Born and raised in Tijuana, Rodriguez—along with his mother Laura and older sister Carolina—arrived that day at the U.S. border to request asylum.

It was a Sunday. Rodriguez was just eight years old.

“The house phone rang, and my mother picked up. I was just in my room with my older sister watching TV,” Rodriguez recalled. “On the other line, there was a man who demanded to be paid a large sum of money. I don’t remember the exact amount, but we did not have that much money at all. He even

recited our exact address to prove that they were serious and knew where we were.”

Rodriguez’s mother knew her family had no choice but to leave the country that same night, without packing a single thing. They had limited ties with relatives in San Diego and headed five miles north with hopes of obtaining a permit to enter the United States.

“I remember having to stay in a little room that looked like a fancy jail with my sister overnight, while my mother was being interrogated for hours,” Rodriguez said. “There was nothing in the room besides a little bench and they brought in a small TV for us to watch cartoons and movies.

“I was never scared because my mother didn’t tell my sister and I what the call had been about or any of the details since we were pretty young,” he continued. “She had just told us that we had to go, and I could tell it was serious, but I was never really concerned for some reason.”

After hours passed, Rodriguez and his family were granted the permit. They eventually became United States citizens, and have been living in San Diego ever since.

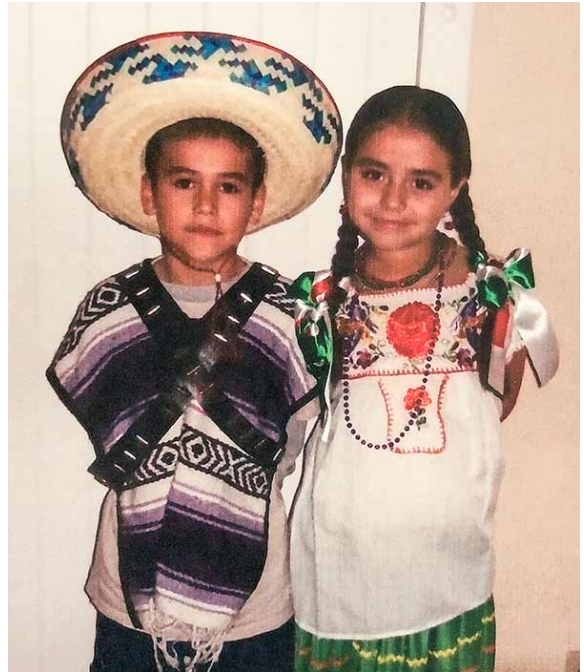
Of the many feelings that arose that winter night, Rodriguez was especially adamant in expressing his gratitude.

“Mostly everyone in Tijuana acknowledges that the U.S. is a great place filled with opportunities, even for poor people. Even as a child I would hear that, which is why I was so grateful once we finally crossed the border that night,” Rodriguez said.

As a result of his experiences, the current joint mathematics and economics major of Muir College has attempted to take full advantage of the situation.

“I took it as an opportunity and learned how to speak English well, took school seriously, and trained hard in a sport I love,” Rodriguez expressed. “Now, I am here at UC San Diego because of that incident.”

Aside from struggling in third grade—his first year at an American school—learning a new language and adapting to a new lifestyle was fairly smooth and straightforward.



*Jonathan Rodriguez and his sister Carolina dressed up on Dia de la Revolution (Mexican Revolution Day).*



*Jonathan Rodriguez, with his mother and little sister Luna, at the CIF XC Championships where he came in sixth place overall.*

It has been 10 years since Rodriguez's life has transformed. Since the drastic shift, the Grossmont High School graduate has relished the ability to reflect on where he came from, what he went through and how well-off he has it now.

"I feel like my experience as an immigrant has made me very empathetic and aware of others," Rodriguez claimed. "I never judge others. It has also made me feel unsatisfied with complacency, while still being grateful for everything I have achieved."

In addition to shaping his outlook from a personal standpoint, Rodriguez touched on how his family's journey has impacted his athletic career as well.

"I went from being a poor kid in Tijuana, to a kid with endless opportunities in one night. That made me want to keep pursuing better and better achievements, which have helped me tremendously as a student-athlete," Rodriguez added. "Now, I just want to keep improving my times and run faster and faster every season."

During his freshman campaign with the Tritons, Rodriguez ran a 25:56.8 at the Capital Cross Challenge 8K—a collegiate best. That same year, among the abbreviated track and field season, he ran the 3000 twice with his fastest performance coming in at 9:07.62.

"Running has provided me with an opportunity to better myself in a way that I am fully in control, unlike a lot of experiences in my life," Rodriguez shared.

"Distance running is a sport that heavily relies on what you are willing to do when it isn't mandated. Summer, winter and preseason training is all optional, and no one is forcing me to do it. I am fully in control, for the most part, of how hard I run, how I run, and where I run. I love that freedom that comes with it."

UC San Diego enters the Division 1 Big West Conference this month. Rodriguez is already targeting aspirations as a contender in the new conference.

"One of my biggest goals is to be competitive with the top runners in the Big West Conference in the invitationals that we race in," Rodriguez said.

Although Rodriguez has fully adapted to life in America, he acknowledged his mother's bravery and her courageous efforts to face the challenges of coming to the United States in the first place.



“I love my mother to death,” Rodriguez exclaimed. “Whenever I find myself struggling, or going through a hard time, I think about how my struggles are nothing compared to what my mother had to go through and that I have to be successful to provide her the life that she missed out on.

“I like to live by thinking that any failure that I go through here is better than any success I could have had there,” he said.

Rodriguez will enter his sophomore year in the fall of 2020. After completing his degree, he plans to enter the field of finance as a data analyst or financial analyst. Later he aspires to start his own business.

Until then, Rodriguez strives to embrace the happy and healthy life he currently lives.

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