

## Digest

This is a mini print version of our email publication, 'The Call.' Sign up for a free e-mail subscription at [thecalltwo.holston.org](http://thecalltwo.holston.org).

# The Call <sup>Digest</sup>

## Back page

"They are not totally alone because they have their church, but they are vulnerable."

December 15, 2015

[www.holston.org](http://www.holston.org)

## Losing Luis: Maryville family fears deportation

By Annette Spence

**MARYVILLE, Tenn.** — Susana Ponce faces the second Christmas without her son at home. Her biggest fear is that she will never see him again.

On Dec. 10, she spent the day crying because she thought that her firstborn, Luis Sanchez Ponce, age 25, had been deported to Mexico.

"How can a mother feel now?" Susana says through a translator. "They have closed the doors for him."

After living the last 15 years in the U.S. and graduating from Heritage High School, Luis is in danger of losing the only home that he knows. He has an eight-year-old daughter who was born in Tennessee, but Luis was not. He is undocumented, and his future is a ping-pong ball for politicians.

Rev. Daniel Castillo, pastor at San Juan United Methodist Church, came to pray with Susana and her family as they waited for more information about Luis, two weeks before Christmas Eve. They received news that Luis would be leaving on a plane at 2 p.m., but they didn't know where he was going.

"He's not the only case in our church," Castillo said, referring to congregants who have been detained or deported. "Everyone understands how hard it is on the family, and so we have tried to tell everyone to keep praying."

### LOST IN THE DESERT

Susana has not seen her son since October 2014, when he was arrested and taken to a federal immigrant detention center in Louisiana.

She shows photos of him. She tears up whenever he is mentioned. "I am like a tree without a leaf," she says.

This is not the first time that Susana, age 44, has anguished over losing her son. Luis was 10 years old when he was lost in the desert between Mexico and Arizona.

"He was lost in a moment of running. He got left behind," says Omar Sanchez Ponce, Luis' younger brother.

Omar is 21 now. He was six in the year 2000, when his parents tried the first time to cross the border from Mexico



Rev. Daniel Castillo (extreme left) prays with Luiz Sanchez Ponce's mother, Susana Ponce (center) and her family.

with their three young sons.

Luis' and Omar's father worked at an east Tennessee marble company, and his family wanted to be with him. So they paid smugglers to help them get to the U.S., leaving Mexico City for what they hoped would be a better life.

Somehow, Luis got separated from his family in the large group that was traveling with the smugglers. Susana was frantic, but the border patrolmen who caught her and her family would not help find Luis.

"He won't survive 24 hours if he is still in the desert," she was told. Susana and her family were sent back to Mexico.

A week later, the family tried again, but this time they were crossing the border to look for Luis. Fifteen days after he disappeared, Susana was reunited with her son in an Arizona hotel. Another group of immigrants had found the child in the desert, "crying and screaming," Susana says.

They saved his life.

### SEEKING FREEDOM

Luis spent the rest of his childhood in Blount County, Tenn. He tried to attend technical college, but as a noncitizen he was ineligible for financial aid. He got a job as a carpenter with a company requiring him to work long hours, sometimes out of state.

In May 2013 he was stopped for speeding and then arrested and convicted of two misdemeanors (simple marijuana and paraphernalia possession) in Loudon County, Tenn.

Continued on back page

Continued from page 1

Later, while Luis was working out of state, Omar went to his probation officer. He says he was assured that paying \$1,300 in fees would prevent his brother from violating parole.

In October 2014, Luis was stopped in Blount County for not wearing a seatbelt and for not carrying identification. He was then arrested for violating his parole in Loudon County.

Before Omar could return with the \$1,200 that an officer said was needed to get his brother out of jail, Luis was transferred into the custody of federal immigration authorities.

“Every legal case that I’ve heard of, people get taken advantage of,” said Castillo, pastor of the Spanish-speaking community at St. John United Methodist Church. “They are not totally alone because they have their church, but they are vulnerable.”

Luis’ family gave about \$7,000 to a Maryville attorney to get him back home. After several months with little action, they believed they had been scammed.

They hired another lawyer, recommended by Tennessee Immigrant and Refugee Rights Coalition, who has since been working to free Luis.

“No one has been held accountable for the lies immigration officers told the courts and their supervisors in order to pursue his removal,” said Andrew Free, an immigration and civil-rights attorney in Nashville. “And because the Obama



Luis Sanchez Ponce holds his baby daughter..

administration knows the majority in Congress could care less about ‘Dreamers’ and immigrant families more generally, I am doubtful anybody will ever have to answer for these actions.”

### STILL WAITING

Both Luis and Omar are “Dreamers,” the term used to describe young people brought to the U.S. as children. The 2012 program known as DACA, or Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, does not provide any direct path to citizenship, but it does provide a work permit and some protection from deportation.

Omar has applied for and received his DACA status. Luis was gathering paperwork and saving money to apply, but detention has prevented his application from moving forward, his brother says.

Susana’s busy family has pulled together in Luis’ absence, even pawning their cars to raise money for his freedom. They’ve spent about \$20,000 since the ordeal started in 2013.

“Every job that I was getting, I paid the bills and gave the rest for him,” said Omar, a carpenter.

“We try to go about our day. We try to stay strong,” says Rachel Potter, Omar’s girlfriend and mother of his three-year-old daughter.

On Thursday, Dec. 10, Susana’s family gathered with Pastor Castillo to pray and process what seemed like Luis’ imminent deportation. An insider at the detention center had informed them that Luis had been handcuffed and led away. His situation was shared in an Univision story and also through the national advocacy group, United We Dream.

“Release Luis!” the social-media messages and letters said. “He deserves prosecutorial discretion.”

Later that night, attorney Andrew Free learned that Luis had not been deported, but moved to another detention center in New Mexico.

Susana continues to wait and pray, in hope that once again, Luis will return from the desert. ■

The United Methodist Church recognizes, embraces, and affirms all persons, regardless of country of origin, as members of the family of God. The United Methodist Church affirms the right of all persons to equal opportunities for employment, access to housing, health care, education, and freedom from social discrimination. -- “Social Principles”