Isaias plays guitar in his room. *(Photo by Karen Pulfer Focht/The Commercial Appeal)*

THE BOOK OF ISAIAS

...

A Child of
Hispanic Immigrants
Seeks His Own America

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DANIEL CONNOLLY

ST. MARTIN'S PRESS
NEW YORK

www.stmartins.com

Designed by Kathryn Parise

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Names: Connolly, Daniel, author.
Title: The book of Isaias : a child of Hispanic immigrants seeks his own America / Daniel Connolly.
Description: New York, NY : St. Martin's Press, 2016.
Identifiers: LCCN 2016018423| ISBN 9781250083067 (hardback) | ISBN 9781250083074 (e-book)
Subjects: LCSH: Ramos, Isaias. | Mexican American students—Biography. | Children of immigrants—United States—Biography. | Minority college students—United States—Biography. | Talented students—United States—Biography. | Memphis (Tenn.)—Biography. | BISAC: BIOGRAPHY & AUTOBIOGRAPHY / Personal Memoirs. | SOCIAL SCIENCE / Emigration & Immigration.
Classification: LCC E184.M5 C658 2016 | DDC 305.235/1092 [B]—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2016018423

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First Edition: October 2016

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my mother, Candida Connolly (1941–2002),
who told me, "You're a hard worker!"
Thank you for believing in me.

PROLOGUE

...

Gold in a Green Town

If you fly over Memphis in an airplane in the springtime and look out the window, you will see a lush carpet of green trees extending to the horizon, with a few tall buildings sticking through. Entire neighborhoods disappear under the forest canopy. And if you land and take a taxi to one suburban neighborhood in the eastern part of the city, you will notice its distinctive features: small, square brick homes under the oak trees, gray satellite dishes bringing in Spanish-language channels, gang graffiti spray-painted on the wooden fences. And soon you will spot a building that you might have missed from the air: Kingsbury High School, a two-story brick structure with decorative white columns at its porch-like entrance.

It was in this school one spring afternoon that a teenaged boy raised his hand in an English class to ask a question. "Have you thought about being a teacher, Isaias?" the boy asked. He used the English pronunciation, "Eye-ZAY-us."

"I did," Isaias said, standing at the front of the classroom. "I didn't like it."

The boy continued. "Don't he sound like a teacher?" he asked his classmates. "I learned so much from him, fool."

Isaias laughed. "Thanks a lot."

The question might have sounded like a taunt, but it wasn't. At Kingsbury, many kids admired Isaias and treated him like a leader. Isaias was 18, relatively short in stature, with glasses and dark brown hair that tended to puff up on its own. He had just delivered a talk to his classmates as part of his senior project, standing behind a podium in his school uniform of khaki pants and white shirt and occasionally pointing out images projected on a screen. He spoke English with the slightest trace of a foreign accent, and he bounced from topic to topic: religious freedom, the Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi, energy conservation, a defense of abortion rights and stem cell research. He said that during the financial crisis, every conservative in the world had wanted to save failing banks, but he praised Iceland's government for taking a different approach. "In Iceland, not only did they not bail out the banks, the bankers—but they actually sent them to prison for using people's money like that."

Tying it all together was Isaias' call for political liberalism. He defined liberalism as critical thinking rather than blindly following tradition. "That could take us so much farther, to make us progress so much more as a world," he said. "Not as a country, not as individuals, but as a world, united against human suffering, against human injustice."

Perhaps if Isaias had made this presentation in college, a professor would have raised questions—was it really true, for instance, that *every* conservative supported bailing out the banks? And did liberals *really* possess the solution to all the world's problems? Yet it was impossible to miss his love of learning and his excitement at engaging with ideas.

Every Kingsbury student had to complete a capstone project and class presentation to graduate, and some of Isaias' fellow students had simply copied material off the Internet and read it out loud in class without absorbing its meaning. But Isaias had clearly thought through his presentation, and as he spoke, he made confident gestures with his large brown hands.

Almost all the students at Kingsbury came from poverty. Some came from worse situations, and their senior projects reflected it. One girl focused on the experience of being raped by her father. Another girl spoke about

abusive relationships and told classmates she'd been in one a couple of years earlier. One boy's project focused on drug smuggling, a business he said he'd nearly joined.

For Kingsbury teachers, bright students like Isaias were a happy contrast to the school's sad stories. Isaias ranked sixth in his class and had scored a 29 on the ACT, better than 93 percent of kids in the United States. For fun, he'd taken up the viola and helped build a soccer-playing robot. He'd gone on local TV as captain of the trivia team. Adults invested their hopes in Isaias—perhaps too many hopes.

Now a girl asked him, "Have you ever thought about going for, like, government or something like that? Like a politician?"

"I thought about it as well," Isaias said. "But I didn't like it either."

Someone muttered "construction worker." The guidance counselors had wanted Isaias to apply to Harvard, yet he'd talked about joining his family's house-painting and remodeling business instead. His parents were unauthorized immigrants from Mexico and were thinking about returning to that country, leaving Isaias and his big brother, Dennis, in charge of their little brother, Dustin, still a young boy. The brothers considered Memphis home and had no plans to accompany their mother and father when they went back. If their parents went back to Mexico, the law might prevent them from returning to Memphis for years, possibly forever, and the family members might have to endure a long separation.

As Isaias saw it, college would complicate both the painting business and his duty to help raise his little brother. Perhaps more importantly, he questioned the school's go-to-college gospel, just as he had pushed against the culture of this strongly Christian city and his parents' Catholic beliefs by identifying as an atheist. He knew he wouldn't live forever, and he was saddened by the thought of spending four years of his life on college, something that he saw as ultimately a waste of time.

Or so he said. The teacher who had coached Isaias in quiz bowl wondered if this exceptional student simply believed college was out of reach. His parents had brought him to the United States from Mexico at the age of eight, and they'd crossed the border illegally, a fact that greatly

complicated his search for financial aid. While some kids in this situation fought to find a way to get to college, Isaias dismissed the idea.

"It's not that I'm undocumented," he said once. "It's not that I feel *less*. If anything, I think it's the other way, maybe because I feel *above* college, or like if I went to college I'd be too confined and my mind would be too diminished, too driven in one certain path. And that's not the path I want to go on."

But Isaias had a habit of changing his mind. Perhaps he'd take the college path after all. Now, in his final year of high school, Isaias was forced to make choices that could affect his life for decades and influence the lives of his potential children and grandchildren. Dozens of his fellow seniors at Kingsbury would make similar decisions that year. So would countless legions of students like them across the country. And so will millions upon millions more in the years to come.

In that final year, Isaias would sometimes leave school without permission and eat lunch at Taco Bell. He would fall in love with one of the smartest girls in the school and caress her face with the back of his hand. He would exclaim, "I love Shakespeare so much!" and mean it. He would play the keyboard in smoky bars with a punk rock band called Los Psychosis. He would sing along to songs by his favorite artist, Björk, and her old band, the Sugarcubes. He would make a teacher cry in disappointment. He would inspire an intervention to change the course of his life, as family and friends would do for an alcoholic.

His parents worked long hours. When it came to big decisions on school and the future, they let Isaias find his own way. They didn't speak English and didn't understand the college application process. "No, we really have no idea," his father said in Spanish one day in the family's sunny kitchen. "The little that we know is that it's possible to find scholarships. If he wants to go, I told him, you must find them yourself." Isaias' father had gone only through the sixth grade, his mother through the ninth.

The people closest to Isaias often didn't know what he was thinking. Like many teenagers, he'd push back when his mother asked about his plans for life after high school.

Would Isaias make it to college? Would his family split apart? That last year of high school was a crucial time. But Isaias rarely seemed to worry about the decisions before him.

"I'm not sure at all," Isaias had said early in the year. "I kind of like it that way. Because when you're sure of everything, there's no room for surprises. That's no fun."

• • •

If you had visited the same Memphis high school some years earlier—1989, for instance—you likely would have seen no students of Mexican origin. An official report for that year placed Kingsbury students into just two groups: black and white.

But starting in the 1990s, thousands of immigrants began arriving in Memphis, many coming directly from Mexico. They made up part of a national immigration wave that was unprecedented in size. "Looking back over the entire span of U.S. history, no country has ever seen as many of its people immigrate to this country as Mexico has in the past four decades," demographers for the Pew Hispanic Center wrote in a 2012 report.[1]

The demographers later compared this modern immigration to the two previous largest waves. In the 1840–1889 wave, the leading country was Germany, which sent 4.3 million people. Ireland sent 3.2 million. In the 1890–1919 wave, the leading country was Italy, which sent 3.8 million.

Some 250,000 of the Germans who arrived in the nineteenth century were Jewish, and over 2.5 million more Jews would arrive between 1881 and 1924, mostly from Russia and eastern Europe.[2]

Modern immigration from Mexico has dwarfed all of these previous waves in raw numbers. Between 1965 and 2015, Mexicans arriving in the United States numbered 16.3 million, eclipsing each of the previously mentioned migrations by more than a factor of three, although of course today's immigrants arrive in a country with a much bigger total population. Mexican immigration and large numbers of arrivals from countries like China and India pushed the proportion of foreign-born people in America

to 14 percent by 2015, nearly as high as the record 15 percent from the early 1900s.[3]

Modern migration from Mexico touched almost every part of the nation, and it was followed by births. In 2007 alone, so many Hispanic* children were born in the Memphis area that they could have filled more than three elementary schools.[4] By October of Isaias' senior year, Hispanic students made up 37 percent of the student population at Kingsbury High: 422 kids in all.

National statistics were even more dramatic. By 2010, the proportion of Hispanics among America's youth had grown to almost one in four. And demographers had pointed out a related number: if you looked at American kids of all ethnicities, not just Hispanics, the proportion with at least one immigrant parent also stood at nearly one in four.[5]

All of this would have been hard for me to imagine as a non-Hispanic white child growing up in Memphis in the 1980s. My introduction to Hispanic culture came when I was a teenager and Mexican immigrants began moving into my family's neighborhood, called Fox Meadows, or more broadly, Hickory Hill. Many immigrants attended the Catholic Church of the Resurrection, the same church my family went to. The changes in my neighborhood prompted me to learn Spanish in my college years. During my work as a news reporter in Alabama, Arkansas and Memphis in the early 2000s, I returned over and over to immigration stories. Maybe I loved these stories because I had a sense of what it was like to live in a place but think of somewhere else as home. My parents had come south from New York when my father got a job teaching German at what was then Mem-

* A quick word on terminology: the word "Hispanic" refers to any person who identifies with a Spanish-speaking culture, regardless of race, skin color, citizenship, nationality, or whether the person actually speaks Spanish. In Memphis, most Hispanics are Mexican immigrants or children of Mexican immigrants. Many other people might identify as Hispanic: a young man from Peru who just arrived in Alabama; an Afro-Caribbean woman from the Dominican Republic who's lived 30 years in New York; a U.S. citizen child growing up in an old Mexican-American family in Texas where everyone only speaks English. And when I refer to "children of immigrants," I mean children born in the United States as well as those like Isaias who were brought here when they were small.

phis State University, and even though I was born in Memphis, I grew up seeing the place much as my parents did, as outsiders.

In my early years of covering immigration, I almost always spoke with adults. One conversation in November 2010 would change that. I went to lunch with Mauricio Calvo, whom I'd met years earlier at the Catholic church in my old neighborhood. He'd moved from Mexico City to go to college in Memphis, and after he graduated, he ended up staying. We became friends, and in 2008 he became the director of the city's biggest Hispanic social services organization, Latino Memphis.

At the lunch, Mauricio said he worried about immigrants' children. Adults worked long hours away from kids, domestic violence broke homes, parents were separating, many mothers were raising sons and daughters on their own, and in some cases children were abused. Workers in medicine, social services and mental health weren't trained to deal with first-generation immigrants. Now children of immigrants were getting older and often dropping out of school. *"¿Qué nos espera?"* Mauricio asked—what awaits us?

Nationwide, others were raising similar concerns. Historically, few Hispanics had gone far in school, which held back their social and economic progress. Only 14 percent of adult Hispanics had a college degree in 2012, compared to 19 percent of African-Americans, 33 percent of whites and 51 percent of Asians.[6] Though people in power frequently talked about immigration, they were usually talking about adults. But the demographic changes raised another question: Would the huge new generation of immigrants' children do better than their parents?

Given the sheer number of children of immigrants in America, you might imagine governments and social organizations were devoting plenty of resources to supporting them. Not so. On a trip to Washington, D.C., in 2012, I visited the offices of some of the leading organizations that focused on Hispanic education. The White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for Hispanics had an impressive name, but just three employees. Another leading group, *Excelencia* in Education, had a staff of six.

The tiny staffs of these organizations drove home the point that in the

eyes of the broader society, the education of immigrants' children just wasn't that important. Except that it *is* important. Higher levels of education generally lead to higher wages, more tax income, more demand for goods and services and more money to fund Medicare and Social Security. These young people will not just work. They will fight America's wars, play its sports, fill its churches, elect its leaders, sing its songs. And they will raise the next generation of children.

Failure can echo for decades, but so can success. I can point to a case from my own family: my mother's father. I knew him as a short-statured, very quiet man with blue eyes and white hair. He was a child of Italian immigrants and the first in his family to go to college, and through a series of high-paying engineering jobs, he accumulated wealth. My grandfather died when I was a teenager, and when my mother and grandmother passed away years later, I inherited part of his earnings. The money would help cover my expenses during the early stages of writing this book.

My grandfather's life is an example of how higher education can vault children of immigrants into the American mainstream and influence the generations that follow, a fact that's worth remembering as our nation seeks to absorb the great wave of Mexican immigration.

One factor complicates the process of helping immigrants' children: the ongoing fight over illegal immigration, a fight in which some people have argued that these parents and kids don't belong in America at all. In Memphis and across the country, Mexican immigration differed from previous waves not just in size, but in immigration status—in 2012, the Pew researchers said that more than half of Mexican immigrants had "unauthorized" immigration status, which most often meant they'd overstayed visas or entered the country illegally.[7] Away from the border, the government rarely enforced immigration law, and these newcomers lived in a legal gray zone, neither fully accepted nor fully rejected.

Isaias and some of his peers at Kingsbury High had illegal immigration status. But theirs wasn't the only story at Kingsbury, of course. Some Hispanic students at Kingsbury were born in the United States, which automatically made them U.S. citizens under the Fourteenth Amendment

of the nation's Constitution. Indeed, most Hispanic kids across the country enjoyed citizenship.

Regardless of citizenship or ethnicity, many Kingsbury students did poorly. The overall graduation rate for the 2011–2012 school year was only 61 percent. Many adults at the school were fighting to improve the bad outcomes. It was a struggle that had relevance for the rest of the country, and I wanted to watch it happen. I asked Kingsbury principal Carlos Fuller for permission to report within the school for a year, and he said yes. Mr. Fuller hoped to highlight the troubling stories of good students with immigration problems, and because he supported the project, the school system agreed. I took a leave of absence from my newspaper job and reported full-time within Kingsbury High, observing classrooms, faculty meetings, the principal's office and the guidance office.

I kept up with students outside of school, too, visiting them and their parents at home and following kids on field trips, to soccer games and on college tours. After my time inside Kingsbury ended in 2013, I kept talking with some of the students and adults for more than two years. I stayed in especially frequent contact with Isaias.*

Children of immigrants will form part of our society for decades. Their numbers are too big to ignore, and they hold great potential that our society should help develop. America is beginning to look more like Kingsbury High. Isaias isn't a prophet, but he's named after one, and his story can show us the future.

• • •

When I first met Isaias' parents in 2012, his father, Mario Ramos, was 51, with a soft voice, bright eyes and a large stomach. His wife, Cristina Vargas, was nearly a decade younger, pretty, with flecks of white paint in her hair from work. Mario liked to make jokes about her. A novelty license plate hung on the decorative wrought-iron front door of their house: "Never

* This is a work of nonfiction. I have used people's real names, and at the rare times that wasn't possible, I have simply left names out rather than inventing pseudonyms.

mind the dog—beware of my wife!" It had originally said "ex-wife," but the "ex" had been painted over.

Jokes aside, they clearly loved one another. They had been married for 22 years. "Most people ask us, 'And you haven't killed each other?' " Mario said. Cristina said, "It strengthens you a lot. That's the way I see it."

We spoke at a table in their kitchen, and Mario and Cristina sometimes sat so close to one another that their elbows touched. Early in their relationship, Mario had followed Cristina everywhere. "We got married and my father told me, 'Enough, leave her alone! Separate! Because if she goes to grind some dough, you go. If she goes to cook food, you go. If she goes to the bathroom, you go!' "

On painting jobs, they acted like work colleagues, and sometimes they spoke harshly with each other, jokingly, Cristina said. She might tell him, *"¡Agárrale, pendejo!"* Grab that thing, you dumbass! Away from work, they sometimes fooled around like children. Their sons heard them laughing behind their bedroom door. What are you doing? they'd ask. The answer: we're playing!

The chain of events that brought the family to Memphis had begun a decade earlier in a village nestled amid a landscape of rolling green hills, rough footpaths, grazing sheep and agaves, which look like giant aloe vera plants.

The cluster of buildings in central Mexico's Hidalgo state is called Santa Maria Asunción. A tall tree looms over the town square, an Asian variety called *alcanfor*, or camphor. The tree can produce medicine. But the people of the town sometimes put it to a different use. Over a period of many years, residents occasionally dragged people accused of theft, rape or other crimes to the tree. Sometimes the crowd beat the troublemaker or they'd toss a rope over a branch and hoist him into the air by the wrists, where he would hang with arms wrenched painfully behind him, screaming. Such vigilante actions happened as recently as 2013, when police officers were accused of trying to extort money from the owners of one of the many tiny factories in the village that produced clothing for open-air markets across Mexico. A crowd hauled the officers to the tree, and a local news

photographer took pictures of the frightened figures with bowed heads. Before the punishment could start, other policemen saved them.[8]

The punishment tree and the bell tower of a white adobe church stand a few feet away from an elementary school where one-story classroom buildings open out into a central courtyard with trees. As a child, Isaias sometimes hid among the small trees during recess with his best friend, Ponchito. Sometimes when the other kids went back to class, they sneaked away to play with marbles, tops or yo-yos. They'd play together outside school, too, each shadowing an older brother. The four boys caught frogs, floated paper boats down a creek and built dirt racetracks for their toy cars. Their mothers joked to one another, "Either you have to come live in my house, or I'll go live in yours, because we can't separate the children."[9]

Inside their cinder block house with its corrugated metal roof and a big satellite dish, Isaias' mother, Cristina, joined other women pushing cloth through whirring sewing machines, and little Isaias amused himself nearby, listening to a radio play Mexican and American songs.[10] Isaias' parents owned this in-home shop and lived with their children in the other rooms. When Dennis and Isaias were both very young, Dennis couldn't pronounce his little brother's name, and called him Chaias. The name stuck, and at home the family members called Isaias "Chay." They pronounced it "chai," like Indian tea.

The family had drinkable water and a television. Mario had a guitar, too, and played it, until baby Dennis broke it, ending his dad's musical career. Despite all they had, Mario wanted the family to progress economically. "Mexico gave us enough to live," he said years later. "But you can only live up to a certain level. You can't go beyond it." The house that they were living in had belonged to Mario's parents, and Mario and Cristina wanted their own. Buying or building a house would cost serious money—money Mario could earn outside Mexico.

In 1998, Mario crossed the border illegally into the United States by himself. He worked hard jobs, tending fruit trees and laboring in an icy cold lumber mill near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, picking blueberries near

Atlantic City, New Jersey, and finally on construction jobs in Fort Myers, Florida.

Dennis remembered his father's phone calls from those distant places, and his absence. On the last day of fifth grade, the kids were told to bring their fathers for a ceremonial sanding and painting of the desks. Dennis had to go by himself, and it hurt.

Mario's mother died while he was away. Cristina cared for the two children on her own, living like a single mother. She said she wouldn't wish the separation on anyone. Mario said the lonely years in America were a terrible time. After about three and a half years, he finally returned to Cristina and his children in 2002. "When we got back together, I told her, never again will we separate. No matter what."

At first, Mario didn't want to go back to the United States. But the basic economics of their situation hadn't changed. Cristina wanted funds to remodel their house. Mario would say later that he wanted a better education for the two boys. The year after Mario returned, he and Cristina made plans. They would go together to America, spend three years there, earn money and come back. They didn't realize Cristina was pregnant.

One day at recess when Isaias was eight, he told his friend Ponchito that he was going to America with his family, walking through the desert. At first, Ponchito didn't believe it. Then Isaias said it again, more seriously, and with more detail: his mother, father and 12-year-old brother would travel light and carry water.[11]

Mario and Cristina knew a woman who had recently emigrated to the United States: Paulina Badillo Garcia. She had sewed men's button-down shirts in the Ramos family shop until the work slowed down. Mario and Cristina had lost contact with her, but Mario went to Paulina's parents in town, got her number and called her. He said he wanted to go to the United States but didn't know where exactly. Paulina said they were welcome to stay with her, in the city of Memphis.

The boys packed their toys into a storeroom: bicycles, a toy truck, a top, a dinosaur. They wouldn't be gone for long, and they planned to open the storeroom and play with the toys when they came back. A human smug-

gler who lived nearby agreed to take the family's sewing machines as payment for the crossing.

Mario and Cristina each prepared a backpack with a few items for survival: water, Gatorade and the sweets known as *alegrías*, clusters of small seeds stuck together with honey or sugar. The family members brought no clothes other than what they wore because in the desert, every ounce counted.[12]

Shortly before they left, a woman they had met through the sewing business asked them to come to her house in Mexico City. She knew they were leaving and gave them blessed items to protect them on their journey, including a small wooden plaque that showed an image of Christ with the words *"Jesús, yo confío en Tí."* Jesus, I trust in you. Cristina put the image in her backpack.

Isaias remembered walking in darkness, seeing strange shapes in the nighttime landscape of the desert: walls, castles, and at one point a racetrack with a Formula One car. He got closer, and the racetrack became a cactus and a little ditch. He had imagined it. Dennis would remember more: a stop at a border town to buy supplies, walking at night with a group of migrants, resting under trees in the early morning, the sand beneath him still warm, getting up to walk in the sun, fleeing at the sound of a helicopter, the group running low on water, then stumbling upon a cache of water jugs someone had left in the desert. Spending a night in an abandoned, half-burned house, crawling through a tunnel to get from one side of a highway to another, the sand cold this time. Then huddling on the floor of a pickup truck with a crush of other migrants on top of him, learning that the truck was stolen, seeing that the driver turned the ignition not with a key but with a big knife.

Cristina remembered that the border itself was marked by a fence so low she could practically step over it. Mario said that on both sides of the border, the desert landscape looked exactly the same.

It was March 2003, and the temperature in Arizona was moderate, with highs in the 70s.[13] As the temperature began to rise later in the year, migrants died in the heat. That year alone, about 200 corpses were found

in southern Arizona. A reporter for the *Tucson Citizen* newspaper told the story of one man named Alfredo who searched for the body of his brother Rafa.[14] Surviving migrants had told Alfredo where to look, and after days of seeking, he found a skeleton that wore the same brown pants his brother had worn when he left home. Upon seeing the skeleton, Alfredo vomited and began to weep.

The Ramos family arrived at a hotel in Phoenix and rode eastward in a van. The vents in the van blew hot air, which impressed Dennis because in Mexico, he'd grown used to vehicles whose heating systems didn't work. The van slid off the road in snow near Denver. A tow truck pulled it out, and they stopped for a day to wait for the snow to melt.[15] Dennis and Isaias played in the first snow they had ever seen.

The van that carried the Ramos family rolled east on Interstate 40 across the country. As they left the flatlands of Arkansas at night, Dennis saw a big bridge lit with electric bulbs and beyond it, the skyscrapers of a modern metropolis. To Dennis, Memphis seemed like the mother of all cities.

...

The van that carried the Ramos family across the Mississippi River represented a tiny drop in a great wave. The Ramos family joined an estimated 570,000 Mexicans who arrived in the United States in 2003—an astounding number, but far fewer than the 770,000 who had arrived in 2000, the peak year.

Economic factors pushed Mexicans north. Mexico's peso crisis of 1994–1995 had increased the price of imported goods and led to a recession and unemployment. The wage difference between the United States and Mexico rose dramatically. In 2004, I traveled to Acambay, Mexico, with photographer Jacquelyn Martin, who snapped a picture of a man climbing high into a tree to chop down dead branches, his only support a rickety ladder of boards nailed to the trunk.[16] "It's good work," he told her. "I make ten pesos an hour." That was about 87 U.S. cents. In Mexico, he was risking a deadly fall to earn the equivalent of roughly $7 for a full day's work. In

just one hour of work in America, he could easily earn the same amount or more.

Mario would later say that he and Cristina hadn't fully known the long-term consequences of an illegal crossing. "When you're in Mexico, you don't know anything about this country," he said. "So you don't know that crossing illegally can cause you problems. You don't know this. You just know that everyone's going—or anyone who wants to go does it and comes back, and nothing happens."

That statement might strike some people as strange. How could he possibly think that breaking immigration law was no big thing? Laws are laws—right?

Two facts to point out: First, Mario had lived most of his life in Mexico, where corruption was common, the justice system barely functioned, and laws often meant little. Second, the U.S. government often didn't take its own immigration law very seriously. Not only did the government rarely enforce immigration law in the interior of the country; for decades, border enforcement had been light, too, so much so that it had really been no big deal for men to enter the United States illegally, work for a while, return to Mexico, then do it again. By 2003, border enforcement had already been increasing for years, and crossing was becoming much harder—that's why smugglers had shifted from traditional urban crossing points like El Paso and were now taking people through a remote Arizona desert, and why men were beginning to bring their families. Crossing back and forth to visit loved ones was now too difficult.[17]

Mario said in hindsight that it would have been better to go to the consulate and get a visa. But if Mario and Cristina had tried to get a visa to enter the United States legally, they almost certainly would have failed.

They had no family connections in the United States, which shut off a major route to legal immigration. Some visas were available in agriculture and other seasonal work, but they lasted only a few months. Mario and Cristina could have tried to get an employment visa. But there were only 10,000 such visas available each year to unskilled laborers worldwide, said Greg Siskind, a Memphis attorney and expert on immigration law.

And only 7 percent of those employment visas could go to Mexicans, which meant that the number available could be as low as 700. The Ramos family would also have to find a U.S. employer to sponsor them through the application process. That would cost the employer thousands of dollars and take roughly eight years. As late as 2015, the country was still operating under immigration quota numbers that had been set 25 years earlier. Efforts to change the system had failed in Congress.

Paulina, the woman who had worked in the Ramos family sewing shop, was waiting for them on the night of their arrival in Memphis in 2003. Mario gave the driver Paulina's address, not far from Kingsbury High School. It was late at night, and the driver couldn't find the address, so they stopped at a gas station and telephoned Paulina, who came to meet them.

Including bus rides in Mexico and waiting for transportation, the Ramos family had been under way for about 20 days. Paulina would remember how exhausted they were. She brought them home. A total of six people were already crowded into her small two-bedroom house. They included two of Paulina's brothers, a sister, a cousin, and Paulina's infant daughter. The Ramos family took up residence in the living room, the boys on a couch, Mario and Cristina sleeping on the floor.

Mario and Cristina had bet everything on America, and by extension, on Memphis. They'd left friends and family and their home culture and language. They had crossed a desert with two young boys. Not everyone would run such risks, but from an early age, both husband and wife had shown an unusual independence and willingness to take chances.

Mario was lucky to be alive at all, since most of his brothers and sisters had died young. I wouldn't understand how this happened until one day in Mario's home village I spoke with one of his cousins, Margarita Tellez Vargas, whom Mario respectfully called Señora Mago. She was 68, with gray hair and a brown, lined face, a clear voice and a keen memory. In the back room of her family's paper products store, she told me the sad story of Mario's mother, Carmen Tellez.

Mario's mother made a living selling vegetables and she spoke both Spanish and Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, a language Mario would

never learn. Mario's mother had many children, but they kept dying. They were born *"al valor mexicano,"* or with Mexican courage, meaning without a doctor's care, Señora Mago said. Many were stillborn. Those who survived the birth died later of something as simple as a fever. The older ones, like Bonfilio, who died about the age of nine, and Margarita, who died around the age of four, were remembered in nine days of prayer. Señora Mago went to their wakes.

So many died that Señora Mago lost track. "I think it was 16 children . . . Of course we cried. We felt the loss of these little ones." Carmen Tellez's husband Juan Vargas blamed her for the deaths and sometimes slapped her—Señora Mago said she saw the violence herself.

Then Juan Vargas died, and Mario's mother married Eduardo Ramos, who had children from a previous marriage. Eduardo was a better husband who didn't hurt his wife. More children were born, but Mario was the only one who survived. Señora Mago described the difference: another woman, Mario's godmother, helped care for him and took him to the doctor.[18]

The story of the deaths reflected Mexico's lagging development in health, education and infrastructure. Electricity didn't come to the village until Mario was seven or eight years old. He remembered going to a neighbor's house to watch part of the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City on TV, then the moon landing in 1969.

Mario said his mother's vegetable and fruit sales brought in enough money for the family to survive. They always had food, shoes and clothing, but few opportunities. When Mario finished sixth grade, he wanted to continue studying, but the closest middle school was in a nearby big town, Tulancingo, and his family couldn't afford to send him. So his formal education ended.

His parents kept him busy with chores. He'd walk far into the forest to find firewood, cut it and haul it back. He recalled conversations he'd have afterward.

"Are you tired, my son?"

"Yes, I'm tired."

"Good, as a way to take a rest, grab two buckets and go fetch some water. Then feed the donkeys, the pigs and the chickens."

Mario said his mother had a generous spirit and opened their home to other kids who needed a place to stay. But she also had an explosive temper and would smack him if he did something wrong. Otherwise, he got along well with his parents. Yet he chafed under the orders and heavy work. He felt used. "When you're a child, you want to play. You don't want to do work. So it was very hard for me as a child.

"I decided to escape."

One incident played a role—he was in the forest cutting wood when he badly sliced the back of his left thumb with a machete. He would carry the scar the rest of his life. He rode a donkey back home, holding up his bleeding thumb. His mother wasn't sympathetic. She said he'd cut himself on purpose to avoid work. That hurt him a lot, and he left.

Twelve-year-old Mario gathered some pesos he'd saved, folded a few pieces of clothing into a bundle and bought a bus ride to Mexico City. People in Santa Maria Asunción had many ties to the giant city just a few hours' drive down the road. Men would sometimes part from their families for a time and work there, much as international migrants would travel to the United States in the decades that followed.

When Mario arrived in the capital, he slept in the bus terminal. The people on the cleaning crew approached him. "What are you doing here, son?" He wanted to stay in the bus terminal indefinitely, but the cleaning staff said he couldn't, and eventually the adults tracked down one of Mario's half brothers, his father's son from a previous relationship. The half brother took Mario in and brought him to work in a shop where he learned to paint cars. He worked there for about two years.

But Mario didn't like to take orders and rebelled against the half brother, too. He found another job, this time making cabinets.

Mario came back to Santa Maria Asunción to visit and, seeing that his parents were now all alone, decided at age 20 to live with them and keep them company. He started a tire shop, then later helped his mother sell vegetables. Years later, he went to a party to celebrate Three Kings' Day

and spoke with a girl he'd already seen in the small sewing shop run by one of his friends. She was Cristina, his future wife, and she was only 16.

Cristina had left home early, too. She had grown up as one of ten children in a little hamlet on a hillside above Santa Maria Asunción. Her mother was sickly and spent a lot of time in bed, and her father was often away in Mexico City working construction.

Cristina's brother Alberto told me that all ten children slept on the floor with their parents as well as grandparents or aunts or uncles who might happen to be visiting: "We only slept a little bit. The next day we'd get up early and work!" They kept sheep, horses, donkeys, hogs, goats and chickens. They had to walk long distances to wash clothes and fetch drinking water. Cars were a rare sight, and when they appeared, everyone feared the drivers had come to kidnap children.

Unlike Mario, Cristina experienced extreme poverty in childhood, including going hungry at times. She began looking for a way out.

When Cristina finished elementary school at around age 11, she moved to the big town, Tulancingo, to study at a *secundaria*, or middle school. She stayed with a female doctor who had taken care of her mother. Cristina did domestic work in exchange for a place to stay: washing dishes, sweeping, cleaning up the garden and helping out in the clinic. She was a little girl working long hours, and the doctor didn't pay her. Cristina now describes the arrangement as exploitation. She later went to work for a family that gave her room, board, and some cash. Cristina's move to the big town paid off—she managed to finish the ninth grade. Among her nine siblings, only Alberto had done the same. At 15, Cristina wanted to move to Mexico City and keep studying, but her mother felt afraid and said no. So Cristina came back to the village, learned to sew, and that's how she landed in the little clothing factory where Mario first saw her. Roughly a year after they started talking at the party, they married. She was 18, he was 27.

And now, all these years later, they were sleeping on a floor in Memphis, Tennessee.

...

Soon after the Ramos family left Santa Maria Asunción in 2003, Ponchito and his older brother bombarded their mother with the same question. "When are they coming back? When are they coming back?" Almost every day, Cristina called Ponchito's mother. One time Cristina almost cried: she had trouble adjusting to new foods, the boys stayed inside instead of wandering outdoors, and she washed clothes by machine rather than in the creek. The changes in daily life overwhelmed her. "I can't stand it," Ponchito's mother recalled Cristina saying. But as the family gained a shaky foothold in America, the distance asserted itself and the phone calls tapered off.

In 2003, the Mexican-born population in the United States reached 10.7 million, the highest in recorded history at that point, and it continued to grow for years thereafter, peaking at 12.6 million in 2007.[19] After the 2007–2008 financial crisis, the Mexican-born population declined as fewer immigrants arrived and some went home. Most lived in the United States illegally.[20]

Dennis, Isaias and their mother Cristina on a cold day at Shelby Farms Park in Memphis, Tennessee, around 2004. *(Photograph courtesy of the Ramos family)*

Eight-year-old Isaias had expected America to be a magical place, like the one he had seen on the British TV show *Bernard's Watch*. The houses and neighborhoods in the show looked well maintained and uniform, and the boy named Bernard used a special timepiece that could freeze time itself. Memphis wasn't like that. It was more like Mexico. Kind of like real life.

Dennis and Isaias had been brought to the country illegally, but they could still go to school. The 1982 Supreme Court ruling *Plyler v. Doe* had mandated that governments provide unauthorized immigrant students with a basic education—in practice, that meant through twelfth grade. The ruling struck down a 1975 Texas law that blocked Mexican children from going to school if they couldn't prove legal status.

Justice William J. Brennan, Jr., wrote the court's majority opinion, saying that there was no rational or legal basis for the Texas law, which placed a "lifetime hardship" on children who couldn't control their own immigration status or their parents' conduct.

Isaias' parents put him in the local elementary school right away, during the middle of the academic year, and he had to repeat third grade. He quickly began to learn English. A few grades ahead of him, so did Dennis.

Paulina had fond memories of the Ramos family's early days in Memphis, how everyone in the crowded house gathered each night to eat dinner together. After a month of sleeping in Paulina's living room, the Ramos family began renting one bedroom in a house nearby. Later in 2003, Cristina gave birth at a Memphis charity hospital to a boy. They named him Dustin.

In the earliest days in Memphis, Mario went to seek jobs as a day laborer on a rough street nearby, Jackson Avenue. Cristina went to work, too, washing dishes in a Mexican restaurant, then going out to rake leaves in nearby yards. When Cristina was working, other women in the neighborhood took care of Dustin. Later, Dustin stayed at a church day care. The older brothers watched him, too.

One day the Ramos family went shopping at Walmart. Little Isaias walked up to a white American woman and asked if she'd take their picture. Of course she would. She accepted the disposable camera, and Isaias' family lined up between racks of clothes, arranging themselves around a fully loaded grocery cart with a big tub of ice cream. The stranger raised the camera. Isaias looked straight ahead, his expression neutral, hands behind his back. His mother leaned on a three-wheeled stroller with the infant Dustin, the American boy with a single American name. Mario had

(Photograph courtesy of the Ramos family)

given the older brothers double names, one Mexican, one American: Dennis' other name was Adolfo, Isaias' other name was Kenneth.

The shutter clicked.

The stranger gave back the camera. The family wanted to send the picture to the people they left behind in Mexico, to show *we're together and we're all right.* The picture of the healthy family with the full grocery cart didn't tell the whole story—they were still poor, wearing clothes from a dollar store. Both parents were busy, and they never got around to sending the photo.

When Mario began working with another man named Manuel painting houses, Cristina said she wanted to join them. Mario didn't like the idea at first. Dustin was a baby, and he thought she should stay home with him. And he didn't want his wife to enter construction, a man's world full of foul language and crude comments. But Cristina kept asking, and Mario relented. Soon, both Mario and Cristina were working with Manuel, who taught them basic painting techniques.

Through the work with Manuel, Mario and Cristina met a young woman

who needed a house painted. They saw the job as their chance to start working independently, which could mean more money and could protect them from being ripped off by bad bosses. The construction business in Memphis attracted some questionable people. Once, Mario earned $200 on a job, and the boss didn't pay. Some contractors took payments from clients, didn't finish the work, then disappeared.

Most top-level general contractors were American-born, but many immigrants occupied the subcontracting levels just below them. Lawbreaking was rampant. I spent time on a construction site with a homebuilding subcontractor from Mexico who openly acknowledged that he hired unauthorized immigrants and didn't pay overtime or workers' compensation insurance. Such practices allowed him to lower his prices and helped him win contracts.

He and others could break rules because the government rarely enforced immigration law, unions lacked clout, big contractors shielded themselves from subcontractors' actions, and local and state inspectors had limited resources and authority.[21]

Mario and Cristina didn't speak English, so when they met the young woman at the house she wanted painted, they brought Dennis along to interpret. It worked. The woman was so satisfied with the painting job that she referred them to other clients, who in turn referred them to others. For this crucial first client and those that followed, Mario also used a cell phone with an unusual feature: a built-in voice recorder. When clients called, Mario would offer a memorized response. "I'm driving now. Give me your phone number and your name, and I'll call you back." He'd turn on the voice recorder and use his limited English to prompt the client to repeat the address and other details several times. Then at home, he'd play the recording for his sons to translate.

Mario and Cristina gained a reputation for quality work, and when people began asking them to expand the scope of their duties—by installing a fan, for instance—they said yes. At first, Mario and Cristina didn't know how to do these things. But they knew that every piece of hardware or paint came with instructions that were often printed in Spanish, and

they could decipher some written English, too. They read the instructions, did the jobs, and their skills grew. They didn't just paint, they laid down floors, repaired cabinets, did carpentry or virtually anything else the client needed.

Mario and Cristina thought it was best to paint a client's house with as much care as they spent on their own. "You do it for the love of what you're doing," Cristina said.

They kept moving to better housing: a two-bedroom apartment, then a rental house where they lived for several years. By 2011, they'd earned enough money to buy a foreclosed house near Kingsbury High School for a bargain price: $20,500. They had held on to the image of Jesus that Cristina had carried across the desert in her backpack, displaying it in the places they had lived in Memphis, and now they hung it in the kitchen of their new home.

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They were building a long-term home in Memphis, a city full of both problems and potential. The city's modern history dated to 1819, when developers carved up newly purchased Indian land on high bluffs along the Mississippi River.[22]

For decades, Memphis relied on the cotton trade and the large population of African-Americans who worked the nearby fields, first as slaves, then as oppressed laborers. Through the years, many Memphis whites worried about a black uprising, said local historian G. Wayne Dowdy. They had "this deep-seated fear that if you let them up, they're not going to be satisfied with being equal to you," he said. "They're going to want to take over."

Fear of a black uprising contributed to the city's deadly violence of 1866. A large group of African-American soldiers had just been discharged from the Union army and were drinking heavily when a brawl escalated into a gunfight with white police officers. That night, a large group of whites began burning buildings and killing every black person they saw. As Dowdy put it, it wasn't a riot, it was a massacre. Over three days of bloodshed, two

whites and 46 African-Americans died, and five black women were raped. Even in 1942, during the Second World War, the Memphis mayor had to publicly deny rumors of a brewing black revolt.

The fear of black people had a curious consequence, Dowdy said. Most of the original white settlers of Memphis were English and Scotch-Irish, but since they viewed the world through the prism of black and white, they generally accepted any foreigners not of African origin as "white." That included the Irish, Italians, and German Jews. In the nineteenth century, white schools also accepted children of Chinese descent.

Memphis had experience with Mexican immigration, too, though it was temporary. In the late 1940s, thousands of Mexican workers known as "braceros" toiled in the fields around Memphis under federal contracts, and Mexico's government opened a consulate in Memphis to serve them. The braceros program ended in the 1960s. "There is very little work here for a Mexican consul nowadays," the last consul told a local newspaper in 1971, not long before the office closed.

In the late 1960s, the city saw tentative progress in race relations. For instance, in 1967, three African-Americans were elected to the City Council, the first time since the 1880s they had been represented there. But in 1968, civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Memphis to support a sanitation workers' strike, and an assassin shot and killed him. The killing would harden racial resentments for decades. The decline of downtown Memphis accelerated as whites moved farther and farther from the core city.

The 1990 Census found that for the first time in Memphis history, the majority of the population was black. In 1991, city schools superintendent Willie Herenton gave up his post to run for mayor and won by only 142 votes, becoming the city's first elected black executive.

Mayor Herenton would gain white support and win election four more times. But scandals and his sometimes abrasive personality hurt his popularity. Critics called him racially divisive. In 2009, he unexpectedly announced his retirement in the middle of his fifth term.

At the end of the mayor's almost 18-year tenure, the city still struggled

with low education levels, a high crime rate, racial conflict, and poverty that was among the worst in the nation. Some in Memphis seemed to have internalized an inferiority complex, the sense that their city would always lag behind the region and the world.

Life in Memphis wasn't all bad, of course. The mayor could point to successes including a revived downtown and a new NBA team, the Grizzlies. The city also boasted a musical heritage based on the blues and Elvis Presley, and its visual arts scene grew in strength as old storefronts on South Main and Broad Avenue were transformed into galleries. The city full of trees was becoming more international, more diverse, and more interesting: whether you were into judo, salsa dancing, Vietnamese Buddhism, Japanese animation or African-American Gospel music, you could find a community of like-minded people. Despite the area's long-standing racial problems, interracial dating and marriages were relatively common. Plus, housing was cheap. I paid $530 per month for an apartment near Overton Park, the Memphis equivalent of New York's Central Park, and for more than nine years, my landlord never raised the rent.

The low rent reflected a sad fact: many people with money moved to outlying suburbs. Between 2000 and 2010, the city saw its population decline to 647,000, a drop of about half a percentage point, even though the government had annexed new territory.

In that decade, the city's black majority grew slightly, the white minority shrank—and the Hispanic population soared. The 1990 Census had recorded just 7,000 Hispanics in the county that included Memphis, less than one percent of the population. By 2000, shortly before the Ramos family arrived, the county's Hispanic population had grown to 23,000, or 3 percent. Most were immigrants from Mexico, with smaller numbers from countries like El Salvador and Venezuela. Many worked in warehouses or in construction.

By 2010, the Hispanic population had more than doubled again, to 52,000, or 6 percent of the county population. Many of them lived within the core city, and by Isaias' senior year, Hispanics made up nearly 10 percent

of students in the urban Memphis City Schools system: more than 10,000 Hispanic kids.

Beginning early in the immigration wave, Catholic churches and evangelical congregations began offering services in Spanish. Spanish-speaking businesses sprang up quickly to meet immigrants' needs: newspapers and radio stations, restaurants and grocery stores, lawyers, mechanics, medical clinics, nightclubs, hairstylists and wedding photographers.

Hispanics moved primarily into two Memphis neighborhoods: the suburb where my family lived, Hickory Hill, and the neighborhood around Kingsbury High. People called this neighborhood by different names: Highland Heights, Nutbush, Graham Heights, the National Cemetery area, and sometimes simply Kingsbury.

As Memphis struggled with its old problems of racial tension, poverty and crime, the city's leadership remained split between blacks and whites. Many immigrants came to the country illegally, which meant they couldn't vote, and no one of Hispanic descent was elected to office. At City Council meetings there were no Hispanics on the dais, rarely any in the audience, and the politicians seldom talked about immigrants except to make general statements of support. The population of tens of thousands of people was largely ignored.

Being ignored had a benefit: though some people in Memphis made anti-immigrant remarks, no one organized a serious anti-immigrant movement. By contrast, not far away in majority white Nashville, the state legislature passed a series of mostly symbolic measures against illegal immigration, and a conservative group campaigned unsuccessfully to limit most local government communications to English.

Being ignored also had a downside. Memphis immigrants complained that when it came to commitment of government money and resources, they were skipped. For instance, in 2007 the city office dedicated to helping immigrants had just two employees, and neither spoke Spanish.[23]

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Isaias and Dennis started working with their parents when they were teenagers, and Mario and Cristina relied on them as interpreters, too, because their own skills in English remained limited. The parents could say hello, exchange a few words with clients about a job, read a little bit. But they couldn't conduct a real conversation in English. Learning a language as an adult was hard, especially for those who had little formal education. It required many hours of study, time that many immigrants simply didn't have.

Mario and Cristina would get home in the evening after a long day at work, prepare something to eat, check on the children and then go to sleep before getting up and doing it all again. The boys would ask their parents why they didn't learn English, and Mario would say: "How about you go to work, and I'll go to school for six years? And I'll learn English." Churches offered some English-as-a-second-language programs that met the needs of working immigrants, but they varied widely in quality. In Memphis and around the nation, many newcomers stayed within the Spanish-speaking universe, and when they ventured outside it, they often did so with the help of their children.

Dennis played an increasingly important role in the family business. At 22, he looked and sounded like an older, larger version of Isaias: the same glasses, the same very slightly accented English, the same love of music, the same curiosity about the world. He hadn't made it to college, but it was easy to imagine him there.

One time he and Isaias started talking about the situation in Gaza while they took down a gutter on a house they were preparing to paint.

"The problem is that they're already moving troops to the edge. It's escalating," Dennis said.

"Wow! It's war," said Isaias. He asked if the U.S. government had said anything. Dennis said, "No. They condemned the Palestinians, but—" Isaias interrupted with a sarcastic "Ooh."

"They don't talk about Israel," said Dennis. He wielded a whining electric drill to unscrew the gutter. The brothers switched to quick bursts of Spanish as they eased the metal to the ground.

Dennis had hoped to become an engineer in the army after graduating

from Kingsbury in 2009, but his immigration status stopped him. He applied to state colleges, but he would have had to pay expensive out-of-state tuition. His parents told him they'd be willing to help pay for college. He said later that he just couldn't do that to them. As he saw it, it was their money. They had lives of their own and things they wanted to do.

As Isaias drew closer to high school graduation, Dennis doubted his brother's chances of getting to college. "I don't want to tell this to Isaias, but I just don't see many opportunities out there," Dennis said at one point. "I really hope he gets one and I think he's talking to people that may be able to help him. But I saw it. And there's just no way. No one helps you."

In 2010, Dennis traveled to New Mexico because it was one of the only states where he could get a driver's license without a Social Security number. He ended up staying with a group of young men for several weeks and became close friends with one of them, who taught him about atheism. "He looked at me in the eyes one day and told me, 'You're going to die and that will be okay. I will die. So instead of praying for a better life in the afterworld, which we're not even sure exists, let's just make the best out of our lives that we know exist now.' "

Dennis began watching online videos featuring atheists. Many of the atheists were political liberals, and Dennis began to identify with liberal politics, too. And he came across a website that sold car magnets that parodied the Christian symbol of the fish by adding legs to it and writing the word "Darwin" inside. Dennis ordered one of the Darwin fish and put it on his truck. "That represents me and what I believe," Dennis said. "And I believe in science. And my fish wasn't created. My fish evolved." Dennis came home from New Mexico and told Isaias about atheism. Isaias said he was immediately receptive to the idea because prayer had always struck him as silly. "And right there it just seemed like, duh, I've been thinking this my whole life," Isaias said.

I asked Mario and Cristina much later about their sons' atheism. They said they accepted it.

"They're free," Mario said. "They can make their own decisions." Mario and Cristina had helped lead a Christian group in Mexico. They

still considered themselves religious, but now they only went to nearby St. Michael's Catholic Church once or twice a year. When Dennis had a tire blow out on his truck while he was driving, Mario made him go with him to the church to give thanks that he hadn't died: "This is my belief and I want you to go with me." Dennis didn't want to, but he eventually relented and went with his father. He said he didn't feel anything at church but was glad the tire blowout hadn't hurt him or anyone else.

Cristina said she sometimes threw holy water at the boys when they made her mad. Or she'd say, *"Cruz, cruz-que se vaya Isaías y que venga Jesús."* Cross, cross—go away Isaias and come here, Jesus.[24] Generally, though, the parents maintained a warm relationship with their children. They didn't believe atheists were bad people. Cristina thought her sons' views might change as they got older and life became harder.

Isaias' parents recognized the potential in their middle son. "I see in him a hidden artist," his father said. "You just have to find him. I don't know. He has something. He's special." Much later, they told the story of how Isaias was born—how Cristina's labor pains began at home and she went with her husband to the nearest clinic, walking because they had no money and no other transportation. They arrived to find the clinic empty. The bishop had come to town, and the clinic staff had gone to the celebration. Mario left Cristina waiting there and raced to the nearby church, where he found the nurse and the doctor and hurried with them back to his wife. The doctor was still putting on gloves when the child emerged and fell into his father's hands.

"He caught me by surprise," Cristina said. "He caught us all by surprise." Cristina believed that from that moment of birth, Isaias was destined for something unusual.