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February 27, 2017

Newsroom

NY TIMES: Refugee, Immigrant, and Citizen

The New York Times tells the story of alum Luis Mancheno's journey from refugee to immigration advocate and leader.



From the New York Times: [“NY Today: Refugee, Immigrant, and Citizen”](#) by Alexandra S. Levine

Feb. 27, 2017: When Luis Mancheno was 14 and living in Quito, Ecuador, he knew he had to learn English, and fast.

It was around that age that he realized he would eventually need to leave his evangelical family, his all-boys Catholic school and his country: He feared they would reject him for being gay.

So he holed up with the [“Harry Potter”](#) books, and he studied the movies' English subtitles.

“I was able to identify with Harry, being different in a world where no one understands you,” Mr. Mancheno said.

Over the years, Mr. Mancheno grew from a teenager with a secret into a young adult facing violent persecution. He became an immigrant from Latin America, a refugee and eventually an American citizen. Now a lawyer in New York City, Mr. Mancheno, 30, is supporting others on that journey.

Mr. Mancheno was one of more than 100 names submitted by readers as being a model New Yorker who has made a difference in the community and put others first in challenging situations.

“My job is to give a voice to all the Luises out there,” he said, “who are completely alone, completely resourceless, and who are fighting a gigantic system that tells them that they don’t have the right to a better life.”

His experiences in Ecuador were harrowing, and the breaking point came in 2007, when he and a gay friend were drugged at a bar. He woke up with his pants down, in his car, on the edge of a cliff. The car had been crushed beneath a light post.

Soon after, he inquired about an international exchange program, and, with limited English and \$200 in the bank, he left Ecuador on a student visa, bound for college in Oregon. There, he learned about refugee law and decided to apply for asylum. By 2009, it had been granted.

During a graduate program at **Roger Williams University School of Law** in Rhode Island, Mr. Mancheno began guiding low-income people through deportation proceedings and representing them in immigration court. He spent time at the [United Nations’ refugee agency](#) in Washington, D.C., and he helped detainees in Arizona.

“I saw myself — and I still see myself — in every single one of the clients that I represent,” Mr. Mancheno said. “I see the fear in their faces, the uncertainty, the powerlessness.”

In New York, he joined the inaugural class of the [Immigrant Justice Corps](#), a group of young lawyers providing legal services for people facing deportation. And through his work with [The Bronx Defenders](#), he became part of the [New York Immigrant Family Unity Project](#), which provides free legal representation to disenfranchised people detained in immigration court.

Mr. Mancheno — now [a teaching fellow](#) at the Benjamin N. Cardozo School of Law in Manhattan — became a United States citizen less than a year ago.

“People from all over the world — Russia, all different countries in Africa and Europe — we were all there saying that we wanted to be a part of this country,” he recalled of that morning in June. “And just like that, by raising my hand and putting it down, suddenly, I was an American citizen.”

Since then, the climate for refugees and immigrants coming to America has changed dramatically.

“I am Latino. I am an immigrant. I am gay. I am a refugee. And every single one of those elements that are part of my identity are under attack today,” he said. “But even then, there’s now an opportunity for me to actually change the narrative.”

Last month, when [a federal judge in Brooklyn](#) blocked a travel ban under President Trump's executive order on migration, Mr. Mancheno stood — in the same courthouse where he had been declared a citizen — among a group of immigration lawyers representing several people who had been detained at Kennedy Airport and who were facing imminent deportation. Among those people was a Syrian woman, one of Mr. Mancheno's clients. Her story was presented to [the judge](#) minutes before she was to have been flown back to Syria. It was this woman's story, Mr. Mancheno said, that helped the judge to decide to halt the order as quickly as she did.

"Right now, that's what I want to do with my day, with my time, with my energy," Mr. Mancheno said. "The Constitution will never allow me to be president, but if I could, I would run today."