

*I have learned, that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.*

- Henry David Thoreau

In the end, it's all about family. From my life in El Salvador to my life in the United States, I've always surrounded myself with family and I put my children first in my life. I would do anything for them. But when one bus operator's shocking actions unexpectedly changed my life forever, I discovered that there are others who will do just as much for people who aren't even their blood relatives. I'm talking about my attorney, Salvatore J. Zambri of Regan Zambri & Long, who guided me through the civil justice system and represented me with the compassion of a family member.

I had six brothers and sisters growing up in El Salvador. Later in life, while still in El Salvador, I was blessed to give birth to two children, Johana and Oswaldo. My mother and all my brothers and sisters left for the United States to try to make a better life for themselves and their children. I had a harder time deciding whether to leave for America. I wanted to come to the U.S. legally, which meant I couldn't bring my children at first. How could I leave them behind? In the end, I believed in the American promise of equality and democracy, and I wanted my children to be educated here in the United States. I had just nine years of school in El Salvador, and I wanted them to have access to opportunities unavailable to me. So I emigrated to the U.S. on a work permit in 2000, on my daughter Johana's sixth birthday. It was heart-breaking to leave, but I sought to fulfill the American Dream.

Once here, I took a job in the District of Columbia working as a cleaner at La Taberna Del Alabardero restaurant every Monday through Saturday, where I quickly became a valued employee. Then I found night work as a cook's assistant at Café Citron, another D.C. restaurant. I learned how to do everything the cooks did and eventually became a cook myself. I was making \$21,000 a year, sending as much of it back for my children as I could, and saving the rest so I could eventually bring them to the U.S. once I obtained full resident status. I wanted to buy a small house, nothing fancy, but something I could show to them and say, "Children, this is yours." I really enjoyed working, and my co-workers and bosses were very supportive. In the little free time I had, I liked to play softball and ride my bicycle. The American Dream was coming true for me.

In May 2004, I realized I was pregnant with my third child. I prayed for a trouble-free pregnancy so I could keep working to save money, and my prayers were answered. Jennifer Gabriela, or Gabi as we all call her, was born healthy. I

took two months off work to care for her after she was born. When it came time to go back to work, my sister-in-law was happy to take care of Gabi for me. I hurried home, though, from work every day so I could spend as much time with Gabi as possible, and on Saturdays, when La Taberna was closed during the day, I would bring Gabi with me to work. Like my other children, Gabi enriched my life immeasurably.

October 15, 2005, was a Saturday. What happened that day changed my life. In the morning, while I was preparing Gabi's bottle to take with me to work, a voice in my head said, "Don't take your daughter." So I left her with my family and headed to La Taberna alone, which was unusual, as I loved being with Gabi at work. Because of what took place on the way to work, I'm convinced it was God's voice I heard that morning.

I took the "S" bus to northwest, D.C. as I normally did and got off to walk the rest of the way to the restaurant. When I came to the intersection of 17<sup>th</sup> and I Streets, the light was yellow, so I stopped and waited for it to change back to green. Once I saw the "Walk" signal light up, I began crossing the street. I was nearly full across the street when it happened.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, I was struck on the ride side from behind. I felt myself thrown to the ground. When I looked up, I saw a bus looming over me. I tried to move, but I couldn't. When I looked down, I saw that my leg was pinned underneath one of the bus's tires. I was screaming and cried out in pain. The bus then rolled backward and the tire crushed down on my leg yet again. The pain was indescribable. Soon, a police officer and another man arrived and were doing what they could to help me, but all I could do was scream. My foot did not appear to be attached to my leg. I was very scared. An ambulance came and took me to George Washington University Hospital, which would turn out to be my temporary home.

My earliest memories of the treatment all run together, but I do remember that while I was in the intensive care unit, I heard my brother Hugo, who had come to check on me, crying. I opened my eyes and told him, "Don't cry, because I've lost my foot, not my life. I'm alive. You should only cry if I were dead." I tried to be strong, but I was frightened of what would become of my life and worried about how I would be able to care for my children. My dreams seemed shattered.

My leg was injured badly. I sustained compound fractures in my ankle, and my flesh had been horribly mangled. The doctors put three five-millimeter wide pins into my shin, another in my foot, and attached the pins to a big metal frame to hold my foot in its proper position. I spent six weeks in the hospital. Then I returned to the hospital for another operation. This time, they shaved almost all

the skin off my right thigh and grafted it to the exposed flesh on my foot and leg. The process was excruciatingly painful. That was another eight days in the hospital. My upper leg is now grossly disfigured like my lower leg. I started physical therapy in late March 2006. The therapists did their best, and Hugo always came with me to the therapy appointments for support. There just wasn't a whole lot they could do for me.

Given the extreme pain I was suffering, I had to endure another operation last year in which my ankle was fused. My leg and foot are now locked in a 90 degree angle, and always will be. I'll never be able to move about normally. This is a fact of life for me now.

The metal brace, the pins, the cane, the orthopedic boot, the fusion—all of that wasn't as bad as not being able to take care of my children. Even now, I can't kneel or squat when I'm giving Gabi a bath; I have to sit on the commode lid and lean over the tub. When I want to go to the park to play with my children, I have to put on a leg brace and orthopedic shoes, and the half-block walk to the park is almost too much. Softball and riding my bicycle are out of the question. I can't stand for very long, and I have significant lingering pain in my ankle. But I always remember to count my blessings when I think about what would've happened if I had taken Gabi with me that day, if God hadn't intervened. I'm certain she would've been killed by that bus.

After all the treatment was finally over, I knew that everything had changed for me. I was most worried about being unable to work. How was I to bring Johana and Oswaldo to the U.S. from El Salvador? That dream was the whole reason I had worked so hard before the accident. In addition, I had enjoyed working. Due to my injuries, I was barely able to leave my apartment. I became depressed.

I incurred close to \$228,000 of medical bills, and I had no health insurance. In addition to that pile of bills, I knew I wouldn't be able to return to any kind of work that would require me to stand or move, like the cleaning and cooking jobs I once held. And since I couldn't speak English and had so little education, a clerical job was out of the question. In other words, my ability to hold a steady job had been lost. I also faced hundreds of thousands of dollars more in future care costs. I thought I might have a claim against the bus driver, but I had heard horror stories about people being taken advantage of by the legal system. I didn't know at all what to expect from the litigation process. Fortunately, a co-worker recommended an attorney, Mr. Zambri, who had represented her well in the past. I went to his office, and his warm demeanor and obvious competence immediately put me at ease and inspired confidence. He

agreed to represent me. I was grateful, but still worried. I did not realize then that my attorney would become my savior and friend.

We filed suit against the bus driver and the bus company he worked for. It turned out the driver was a part-time employee in his seventies. When the 13-ton bus ran over my leg, he didn't even realize it until the man who had helped me yelled to get the driver's attention. The driver admitted that he never even saw me, although I was in the middle of the crosswalk.

The bus company could see how bad the case looked for them, and they wanted to settle immediately, but Mr. Zambri urged me to be patient while the experts he retained fully evaluated the extent of my injuries and the effect they would have on my life. He told me to focus on my medical treatment and let him take care of developing my case. So we held off on a settlement. Mr. Zambri always talked with me about the exhibits he was putting together for trial and took time to explain them and their purpose. Once the mediation process started, he kept me fully informed of all the developments and offers.

Mr. Zambri was not only compassionate and supportive; he was also zealous. The bus company kept making larger settlement offers, but he knew how strong our case would be at trial, so we held out. He, in fact, stopped the mediation outright on two different occasions because he recognized that the bus company's insurance carrier was not sufficiently prepared and he knew that the company and the carrier did not fully appreciate how serious and extensive my injuries were. He wasn't afraid, and so neither was I, of taking the case to trial. I felt like Mr. Zambri was with me every step of the way, supporting me—just like my family was. I knew the system was going to be fair to me with Mr. Zambri by my side.

In the end, before the case went to trial, the bus company offered a fair settlement, and I accepted. No amount of money could ever restore my leg, but the outcome compensated me for my harms and losses, and it restored my faith in the American way of life. I may have lost use of my leg, but thanks to Mr. Zambri and the civil justice system, and the support of my family, my dreams remain in tact. Despite my injury, I am now a proud United States citizen. I'm surrounded by family, just like I was in El Salvador, and my children's futures are limitless.