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NEWS

Freed US man: Nicaraguan prison was 'horrific'

Jason Puracal spent two years there, charged with drug trafficking, money laundering

The thought of his wife and 5-year-old son born with Down syndrome is what helped Jason Puracal endure two years in a crowded, bug-infested Nicaraguan prison serving a drug sentence that was later withdrawn when he won an appeal.

Now, the 35-year-old Tacoma man feels ecstatic to be back in the United States a free man and able to see his mother, two sisters, his wife and son.

"I'm feeling wonderful, feeling great," Puracal told Natalie Morales on TODAY Tuesday. "It's overwhelming... it's not sunk in. It's still very surreal."

Before last week's appeals victory, Puracal was an American serving a 22-year sentence in a Nicaragua maximum-security prison on money-laundering and drug charges that stemmed from a November 2010 arrest at his beachfront real estate office in the surfing town of San Juan del Sur, near the border with Costa Rica. Prosecutors charged that he used his business as a front for money laundering, selling farms on behalf of suspected drug traffickers. A judge convicted him of all charges in August 2011.

In prison, Puracal says he was assaulted more than once and was hospitalized for poor nutrition. He lost nearly 30 pounds because other inmates would often take his food. "It was the most horrific experience I've ever had to deal with," he told Morales Tuesday. "There were days when I didn't think it was going to end."

Conditions were harsh, but he endured them hoping to eventually go back to his son, Jabu, who has Down syndrome, and his Nicaraguan wife, Scarleth Flores, whom he met in 2006.

"Just thinking of my son, he kept my hopes alive, kept my sprits alive," Puracal said on TODAY.

But the Tacoma, Wash., man says the case against him isn't closed yet. Nicaraguan authorities say they are studying the ruling by a three-judge panel announced last Wednesday before revealing if they will appeal with the Central American nation's Supreme Court.

Puracal said the U.S. government had to negotiate with the country's immigration authorities to let him exit the country on a long holiday weekend, instead of waiting until Monday.

He left the prison Thursday afternoon hunched down in the back seat of a car being driven by his lawyer. They spent the night at a hotel in Managua, the capital, guarded by the country's immigration police. Puracal and his attorney drove to Honduras the next night and then flew from Tegucigalpa to New York on Sunday.

Puracal's case drew the attention of human rights advocates and U.S. lawmakers who defended him and pushed for an appeal hearing after many considered the judicial process flawed with inconsistencies.

Court documents say police had intelligence reports that Puracal and 10 other suspects were awaiting the arrival of a vessel containing drugs. Nicaraguan prosecutors charged that Puracal had used the money of suspected drug trafficker Manuel Ponce Espinoza to buy area farms, but didn't explain how the two men were allegedly connected. Ponce testified in court that he didn't know the American, and Puracal said he didn't know Ponce or any of the other nine defendants.

The appellate court ruled that the sentencing judge failed to carefully examine the evidence and explain the reasons for convicting Puracal and 10 others. Also, the court agreed the judge had violated the defendants' rights by not allowing the defense to introduce evidence. Courts officials said the judge that convicted and sentenced Puracal was missing paperwork to be officially certified to oversee cases.

The American has maintained that all his home sales were legitimate purchases by Americans, Canadians and Europeans looking to establish on the Nicaraguan and Costa Rican coasts. Moreover, he says authorities built an indictment against him based on lies.

"There is no way for me to know why exactly... what motivation the police had to invent such horrible lies about me, without any evidence, without any reason," he told the Associated Press. "I don't know and I don't know if I will ever know why I was put in this situation."

Puracal's family flew to New York to meet him Sunday night after he arrived from Tegucigalpa. His sisters and mother had launched a campaign to release him and took out loans, spending more than half a million dollars. His sister Janis Puracal, a Seattle attorney, was key in the efforts to vacate the charges, Puracal said.

"She has gone above and beyond what any family member would do. She has put in

thousands of hours as an attorney," he told AP.

Despite living nearly two tough years, Puracal says he wouldn't change his decision of moving to Nicaragua. Ten years ago, he traveled there in a Peace Corps mission and taught farmers about vegetable gardening. After ending his stint in 2004, he decided to stay and made San Juan del Sur his home, living in a three-bedroom house overlooking the bay. He started selling homes and then obtained a Re/Max franchise with three other Americans.

On Nov. 11, 2012, masked police officers with AK-47s raided his office and arrested him. First, he shared a cell with between nine and 12 inmates who fought among them and prison guards, he says. Puracal claims the cell was infested with insects and at times there wasn't enough drinking water for inmates, which caused constant stomach pains.

After human rights groups and congressmen complained about the conditions, he was moved to solitary confinement.

The University of Washington graduate said he intends to go back to the school he graduated with degrees in economy and zoology. "I plan to go back to school to the University of Washington. They have a degree in sustainable urban development."

He added, "Nicaragua will always have a place in my heart. I hope to go back there one day to finish the sustainable projects that I started."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Transcript of Interview with Jason Puracal – Man Wrongly Imprisoned: It Was ‘Overwhelming’

back now with the story of a washington state man who spent nearly two years behind bars in a central american prison for a crime he did not commit. jason puracal is here with us this morning, and we'll speak to him in just a moment, but first more on his story from nbc's kerry sanders . kerry, good morning.

good morning. that's right, natalie. jason puracal spent 22 months in prison in one of the most notorious prisons in central america . he was wrongfully convicted of drug trafficking and money-laundering, but he's now free in large part because of the very diligent efforts of his family. a homecoming years in the making.

i'm in america.

this past thursday american jason puracal was set free from this nicaraguan prison after nearly two horrifying

jason puracal first went to nicaragua as a peace corps volunteer. he joined after graduating from the university of washington . during her sis advice in that country, he fell in love with a local beauty, married and started a family. he settled down selling real estate to a growing number of americans who see this picturesque seaside village as the perfect place to retire. in november 2010 , jason 's peaceful life was torn apart when police stormed his remax office. his mother was there visiting when her son was taken into custody.

i was thinking that this is all some strange mistake, and things would be over pretty soon.

instead, jason was held in prison for nine months, then charged and convicted, ultimately sentenced to 22 years in prison for drug trafficking and money laundering . jason 's wife scarlet.

i know 100% that jason is innocent.

there are no drugs in this case.

jason 's family back home launched a full-time campaign to win his freedom. they received support from a wide range of current and former u.s. officials, including tom cash, the former miami station chief for the drug enforcement administration .

i say that there's a lot of major drug traffickers in nicaragua , and there's a lot of major drug traffickers in central america , but jason puracal is certainly not one of them.

thank you, everyone, for praying for me.

nicaraguan justice system eventually agreed with an appeals court overturning jason 's

sentence and setting him free. before he left the country, jason insisted on stopping off to say good-bye to old friends who had stood by him. and then as he was leaving nicaragua and crossing the border into honduras, he began to take pleasure in things that only a man who had lost and regained his freedom could truly appreciate.

have you ever seen such a beautiful traffic jam ? this is a wonderful traffic jam .

enjoying a traffic jam . jason puracal physically free, experts say fully understanding that he's mentally free. that will take some time. natalie.

kerry sanders , thanks so much. jason puracal is here, along with his sister janice who fought so hard to save him. good morning to both of you.

good morning.

good to have you here. jason , how are you feeling and has it sunk in you're free?

i'm feeling wonderful, feeling great. it's overwhelming and, no, it's not sunk in. it's still very surreal.

tell me what those 22 months in the nicaraguan prison were like. describe the conditions, and how did you keep your hopes up?

it was the most horrific experience i've ever had to deal with. there were days when i didn't think it was going to end. just thinking of my son, he kept my hopes alive. kept my spirits alive.

and i know it was a really hard time for your son as well, and can you tell me how that reunion was with him?

it was overwhelming joy to have him in my arms again. it's been hard to let him -- put him down these last 24 hours , so --

yeah, i can imagine. i read that you said you slept with him in between you and your wife, and you just didn't want to leave his side.

that was the first night that i actually got seven hours sleep. my wife and son piled on top of me.

oh, amazing. janice, as jason has said, you and your family are the reason he is out and free today. what do you think was the key to the success in this case?

you know, it's really hard to pinpoint one thing that really was the tipping point, that pushed us over the edge . we had a phenomenal team of individuals who were so dedicated to jason , and it was people that had known him and people that had never met him, but knew his spirit and knew what an incredible injustice this was, and they were

willing to fight for him for two years.

tell me what that moment was like when you got the phone call , when you found out that your brother would finally be set free .

jason 's defense attorney called me from nicaragua . he doesn't speak english, and he was telling me that the ruling would be free and when the family figured it out i was screaming and yelling. everyone was so excited.

a long two years for all of you. i mean, how much has this changed you, jason ?

definitely affected me, but i went to nicaragua to do sustainable development , and i plan to go back to school to the university of washington . they have a degree in sustainable urban development .

do you want to go back to nicaragua some day? do you feel like what happened to you was such an injustice would keep you away from a country you love so much? you even mayor aid local.

yes. my son was born there and nicaragua will always have a place to my heart. i hope to go back there one day to finish the sustainable projects that i started.

do you ever understand? do you know why this happened to you? have you tried to figure out what it was that made them have this case against you which turned out to be a complete bogus case in the end?

that's a question i've been asking myself every day for -- for almost two years, and i probably will never know the answer of why they invented such horrible lies about me, but right now i just want to focus on my family and moving forward, so –

it's great to have you back, and so glad that you're able to spend time with your family. enjoy this time. thank you so much.

thank you.

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