

Al Letson: From the Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX, this is Reveal. I'm Al Letson. It's September 2021, and Omar Gómez Trejo is leading a crowd of reporters down the slope of a steep and stony ravine somewhere in the Southern Mexican state of Guerrero. The journalist traveled more than six hours in a caravan of vehicles for a chance to see this site. Despite the harsh sun overhead, the treacherous path under foot, the thorny brush and biting flies, the group is eager to visit this place. It's been closed to them since investigators found a collection of bone fragments here. The reporters cluster around Omar and turn on their microphones. In a way, all of Mexico is waiting to hear what Omar has to say. He's not a politician or big time movie star, nothing like that. Omar is a 40 something human rights lawyer with a scruffy beard, Clark Kent glasses, and tattoos up his arms. He's at the center of an investigation into one of the most horrific crimes in Mexico's modern history.

Omar Gómez Trejo: We're opening new lines of investigation and identifying more places to search. We continue to make inroads.

Al Letson: Maybe you've heard of this case. When students from a rural teacher's college were violently attacked by police, 43 young men have taken away and never seen again. It happened in September of 2014, and it scarred Mexico. More than seven years have passed since the disappearance of the students and the parents continue to live without knowing what happened to their sons or why. The president of Mexico tapped Omar to solve what's come to be called the Ayotzinapa case, named for the teacher's college the students attended.

Omar Gómez Trejo: My team and I want to communicate to the families of the 43 students of Ayotzinapa our deepest commitments with the search of your sons. We will not lose hope, and we will keep doing whatever is humanly possible to find your children.

Al Letson: On the one hand, it makes perfect sense for Omar to be the face of this high profile government investigation. He's been involved in it almost since the beginning. On the other hand, it's the last thing he ever expected given his past experience. You see, not that long ago, the Mexican authorities were doing everything they could to get Omar off the case and out of the country.

Omar Gómez Trejo: I was put in a place where I was actively being targeted. I was all over the media being set up.

Al Letson: The case of the missing students has been an odyssey for Omar, the families of the missing boys, and the people of Mexico. It also has a surprising connection to US policy. We're going to tell you this story in a way no one else can, because for the past year and a half, we've been following the investigation into this crime from the inside. We've done that with help from Omar himself. He's allowed Reveal reporter Anayansi Diaz Cortes, and our partner for this

story human rights investigator Kate Doyle, into his day-to-day life. They've been having regular conversations.

Anayansi [Spanish].

Diaz-Cortes:

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Al Letson: And Omar's even been keeping an audio diary.

Omar Gómez Trejo: [Spanish].

Al Letson: Kate is with the National Security Archive, a nonprofit research institute in Washington with no ties to the US government. They use freedom of information laws to expose human rights atrocities in Latin America and hold their governments accountable. And Anayansi's been following this case since it happened in 2014.

Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes: I was living in Los Angeles when this all went down, and LA is very much a Mexican city, so it took all of us. It was huge news. And I was covering Mexico at the time and I just remember wanting to grab my editor by the collar and say, "Send me there. I need to cover this. Public radio needs to be there." But I was pregnant. I was seven months pregnant and it was impossible. So instead, I remember just following obsessively on my phone as it was unfolding.

Al Letson: Anayansi says the story is especially important to her as a Mexican American.

Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes: The Mexican part of me knows that this is a crucial test for Mexico's justice system, because it goes beyond these 43 missing students. More than 90,000 people are missing in Mexico today. And the perpetrators, they haven't been brought to justice. If you ask the families right now of the disappeared, they'd say that the government doesn't care, that they have to seek their own justice. And then there's the American part of me. The American part of me wants people to understand that there is a US connection, and that they should care, because we bear responsibility on this side, too. This story connects to the war on drugs, because in Ayotzinapa, it took a bad situation in Mexico and made it so much worse. It actually stoked chaos, corruption, and violence. And Americans don't even think about this while Mexicans have to live with the consequences of the war on drugs every single day.

Al Letson: Reveal is devoting three episodes to the Ayotzinapa case, which will take us from the heart of rural Mexico to the suburbs of Chicago. When we come back, Anayansi introduces us to one of the young men who was there the night of 2014 when it all started.

Nico: And then two or three police cars arrived, local police. They barricaded us first from the front and then the back.

Al Letson: This is Reveal's serial investigation, After Ayotzinapa. Chapter One, The Missing 43.

Al Letson: If you like what we do and you want to help, well, it's pretty simple. Just write us a review on Apple podcast. It's easy and only takes a few seconds. Just open the Apple podcast app on your phone, search for Reveal, then scroll down to where you see, "Write a review." And there, tell them how much you love the host. Your review makes it easier for listeners to find us. And well, it really does make a difference. And if you do it, you will get a personal thank you for me right now. Not him, not... You. Yes, you. Thank you so much. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. All right.

Al Letson: From the center for investigative reporting and PRX, this is Reveal. I'm Al Letson. What ended up being one of Mexico's most notorious human rights crimes took place late one Friday night in September 2014. Before we move on, we should mention that this story does include some graphic details of gun violence. Reveal's Anayansi Diaz Cortes walks us through what happened through the eyes of one of the students who was lucky enough to survive.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: It's September 26th, 2014, and Nico [inaudible] is resting in his dorm room after band practice. The first week of classes kicked his butt, but he's happy. Nico's studying to become a teacher at a rural college in Southern Mexico. He's 21, old to be a freshman. After high school, he fixed fridges and washing machines for a couple of years, but he could barely make ends meet. Then his buddy, Daniel [inaudible], told him about this teacher's college. "You have no other choice if you want to study," Daniel told him. "Come on, let's do it together.

Nico: And so this became a light of hope, because I wanted to keep studying. I didn't want to get stuck just working. So I took his advice.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Daniel had just turned 18. Nico felt like his older brother.

Nico: We tried to do everything together, to always be together. I was older and I promised his family I would take care of him.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Daniel [inaudible] from Guerrero, one of the poorest states in Mexico, where there's few opportunities for young men. Someone put it to me this way. In these parts of Guerrero, boys are born [Spanish], farm workers. If that's not what you want to do in life, you've got three main choices: trek to the US to try your luck there, join [Spanish], as in become a drug trafficker, or come to this college, [Spanish] and study to become a teacher. That's what Daniel and Nico wanted.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: But there's a few things that you should know about the way it works. First, the school is free, funded by the state, and it's bare bones. There are no dorms. Nico and Daniel live with eight to 10 students in a tiny concrete room with no windows. A single light bulb hangs from the ceiling. They all sleep on the floor,

and [Spanish] is rooted in leftist politics and social protest. It was founded in 1926 after the Mexican revolution. Its mission? To create a generation of activist teachers who would fight for the rights of the poor. They're known for protesting a lot. They speak up against government corruption and police brutality. The biggest event of the year is a pilgrimage to Mexico City every October 2nd. That's the day in 1968 when leftist students protesting military and police violence were gunned down in a public plaza.

Man on News: The troops have moved in. It started off as a peaceful demonstration. The army was circling this plaza called the Plaza [inaudible]. They were holding a peaceful rally, but now the troops have come and you can hear what it sounds like.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** That anniversary is just a few days away when a group of older students show up and tell Nico and other freshman, "Get ready. We have a job to do."

Nico: They just said, "Let's go this way."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** He and 60 other students get on a bus parked on campus. One of the older kids says, "Vamos [Spanish]. We're going to hit the streets and ask for money, donations for the school." But asking for donations isn't the only thing this trip is about. The older students plan to take over buses so kids from other rural schools can make that pilgrimage to Mexico City on October 2nd. I know this sounds odd. Maybe the word stealing comes to mind, but it's more like borrowing. Students in Mexico have been commandeering buses for decades. It's one of the only ways they can travel, because the state doesn't give them the money they need to have buses. Most of the time, the bus companies and drivers go along with it and help the students out.

Nico: On the road, I don't know, I felt a kind of heavy vibe. Everything was calm, but I sensed something strange. But we kept going.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** They pull into a town called Iguala about halfway between their college and Mexico City.

Nico: We got to the bus station and started to spread out. We woke up and some [Spanish] were already in the station. We started to take some buses. We grabbed three in total and we had two other buses that we brought from the school, so there were five.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Usually when police hear about students taking buses, they'll try to bust them. But they have to catch them first.

Nico: We started to leave, but then we arrived at the point where there is a town square.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** They keep driving, and so far, no cops. It feels like they got away.

Nico: Then two or three police cars arrived. Local police. They barricaded us. First from the front and then the back.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Now, what typically happens is a shouting match, maybe some rock throwing, an arrest or two if students get rowdy. But tonight...

Nico: They didn't want us at all. They just got down and started shooting. Shooting to kill.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Nico's account was recorded about a week after the attack by an American reporter covering the story. We'll meet him later in the show. This is the first time it's being broadcast. We should also mention that Nico is not his real name. We changed it because he's been threatened and harassed for telling his story.

Nico: One of our [Spanish] tried to get out and do something to move the police cars, and that's when the first one of us was shot.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** [Spanish].

Nico: I saw my [Spanish] on the ground lying in a pool of blood, convulsing, and that the police just never stopped shooting.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Nico throws himself on the floor, dodging shards of glass and bullets. He inches toward the back of the bus.

Nico: I was taking cover near a broken window. It was totally busted, but I could peek through. I saw two cops pointing at us, and then I saw a bunch of [Spanish]. They had already been arrested, but they continued to shoot, and all of us continued to shout.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** "We are students! We are not armed!" On another bus, Lalo Lopez is up for the fight with the cops. Again, we changed his name because he's been harassed for speaking out.

Lalo Lopez: I was up in the front with the bus driver. He gave me the fire extinguisher and he said, "Here, throw this at them. It'll explode, and then all you guys could escape, and then so can I." But right when I threw it, they shot me. And that's when we realized we were done and we gave up.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The bullet went right through his arm, blood everywhere. They tell the driver, "We can't keep fighting. We're going to surrender."

Lalo Lopez: When we got off the bus, the police stood on the side of the door and started to pull us out and put our hands behind our heads. My arm was hurting me, and then they started to throw us down on the ground.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Lalo Lopez:** And then one student, a junior, stands up to the cops. They grabbed and beat him in the stomach with the butt of the rifle. They knocked him to the ground and started to beat him in the face. "If you're such bad asses, then show it now, you damn [Spanish]."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The next thing Lalo feels is a gun barrel on the side of his head. Then a cop says...

Lalo Lopez: "What if I kill him?" And I thought, "Well, this is it." And then just seconds later, he moves the rifle away from my forehead and that same guy calls an ambulance.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The ambulance arrives a few later, and Lalo is taken to the hospital. As they're driving away, he's able to glance back.

Lalo Lopez: That was when they started to put my [Spanish] in different police vehicles. I could see it. My [Spanish] were just crying. None of them said a word.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** From inside his bus, Nico sees this too. Police push the students towards some pickup trucks and make them climb in the back. One leg over the tailgate and then the other, they force them to lie down. The trucks move out, the cops ride in the back and on the sides, resting their feet on the students' backs.

Nico: Those of us inside the first bus were still just waiting for it to be our turn. But then the police all started leaving. Then we didn't hear anything. Everything went quiet. The street was calm, silent. And that was when we started to get off the bus.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** It's around 10:30, 11, and the students gather outside the buses. Nico hugs his friend Daniel. He can't believe they made it out alive. They check who's injured, who's okay, who's missing. They see bullet holes, casing, huge pools of blood. Despite their shock, their instinct is to secure what is now a crime scene.

Nico: We agreed not to move a single shell. The [Spanish] were taking photos and filming. Some people started to arrive, including parents, but they started to walk all over the evidence, so we made a human chain to protect the area.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The students called their teachers and local reporters, and soon they show up. The gathering turns into an impromptu press conference, with students giving statements, trying to describe what just happened. But there's so much they can't explain: why the police opened fire, where they took their buddies. When suddenly, Nico sees a suspicious car. Inside, a man with a machine gun.

Nico: He started shooting in the air, then shooting at us. The bullets hitting the pavement. It was like Christmas, like firecrackers. So what we did then was run.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: The next few minutes are chaos. Nico finds himself with about eight other students crouching behind cars. Then they make a run for it and jump over a fence into a lot. Up ahead are two small houses. The owners come out and students ask to stay in their patio, which was hidden from view.

Nico: And yes, they let us stay there to hide there and wait. We were all bunched up together in the patio, trying to hide as best we could.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: One of the students gets a call.

Nico: That was when someone told us that two students had been hit. One of them was Chino.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: El Chino, as in curly, because of Daniel's curly hair. It was Daniel [Spanish], Nico's buddy.

Nico: I didn't want to believe that it was Daniel. I wanted to believe that he had been able to run and get to safety.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Around this time, Nico feels a drop of rain, and soon it's pouring. The boys huddled together in the downpour.

Nico: One [Spanish] told me that he had been standing next to Daniel and was able to see him where he was lying in the street crying for help. He said he wanted to go back, but those assholes were still shooting. He said he saw Daniel with blood on his neck. I was very upset with that [Spanish]. "Wow, why didn't you tell me?" If I had known and if I had seen, I wouldn't have cared if they shot me. I would've gone back for him.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: And finally, just as dawn is breaking, the downpour becomes a drizzle.

Nico: It was around six in the morning when we got a call from a [Spanish]. He asked where we were and told us that it was all over. He told us to come out of hiding, that it was okay now.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: They walk out onto the puddled streets, soaking wet.

Al Letson: News of the attack on Nico and the other students would soon spread throughout Mexico, sparking a movement. This is when Omar, the young human rights lawyer, gets involved.

Omar Gómez Trejo: Wow. No, I had never seen a protest that big in Mexico.

Al Letson: Anayansi is back with that part of the story in a minute. You're listening to Reveal. From the Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX, this is Reveal. I'm Al Letson. As the sun breaks through the clouds over Iguala, the rain stops and Nico decides to make his way back to the school.

Nico: The minutes felt eternal, and then once we arrived at [Spanish], we felt a sense of relief.

Al Letson: By the time he gets there, word has spread about the attack on the students and the murder of Daniel and others. And when Nico goes to the dorms, Daniel's parents are there.

Nico: And his mother broke down crying. And all I could do was hug her and ask for her forgiveness for not taking care of him like I wanted to.

Al Letson: Back in Iguala where the shooting took place, things are in chaos. Some students are still hiding in houses, too scared to come out. Others are on the hillsides miles away. Some of the guys regroup in Iguala Center and try to tally who's missing. They figure out that three students are dead. Three bystanders were killed too. But they can't find the dozens of other students who were arrested and taken away by police in pick-up trucks. The survivors assume those boys are in custody, so they make their way to the courthouse and find the town's prosecutor. "We want to bail out our [Spanish] and go in peace," they tell them. But there's no one to bail out. The missing students aren't in jail or in custody, and the police say they have no idea where they are. And to this day, we still don't know what happened to them. Reveal's Anayansi Diaz Cortes got to spend time with the mother of one of the missing boys and has her story.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: It's been more than seven years since Nico and the other students were pulled out of those buses. [Spanish] sleeps in her son's room every single night. "It's better this way," she tells me.

Cristi Bautista: This is his room. A long time had passed. I would see his room and I felt like I couldn't go in. It made me sad and everything. And one day I made the decision to sleep in his room to feel closer to him.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: So every night, she slips into his bed, imposing her loneliness onto his space. And every morning she leaves it. Clothes, shoes, hair gel exactly how he left it when he went to college in 2014. [Spanish] was one of the dozens of boys taken away by police that Friday night. [Spanish], who everyone calls [Spanish], lives in a village deep in the mountains of Southern Mexico, so she didn't get the news until days after the incident. Her brother read her the newspaper headline over the phone.

Cristi Bautista: And I began to just feel this pressure in my chest. Then I called him, and nothing. It went to voicemail, voicemail, voicemail, and I began to worry.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: [Spanish] can't get a hold of Benjamin, so she gets on a bus and heads to the school.

Cristi Bautista: I cried whole way. I don't know. I just felt... Why? What happened to my son? Why doesn't he answer me? I would try to think positive. Maybe they stole his phone. I kept thinking this. I just started crying.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Once at the school, she stands under the Archway at the entrance, hoping, praying that her son would be there and run up to her.

Cristi Bautista: And so I went up to one of the boys and I said, "I came to visit my son." And he said, "Ah, [Spanish]. What's your son's name?" And he said to me, "[Spanish], your son disappeared with the other [Spanish]."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: [Spanish] can't find the words to respond.

Cristi Bautista: "But don't worry. We're looking for them. We're going to find them."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: But the students were not found that day, or the next, or the next. [Spanish]. And that's when their martyrdom began. [Spanish] and all the other parents go to the state capital with photos and birth certificates. They file missing persons claims and demand their boys be found. What did they tell you?

Cristi Bautista: Nothing. I kept asking what, how, what happened? Because the survivors saw everything. How their [Spanish] were taken away in police cars.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: It was like they were disregarding what Nico and the others had lived through that night. All the authorities did was swab the parents for DNA and take blood samples. But that wasn't enough for the mothers and fathers.

Cristi Bautista: We went to march. We went to Mexico City to march.

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: Within days, the families take to the streets. Hundreds of people join them because even in those early days, the families fear they're being lied to, that the government isn't doing enough to find their children. So instead of waiting for the authorities to just tell them what happened, the families decide to get outside help. With their lawyers, they get a renowned Argentine forensic team to work on the case on their behalf. Slowly, the news of what happened in Iguala starts to spread. John Gibbler remembers seeing the first headline.

John Gibbler: September 27th is my birthday. An initial headline read something like, "Police and students from Ayotzinapa clash in Iguala. Six people dead and 57 students disappeared."

Anayansi Diaz-Cortes: John is a journalist in Mexico City. He's from the US, from Texas, but he's been in Mexico a really long time.

John Gibbler: And the initial impact was just shock and disbelief.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** So a few days later, on October 2nd, he heads to the same march that Nico and the other students had been planning to go to with those buses, the march that commemorates the 1968 student massacre in Mexico City.

John Gibler: And the march just seemed totally deflated. Of course, nobody had come from Guerrero, because people in Guerrero were desperately looking for 43 disappeared students at that moment. There was no presence of this mass force disappearance in this march. That is actually what shocked me. And that was the moment that was when I decided, "We need to go. We collectively, many reporters, need to move quickly, because something really, really big is happening."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** That same night, John goes home and packs a change of clothes, two notebooks, and a tiny old Sony handheld recorder. The next morning, John shows up at the school and starts piecing together what happened the week before. He gets to work interviewing every survivor, including Nico and Lalo, who you heard from earlier in the show. He figures out that the actual number of students taken by the police is 43. His interviews end up becoming crucial to understanding that night in Iguala. The very first recorded accounts from survivors and eyewitnesses. While he was doing those interviews...

John Gibler: News came out that the police in Iguala had located a series of mass graves in the hillside outside of town.

Anayansi And with this news...

Diaz-Cortes:

John Gibler: A group of us all went in a small caravan to Iguala, two cars. We were trailed, probably starting about five miles before getting into the city, by men on motorcycles who at every red light would pull up right next to us and just look in and listen to our conversation and then keep following us until the last turn we took.

Anayansi The last turn is a few miles from town on a hillside.

Diaz-Cortes:

John Gibler: So we get there. There's an army blockade. The Marines are there. The state police are there. And they wouldn't let reporters get close to the grave sites.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** One soldier even shoots off his gun to scare photographers inching too close to the site. John recognizes the police commander and walks up to him.

John Gibler: "Do you know how they found this, these graves?" And that was the official who told me that the body and the graves belong to the students and that the rest of the students had gone home. Of course, I said, "That's impossible." We just came from the school. We were just with the parents. And he's like, "No, no, no, look. You don't have good cell service here. You'll see when you get back down into town that the rest of the students are back home," which is that level of [Spanish]. There's just shamelessness.

- Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Back at the school, the parents are getting the news about the graves.
- Cristi Bautista:** They found the bodies very burned, very tortured. They're the students. That was such a heavy blow. Maybe my son is there. The chills I got. I lost all my strength. I remember saying, "Oh God, give me strength. I don't want to faint here." I just grabbed hold of myself until the shock passed.
- Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** By this time, the team of independent forensics experts has arrived from Argentina and they begin taking their own swabs from the families of the 43 missing students.
- Cristi Bautista:** They said, "With this DNA test, they will not be able to fool you." They said, "We're going to help you. The government won't be able to give you a body that isn't your son and then tell you to go home." They told us, "We don't know if it's them, so please calm down." But how are we going to calm down? We couldn't control it. We were just weeping.
- Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** The government gave the team from Argentina access to the bodies found in the mass graves, and they spent days collecting DNA and comparing it to the families. In the end, there were 28 bodies in the graves, but they weren't the students. They were other people, a mother and a child, older men, women. It was a different group of disappeared people.
- Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** This is where the story of the 43 missing students becomes part of something much bigger. See, for years, people had gone missing all across Mexico, tens of thousands of them. Family of the missing people suspected gangs or cartels, but they didn't go to the cops. They couldn't. They believed the police were involved or too afraid to investigate. Discovering the mass graves changed everything in Mexico. If these were not the students, who were they? Who buried them there? Many other graves could there be? Just like that, Mexico woke up to the reality of the tens of thousands of people who had simply vanished. It propelled a movement, and it swept up people like Omar Gomez Trejo.
- Omar Gómez Trejo:** It was a watershed moment in Mexico. The feeling in Mexico was outrage. It was like, "Are they, or are they not the students?" And this question over and over again, well, it begins to create a cloud of doubt. Tell us the truth about what happened and how it happened, and especially about what the government was doing in that moment.
- Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Omar is the man we met at the top of the show. At this point, he's working for the United Nations in Mexico City. And along with thousands of others, he takes to the streets.
- Omar Gómez Trejo:** Our job was to go and accompany the protest with our UN vests, going along with them to make sure that it was a peaceful demonstration, that there was no violence by the authorities. Meaning, we were also sharing in that sentiment. I remember the feeling of outrage, fear, despair.

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés:** And now though protests represent the heartbreak of tens of thousands of families whose loved ones have disappeared. The 43 students exposed a national crisis.

Omar Gómez Trejo: Wow, no. I had never seen a protest that big in Mexico. Never. How is it possible that 43 students are uncovering the mass grave that is Guerrero?

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés:** That was in the city. In the countryside, people take to the hillsides with sticks and flash slides to poke the ground and look for remains. And they find more mass graves that month. Many more, containing dozens of bodies. The bodies in those graves aren't the students either. Back at his office, Omar follows the news and slowly becomes obsessed with the case. He'd been telling his boss to let him work on it more closely, and one day his boss pulls him into his office. "You've been wanting to be a part of this. Well, there's been a breakthrough. The government thinks they found the students and the attorney general needs someone from the UN to go. You're it." The government said they had a lead. The next thing Omar knows, he's in a helicopter with another UN observer on their way to a garbage dump in a place called [Spanish], about half an hour south of the town where the students were taken.

Omar Gómez Trejo: We flew to a soccer field in [Spanish] near the dump, and suddenly we see many trucks drive by and a person with a baseball cap comes up to us. "Hi, I'm Tomas [inaudible]. Good afternoon."

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés:** Tomas Zerón, a trusted aid of President Peña Nieto, and head of the government's investigation into the case. He orders a car and an SUV pulls up in front of them. Omar and his colleague [Spanish] slide in.

Omar Gómez Trejo: Pelar and I, we're sitting in the middle, and all of a sudden, these two guys get in with their huge guns.

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés:** The whole time Omar is thinking.

Omar Gómez Trejo: We're thinking, "Are they arresting us, or what?" And then all of a sudden, the SUV speeds off and takes us directly to the dump.

**Anayansi
Díaz-Cortés:** It's all very confusing. They bounce along a rocky road until they get to the dump. From a distance, he can see forensic people sifting through dirt and garbage.

Omar Gómez Trejo: You couldn't really tell who was who because they had their hazmat suits, but we knew the Argentinian team was working there.

Mimi Doretti: We're in this gigantic hole full of garbage, which is very weird. There was an entire wall of 40 meters all full of garbage.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** That's Mercedes Doretti, leader of the Argentine forensic team working for the parents of missing students. Everyone calls her Mimi. Like Omar, the government called Mimi to come to the dump. Mimi's team sets up a perimeter and a grid to analyze the entire scene for evidence of the students.

Mimi Doretti: There were bones. We couldn't tell yet if they were human or not, but we could see there were bones and that all that area was burned.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Mimi and her team work hard for the next day or so. They're examining the bones they turn up in the charred remains of garbage. Then they get an urgent message from government officials.

Mimi Doretti: One of the two federal prosecutors came to the garbage dump and said, "You have to come to another place, to another site." And I said, "But we're working here. We don't have a lot of people." "You have to come."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** She climbs up the wall of garbage with the prosecutor pressing her to hurry. "We must go now." And she gets into an official car and speeds away. It's a dizzying turn. Just as urgently as the government wanted them to rush to the dump a few days ago, they're now switching gears and sending them to a different place.

Mimi Doretti: And that's when they took us to the Rio San Juan, where there was another completely different scene.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** This time, it's at a small river. And near the riverbank, there's already a Mexican forensics team well into their work. They were brought there by Tomas Zerón. They were cleaning and laying out burnt remains on the ground. The remains were in a plastic garbage bag that had been pulled from the water.

Mimi Doretti: They were coming out with fragments of bones, a lot of different fragments, maybe, I don't know how many. There could have been a hundred or more something like that.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** To her eye, the bones all seem charred, almost cremated. She looks for a fragment that could be a good candidate for testing.

Mimi Doretti: I remember very distinctly I saw this fragment of bone that was very different from the rest because it was way bigger and it was almost not burned. It immediately caught my attention because I thought it was very different from the rest and because I thought, "If in this bag, there is more like this, we're going to be able to get DNA and so we are going to know if these remains belong or not to the students."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** And was there more like that?

Mimi Doretti: No. That was the only one.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** And so Mimi sets that bone aside, feeling reassured. Even if it was the only bone in the bag, it would be tested and the world would know if the students died here or not. Then she sees Tomas Zerón's agents approaching.

Mimi Doretti: They brought these two guys to the scene. [Spanish] that they were holding from the neck like that.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Mimi grabs the scruff of her own neck to show me how they were holding the men. She remembers one in particular, one of his eyes was black and swollen.

Mimi Doretti: The face of the guy, I always remember that he seemed absolutely terrorized. Looks like a kid. It was very, very young, very, very scared.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** And there in front of dozens of people, this man who looks like a kid starts shaking, and in a barely audible voice, he begins to confess to the crime.

Mimi Doretti: He starts saying, "Well, we were in different cars. We brought the students up there to the garbage dump. We killed them. We burned them the whole night."

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Mimi Doretti:** Mimi is aghast by this play by play.
There's 50 people here. This guy is incriminating himself. Their lawyer is walking around, not really actively giving them advice.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:
Mimi Doretti:** Then, one of Zerón's men turns to Mimi.
"Ask questions." Am I authorized to interrogate someone? I'm just one anthropologist just doing the work. And I was like, "No, no, no. I'm not going to..." Because I felt, I'm not sure this is legal.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** Almost as if sensing her concern, the police start talking about how well they're treating the detainees.

Mimi Doretti: And the fact that they call my name and the fact that they said several times, "See how we treat them well, see how we treat them well." My mind was exactly the opposite. And that's when I thought, "Is this torture here?" For me, it was a red flag there.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:** But as far as the Mexican authorities are concerned, they're on their way to solving the case. And just over a month after the attack on the students, they hold a press conference. That's Attorney General, Jesus Murillo Karam. For the next hour, the Attorney General shares photos, videotaped confessions, and maps. He says that after police attacked the buses and killed three students, they took the 43 others away. He says these cops were working in cahoots with a local gang called Guerreros Unidos, led by [Spanish], known as [Spanish], orders them killed. [Spanish] is now on the run, he says.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:**

Then the Attorney General shows a video of the same guy who Mimi saw at the river. He's confessing to killing the boys. "We took them in the largest truck," he says, "to the garbage dump at [Spanish]." By the time they are arrive, he says 15 of the boys are already dead, smothered under the weight of their classmates. After showing the video, the Attorney General continues. He says the rest of the boys were taken to the garbage dumps and shot dead one by one. The gang members threw the bodies down a steep hill of garbage, then covered them with tires, wood, plastic, and finally gasoline, and burned them for 16 hours. They put the remains into plastic garbage bags and took them to a nearby river. There, he says they dumped out all the remains except for one bag, which they threw into the shallow water. That's the bag that had the bone laid out when Mimi arrived at the river.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:**

"Thank you, enough. I'm tired now." This is how the Attorney General ends the hour long press conference. And that one line, [Spanish], becomes a rallying cry for the parents. "I am tired." The parents do not believe the government's story. They have the same suspicions as Mimi Doretti. It just doesn't seem plausible. Here's [Spanish] who lost her son, Benjamin. "What do you think the truth is," I ask her.

Cristi Bautista:

Whatever it is, I need to know. I need the truth. I want my son to return to achieve his dreams of being someone in this life.

**Anayansi
Diaz-Cortes:**

Within weeks of the Attorney General's press conference, they travel to Mexico City and gather in front of President Peña Nieto's residence. But he doesn't come out. He won't face them.

Al Letson:

In a matter of weeks, the lives of Doña Cristi and the other parents have been turned upside down. First came the news of the attack on their sons. Three killed and 43 taken away by police. Now the government was telling them the police were mixed up with a local gang and their sons were dead. Investigators seemed anxious to close the case and tell the families to move on. But the parents knew there was more to the story. They had a lot of questions like, "Why were the students attacked in the first place?" Next week, we meet an American DEA agent who's convinced that the answer has a lot to do with an illegal drug operation right here in the US.

Mark Giuffre:

These students hijacked the wrong bus. They hijacked the wrong bus. To me, it was just so crystal clear at that, if not for that being the bus they hijacked, my hypothesis is they might all very well be alive today.

Al Letson:

And we'll learn how Omar Gomez Trejo found himself at the center of a new investigation, one that put in question everything the Mexican authorities were saying about that bloody night in Iguala. To see cell phone video of the attack and documents related to the investigation, visit revealnews.org/disappeared. Our lead producer is Anayansi Diaz Cortes. Kate Doyle with the National Security Archive is our partner and co-producer for this series. Taki Telonidis edited the show. We have production help from

Reveal's David Rodriguez and Bruce Heel. Thanks to Tom Blanton, Megan deTura, and Claire Dorfman from the National Security Archive, and to Laura Sarcheski, Lisa Pollock, John Gibler and Ariana Rosas. Special thanks to Santiago Aguirre, Maria Luisa Aguilar from Central Pro, and Maureen Meyer from the Washington Office on Latin America.

Al Letson:

Victoria Baranetsky is our general counsel. Our production manager is Amy Mostafa. Original score and sound design by the dynamic duo, Jay Breezy, Mr. Jim Briggs, and Fernando my man Arruda. They had help from Claire Mullen, Kathryn Steyer Martinez, and Steven Rascon. Our digital producer is Sarah Merck. Our CEO is Kaizar Campwala. Sumi Aggarwal is our editor in chief, and our executive producer is Kevin Sullivan. Our theme music is by [inaudible], Lightning. Support for Reveal is provided by the Reva and David Logan Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. McArthur Foundation, the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, the Ford Foundation, the Heising-Simons Foundation, the Hellman Foundation, the Democracy Fund, and the In As Much Foundation. Reveal is a co-production of the Center for Investigative Reporting and PRX. I'm Al Letson. And remember, there is always more to the story.