

Words by Sue Willman on receiving the “Valor’s Award” from Catalan Bar Association on behalf of Colombian Caravana

1 June 2023
Seu Vella (Lleida)

Dear Colleagues

Let me share a story about a hero of mine.

Surprisingly he is a lawyer!

...his name is Reinaldo Villalba Vargas, and he works as a lawyer with the Colectivo José Alvear Restrepo, an acronym for CAJAR, the well-known Collective of human rights defenders in Colombia, who are under state surveillance and under threat from paramilitaries.

When Reinaldo's son was very young, he asked his father: "Dad, why do they kill so many of your friends? Reinaldo replied: Because my friends are looking for justice, and there are people who don't like justice.

Another morning his child saw him putting on a bulletproof vest and asked. Dad, what is this? Reinaldo hesitated; my dear, it is an orthopedic device. Dad, tell me, can bullets pass through this device?

Because of the bullets, and the kidnappings and attacks against lawyers like Reinaldo, CAJAR asked for our help, so in 2008, the International Caravana of Jurists was born in London, thanks to Sara Chandler. **The idea was for us to offer a different kind of bulletproof vest,** built on publicity, and international solidarity, in other words, to shine a light on what was happening in Colombia to stop the bullets and them from killing our colleagues there.

I am delighted that we have been accompanied during our biannual visits by lawyers from Canada, Mexico, Europe, and of course, from the Basque Country and Catalonia—we had Catalan coordinators who are here.

The friendship and support that you offer us today have motivated us to continue the work of the Caravana through fifteen years of civil war and challenges.

My story of Reinaldo ends with his achievement in bringing to justice former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez who was under house arrest until the second half of 2020 when he fled the jurisdiction of the Supreme Court to evade it.

So, we accept this award with humility and gratitude on behalf of Reinaldo and on behalf of all Colombian lawyers who never falter in the pursuit of justice in Colombia.