

Jonathan Mann Award for Global Health and Human Rights Nomination for Dr. Juan Manuel Canales Ruiz

Why are you recommending this person for the Jonathan Mann Award?

Juan Manuel Canales has worked in conflictive zones of El Salvador and Mexico for the past twenty-five years helping marginalized peasant and indigenous communities demand their human right to health care by establishing community medicine and public health programs.

Security forces in both countries have at times viewed health care for these populations as subversive and have targeted medical providers like Dr. Canales. He has worked tirelessly, in the most stressful conditions and without regard for his own safety, to train health care promoters, to augment scarce medical supplies by promoting and using indigenous remedies, and to pioneer the use of community radio as a vehicle for public health education.

He has demonstrated a rare blend of compassion, commitment, and intelligence that has endeared him to the communities he has served; inspired those he has mentored and trained; and allowed him to systematically apply community-based epidemiology to reduce morbidity and mortality. His humility has kept him out of the limelight and he is the first to give credit to others, but anyone who has worked with him knows he is the steady, behind the scenes glue that creates and sustains systems. Dr. Canales' belief that health care is a right, that the Geneva Conventions should protect civilians' right to medical treatment in the midst armed conflict, and that a rights-based approach is an important tool for indigenous communities to protect themselves stem from his understanding of and commitment to human rights and humanitarian law.

Provide specific examples of the work of your nominee in linking health and human rights

During the civil war in El Salvador, the armed forces would confiscate medicine, destroy clinics, and target health care workers. Dr. Canales himself helped collect data on the violations of medical neutrality by both the government and the guerrilla forces. He trained villagers in El Salvador and indigenous people in Chiapas that they have a right to medicines and that by international law, the military is not permitted to interfere with provision of medical care for civilians. Villagers understanding of these rights often led to their standing up to protect them, leading soldiers to back down.

Since his year of medical social service more than 20 years ago – working with remote indigenous communities on the Mexico-Guatemala border – Dr. Canales has labored ceaselessly on behalf of the marginalized, exploited, and poor. He recognized early on that achieving good health entails much more than simply providing clinical services to individual patients. Like Jonathan Mann, Dr. Canales recognized that lasting health requires addressing the deeper injustices afflicting society on a population level. Putting his principles into practice in a way that most people only dream of or give lip-service to, Dr. Canales volunteered as a physician in El Salvador in the 1980s, working with the Red Cross and Doctors without Borders, among other

organizations. For 10 years he attended to marginalized populations struggling for survival in a violent, war-torn country.

After the civil war ended in El Salvador, Dr. Canales stayed in one of the most devastated communities – Santa Marta. It was there that he first began to use community radio as a public health tool. He worked extensively with health promoters and midwives to develop simple radio dramas that were humorous, but effective and engaging to teach about human rights and health.

Since 1999, Dr. Canales has turned his attention to the politically oppressed, but fiercely independent populations of indigenous Mayans in Chiapas, Mexico, who are struggling for self-determination and respect for their human rights. There, as head of the community health program run jointly by the non-governmental organization Doctors for Global Health and the Daughters of Charity, an order of Catholic nuns, Dr. Canales again puts into practice his belief in the interconnectedness health and human rights on a daily basis, helping to construct a basic community health system that respects the needs of the indigenous population without imposing the priorities of outside health professionals. Activities undertaken by Dr. Canales include training community health workers, or “health promoters,” supporting a women’s rights cooperative, and working with volunteer doctors and public health students to introduce them to a model of rights-based, community development work. Recently, Juan Manuel has been asked to assist in the creation of a school to train indigenous health promoters to provide them with a secondary education presently unavailable in their remote communities.

Provide some examples of leadership, creativity, and /or courage on the part of your nominee

During his decade in El Salvador, Dr. Canales focused much of his energy on the training of young health promoters to address the broad health needs of their communities. At a time and place when traditional concepts of physician-based curative care were the norm, Dr. Canales was promoting a population-based approach with an emphasis on prevention.

Championing this cause took no small amount of courage in 1980s El Salvador, where right-wing death squads roamed and community-based health care was considered a subversive activity. Dr. Canales lived and worked in areas of heavy conflict, where the population was continually forced to flee bombings and incursions by the Salvadoran army. The violence eventually caught up with him, leaving him with loss of vision in his left eye and an injury to his leg that resulting in a permanent limp. Despite this, Dr. Canales remained in El Salvador after the end of the civil war in 1992, working closely with the Pan American Health Organization and other groups to aid returning refugees and establish mental health programs for traumatized communities.

Dr. Canales’ understands that an outsider can serve but as a catalyst and conduit for a community’s own drive for health and justice. He brings unbounded enthusiasm and creativity to his work, but respects that the ultimate focus of his activities must come from the people he serves. In training health promoters, Dr. Canales takes a “low-tech” approach, the only teaching aid at his disposal usually being an old chalkboard. Instead, he relies on the use of “dinámicas,” or active small-group discussions, to engage his students. Since many health promoters are

illiterate, his creativity has been essential for effective teaching. He has also learned to speak Tzeltal, one of the local Mayan languages. To assist the women with their cooperative he has had to educate himself on running a small business. In all of these activities he is eager to learn new things, and thus serves as an example to others.

In 1994, Dr. Canales sought to formalize and enrich his training on population-based health. Through a scholarship from the International Medical Relief Fund, he completed a Masters degree in epidemiology, subsequently applying this knowledge to various research projects, including a comparative study of official and popular education in Santa Marta, El Salvador; a socioeconomic analysis of the municipality Villa Victoria, El Salvador (where Santa Marta is located); and a study on tuberculosis prevalence among indigenous Mayans in Chiapas, Mexico.

In Chiapas, a climate of low-intensity warfare against the indigenous Mayans persists, although somewhat abated since the early years of the conflict. To reach the most marginalized populations, Dr. Canales often traverses the most heavily militarized zones, encountering intimidation tactics and military roadblocks. Paramilitary groups also operate freely in the region, and have assassinated indigenous Mayans or others supporting their struggle for self-determination.

Provide any other information you think relevant in the selection of your nominee for this award (optional)

Dr. Canales has been an invited speaker at a broad array of forums in the United States and elsewhere, eloquently speaking on the rights and realities of indigenous communities at the Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard University, Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine, and the General Assembly of Doctors for Global Health, among others. Had he turned to a purely academic career years ago, he would likely now be considered one of the foremost experts in the field of community health and human rights. Instead, he lives simply in Chiapas, conducting trainings, implementing health care projects, living, sleeping, and eating with the indigenous communities he supports, patiently and determinedly offering his heart and soul in the accompaniment to the people he cares about. He expects no recompense, and he knows that, no matter how involved he is, the story is their story, not his.

Granting of the Jonathan Mann Award to Dr. Canales would represent much more than simple recognition of an individual deserving of praise. In this era when corporate globalization threatens to homogenize our planet and obscure human rights issues of marginalized and indigenous populations, extending the Award to Dr. Canales would serve as a signal that these populations in Latin America and elsewhere, no matter how small or remote, are still important and not lost in the headlines about Hamas and Abu Ghraib.

This kind of work is often funded by small family foundations; an award like this would assist Dr. Canales profile and his projects' fund raising capacity enormously. It could also protect his life, which has been threatened on many occasions.

What is your relationship to the nominee?

Dr. Canales is a colleague with whom I worked in the Guazapa region of El Salvador during the civil war – I was there a year, he stayed a decade. I have followed his post-war work in both Santa Marta and Chiapas. I was President of the International Medical Relief Fund when it provided a scholarship that enabled him to obtain an MPH at the University of Guerrero in Mexico. I have also recommended Dr. Canales to staff at Physicians for Human Rights when they were conducting studies in Chiapas; he has consistently offered his services to human rights organizations investigating the plight indigenous communities in Chiapas.

Thank you for the opportunity to bring the work of Dr. Juan Manuel Canales Ruiz to your attention. I think he compares favorably with the established criteria and with previous winners.

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