

My Friend Luis

Episode 12 — “Pass It On”

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LUIS: All these years — I, you know, I have all this talent, all these years, but I never really used it. I used to train kids and stuff like that, but not with this love and devotion — that I really enjoy talking to them. I really enjoy seeing them grow, not just as boxers, but also as human beings, as citizens, and form their character. It's amazing.

WAYNE: Hi, I'm Wayne Jacobsen, and this is My Friend Luis — the story of one of the most engaging men I've ever met, and of the friendship that developed between us. It has transformed both of our lives and left us in grateful awe at the adventure of life on this little planet. When we left the story in our last episode, Luis's kids were being forced to attend a church youth retreat in exchange for the church not pressing charges for their vandalism. Here's how well that turned out.

LUIS: We went to a retreat that they didn't even want to go. They actually went because it was a punishment for what they did to the church. They're going to go there as a punishment. We went there, and we're supposed to go three days, and when I got there, I got really sick. And when I was sleeping, and then I heard like noises — when I woke up, there was them sleeping right next to my bed. There were a lot of rooms; they already had their place where they were going to sleep. Then I looked down and said, "What are you doing here? You're supposed to be over there with other kids." And then they said, "No, we don't want to be there. We want to be here with you. Please — please don't kick us out." So what I did, I get out of the bed, and then we went to one of the living rooms so we can all be on carpet, because I didn't want to sleep them on bare linoleum or something like that. It was too cold for them.

In the morning they mentioned it to me. They said, hey, this kid — you know, the son of one of the leaders — he was kind of teasing them. And I said, hey — I said, look, don't pay attention to that, and just stay here with me, okay? Just stick with me, okay? So one time at night, I was asleep. They planned it — they confessed to me, they planned it during the day. And they went at night, and they cut his hair with scissors. The kid had a long hair — you know, it was actually braided. You know, he was really proud of his hair. They went over, and — he said, they said it was really easy, because there were like four or five little braids all over his head. And they went like, you know, at night, and then they run.

Well, of course the kid woke up, but he was so dazed that he didn't know what was going on. He felt it right away — he was kidding, he didn't feel them, I guess, the braids. He started screaming in the middle of the night. When he started screaming, I woke up, and then I looked around and I saw my kids in there — like, one of them even pretending to snore. He was like — trying to fake it, and he was pretending to snore. I didn't say anything to them, because I didn't know. I said, what's going on? When I went up there to see why they were crying, I heard somebody running downstairs, where we were. And what they did — they took the braids, and then they run outside and toss them. It was in Big Bear, so it was like — kind of like a

lot of trees. They toss them into the trees and came right back.

Then the father was very, very upset, and he went and he runs up to them. I mean — I'm not — I wasn't defending what they did, because I know it was wrong. And I told them, I know — I know it was wrong — but I was defending them. They're my kids. But you know, I said, well — you know, look, I am very sorry they did this — but I was sticking up for them. Like I said, okay, what should we do? And I said, well, let's see — like, call them in and ask why they did it. They say, "Well, I'm sorry, but he's always teasing us." And he's always making us — calling them delinquents, and Spanish delinquents. He was calling me crooks. He was calling them like *lacra*, which is in Spanish — it's like the worst of society. And that's what the kid was saying. And the kid was saying that because the father was saying it. So the kid was picking up. So I really put fault at the kid's feet for saying it — he has to take responsibility for that — but he was hearing it from his dad. So I called him on that: he was saying this because of this, and they did this because of the way they were treated, which starts with you. So I said, "I'm sorry for what happened. I apologize." The kid says he was growing it for two years. And I said, "Don't worry, there's two more years to come." And really, that really got me in trouble.

So at that moment — what I was thinking. I look back and I laugh about it. We still talk about it. We still — sometimes when we text or talk, we Zoom — I think it's called Zoom; we Zoom a lot — they mentioned that. If somebody says something, and says, "Hey, Coach." I said, "What?" "I told him to behave." I said — I said, "Yeah? What was he — what's he doing?" He says, "Oh, no — if he doesn't behave, we're going to cut his hair." And then they start laughing. They're making a joke — it's an inside joke that we have. I said, "Well, yeah — that's funny. But stop. Stop the cutting. Stop the haircut. We're not doing that anymore, okay?"

So I felt really bad for my kids. The kids were crying, not because they were just mistreated, but because they don't want to be there. They hated it there. And we were forcing them to be — supposed to be good for them, because it was a religious thing. Praying all day long, parts of the night praying, reading the Bible — you know, like, really exhausting. One time I used to sit in one couch and they sit right there — you should have seen, like sardines, one leaning on top of the other, the last one leaning on my chest, because they were sleeping. We're talking about kids — like, the smallest one was nine, the oldest one was 14. It really broke my heart. I looked at them and I said, "I love you. Jesus loves you. You guys are amazing." And they keep saying this: "If God loves us, then why is he punish us for being here?" That's how bad they hated it. I was — I wasn't driving on that day. But if I was, I'm telling you, I would have said, "You know what? This is enough." I would have just pick up my kids and leave. Because honestly, I was really sick anyway. I didn't want to be there anyway. I was there because of my kids. They sent them in, so I said, I want to be there for them. When they come back, they're going to hate the Lord.

WAYNE: That might have been true if Luis hadn't been with them, but it only hardened them against the attitudes of religious people. At times the church wants them around in hopes of reaching them, but they want to reach them with religious demands and expectations the kids resist. Luis, however, keeps demonstrating the contrast between trying to serve God religiously and the joy of transformation that comes just from knowing we are loved by him and can learn how to follow him.

Every week you're here sharing with me the interactions you're having with those kids, and what you're pouring into their lives is not — it's not religion. It's just, "I'm loving them."

LUIS: One of the kids I have, he had a really problem with eating. He kept eating and eating. He's nine years old, and he was weighing 250 pounds. He was really proud when he called me. He says, "Coach, Coach, guess what?" I said, "What?" "I ran a quarter of a mile." He was on speakerphone, and I said, "That's amazing." And all the kids — "Oh, that's nothing. I ran a mile. I can run it back, or I can run it on my knees." And then I put him on — you know, because I didn't want him to hear that. I said, "That's amazing, buddy." And keep in mind that he's a nine-year-old, 250-pounder. He felt so proud when he was telling me that, and I was so proud of him. I said, "That's amazing, buddy. There you go. See, you can do these things." He says, "Yeah, and tomorrow I'm going to go for a half a mile." I said, "Well, okay — just don't get too brave here. Don't get too brave here." "Oh, I can do it, Coach." I said, "Okay, all right." Last time I checked him, he was at 225. He lost 25 pounds in like two and a half months, just being with us. And he didn't even change his habit. I'm not a dietitian, right? But I can tell him what I was eating when I was fighting. He says to them, "It was really hard at first," he says, "but I'm getting used to it."

WAYNE: I get stories like this almost every week from Luis, as he shares with me the joys and challenges these kids face, both circumstantially and internally. A while back, Sarah and I decided we wanted him to have more time with them, so we bought some of his work time to free him up to be with them. It's not just our gift to Luis. It's also our gift to the community we live in. There's no more valuable use of Luis's time than what he invests in these kids. And we're not the only ones who see it. Do you remember the gang member who threatened Luis to leave his boys alone, and when that failed, made them vandalize the church where they met? A few months later, while waiting to check out at a local store, a man came up and asked if his name was Luis. When he said it was, the man identified himself as the leader of the gang who had threatened him. He told Luis he wouldn't be bothering him anymore, because he really appreciated what he was doing to help those kids.

LUIS: So the more they came, I see them. And then I started learning about their problems and about their situations. And I started taking it. At first it was getting really overwhelming, because I used to keep that, instead of just handing it back to God and praying with them and trying to help them. But I was actually keeping all that, and that was burning me. That was way too much. I couldn't carry that much baggage, until I just gave it to God. And I said, "Lord, I am going to do what I can." It's an amazing thing what God does. He uses resources so we can pull them out of drugs or out of gangs.

WAYNE: What I love — when you talk about these kids, you don't say, you know, "God's given me this ministry, and I spend a lot of my time with these kids, and it's really hard." You laugh. "I love being with these people. They are so funny. I love these kids." And I love that they're in your heart. You can tell it's not a ministry you're doing. You're just loving these kids.

A guy from the church came to go to one of your things, because the church is concerned you're not doing enough Jesus stuff with the kids, right? Because it's not a Bible study. It's not a church service. It's some boxing training and a lot of conversation. He went there to check you out, right?

LUIS: He's the son of one of the elders. So they sent him in, just to see what I was — to document what I was doing, to take pictures and video. And after being there —

WAYNE: With the idea of finding dirt on you, right?

LUIS: He went to find it, of course, yeah. He went to find dirt on me, and just to see what — and report back to the elders. So after we finish training, he walks up to me, and he told me exactly what he was there for. He told me the truth. And then he says, "As you can see, I didn't took any video. I didn't do anything." He says, "In fact, I love what you're doing. Can I be part of this? Can I come and train with you guys too?" I said, "Sure, you're welcome."

WAYNE: You've also talked about love.

LUIS: I found out, through this journey, and with this kids, and knowing you too, that when you feel loved and accepted, you have no reason to reach for anything else, because there's nothing else to reach for — because it's already there. We were created with that — with that that can only be filled by our God, by our creator — that the moment he came into my life, the first thing I felt, it was this accepting love. It was something I was reaching for, and I was trying to fill the void with other things. But now that he is there, I have no reason to reach anywhere else. And that's what moves me with this kids. And I see that with this kids.

When they call me, it's two or three a.m. And then I heard my phone ringing, and then I look, and one of the kids is texting me, or group texting, going like, "Coach, are you awake?" And then I text back saying no; two or three seconds later, my phone rings, and it's them. They want to talk to me. And they said, "I can't sleep, Coach." And so we start talking. And after like maybe an hour talking, they start yawning — and, oh, they sound tired — and they said, "I got to go to sleep, Coach." They're amazing kids — seeing them grow. Some of them, they have horrible — I mean, horrible — backgrounds. So it's heartbreaking — and seeing them flourish, and seeing them coming back, and seeing them, from somebody who had Fs at school, come back to have B-pluses, and moving in the right direction, and not using drugs, or away from the gang life. It's amazing. That's something I would not change for anything.

WAYNE: These kids just love hanging out with you. And even when the pandemic started, and you could no longer have these training sessions with the kids, they still seek you out. I mean, you still spend all week long on your phone — texting, talking to, you know, meeting these kids in a park or something where you can space out — and even helping them with their fears about the pandemic, and being stuck at home, and some of the home situations not being the best. And they've really leaned on you, even calling you in the middle of the night — 3 a.m. You really pour into these kids. It's just amazing that this love that God gave you crossing the border, that was reawakened in you a couple of years ago, is now bearing fruit in so many of these kids that are in very dangerous situations. You're really right in the front lines of being really hurt when someone you love suffers, or gets killed, or makes a bad choice, or whatever. And I watch both. I watch you love well. I watch you hurt in loving well.

LUIS: Right now, I got probably more than 60 active kids. But if I can say, about 20% of them, they don't fight. They don't box. They just go over there, and they want to hang around, and they want to talk. They talk to me, and they call me Coach. They ask me questions. They say, "How can I help my friend?" or "How can I do this?" And it's a wonderful opportunity for me to serve and expand the kingdom of God. It is also very painful, too. Because when you love much, you hurt much. And especially this last year — we lost three kids, and it really breaks your heart.

WAYNE: What do you mean, lost three kids?

LUIS: Well, two of them committed suicide. And one of them got killed by gangs, when he went back to tell them that he was no longer part of the gang. It's really extremely painful. And you know what's more — even more painful? Because in 2020, because of the pandemic, you couldn't even say goodbye. I mean, you can't even see them for the last time. They just take the body, and then they bury them really quick. Their parents — they didn't even get to see them. It's really painful, that part.

And I learned this from you: when you love much, yes, you hurt much — but the friendship along the way, and the memories along the way, it's worth the pain.

WAYNE: And I think that's a godly view of creation, right? God knew, when he created the world, how much pain would be in a world of fallen people who were captive to sin. And yet for him, and even for his son to go to the cross, to die for us — all that pain was worth loving us. Which is hard to imagine, because if you just think of human love — human love oftentimes is all about avoiding pain. But the God kind of love goes into pain with people, and can celebrate the friendship even in the midst of pain. That's kind of hard to believe.

LUIS: All these years — I, you know, I have all this talent, all these years, but I never really used it. I used to train kids and stuff like that, but not with this love and devotion — that I really enjoy talking to them. I really enjoy seeing them grow, not just as boxers, but also as human beings, as citizens, and form their character. It's amazing.

WAYNE: So now you're becoming a Captain Herrera to kids here?

LUIS: At one point, when I needed, he put Captain Herrera, and then he sent Rafa. And now, what I can see, it's you. God put you in my life to continue with the legacy. And I can see that through dreams.

WAYNE: I'm not Rafa, just so you know.

LUIS: No, okay. Just checking.

WAYNE: I don't think I've ever done that before — worn Converse. White t-shirt, for that matter. White t-shirt or jeans.

LUIS: You're taking that role in my life.

WAYNE: When I see Luis touch these kids with such love, I'm even more grateful for the journey God invited Sarah and me on 25 years ago, when he let me know I had more to learn walking away than I'd ever learned holding onto my position in that congregation. I've been helping people all over the world discover how to live loved, and to see the fruit of that touch Luis — and through him, some of the most desperate kids in the community I live in — has been one of the greatest joys of my life. Truth be told, I learn as much from Luis as he does from me. Our lives and passions have overlapped in a marvelous symphony of joy as we watch how God works in the world around us. I love how a growing relationship with a loving God changes people from the inside. The more they know him, the more they engage others with compassion and patience. The same is true with Luis and his kids, as he calls them. They are a significant part of the transformation going on in Luis while he's helping them.

So what's your hope for the future? For you, your kids?

LUIS: Well, my hope for the future is — for my children, it's for them to have a relationship with Jesus where they can enjoy that relationship, and not worrying so much about the religious acts or things like that. Because when you focus so much on that, you don't even have time or think about enjoying that relationship. For my girls to have that world — you know, that view, really, of God the Father as a loving Father that loves them, that accepts them — and not to fall into these religious patterns. For myself: keep loving the children, keep being there for them, and to love them, and to use boxing as a vehicle to deliver the love that God has for them — to show them that there is a Captain Herrera for them also, and there is also a Raphael for them also. And I want to be that Captain Herrera. I want to be that Raphael for them. And I don't think I would have seen it like that unless I met you. I would have been so focused on me pleasing God that I'll probably be the priest walking and seeing the man by the road, beat up, and I wouldn't even notice him, because I was so busy going to the temple or whatever. I want to be like the good Samaritan that comes in and acknowledges the man, because he was his neighbor. That's what I want to do.

WAYNE: Even part of wanting to be legal here is because you want to spend some time in Mexico, not just with family. You've talked to us for years about doing some evangelistic work, and helping some people over there who are doing some genuine ministry among the people in Mexico. You have some heart for the Mexican people.

LUIS: I want to open up another gym there. What I'm doing here — what's on God's heart, it's opening up a lot of gyms with the same philosophy. Not just creating fighters, but molding characters. And they don't even have to come to fight. They just can come in and hang out and be with friends and talk.

WAYNE: Partly because you would like to go to Mexico — that's what's interesting. Even having gyms like this in Mexico, to help young kids find a way out of — not gangs like here, although gangs there too, but cartels. Same thing Captain Herrera did for you.

LUIS: Yes. I want to continue his legacy. The gym where we used to train — it's all rundown. They sent me pictures of it the other day, and it broke my heart. It's not a gym, it's a shack. It's just a rundown shack.

WAYNE: Part of it — where you grew up, in your stories about how the cartels are in such control, you can't live a normal life there. That's what the government has to clean up. And yet it's impossible. There's so much money and guns and corrupt police and political people that the — I mean, they've been trying. There've been people in Mexico trying to clean that up for decades. And it's just man's lust for money and power, and willing to kill to get what he wants. It's a destruction around the world. And that's what a good culture does. A good culture, at some point, holds the lawless at bay enough to let normal people live out their lives in safety and security. And a bad government doesn't do that, because it's so corrupted by the influences of evil. And I know that's a big thing in Mexico. It's a big thing where you grew up, which is what put you in danger in your life — Captain Herrera killed.

LUIS: Remember when we talk about the opening up a gym and everything there? Well, look — if I want to open up a gym over there where I was born, or for the little towns nearby, I don't have to deal with the government for that. It's not their permission I need. It's the cartel's permission I need. And even if I go talk to the government — my brothers, they can go back and forth, and they told me this. He says, "Look, if you ever have any problem, I'm going to talk to you." And he went and talked to him, right? He says, "Oh, look, somebody went into my land, and they did this." And he says, "Well, what are you telling me for? Go talk to El Pato." It's a nickname, which means the Duck. And then I said, "Who is this Duck?" And they said, "Well, he's the head of the drug cartel here." He says, "We don't get involved in any problems anymore." My brother says — "Who are you? What are you doing here?" He says, "Oh, no, no, no — they leave us alone, and we leave them alone."

Unfortunately, I will have to deal with them. Because if I go and build it on my own — you just don't do that. They're going to come in and destroy it, especially after they've seen that you're bettering the lives of people, or you're helping people get out of drugs or something. They want the people to be in drugs, because they provide them. They want people to be addicted. They want people to drink. They want people to go to parties. They want people to use drugs. They want people to be in the cartel — and you're pulling them away from them.

WAYNE: And we have those same people in the U.S., obviously. They want people to go to parties and get on drugs. But that's the definition of a failed state — when the criminals control the civic life of the people.

We laugh, but the cartels are not just a Mexican problem. Their money and power mostly flows from America, because the demand for the drugs they supply is here. We have helped corrupt that society by our own addictions and failed war on drugs that drove prices through the roof. We can't just wash our hands of the problem or its aftermath in the lives of people. We both hope that someday this problem will get the attention it needs on both sides of the border.

LUIS: Well, of course, a lot of the problems that countries like Mexico — you know, they have to also take responsibility for their citizens. If I was a president in Mexico, what I would do — I would copy the American system, the American way of life. What are they doing right? So we can be — for a reason not to leave. The U.S., you can see — not just from Mexico, all the parts of the world — this is where they want

to be. This is where I want to be.

WAYNE: For the people who hear this podcast over time — if you want to support Luis, and you just want to support this outreach to gang kids, we have a fund at Lifestream Ministries, and there'll be a donation button on the website. And if you want to donate, I can promise you this: every dime given will go to Luis and Maria, and they'll work with these kids — and maybe someday we're doing a gym in Mexico.

I know you want to have a gym here. One of the strange things in our story is you've been working with these kids, but you don't have a place to train them. You used someone's yard here for a while, and they couldn't keep using it. You used a church in a nearby town — used the church grounds — and they let you still do that. But here, where you live, you don't have that space.

I did a thing for the city on the one-year anniversary of the death of kids that were shot at the Borderline country music bar here — and then the next day we had this huge fire, where 200-some-odd-thousand people were evacuated — and, you know, people were affected by both those tragedies. They asked me to help in a storytelling event, to kind of commemorate the first year and help in the healing process. And one of the people I got to coach in their story was one of the policemen. So I asked him one day — as I got to know him, he became a friend — I told him about you, and I said, "Is there any chance the police would like to be involved with you, with these kids?" Because that would be such a deal to bring law enforcement into connecting with these kids at a very young age, so they don't grow up so hostile to the police, or afraid of police. He was all in. He was excited, and he said, "What can we do to help?" And I said, "Well, we need a place. We're looking for a place here." And he knew the guy who headed the gymnasium in the town that was connected to Kobe Bryant. And they were real excited about — "Hey, let's get the kids in here. We've got plenty of space. We'll give them a room. They can have it on their own." And there would be this amazing space, and it would be part of their vision to help with the community.

We were going to go talk to the manager of that gym on the Monday after Kobe Bryant was killed that weekend in a plane accident — not but a few miles from where you and I live, where his helicopter went down and he died. And so all that got put on hold, until we were just starting to talk about it again when the pandemic hit. And then, obviously, they can't bring kids together in those places, and the gyms are all closed. So it seems interesting that God has something in mind here — and we've tried a few things, and they didn't quite work. Now someone's volunteering a barn, maybe, for you to do some training in when we can get back together, when kids can get back together. But I really want to make available — if this story touches you — and we didn't do it for this purpose; I've not bugged you the entire podcast about Patreon or paying for the podcast or anything. We're doing this as a labor of love. But if at the end of it you would like to be part of Luis's passion to help kids find a different way out of cartels or gangs — by being loved, and maybe out of a gymnasium setting — get in touch with us. We'll find a way to help that happen.

Can you imagine the day you and I are going to stand before a judge, and he's going to swear you in as a citizen of the United States?

LUIS: Oh, man. Yeah, funny you asked that — but because I didn't have to dream or anything about that, but I keep thinking about that. And you know why I keep thinking about that? Because I really grab hold of what you told me once. You said when you get your green card — not the citizenship yet, but the green card — we're going to have a party. We're going to throw a party, and we're going to invite our friends, and we're going to tell them, "Look, we're rejoicing today, because my friend Luis got his green card." He can get a job legally. He can travel to Mexico and help children over there, or he can have more freedom even here in the U.S. He can come out of the shadows, right? And have his own bank account, and without, you know — or no longer have a P.O. box. He can actually have the mail directly sent to his house, because he doesn't have to hide. Or he can make trails of paper now, because he has nothing to hide. He doesn't have to hide anything, you know, from anybody. He's free.

Can you imagine the citizenship? Can you imagine me being able to vote here, on this nation — the greatest nation on the entire universe? Not the world — the universe. Oh, man, I can't. The answer is, I cannot imagine it. No, it's too much. But I can imagine at least when I get my work permit, you know — at least that.

WAYNE: We haven't come to the end of our story. Our lives continue down this track together. Sadly, however, we have come to the end of this podcast. There's so much more we could have shared with you, but chose these things to highlight the richest part of the story. As I've been editing our conversations together, I continue to hear stories, both from Luis's childhood and from his work with his kids, that make me grateful to have Luis as my friend. If you're interested, stay subscribed. We may add an epilogue or two in the future. Luis's application for legalized status is moving through channels as we speak. We'll definitely update you whenever something changes there. We may also add another podcast or two as situations might warrant, and I'm thinking of doing an interview with him to see how this podcast has affected his life.

In the course of airing it, Luis has heard from some of his family, who found out about the podcast and have been listening. Even though they all live in the same city, they have very little contact, despite Luis's attempts. One brother was angry that Luis was airing the family's dirty laundry, but one of the others told him how much he appreciated these things coming into the light. He said it has been a relief to finally hear about these things, and that he has spent a lifetime feeling guilty about how they treated him. "Everything you said was true. I can vouch for it," he told Luis. One of the things he shared with Luis was how frustrated all the brothers were with Luis. Even though they stole his food, they couldn't figure out why he still had plenty to eat. They also didn't understand why he did so well in school, and how that made it difficult for them. Who knows what healing God might still bring there.

So thanks for listening. We've had a lot of fun telling it, and those of you who've been moved by it — don't forget, if you want to donate to Luis's work with these kids, don't forget the donate button at myfriendluis.com. Every time you give, we'll free up his time to be with these kids. If you've enjoyed the podcast, you can spread its message by recommending it to your friends, posting your favorite clips on social media, or by reviewing it at your favorite podcast provider. We hope this story keeps finding its way into the world and encouraging others who need to know that they are deeply loved by the God who made

them. And we want that for you too. We both pray that you will recognize God's fingerprints in your own story. He wants to connect with you too, even in the midst of some of the darkest days of your life. He knows how to make himself known to you and draw you into his love. And when you're loved well, you'll love well, and the world will change. And if you need any help or encouragement with that, you'll find a host of free resources at lifestream.org designed to do exactly that.

I'm going to interrupt the end of this podcast to bring you some incredibly special news. Just after I completed these twelve episodes, Luis's old friend Raphael appeared for the first time since he rescued Luis from the tractor-trailer rig over 30 years ago that we highlighted in episode 5. It was a complete shock. But the things he said to Luis during their time together on Good Friday night provide some amazing insight into this story, and brought no end of joy to Luis's heart. We will definitely be adding at least one more episode here when we can talk about it. So stay tuned. It's a great end to this amazing story.

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