

AN INTERVIEW WITH JUAN PABLO ESCOBAR

(now Juan Sebastian Marroquín Santos)

I was born into a world fertile for violence. With this as my legacy, my only choice is to search for peace.

When deciding to expose your identity you probably evaluated the risks involved, but most likely your courage was driven by an objective which prevailed over the fear. Why did you decide to once again become the son of Pablo Escobar for the rest of the world?

It seemed selfish to me, just keeping to myself a solitary pacifist legacy of this violent story. I wanted to share with young people what I have learned about the serious consequences of participating in the cruel game of drug dealing. I am just doing what I believe is right. If I can prevent even a single young person from entering that world, then it will be worth it.

As you explain in the documentary, during your childhood you lived a life of luxury, interspersed with fear and violence. In your childhood you probably experienced several times the fear of losing your family because of drug trafficking, and you witnessed the violence inflicted on others by your father. Do you think that your decision to end the cycle of violence had been made even before the killing of your father?

I always expressed to my father, when he was alive, my disapproval of any form of violence and rejected his actions. Maybe that was why he dedicated his surrendering to justice to his 14 year-old pacifist son. It is very difficult to get out of the cycle of violence when you are being attacked from all sides, but finally a "spirit of goodness" prevailed. We can't change the past, but we can change the present and the future.



Despite your father having been one of the most dangerous drug dealers, nobody can deny he was a father to you. He once said: I can replace things, but I could never replace my wife and kids. In the end he condemned himself to death when he wanted to reach your family by phone. You are living with a heavy burden and with the big contradiction of loving a person and at the same time condemning what he has done to the rest of the world. Many poor young people in Colombia cultivate the dream of becoming Escobar. Do you have a message for them?

The message is: imitate only the good things my father did, like his sensitivity towards the poor and the needy. Violence and revenge only lead to more violence. Drug trafficking money will lead you to self-destruction and war. I don't know of any retired "bosses"! Making money is hard work both legally and illegally, but if you do it legally you will be able to really enjoy it. We must recover the human values lost in war.

Why do you think that you felt a need to seek absolution for the acts of your father?

I feel I have a moral responsibility for my father's actions. The least I can do in order to pay my respects to the victims of his violence is to apologize for his actions.

How much did the work of Nicolás, the director of the documentary, contribute to the reconciliation process with the sons of Rodrigo Lara Bonilla and Luis Carlos Galán?

Nicolas was not only a director, but also a great mediator between the parties. He did an excellent job and was very respectful towards the children.

What was the hardest part of making the documentary?

Writing the letter of apology and participating in the two subsequent meetings with the children of Galán and Lara. It was a real challenge, but I'm proud of having been part of this project because it demonstrates that Colombians can achieve peace through dialogue, forgiveness and reconciliation as effective means for a healthy coexistence in society.

The documentary lasts 90 minutes and covers a long period of time, presumably some issues were excluded during editing. Are there any other points or issues which you wanted to include in the documentary?

It is difficult to explain 44 years of history in 90 minutes. The only thing to be highlighted is the joint responsibility of many sectors of society, which created a suitable atmosphere for someone like my father to be able to go so far. Without the corruption and complicity of so many states, my father would not have progressed an inch.

Your identity and your face have now been disclosed because of the documentary. Has your life changed?

I don't believe in the culture of fame. My life is like that of any other architect living in Argentina. I have to work for a living. The only thing that has changed is that now I receive much more affection from people, and countries that in the past didn't welcome us are now generous because they believe in this message of peace.



Have you been in contact with any of the people who used to work with your father? What do you think their opinion would be of the film and your actions to seek reconciliation?

Most of them are dead. Actually, there are not many people to talk to. The interesting thing is that this documentary appeals to the "human" and makes no distinction between uniforms. I have received expressions of solidarity from both children of drug dealers and the anti-drug police, and also from many relatives of my father's direct victims. We are all sick of violence. Now drug dealers ask their children to watch the documentary so that history is not repeated.

How do people tend to react when they find out about your past?

After watching the documentary I get the most noble and pleasant affections from people around the world. So far no one has "thrown a shoe at me."

You had the courage and the will to try to close the wounds of the past, of which you have also been a victim, obliged to live as a fugitive and fully aware of the fact that you will never be a normal citizen. Do you have any life long goals that can help you to escape from the burden you are carrying?

For 17 years I have been living on extra-time. I live one day at a time. My goals are to continue respecting the lives and liberties of all, hoping for the same in return.

Do you think that you will ever be able to return to Colombia permanently?

Returning is not a concern of mine. I would like that every Colombian who has abandoned their land because of the violence, one day regains the right to choose to return.

In analyzing the situation of your country over the last decade, and the spiral of violence that drug trafficking has generated, do you think that this burden should also be shared by the consumer countries of the drug trade? What do you think is in store for Colombia in the future? Do you think the Colombian people will eventually achieve widespread peace? And is this possible with the continued existence of the cocaine trade?

The problem exists because the consumer has never stopped buying, and it continues because it has been managed as a military issue instead of a topic of public health. This ensures the profitability and violence among producing groups, fighting for the control of territories and drug trafficking routes. I am not saying drugs are good, but they are made worse and more deadly because of the ban. In fact, alcohol is the worst of the drugs, yet it seems that it has a license to kill just because it is under taxation. I think that if tomorrow pizzas were banned, there would be a war because of it. You don't educate your children by forcing them. Nobody learns math at gunpoint. Education is the most powerful tool against drugs. Any other attempts will fail. Peace is possible even in the worst and most absurd of wars. Colombia will finally live in peace when these things change.

These questions were written by Paul Doherty, Andrew Dornbierer and Marina Mazzini.

Photos: courtesy of Sebastian Marroquin