

Sergio Alcubilla - From Tragedy to Triumph: Fueling Empowerment with Faith

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Sergio Alcubilla with wife, Hiromi, and their children

Nothing in life is guaranteed, but for some people the challenges can be extremely dramatic and happen at a tender age. Sergio Alcubilla experienced tragedy as a child, but despite many challenges, his journey has also been filled with blessings and faith.

Born in the city of [Iloilo](#) on Panay Island in the Philippines, Sergio came from a lineage of military men. His paternal grandfather served in WWII and Sergio remembers him as a patriotic nationalist and the family patriarch who always invited the extended family over for big meals. Sergio's father, for whom he was named, was also a military man, and it was assumed that Sergio would follow this path. His mother, a resilient woman, was trained as a nurse and also had the demanding job of caring for their six children as well.

Sergio's early years were a time of turbulence in his native country. President [Ferdinand Marcos](#) was in power and the regime was filled with controversy – including an election outcome which was suspect. The Philippines came under martial law; the year of 1986 was filled with political rallies, strife and tension between rival political parties struggling for power.

This struggle was to hit home for the Alcubilla family when Sergio was only six. He recalls clearly, "It was February of 1986; I would usually tag along with my dad whenever I could. One evening, he went out play billiards. I was a rather rebellious six- year old, and although I was told to stay home I snuck into the back of my dad's car. My aunt caught me and as my dad started to drive away, she stopped the car and told my dad I was in the back seat. I was so angry that my dad wouldn't let me go with him."

Ironically, it was fortunate for Sergio that he wasn't in the car. "After my dad left, we kids were watching TV when we heard some popping sounds quite near our house. We turned out the lights; myself and my siblings were locked in the bathroom. We were so scared; we were all crying and praying. After the gunfire subsided we learned that five men had been killed -- including my father. The gunmen had driven by our house and strafed it with bullets."

Many military leaders had defected and a revolution had begun; protestors were demanding changes in the government. Sergio recalls, "It is likely that a Communist hit squad had been after my father as an act of retribution." The Marcos regime was overthrown, but in the process [Sergio's father was lost](#); he was

only 34 when he died. At the time, his mother was in the United States and pregnant with his Sergio's younger brother. The lives of the Alcubilla family were turned upside down as the Philippines struggled to be reborn.

Sergio's mother had been employed as a nurse in New Jersey prior to marrying Sergio's father in 1975, and after being widowed, she returned to the United States with Sergio in tow. Sergio's relatives in the Philippines took in his other siblings and she returned to work at a New Jersey hospital. Remembering these difficult days Sergio recalls, "I remember many times going to the hospital where my mother worked and having to sleep there." Eventually it was decided that Sergio would go to Virginia Beach, VA to live with his aunt and her husband, a retired naval officer while his mother continued to work and prepare for the birth of his younger brother. Within two years, his mother moved to Virginia and brought his siblings to the United States, reuniting the family once more.

Sergio was enrolled in an elementary school in Virginia Beach, but didn't know English very well so his aunt coached him to become fluent in his new language. A few years later his family moved to Leesburg, Florida where he attended high school. "At this point I thought my direction in life was clear and that I would follow my father's path into the military. I did well in high school and had received a scholarship for the [military academy at West Point](#). Although my mother was a naturalized citizen of the U.S. she hadn't completed certificates of citizenship for us so I didn't have the right paperwork. I was mistakenly told by an immigration officer that I needed to apply for citizenship – a four-year process which was inaccurate information. An attorney could have easily resolved this problem, but the upshot was I lost my nomination for West Point." Sergio also had a full ROTC ([Reserve Officers' Training Corps](#)) scholarship as a back-up, but because of his unclear citizenship status he lost that as well. Says Sergio, "At this point it became clear to me that the military wasn't my calling."

With a military career no longer an option, Alcubilla decided to attend the [University of Florida](#) in Gainesville where he majored in political science and economics. "During my time there as a student, one of my professors suggested I apply to law school and become an attorney." After his experience dealing with the citizenship snafu, this idea seemed appealing and he determined to go to law school.

He graduated early from the University of Florida in December of 2001 in order to assist his mother with her business, but later moved to northern California in 2004 with the idea to attend law school in the San Francisco Bay area. However, shortly after his arrival, his life again shifted direction when he joined CARP ([Collegiate Association for the Research of Principles](#)) the student branch affiliated with the FFWPU ([Family Federation for World Peace and Unification](#)). He worked with CARP for two years before being asked to go to New York to assist with CARP activities there. From there it was a short step to attend UTS ([Unification Theological Seminary](#)) to finally obtain his master degree.

"I enjoyed working with CARP, but I was still thinking about law school. I wanted to get my MA degree so when I had an opportunity to attend UTS I jumped at the chance. I was fortunate enough to be part of the last class that attended classes at the Barrytown campus, in upstate New York and I have always been grateful for that opportunity."

Recalling his time at UTS Alcubilla says, "One of my most enjoyable experiences at UTS was serving on the Student Council and being part of the President's cabinet. Dr. Hendricks would meet with our group. There were students from 19 countries represented in my UTS class – including African, European, and Asian nations. The courses were challenging because they were taught in English. Based on my personal experience of struggling to learn another language I could easily relate to students concerns and represent them. I was able to help provide a voice for people who didn't have the power to speak for themselves; it was good to see how solutions could come about through collaboration."

UTS holds a special place in Sergio's heart; in addition to being a graduate, in July of 2007 Sergio received the Marriage Blessing with his wife, Hiromi, a native of Japan. "We were married at UTS in front of family and friends, so UTS is special to me in many ways."

After graduating UTS, Sergio and his wife decided to move to Hawai'i. Sergio entered the [William S. Richardson School of Law](#) in Honolulu on the island of Oahu. He graduated in 2013 and began to work with Legal Aid. States Sergio, "I feel many of the skills I learned at UTS transferred well to my current line of work as the director of [Legal Aid](#) in Honolulu. During my time at UTS I learned a lot about leadership training and I often apply what I learned to what I am doing now. Legal aid provides free legal services to low income people, so I interact with multiple partners including the courts, volunteer trainees and volunteer lawyers. Since we opened in 2012 we have helped over 12,000 people."

"I remember doing projects at UTS where we had to bring many different people and diverse viewpoints together in a cohesive vision. In my current work I sometimes think, 'Oh, this is similar to my experience at UTS. At Legal Aid our goal is to increase justice outcomes for local communities – we take legal cases, do pro bono programs, and offer legal education to the public."

"One challenge I frequently face is being able to communicate effectively with policymakers, private attorneys/law firms, and our community the need to support access to justice. One of the skills I developed at UTS was in my Homiletics class and through my internship with [Peace Club](#); I learned to speak to large groups or congregations and appeal for them to commit their time and resources towards a vision larger than themselves. My UTS experience also better prepared me to work well with people from different backgrounds towards a common goal."

Moving to Hawai'i was not an easy decision for Sergio as he still has family living in Florida. "I feel called spiritually to the Pacific Rim to serve people the people here. Occasionally, I have questioned my decision, but I believe it was the right one."

Sergio and his wife have a young daughter and son to raise and they are both busy with their careers; like his mother, Sergio's wife was also trained as a nurse. When asked how he feels about the future, Sergio reflects, "I try to stay optimistic about the future because of my kids. I feel like I need to create something better for their future. I don't want to lose my sense of idealism as I grow older, but with age and experience I feel I can face all the challenging issues in our lives of faith. When I was younger, I prayed for wisdom. Looking back on my life I can see that God has clearly guided me. I really believe we can make a difference in the lives of our families and our communities. In so many respects, I appreciate how UTS strengthened my faith and my relationship with God."

Living in Honolulu has its challenges – it is not all sunshine and flowers. But Alcubilla appreciates being on Oahu with its cultural diversity and natural beauty. When not working hard at Legal Aid, he can sometimes be found shooting hoops on a basketball court. Most of all he enjoys spending his free time with Hiromi and his children. "I love going hiking or being at the beach with my family. Life here can sometimes be a struggle because of the cost of living, but when I am with my family we spend time in nature, enjoying each other and experiencing the beauty that is all around us. Life is good."

Sergio Alcubilla serves as the Director of External Relations for the Legal Aid Society of Hawaii and focuses his work on improving access to justice and resources for Legal Aid's clients. Sergio worked in collaboration with the Hawaii Access to Justice Commission, the Hawaii State Judiciary and Hawaii State Bar Association to launch the Honolulu District Court "Access to Justice Room" self-help center and continues to provide support for other court self-help centers statewide. Sergio also helped launch the Hawaii Self-Help Interactive Forms Project and expanded it to public libraries across the state. He serves as vice-chair of the HSBA Committee on the Delivery of Legal Services to the Public and is a member of the Hawaii Access to Justice Commission's Committee on Initiatives to Enhance Civil Justice as well as its Committee on Increasing Pro Bono Legal Services. Sergio is a graduate of the University of Hawaii William S. Richardson School of Law, the Unification Theological Seminary, and the University of Florida.