

## Spirit Journey: One man's role in a 6,000-mile run through North America 30 March, 2020

1. What did you think of the article?
2. Tell me about what you have read.
3. Had you heard about Peace and Dignity Journeys?
4. Why might people throw things at the runners like they did in Mexico?
5. What tensions might have arisen between the runners?
6. What does the expression "might not be clever mean"?
7. He says he used a mixture of "gratitude and footwork" to escape from the mountain lion, what does this mean?
8. What sort of mind set would a person have to assault a female runner?
9. How do you know "... when to stop..."? How did you learn this?
10. What do these words mean?
  - Homeland
  - Epic
  - Orchard
  - A staff
  - Dumbest
11. Final thoughts.

While jogging on the spot, Mexican-American runner Noé Álvarez showed his passport to the border officer in Nogales, Arizona. Álvarez was participating in the Peace and Dignity Journeys (PDJ), an ultramarathon for runners of indigenous background like him. His group had run 3,200 miles from the Arctic to the US border with Mexico. They still had miles to go before their destination of the Panama Canal, but for Álvarez, crossing into Mexico had extra meaning – it was the **homeland** of his parents before they immigrated to the US. The border agent, a Latino like him, jokingly asked if he was running in the wrong direction.

It's an emotional moment in Álvarez's book, *Spirit Run: A 6,000-Mile Marathon Through North America's Stolen Land*. The book is about that **epic** run in 2004 and also the background of the author and his immigrant parents.

And what a run it was. The PDJ takes place every four years to reconnect indigenous participants with their ancestral lands. The 2020 event was postponed due to the Covid-19 crisis. In 2004, Álvarez's group ran south to meet another group running north from Argentina.

There were unexpected difficulties – an encounter between Álvarez and a mountain lion in Oregon, stone-throwing motorists in Mexico and tensions between some of the runners. And he didn't finish his run the way he wanted to.

Álvarez grew up in Yakima, Washington, the son of Mexican immigrants of Purépecha heritage. His father worked in an **orchard**, his mother at an apple-packing factory. As a teenager, he worked with his mother at the factory. He also started to run.

He received a full scholarship to Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington but says

he felt “cultural shock on many levels. I had difficulties, there was the worry of failing, and that I could not save my family.” He learnt of the PDJ from “a friend of a friend of a friend”.

He joined in British Columbia after the group had already started its journey from Alaska. Together, his fellow runners represented nine indigenous communities.

They included runners of Mexican heritage living in Canada, and “an elder, our spiritual guide, from the Arctic”.

PDJ runners start and end each day with a ceremony and carry feathered **staffs** during the run. Daily destinations are indigenous communities across North America. At each stop, community members share an important cultural story with the runners and after each story, they add a feather to the runners’ staffs. Sometimes they also shared running traditions, including running as a group in the Tohono O’odham territory in the Arizona desert.

Álvarez, who had never run more than ten miles in a day, has had many things to learn. The PDJ takes place relay-style, with each runner running a certain number of miles each day while others travel by motor vehicle and wait their turn. He learnt to eat while running but discovered that carrying a hard-boiled egg in his pocket **might not be clever** with wild animals around. He and his fellow runners slept in all manner of places, from campgrounds to casinos, and ran across many different types of land, from the forests of Canada to the deserts of Washington and Arizona and the jungles of Mexico.

“It was not just running for no reason,” Álvarez says. “It’s a story about why land is important to people.” He saw that in the Canadian forests, trees were being cut down for the skiing industry and the Winter Olympics, while drier areas were suffering from no rain.

“We honoured the land that a lot of people depend on,” Álvarez says. “We were physically walking, running and connecting with it every step of the way.” In Oregon, he made an unexpected connection – a mountain lion waiting for him at the top of a peak.

“I was completely unprepared,” Álvarez recalls. “I couldn’t run back. I had to keep moving forwards.” He says that when he joined the run, “a really good friend and spiritual guide talked about how to be thankful for the presence of an animal that decides to notice you; take it as a message, an opportunity to reflect.”

In the book, Álvarez describes the mix of **gratitude and footwork** that helped him escape the big cat. “Luckily, I’m still here,” he says. “I read about what you’re supposed to do, and you’re definitely not supposed to run. It’s probably the **dumbest** thing I’ve ever done. After the group crossed into Mexico, they encountered a different kind of danger: people who threw rocks from cars. Female runners were also at risk of assault.

“There were some dangerous situations: people trying to force you into a vehicle, throwing rocks at you, people who didn’t want you there,” Álvarez says. “We adjusted, ran in pairs. Some places were extremely unsafe. If you didn’t want to run, you didn’t have to. Others ran those miles.”

In the end, it was a familiar runner's story – injury – that forced Álvarez to finish his run in Guatemala before he could reach the Panama Canal. He calls it “the toughest decision, probably, I'd ever had to make.”

“I didn't want to stop,” he says. “But knowing when to stop was part of the lesson.”

This lesson has stayed with him ever since – and the border officer's question about whether he was running in the wrong direction has stayed with him, too. “I no longer think about the wrong direction,” Álvarez says. “I now ask myself the questions I need to.” And, he says, “Running is the way I process things now.”