

Meet Joaquin Labour-Acosta: New Director of Grants, Scholarships, and the Ministers' Financial Vitality Initiative

Joaquin Alfredo Labour-Acosta joined the Pension Boards staff in July, 2020, as the Director of Grants and Scholarships for the United Church Board for Ministerial Assistance, the philanthropic arm of the Pension Boards. Joaquin immigrated to the United States in 1998 from the Dominican Republic, and we spoke with him recently about this journey as well as his background and thoughts on immigration policy today.



Joaquin, his husband, Dr. Carlos U. Decena, PhD, who arrived in the U.S. in 1989 at age 15, and their sons, Jordan (l) and Joshua (r), on their adoption day.

Joaquin, can you share a little with us about your background and family?

I was born and raised in the Dominican Republic, a country in the Caribbean that shares land with our brothers and sisters of the Republic of Haiti. I am the fifth and last child (the handsome one, they say) of Fanny Acosta, a doctor in pharmacy, biologist and educator, and Manuel Labour, a lawyer and a career diplomat. Both of my parents are deceased.

They were the ones who started the migratory path that one day I would follow, as I am sure their parents and grandparents did before them.

As a young couple with five children (Iluminada, Manuel, Leandro, Agueda and myself,

Alfredo), they decided to move the family from Neyba, a small town in the countryside, to Santo Domingo, the capital of the Dominican Republic.

Even when their motivation was that same first instinct of many, to give the family a better future, their immigration process—that concept of going in search of a better future—was always linked to having access to a better education. The search for a better education in the eyes of my parents was always the only justifiable reason to leave their loved ones. When my older sister Iluminada

was preparing to enter the university, my parents decided to move the family to the capital in search of a better education for all of us. This same motivation took my older sister to France. Many years later, it also became the perfect excuse to come to the United States. Still, I would have never been allowed to leave peacefully without earning my university degree in computer science first. That would have been a huge disappointment to my mother and the last thing you want to do is to disappoint Dona Fanny.

I came to this country with this sense of knowing who I am and what I was looking for and the connection with my mother is special. The only thing my mother asked me for was to continue studying. I will consider myself a success story if I can get across to our kids the importance of education.

I want to acknowledge that my immigration process was blessed and privileged by many factors. But there is a factor that is common to all of us as immigrants and that will always keep us united in the fight for the rights of immigrants: the inalienable human right to go out in search of a better future.

You emigrated from the Dominican Republic in 1998. What were some of the factors that led you to make the move?

Politics in the Dominican Republic have never allowed a stable and secure way of developing a clear path to success to most Dominicans and least of all for a dark, middle-class gay man. Living in a very traditional society which, after a dictatorship, seems to be taking too long to catch up with the rest of the world, made me feel still surrounded by elements of repression, self-shame and lack of opportunities. All of this made me feel at a very high risk of wasting my life if I stayed.



By 1998, I had already reached the point where my current credentials and my social environment allowed me to see the limitations around me. Already entering in my thirties and having been exposed to what was happening in other parts of the world, the decision was either to stay to push in a system that seemed not to be aligned with the social and economic achievements of more developed societies, or to go out and start from scratch to build a future that, although it would be uncertain, would be as good as the effort that I was willing to make.

Going out to continue educating myself with the hope to one day become a better me, was the idea that I was able to sell to myself to help me make the move.

Can you tell us a little about your experience as a new immigrant?

I guess if I think about it now, it wasn't as difficult as it was supposed to be. At least now it doesn't feel like that. Not even during those first months without having a place to stay, without knowing much English and looking for a quick job before exhausting the \$1,500 dollars that I kept in my pocket, my friends (my extended new family) and my community (the Dominican community of Washington Hts., New York), helped me build the sense of belonging I needed to dream, hope, and work for better days. I still feel that those were the most rewarding moments.

I had a long series of small jobs over several years thanks to the three magic sentences (as I called them). They were: I want to work. I need a job. Yes, Yes, Yes. These three sentences allowed me to work for enough money for food, a shared roof, and English classes, and eventually enough to save to pay for a certificate in Business Project Management at New York University.

Immigration: Facts and Figures

- **More than 1 million immigrants arrive in the U.S. each year.**
- **The top country of origin for new immigrants coming into the U.S. in 2018 was China, with 149,000 people, followed by India (129,000), Mexico (120,000) and the Philippines (46,000).**
- **Since the creation of the federal Refugee Resettlement Program in 1980, about 3 million refugees have been resettled in the U.S. – more than any other country.**
- **In 2017, about 29 million immigrants were working or looking for work in the U.S., making up approximately 17% of the total labor force. Documented immigrants made up the majority of the immigrant workforce, at 21.2 million.**
- **Undocumented immigrants are less likely to be incarcerated for crimes in the United States than native-born Americans.**
- **Immigrants today account for 13.7% of the U.S. population, nearly triple the share (4.8%) in 1970. However, today's immigrant share remains below the record 14.8% share in 1890, when 9.2 million immigrants lived in the U.S.**
- **Most immigrants (77%) are in the country legally, while almost a quarter are unauthorized. In 2017, 45% were naturalized U.S. citizens.**
- **Among all refugees admitted in fiscal year 2019, 4,900 are Muslims (16%) and 23,800 are Christians (79%).**
- **Texas, Washington, New York and California resettled more than a quarter of all refugees admitted in 2018.**
- **In 2018, immigrants were over three times as likely as the U.S. born to have not completed high school (27% vs. 8%). However, immigrants were just as likely as the U.S. born to have a bachelor's degree or more (32% and 33%, respectively).**

[Key findings about U.S. immigrants | Pew Research Center](#)
[Incarcerated Immigrants in 2016: Their Numbers, Demographics, and Countries of Origin | Cato Institute](#)

Those days of watching cooking channels, of opening my ears to the new sounds, and practicing my English made me the cook that I am today.

My first job as a busboy at a Thai restaurant in Chelsea, New York, remains the memory that helps me get back to where I started, the best way to measure progress when tough times left me feeling lost or dis-oriented. I still wear that Thai restaurant uniform, every time I need to be reminded of the most difficult days of my journey. It makes me appreciate that no matter how difficult the current moment may be, with the same effort, things will go well.

Immigration has been a prominent and divisive topic in political and social discourse in recent years, and much of it has been tied to issues of race and racism. Have you felt personally impacted?

In one way or another, we have all been affected by poor immigration laws, inequality, and racism. Social injustice and social inequity keep defining the spaces that we must all share, and we all suffer when some of us are restricted access and equity in them.

Personally, as an immigrant, I was always politically aware of all the challenges of the system, the do's and don'ts that the immigrant needed to know in order not to be successful, but to survive the system.



Joaquin's uniform from his first job in the U.S. as a busboy in a New York Thai restaurant.

I must say that I was not directly affected by racism until the moment when I had to go out to start competing in the world of the white men. When it was time for me to take the same train, to that same neighborhood, in the same city, but now not to wait tables but to be in the space and positions of the people who I used to serve in restaurants. Sitting with them at the same table to participate in the decisions or even simply to support the logistics of those decisions—that is when out of nowhere your accent, your skin color and your “non-local” background become a determination of who you are or who they want you to believe you are.

The current administration is discussing comprehensive immigration reform. What are your thoughts on U.S. immigration policy and are there potential reforms you'd like to see happen?

A comprehensive immigration reform is long overdue. I think it's time for an amnesty. I believe that the people who have been working and

fighting for this country deserve to normalize their immigration status. We all deserve to feel safe, to be able to build a sense of belonging and have the opportunity to work, study and contribute to the society in which we live.

I also believe that immigration laws and programs should be created to allow people to come to this country to pursue their dreams, work, and stay or return legally.

I would like to see the United States dedicating goodwill, time and resources to building equity and justice in the place of origin, so that people do not feel the need to leave in the first place.

I look forward to seeing the leaders of this country set aside political interests and begin working to restore balance to a system that is on the verge of collapse.

Is there anything else you'd like to share on the topic of immigration?

Immigrating is one of the most difficult decisions that a human being must face. Nobody wants, for no reason, to leave their land, friends and family to start over in an unknown place with an unknown future. That was the case hundreds of years ago. That is the case now.

"I truly believe that each immigrant has a unique story to tell and understanding our background is crucial for people to learn and embrace the value of immigrants."

I think people forget their personal history too fast and too soon. We must do a better job of keeping those stories alive throughout our generations, the ones we are raising at home, so that the stories that brought parents and grandparents here may be kept alive: the stories of all immigrants new and old and the stories that move the world.

Twenty-two years after my arrival, I am with my partner of 22 years, happily married since 2016, immediately after society evolved to make that possible. I am the father of two amazing kids, Jordan (4) and Joshua (3). We still have a long way to go as a country for the possibility of successful immigration to be the story of all people everywhere.

I have nothing but gratitude to this country, to the kindness of the good men and women who gave me their hand along the way. It is now my turn to return the favor.

The fight I am in today is the same one that I inherited from those who came before me and it will be the same fight that my children will have to continue. I just hope that I can convey to the kids the need to keep up the good fight. It may seem like we are not moving but we are.

