
Writers on the Range: They struggle to come to America: One woman's story

January 19, 2024



Exactly what causes people to leave their homeland and make a difficult trek of 3,000 miles?

A young woman I'll call Jhovid, who came here from Venezuela, has asked me to listen to her answer, so that I and others may understand.

Her hair is neatly ponytailed, her clothes tidy, she looks composed — but her food is uneaten and tears streak her face. She tells me that people are starving to death in Venezuela. She looks at me to make sure I understand. Starving.

We know about the dire conditions generally, and we know that our Colorado town of Fort Collins, like many, has absorbed large numbers of newly arrived immigrants who fled for their safety. But she hopes someone will bear witness to her particular journey, and so we gather with my friend, bilingual author Laura Resau, who has collaborated with other South American women to help them share their stories.

Jhovid is one of the many Venezuelan refugees who climbed off a bus months ago with no coat, food, shelter or contacts. She's 32, she tells us, and graduated from college with a degree in business administration, but Venezuela was sinking economically as she was growing up. Jobs were scarce and gangs were everywhere.

She traveled with her sister to Colombia, where they worked for five years in a tennis shoe factory. But economic conditions soured there too, so the women went to Chile, traveling 23 days by foot and bus.

"We were crossing a banana plantation on the Ecuador-Peru border and men approached, asked for valuables, but we didn't have any, so they said, 'You'll have to pay with something else, then.'"

I wince, predicting what is to come, but she offers a small smile. "I gave them my cheap cell phone and they left."

Luck, kindness and perseverance seem to be the themes of her story, where, time after time, good people—in law enforcement, nonprofits, people living in poverty themselves—offered help.

Like the time that immigration officials in Chile "gave us medical help and food, and we got jobs in fruit processing." She liked the factory, the country, and sending money to her family.

Pero después. But then. Her father, a retired police officer, who had been kidnapped and rescued, developed Parkinson's disease. Her family was desperate for help. Jhovid knew that if she could make it to the U.S.-Mexico border where there was a "Very Famous Hole" through the border wall, she could get to America and find work that paid more.

For the next three months, the sisters traveled north, walking and hitchhiking through three countries. In Panama, they foraged for food in the jungle with los animales. Worst of all, her sister became very "sick from the river, because the river was contaminated from dead people."

But then her eyes light up: A kind person gave them food, medicine, tickets to Costa Rica. Then it was on to Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and Mexico. They hid under cars at a mechanic shop to avoid the Mexican Mafia. Caught twice by immigration patrols in southern Mexico, they were sent to towns near the Guatemalan border.

By the third time, she knew how to avoid la migra, and after making it through the Very Famous Hole, they arrived in El Paso. Finally, she and others were bused to Denver, where a stranger directed them to a homeless shelter, and later, a bus to Fort Collins.

Various groups stepped up with lightning speed, including churches and the nonprofits Fuerza Latina and Alianza NORCO. She's grateful for all the help but is happy to have found a full-time job.

As Jhovid wraps up her story, I breathe out a sigh. This woman walked thousands of miles through country after country because she had to. Determination and the kindness of strangers helped her succeed. But as I listen, I think of a family member's response to immigrants—one echoed by many in this country: "They're ruining the country, why would you want to help them?"

My answer: Why wouldn't you respect their desperate quest for a decent life?

Laura Pritchett is a contributor to Writers on the Range, an independent nonprofit dedicated to spurring lively conversation about the West. She has two novels coming out this year from Torrey House Press and Ballantine; for more, see laurapritchett.com.