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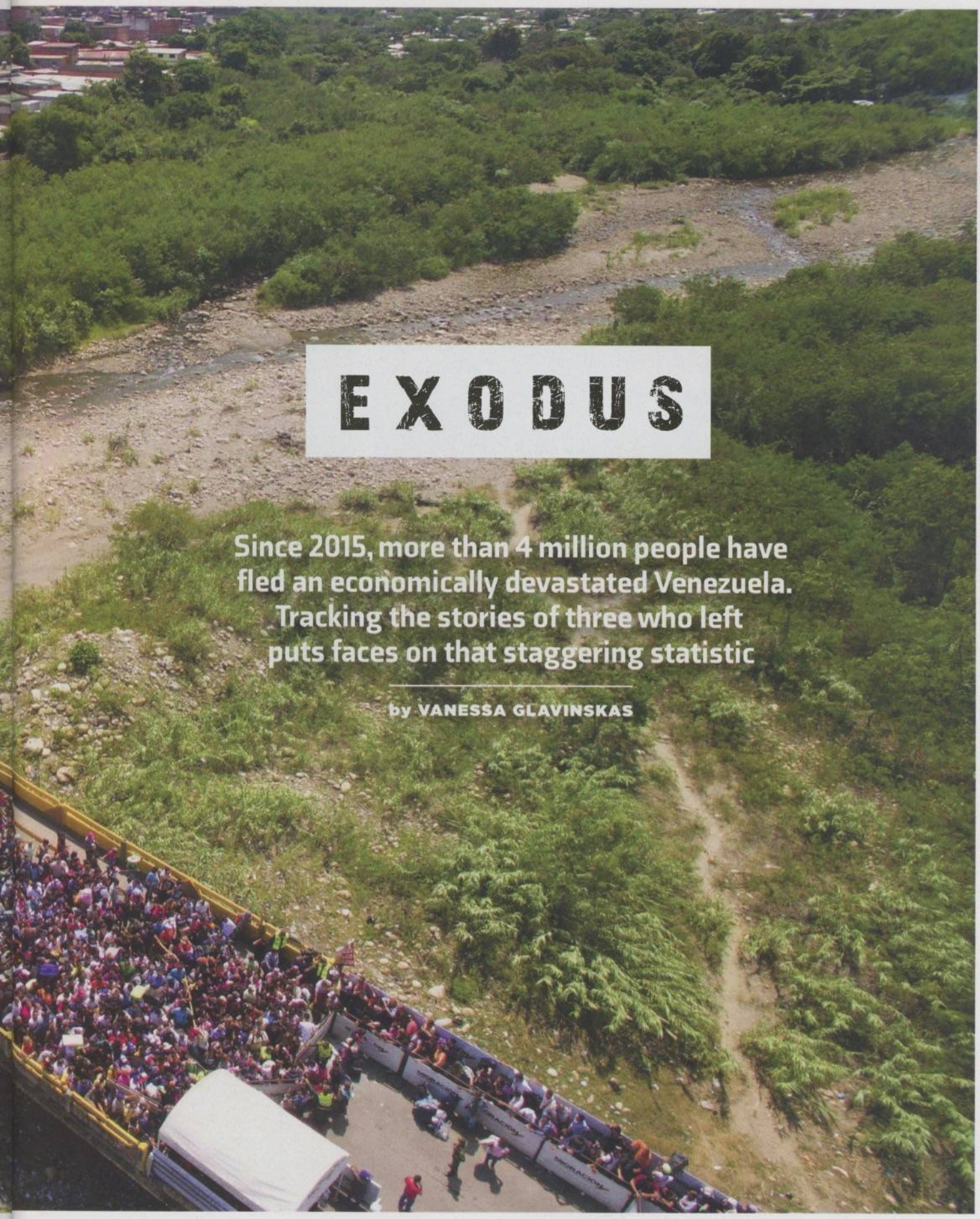
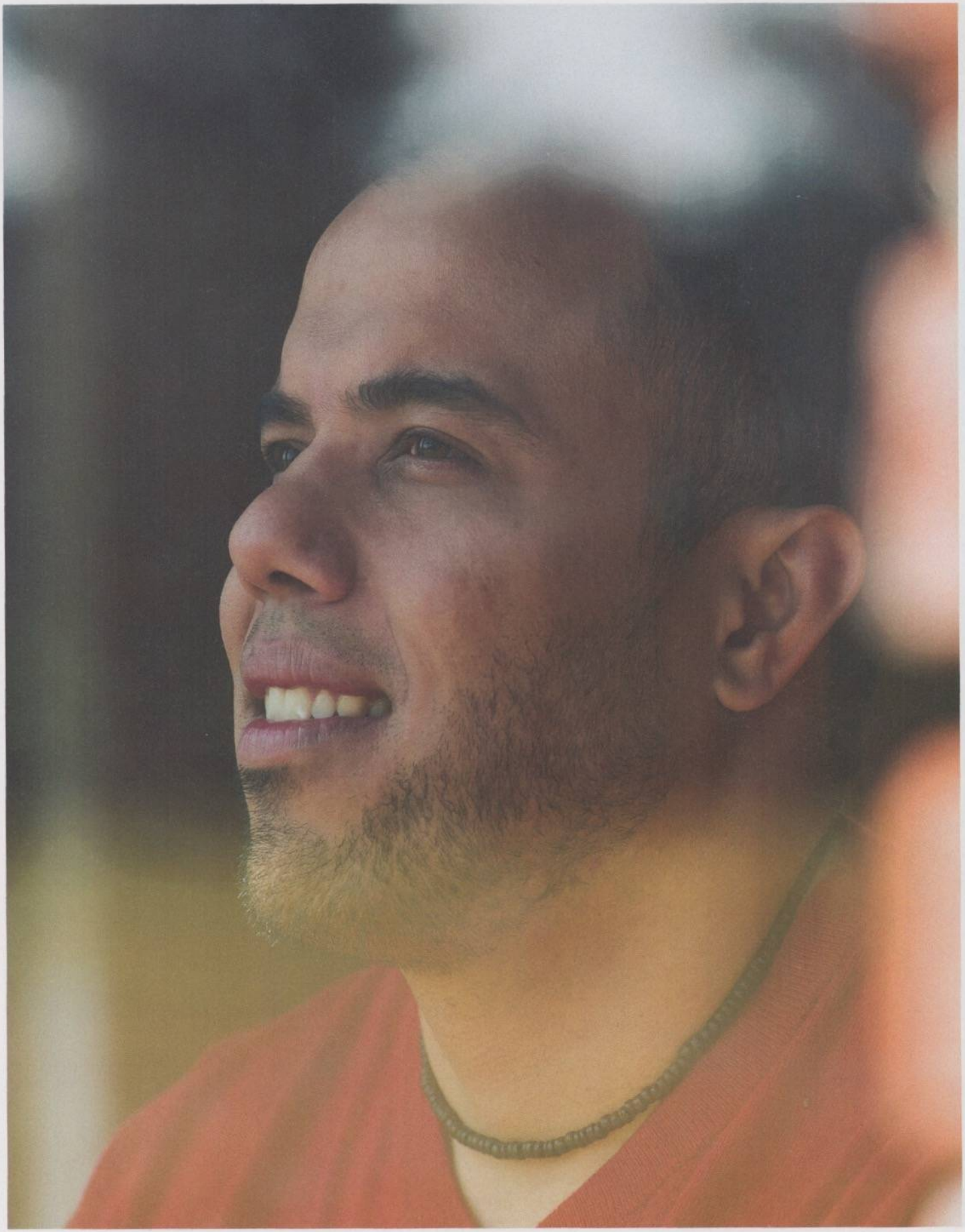


EXODUS

Since 2015, more than 4 million people have fled an economically devastated Venezuela. Tracking the stories of three who left puts faces on that staggering statistic

by VANESSA GLAVINSKAS



Héctor Herrera in Mexico City

Héctor Herrera was driving his father to José Tadeo Monagas International Airport in northeastern Venezuela when they approached a government food stand. Even at 5 a.m., the line was long. "I never thought I'd live in this misery," Herrera's father said. Suddenly a fight spilled out into the street in front of them as two men wrestled over a frozen chicken. "At that moment, my father said to me: 'Son, if you have the opportunity to leave, go,'" recalls Herrera. "'I will miss you, and it will be difficult, but this is already as low as a person can live.'"

That was in the summer of 2015. A teacher, Herrera was 28 years old and a member of the Rotaract Club of Maturín Juanico. A city that boomed in the 1980s as the oil capital of eastern Venezuela, Maturín is now crippled by the country's collapse — an economic meltdown that, for the people living there, is worse than the Great Depression. According to a survey released in 2018, 9 out of 10 Venezuelans did not earn enough to buy food, and more than 17 million had fallen into extreme poverty. The BBC reported that desperate parents have been giving away their children rather than watch them starve.

Those conditions are fueling the biggest migration in the history of Latin America as more than 4 million people flee Venezuela. Economists say the country's collapse is the worst outside of war in at least 45 years, while the Brookings Institution predicts that Venezuela's refugee crisis will become "the largest and most underfunded in modern history." From a distance, those facts and statistics can be mind-numbing, obscuring the individuals caught up in this social and economic catastrophe. But the stark reality comes into focus in the stories of three people who fled.

Eduardo José Campechano Escalona, a Rotarian from Barquisimeto, fled to Peru after being targeted for speaking out against government policies. A onetime Rotary Youth Exchange student, Victoria Garcia Baffigo returned to the United States after her former host family grew concerned about her safety and her future in Venezuela. And taking his father's advice, Héctor Herrera left for Mexico with only $200 and the promise of a place to stay. Each of them had ties to Rotary, which in the end would be their hope and, to an extent, their salvation.

On 10 November 2015, the day Herrera left Venezuela, he took a photo of himself to remember the moment. "When I look at that picture now, I see fear, uncertainty, and sadness," he says. Fortunately, he knew Ferdinando Esquivel through Rotaract.

Herrera had met Esquivel, now a member of the Rotary Club of Zinacatepec, on a trip to Mexico in 2013. The two men became close friends, and Esquivel offered to help Herrera if he ever decided to leave Venezuela.

At the time, Herrera thought things would improve in his native country. But two years later, life was much worse. "The stores had nothing," he says. "Not even toilet paper." He had a passport, but without access to dollars, he couldn't buy a plane ticket. So Esquivel bought it for him and invited Herrera to stay with him in a small town near Toluca. After two weeks, Herrera thanked his friend and boarded a bus for the 40-mile ride to Mexico City, where he hoped to find a job that would give him a work visa.

When he got off the bus in Mexico City, Herrera started to panic. "Left? Right? I didn't know where to go," he recalls. "It felt like there was no floor beneath my feet." He found a place to sit and pulled out his cellphone to text Alonso Macedo, a friend he had met at a Rotary event in Mexico. Macedo had agreed to pick him up and let him stay with him for a few days. But what if he didn't come? Herrera thought. Where will I sleep tonight? And then, Macedo appeared.

> "My plan is to get my family out. I don't have any hope that things are going to change in Venezuela. The damage to the country has been huge."

"After that I looked for work every day — anything that would give me papers," Herrera says. "I couldn't sleep, so I'd get on the computer at night and search for jobs." Finally, a school run by Venezuelans that taught English asked him to come in for an interview, but the school was located four hours from Mexico City. Then another problem arose: He had nowhere to stay. His host was leaving on a trip.

"That night, it was storming," Herrera says. "I walked to a restaurant, opened my laptop, and started to send messages to people in Rotary and Rotaract whom I didn't know personally, but whom I had a connection with through Facebook." He had no choice but to ask strangers if they would be willing to take him in for the night. He finally got a response from Laura Martínez Montiel. They didn't know each other, but they had several mutual friends on social media through Rotaract. She gave him her address and told him to take a taxi.

PATO PORTILLO

Eduardo José Campechano Escalona in Trujillo, Peru

Herrera wrote back and explained he didn't have enough money, so they agreed to meet in a closer neighborhood where Martínez was heading to a Christmas party.

"I was in such a bad state," Herrera remembers. "I was all wet, and my clothes were dirty." He worried that Martínez would take one look at him and change her mind about hosting him. Instead, she took him back to her home and introduced him to her mother, who washed his clothes and fixed him something to eat. He explained that he had a job interview the next day, and together they mapped out how to get there on public transportation. At 6 a.m., Martínez gave him a ride to the metro.

When Herrera arrived for the interview, he saw a familiar face. It turned out he had reviewed the interviewer's thesis a few years earlier. After talking awhile, the interviewer asked if Herrera could start on Monday. "No," he replied, "I want to start today."

Herrera's job was to make hundreds of calls looking for clients for the school; if someone signed up, Herrera was paid a commission. He stayed with Martínez and her mother for another week and commuted four hours each way until he asked for an advance on his salary so he could rent an apartment closer to his job. "On 15 January, I got my first commission," he says. "It was a relief, because as of the 14th, I only had $2."

By April, Herrera was promoted to advertising manager, and in July, he finally received a work permit. Two years later, he found a job that better suited his teaching skills, working as a trainer for a company that advises businesses on streamlining their processes.

"I started giving lectures around this beautiful country," Herrera says. "But on 3 December 2018, I received an email from the national migration authority saying I had to leave Mexico in 20 days." A migratory alert had been issued for him after immigration authorities visited his previous employer, the English school. When they rang the bell, no one answered the door, so they flagged it as a fake company. "I could not believe it," Herrera says. "I was doing well, but now it was worse than the beginning because I no longer had papers. I had to start over."

> "It was painful to leave, but we are very grateful for the opportunity in this country. Now we feel safe."

For the past year, Herrera has been fighting the alert with the help of a public defender. Each day that it remains unresolved, he's at risk of being deported. He's seeking asylum to be able to stay, but with Venezuela's crisis worsening, his claim is one of thousands. "Mexico is now returning Venezuelans immediately when they arrive at the airport," Herrera says. Still, he says he will not give up. "Until I have my dream of a visa, I will not rest."

Eduardo José Campechano Escalona started having anxiety attacks in 2015. "There were constant riots in my city," says Campechano, a former member of the Rotary Club of Barquisimeto, Venezuela's fourth-largest city. "My children could not attend school or go out. They had to live literally locked up in our apartment."

Though he and his wife were university professors, their income no longer covered basic necessities. At the time, hyperinflation was 181 percent. (At the end of 2019, the International Monetary Fund estimated that the annual inflation rate was 200,000 percent.) What's more, several incidents led Campechano to believe the government was targeting him.

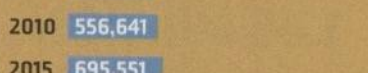
"I had questioned government policies," he explains. "[Government-issued] textbooks omitted parts of Venezuelan history and only highlighted facts related to the government of Hugo Chávez," the country's president from 1999 to 2013. After speaking out publicly about the inaccuracies and biases in the mandated textbooks, Campechano says that he started being denied access to grant funding. When he and his family decided to leave for Peru,

THE ORIGINS OF THE CRISIS

Venezuela's economic collapse intensified in 2014 when global oil prices fell sharply, prompting rapid economic decline in a country already dealing with political turmoil. At the time, Venezuela relied on its vast oil reserves for 96 percent of its export income and about half of the government's budget. To cover its expenses, the government started printing money, leading to hyperinflation. In 2018, Nicolás Maduro's re-election as president was widely criticized as fraudulent, prompting increased international sanctions that have further unraveled the economy and sparked a political standoff: More than 50 countries do not recognize Maduro as Venezuela's president.

A GROWING TREND

Estimated number of Venezuelan migrants and refugees



SOURCE: "Migration Trends in the Americas," International Organization for Migration / UN Migration, October 2019

Campechano went to a state-run bank to get a credit card so he could access dollars for a plane ticket. Again, he was denied. "It was a way to intimidate me," he says. When he posted about it on social media, he received a threatening email.

Running out of options, Campechano asked a friend living abroad if he would be willing to buy him a plane ticket to Lima. Campechano had secured a position at Universidad César Vallejo in Trujillo, a city in northern Peru that he had often visited as a guest lecturer and where he had a work visa lined up.

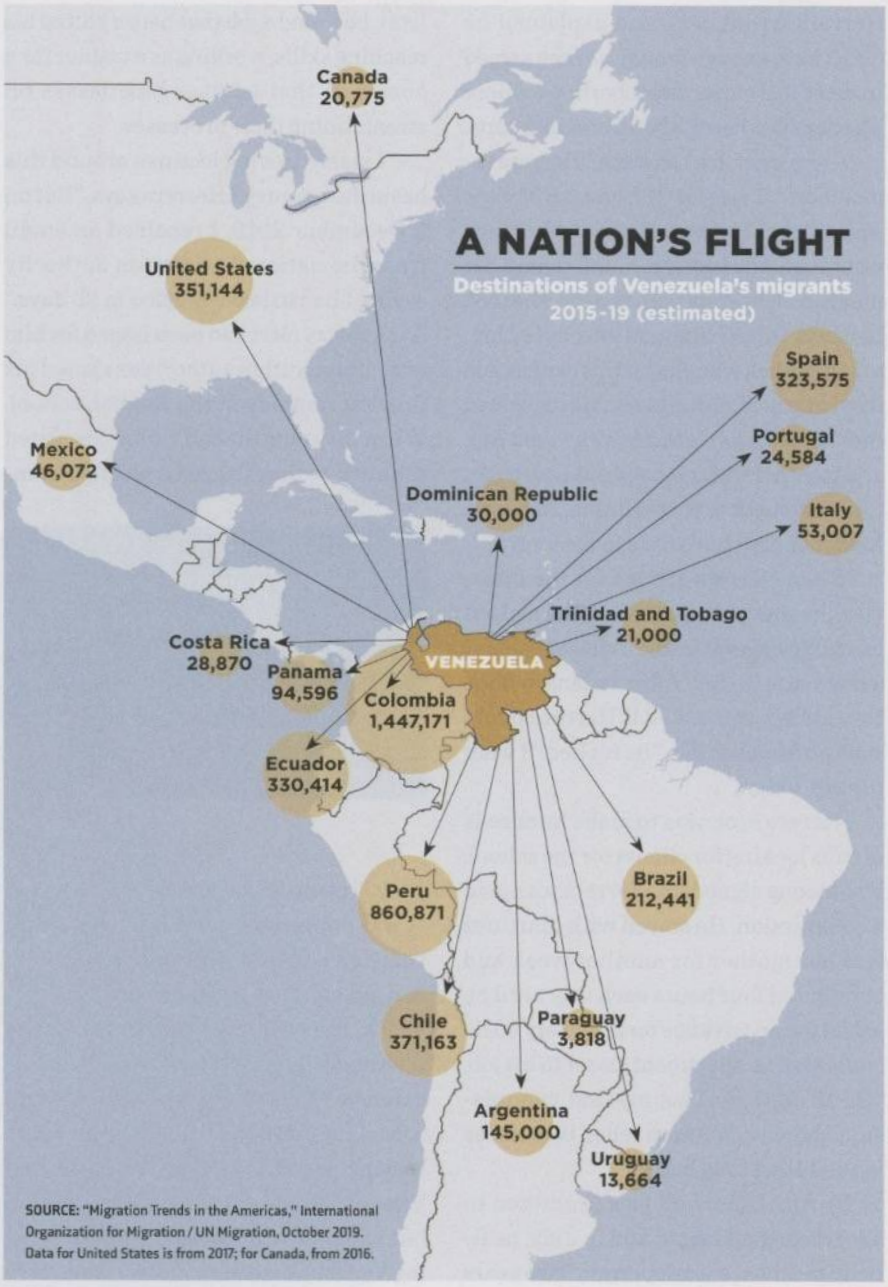
Campechano moved to Peru in March 2017. Four months later, he brought his wife, their two adolescent children, and his mother-in-law, who was sick with cancer, to Peru. "During those first months, my family was the Rotary E-Club of Fusión Latina Distrito 4465," says Campechano. When his mother-in-law died, their Rotary family consoled and supported them.

Campechano remains connected to the members of his former club in Barquisimeto, and he says they are still engaging in service, despite the hard conditions. "There is no Youth Exchange program anymore," he says. "They are just trying to get basics, like food and medicine, to people." Alberto Avelino Camacaro Zerpa, a former governor of District 4380 in western Venezuela, estimates that 20 to 30 percent of the country's Rotary members and nearly 40 percent of its Rotaract members have left Venezuela. Yet many clubs continue to meet when members aren't limited by access to gasoline and electricity.

"It was painful to leave," Campechano says, "but we are very grateful for the opportunity in this country. Now we feel safe."

1.45 MILLION

NUMBER OF VENEZUELANS TAKEN IN BY COLOMBIA, THE MOST OF ANY COUNTRY

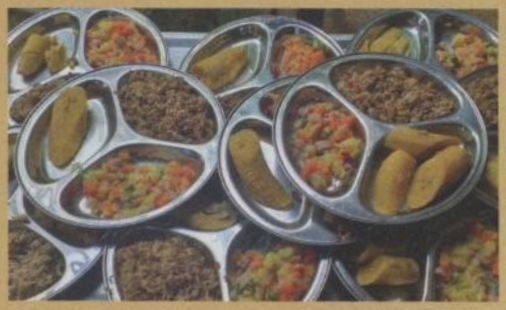


"I **think everyone who returns home** after studying abroad gets reverse culture shock," says Victoria Garcia Baffigo. "I had that, but worse."

After spending the 2015-16 school year living as a Rotary Youth Exchange student with Dave Siegfried and his family in Aurora, Illinois, Garcia went home to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Venezuela. "Some days we didn't have power for 10 hours," she says. Hyperinflation had gotten so bad that her family could afford very little at the supermarket.

One day the phone rang. The caller told them they had her brother and demanded money for his release. Thankfully, they didn't really have him, she says. Still, the call rattled the family.

Chris Olson, a member of the Rotary Club of Aurora Sunrise, had been monitoring the situation in Venezuela from Illinois. "Chris told us Victoria had gotten back to Venezuela and found things had changed dramatically from when



HOW YOU CAN HELP

Rotarians have started projects to help people fleeing Venezuela — and those who remain behind

BRAZIL: Welcoming displaced families

"A year ago, I was walking into a bakery in Brazil when a little girl came up to me and asked me to buy her some cake," recalls Vanderlei Lima Santana. At first, Santana said no. But the girl's mother explained that it was her daughter's ninth birthday and they had nothing to eat. He went inside and bought the girl, a Venezuelan migrant, a cupcake. "That day, I went home and cried," Santana says. "I knew I had to do more to help."

Since then, Santana and his club, the Rotary Club of Boa Vista-Caçari, have partnered with local nonprofits, religious organizations, and the government's Operação Acolhida (Operation Welcome) to offer daily meals, medications, and professional development opportunities to families arriving in northern Brazil from Venezuela. In November, Santana was honored at Rotary Day at the United Nations for his work leading this project. To learn more, contact Santana at **santana.delei@gmail.com.**

COLOMBIA: Offering hope to the walkers

They are called *los caminantes* — the walkers — and they are pouring into Colombia from Venezuela by the tens of thousands, looking for work, shelter, and food. "Imagine the psychological condition of a person who has to leave everything behind and walk for days," says Cristal Montañéz, a member of the Rotary E-Club of Houston.

A native Venezuelan and longtime activist, Montañéz has seen firsthand how the flood of refugees overwhelmed Colombia's social service organizations. Inspired to help, Montañéz and Isis Mejias, another Houston e-club member from Venezuela, created a project called Hope for Venezuelan Refugees; it distributes meals to migrants at several points along the route taken by *los caminantes*. The project is a partnership between the Houston e-club and the nonprofit Rise Against Hunger, which supplies the meals. To facilitate distribution, the e-club works with the Rotary Club of Cúcuta in Colombia along with several food banks and shelters along the route.

Mejias says that the Houston e-club wants to continue Hope for Venezuelan Refugees, but that it needs to raise enough money to cover the cost of administering the project (it's also counting on the continued cooperation of Rise Against Hunger). "Venezuelans are praying for the kindness of international organizations like Rotary," she says. To learn more, visit **mightycause.com/story/29ixvf.**

Cristal Montañéz feeds los caminantes.

VENEZUELA: Supporting communities

"Every day is harder," says José Bernardo Guevara Pulgar, who lives in Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. A human rights lawyer and member of the Rotary Club of Baruta/Las Mercedes, Guevara says he worries most about the lack of medicine. The cost of medical care has skyrocketed, making it unattainable even on a professional's salary. "Public health care is at the brink of collapse," he says. "People have to bring their own syringes, their own medicine. The government is not providing these things."

Despite the hard conditions, the majority of Rotary members have stayed in Venezuela, and many clubs continue to meet. "I'm going to stay here and fight for my country," says Francisco Morello, governor of Venezuela's District 4380. "Venezuela is going through the most difficult internal crisis in its history," adds Ricardo Diaz, governor of Venezuela's District 4370. "We need medicine and medical-surgical implements such as ultrasound scanners, glucometers, and blood pressure monitors." Diaz also expressed a need for wheelchairs, crutches, and walkers, regardless of their condition.

"I would ask Rotary clubs to not stop looking at our country," Diaz says. "Today we need your help. Tomorrow we will be the ones who can help you."

To learn more, contact Diaz at **ricardodiaz1964@hotmail.com.**

Victoria Garcia Baffigo in Aurora, Illinois

she left," says Charlie Schmalz, who, like Olson and Siegfried, is a member of the Aurora Sunrise club. "She had spent all that time studying here, and now her whole future was destroyed. It was a terrible thing. So a group of us got together and said we should do something."

"The first call that Chris made was to my mom, and then my mom talked to me about going back to the United States," Garcia says. "I didn't ever think about staying in the U.S. because my parents couldn't afford for me to get an education there, and I wanted to get my college degree."

Now Garcia had the opportunity to get her degree in the United States, fully paid through a fund the Aurora Sunrise club set up for her. "It's still hard for me to understand," she says. "I can't believe that people who are not family are doing this for me."

It took more than a year to make the arrangements. Much of that time was spent waiting to get a student visa. "Airlines started pulling out of Venezuela," says Schmalz's wife, Mary. "We were so close to Victoria getting the last papers, so Dave bought a seat on the chance that she could come. He bought the seat, and the day before the flight left, Victoria got her visa. It was a miracle."

Garcia is now in her third year of college, at Aurora University, majoring in biology and health science with a minor in biotechnology. She's the first person in her family to go to college. Though the original plan was to rotate host families, she has stayed with Charlie and Mary Schmalz for more than two years now. "We've bonded over board games and watching TV," Garcia says. Adds Mary: "She meshes so easily into our lifestyle. She's like a grandchild to us."

Still, the couple knows Garcia misses her family, so one Christmas, they surprised her with a ticket to visit her mother, who had recently migrated to Peru. When Garcia and her mother lived in Venezuela, they shared an apartment with her grandmother, who remains there. "Every evening, we used to sit on my grandmother's bed, and my mom, my grandma, and I would talk about our day," recalls Garcia. "Then I'd do homework and my mom would make dinner. My grandma and I used to read the same books and talk about them."

> "Some days we didn't have power for 10 hours," Garcia says. Hyperinflation had gotten so bad that her family could afford very little at the supermarket.

89%

SHARE OF VENEZUELANS WHO DO NOT HAVE ENOUGH INCOME TO BUY FOOD

Garcia is concerned about her grandmother's health, but her uncle, a member of the Rotary Club of Valencia, has been crossing into Colombia to get her medications. "My grandmother worries about getting food," Garcia says. "She worries a lot about money and if she'll have enough. It's really hard." Garcia hopes to see her grandmother again one day in Venezuela after she finishes college.

Until then, she's focused on her studies and talking to local Rotary clubs about her experience in the United States and the crisis in Venezuela, raising awareness about the people suffering in the country she loves.

"At the beginning, Victoria was often sad," Mary Schmalz says. "She'd say, 'There's no way I can ever pay all of you back for this.' I told her, 'We don't need to be paid back. What you need to do is, when you're in a position to help someone, you do.'"

"My father died in August," says Herrera. "I feel 1 percent pain and 99 percent gratitude. I'm grateful for his love and that he was always there for us." Herrera was unable to return to Venezuela when his father died; had he traveled there, he would have been denied re-entry into Mexico. He takes solace in knowing that his father would want him to continue trying to build a life in his new home. "My plan is to get my family out," he says. "I don't have any hope that things are going to change in Venezuela. The damage to the country has been huge." The Brookings Institution estimates that the number of Venezuelan migrants could eventually rise to 8 million, even more than the 6 million who have fled Syria — yet Venezuelans have received less than 10 percent of the international aid committed for Syrian refugees.

"The hardest part of migrating is changing your heart," Herrera says. "When I encounter Venezuelans in Mexico, the first thing they talk about is the bad things happening in Venezuela." Instead, Herrera has chosen to honor his father by working toward his dream of success. He even started an Instagram page called "Migrating to Success"; he uses it to share inspirational quotes with his 4,000 followers. "Having to start over isn't all bad," read a recent post. "It's shown me that anything is possible." ■

Additional research and reporting by Claudia Urbano