

## Interview with Venezuelan Refugees

I was walking in the tourist shopping district in the mountain city of Ayacucho, Peru. The street was closed to cars and was a nice wide-tiled sidewalk lined with shops and restaurants. Sitting along the wall I noticed a young woman and two children. They looked dirty and rough and had a paper cup on the sidewalk begging for a few coins. It is common on the streets in the big cities in Peru to see many people begging for money so I didn't think too much of the woman and kids. As I walked past the woman I could see the desperation in her eyes and her quivering lip. I could tell she wasn't a professional panhandler. I kept walking but had second thoughts about not doing anything to help.

I went into the next local grocery store and bought some highly pasteurized yogurt cups and Ritz crackers. I wanted to give her something that wouldn't spoil. I took them back to woman and her kids. She thanked me five times. I was curious about why she was sitting on the sidewalk and I knew she had a story to tell. With the help of a passing student who spoke English, I was able to ask the woman if she wanted to go to the Chicken and Chinese restaurant next door for dinner. Her first response was that she was fine because she had the yogurt and crackers. I told her she could eat the yogurt tomorrow and that now would be a better time for a real meal. She agreed that she was hungry. She got up with her kids

and backpack, which contained her only possessions. She didn't have a cellphone, which is another indication of legitimate people without money. I wanted to learn more about her and we went into the restaurant. I could tell the restaurant manager was a little concerned about the dirty family coming into eat, but since they were with a Gringo white man, it must be okay.

We went to a secluded table and our waitress spoke some English. We looked at the menu and ordered some roaster chicken and fries. The waitress had some time and was able to help me ask a lot of questions. With the woman's limited English and my limited Spanish, we were able to communicate a little. I learned the family was from Venezuela. The mother's name was Winnie and she was 28 years old. Her daughter was six years old and named Valentina.



The little boy was three years old and named David. Both kids had birthdays in October.

The economy in Venezuela collapsed about three years ago and everything shut down. The husband left the family. Winnie moved back in with her mother, but there was still not any money for food. Winnie had a good job and was a telephone call center manager. She had three years of college education. Her business closed because of the economy. Now she was humiliated by begging for money on the street. She arrived in Ayacucho four days ago and slept on a mat in a homeless shelter at night.

I asked her why she came to Peru. She said it was easier than going north to the United States, but Peru had closed its borders to Venezuelans. Even in a poor country like Peru, the immigrants from Venezuela are considered scum. Winnie said in the remote mountains of Peru she had a better chance of not being deported and staying there. Her family started traveling a month ago and had traveled west across Columbia and Ecuador before heading south into Peru. She was traveling with her kids without a guide who usually organizes groups of immigrants to get into the country. She was able to hitchhike on trucks and vans and gradually head south into the mountains.

I knew most of the towns and roads in Peru and I asked her about her route. She said they traveled at night most of the time and she didn't know all the roads. She was in the back of the truck and said they took a lot of gravel and bumpy roads. She was afraid of getting caught



every day. She was sexually assaulted several times and had to fight off her attackers in front of her kids.

As we continued to talk during dinner I could tell she was well educated. I asked her to write a diary and a story about her experiences even if they were unpleasant. Few people really understood why she would leave Venezuela and what it was like being an immigrant on the road. Winnie said she would do any possible work and could maybe get a job as a cleaning lady at a hotel.

I could tell that they had been living in the same clothes for a month. I asked the kids if they wanted to go to a clothing store and get some new pants and sweatshirts. I bought them



some outfits. Winnie said she didn't need anything but her sweatpants were very worn. I asked her to pick out some jeans and two blouses. I told her she should try them on in the changing room. Her daughter Valentine held the curtain shut while Winnie was changing. I picked up David and held on to him because he was an active kid and running around.

Winnie came out of the changing room smiling. It was probably the first time she had smiled in a long time. The kids were smiling and laughing because their mom was happy. It was an emotional moment for me too. I had to bite my lip and look away.

When it was time to go, I asked if they needed anything else. Winnie said it would be nice to get a shower and sleep in a bed at a hotel. There was a cheap hotel down the street that had a room. I booked a room for them for two nights. I told the hotel manager to keep an eye on the family and make sure they were okay. They went into the hotel room with two beds. Winnie said they preferred one big bed because they all slept together. Valentina was impressed by a room with a real toilet and shower.

I said goodbye. I will probably never see them again, but I gave Winnie my email address and asked her again to write a story about her struggles and send me a copy.

The next time you see a politician on television standing at the border wall in Texas doing a photo-op and saying that the immigrants are thieves and drug dealers... most of the immigrants are good people who would rather stay in their country. If

a politician wants to understand the immigration problem, they should go to Venezuela and have dinner with families who are being torn apart from desperation. The immigration problem is a complicated one that won't be fixed easily by keeping everyone out. Any immigrant who has traveled 2,000 miles and put up with all the hardships of being on the road is not going to be stopped by a 30-foot wall. There are a lot of good people who could contribute to the United States. I hope there will be a better way of processing immigrants so more of them will have a better chance of improving their lives.

We would like to help Winnie and her family get a job and some basic housing. We have friends in Ayacucho who are trying to locate and reconnect with Winnie. We hope to have some encouraging news in the coming weeks that we have located Winnie and that we are able to help her achieve a better life.

