

Crisis in Venezuela Hits Close to Home

Spanish teacher translates documents for an asylum seeker, and paraprofessionals and alumna share about fleeing a humanitarian crisis.

By Alice Wu



Pictured are documents that Spanish teacher Kathleen Pommerenke has translated to help a Venezuelan political dissenter apply for refugee status in the U.S. Photos by Alice Wu.

In Venezuela, paper money is now worth more as toilet paper than currency. According to the opposition-led National Assembly, the Venezuelan bolívar is worth so little that inflation reached 83,000 percent in July, and the International Monetary Fund projects that number will climb even higher to 1,000,000 percent by the end of 2018.

Infrastructure is crumbling, and basic food and medicine are scarce, causing spiraling death rates due to malnutrition or otherwise preventable diseases. Although Johnson County has a reputation as the “JOCO

Bubble” for being isolated from the rest of the world, several people at BVN have been intimately touched by the current Venezuelan crisis.

Spanish teacher Kathleen Pommerenke translates documents for a Venezuelan political asylum applicant named Edward, whose last name has been omitted for the sake of privacy. Edward was persecuted in Venezuela for dissenting against president

Nicolás Maduro’s socialist government, and in 2017, he fled to the U.S. Having previously translated for the clients of several immigration lawyers in Kansas City, Pommerenke offered to help with

Edward’s ongoing case.

“As a Spanish teacher, there is an affinity toward the Hispanic community, and if I am in a position where I can help someone who really needs it, I should and will,” Pommerenke said. “Edward’s story is unfortunately more common than many people think.”

Edward attended numerous protests, including the La Candelaria protests on June 4, 2017, when 17-year-old Carlos Moreno was killed by the state-supported paramilitary force called Tupamaro. Edward and other protesters rallied in support of Moreno, causing them to be targeted by Tupamaro themselves. Edward’s business was invaded, and his family was threatened. Soon after, he fled

“They destroyed our country.”
- Paraprofessional Aleixi Martinez

Timeline of the Crisis

Dates provided by the BBC

1998

Due to dissatisfaction with mainstream parties, Hugo Chavez is elected president

February 2009

A referendum approves removing limits on the number of terms in office for government officials. Chavez is allowed to serve for life.

April 2013

President Hugo Chavez dies at age 58. Nicolas Maduro is narrowly elected as his successor, to the opposition’s chagrin.

December 2015

An opposition party, Democratic Unity, wins a two-thirds majority in the Venezuelan National Assembly for the first time in 16 years.



to the U.S. by plane.

“He opposed a lot of their policies and the corruption that they had as far as how their economy was functioning as well as the oppression that the regime was causing to dissidents,” Pommerenke said. “He wanted Maduro’s regime to be disbanded, essentially. He wanted to have actual elections.”

In order to claim asylum in the U.S., Edward has to prove “persecution or well-founded fears of persecution,” as stated in the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, a federal law that provides the outlines for immigration status in the U.S. Pommerenke has translated social media posts and newspaper articles about Tupamaro’s violent actions as well as the autopsy of the man who died. Along the way, several challenges have appeared for her as a translator.

“They have a particular vehicle which we don’t really have a word for here, but it’d be like a truck with water cannons,” Pommerenke said. “There was actually quite a bit of investigation into what [it is]. They call it *una ballena*—a whale. When doing this, you’re kind of like, ‘Why is there a whale all of sudden?’ So there are a bunch of resources that you need to kind of figure out based on the information he provided as well as further investigation to piece some of those mysteries together.”

Because of a network of educated people in Venezuela, Edward was able to receive the extensive amount of necessary documents to give to Pommerenke.

“He is an educated man,”

Pommerenke said. “He has been lucky, but he has decided to use that privilege to speak out and has not had great success with it. He does believe that if he were forced to go back, they would find him, and they would physically hurt him, if not worse.”

Edward is not the only person tied to BVN who has fled possible persecution in Venezuela. Similarly, special education paraprofessional Veruschka Anez was kidnapped by the government for her involvement in several protests. In 2014, she fled and joined her mother, Aleixi Martinez, another special education paraprofessional at BVN, who was already living in the U.S.

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Kathleen Pommerenke**

“We can’t explain or understand exactly the disaster right now that [is] happen[ing] in my country,” Martinez said. “I was okay in my country, working, with family, happy. We had everything over there. We have beautiful beaches, everything. ... They destroyed our country.”

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, Venezuela was once an oil-rich state, but years of corruption and mismanagement coupled with falling oil prices have shaken the country’s economy. Despite the dire situation, the government refuses to be challenged.

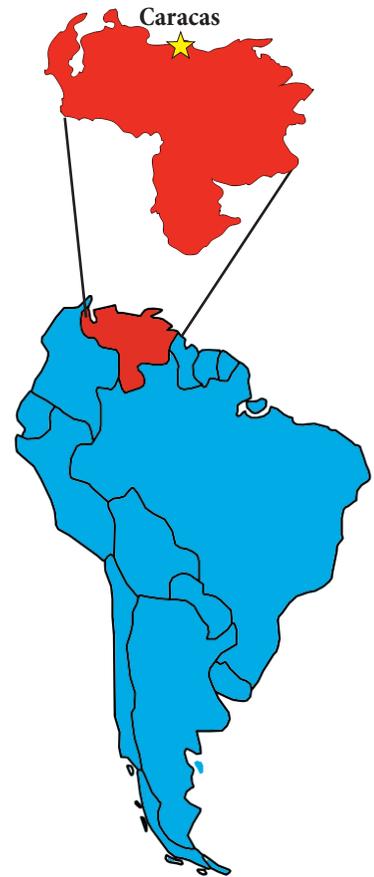
Sharing her mother’s story, Anez’s daughter and BVN alumna Daniuschka Rengifo delivered the BVN graduation speech in 2017.

“They, the criminals, knew where we lived. They knew where my sister and I went to school, they knew who our family and friends were, they knew where we went to hang out

Migration Crisis

Venezuela’s population: 31.7 million

People who have left since 2014: 2.3 million



Venezuela graphic by Linseed Studio from the Noun Project. South America graphic by ilCactusBlu from the Noun Project. Statistics from the UN High Commissioner on Refugees and the CIA. Images edited by Alice Wu.

January 2016

The Supreme Court forces three Democratic Unity deputies to resign, depriving their party of the two-thirds majority needed to challenge President Maduro’s legislation.

July 2017

The election of an all-powerful constituent is elected despite a widespread boycott of the vote and international denunciation.

May 2018

Nicolas Maduro wins a second presidential term.

August 2018

The UN declares a migration crisis: due to shortages in food and medicine, more than two million Venezuelans have fled their country since 2014.





Spanish teacher Kathleen Pommerenke works on translating documents for Edward, a Venezuelan asylum seeker. Photo by Alice Wu.



BVN alumna Danuschka Rengifo '17 delivers her class graduation speech. Photo by BVN Broadcast.



Special education paraprofessionals Veruschka Anez and Aleixi Martinez are pictured. Photo by Alice Wu.

during our free time,” Rengifo said in her speech. “They were going to make sure we didn’t protest again.”

Despite the dangers that she and her family were put in, Anez doesn’t regret speaking up, believing that she did what was necessary.

As the Council on Foreign Relations explains, because the Venezuelan currency carries so little monetary value, producers struggle to cover the costs of the goods they make, and many have stopped selling in Venezuela. Government-mandated price cuts have caused further difficulties for producers, and as a result, grocery store shelves remain barren.

“My parents had good jobs, so they were able to provide for us even when prices started to rise ... [but] the government would announce shortages of water in different sectors for different amounts of times,” Rengifo said. “We would plan ahead by filling up big containers ahead of time. Of course, it was very uncomfortable because ordinary things such as showering, brushing my teeth, or cooking became a challenge trying to save water for the whole week. ... This was four and a half years ago, and since then everything has worsened radically.”

According to the Central Bank of Venezuela, in August, the Venezuelan government removed five zeroes from the previous “strong bolívar” currency and introduced a new “sovereign bolívar” to rein in inflation. However, many people, including Anez, Martinez, Rengifo, and Pommerenke, believe that to truly address the crisis, President Maduro’s government

must be removed, and a democracy must be reinstated.

“This political party of Hugo Chávez and right now, Maduro, have all the control for the institutions. They take all the money,” Anez said. “The court, the Supreme Court, is under this political party. And who says if something is good or something is bad?”

According to the Council on Foreign Relations, prior to the presidential elections this past May, leaders of the largest opposition parties to the United Socialist Party were forbidden to run or arrested. Protests were quashed in the streets. The official voter turnout provided by the National Electoral Council was only 46 percent. After Maduro won a second term, the Organization of American States, which includes the U.S. and numerous countries in Latin America, refused to recognize the seemingly rigged election results.

“There is no justice and no human rights in Venezuela,” Rengifo said. “The government is ... ruthless at the moment, and they are doing everything they can to stay in power. It has become a communist regime.”

Pommerenke disagrees that socialism is the issue, but she is scared for those still trying to flee from Venezuela.

“Everyone says, ‘Oh, socialism is terrible.’ Socialism isn’t bad; the corruption is terrible. There’s no way for the average

person to make it,” Pommerenke said. “You either are very wealthy or not, and so a lot of the times, people who are wealthy enough are able to leave, and if you’re not wealthy enough, you are stuck.”

Pommerenke will continue to help Edward as his case continues to be processed, but Edward’s future, like Venezuela’s future, remains uncertain.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen soon, but it’s [been] almost 20 year[s] in this situation,” Anez said. “People in Venezuela don’t have the power to take

Maduro [down]. They don’t. We need help.”

According to the U.N., they are working with American and foreign governments and various non-profit organizations to grant asylum and provide economic support to families fleeing the crisis. In the meantime, Rengifo believes that

individuals can create change too.

“Many people have no idea even where Venezuela is on the map or what continent it is in, so there is very little awareness on the crisis that Venezuelans are going through,” Rengifo said. “Right now, the internet is the only tool Venezuelans have to communicate what is happening ... Share the news, the posts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, because the more people that know and the more noise we can create, the more international organizations will hear us and take action.”

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- BVN alumna Danuschka Rengifo '17