

★ *Teaching Freedom* ★

VOLUME 1
**LESSONS FROM
VENEZUELA**

The **FUND** *for* **AMERICAN STUDIES**

REAL-LIFE STORIES OF VENEZUELAN ASYLUM SEEKERS

Venezuelan political activists Andrés Guilarte and Jorge Galicia are now available to come to your university or college campus to share their stories.

Andrés and Jorge had to leave their lives in Venezuela after an oppressive regime crippled the economy, caused widespread starvation, blanketed the nation in blackouts, and silenced and jailed those who dared to speak out and criticize the government. With an eyewitness perspective they answer the question: How did a country with so much wealth and promise completely collapse? Could it happen in the United States? Their answer will surprise you!

****This eBook is a transcription of the talk Jorge presented to Young America's Foundation. ****



JORGE GALICIA

Christian, lawyer and freedom fighter – these are the words that define Jorge's life. Before socialism devastated his country, Jorge lived a life not unlike that of middle-class Americans. But now, he is one of 4 million Venezuelans who have fled their country following its economic, social and political collapse. Living under a socialist tyranny showed Jorge the dangers of letting the State grow. From a very young age, he has been speaking out about the very real damages caused by socialism and has made it his life's mission to win the fight. He was a member of Estudiantes por la Libertad (Students for Liberty Latin America), serving as a coordinator from 2015-16 and a senior leader from 2016-17. Today, he travels college campuses speaking out and sharing his story.

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Jorge Galicia:

People say that what happened in Venezuela could never happen here in America, but I was there. I am an eyewitness and I want to tell you, think again.

I was forced to leave my life, my family, and my country behind. Now, I want to tell the story.

In the year 2017, I was texting with one of my best friends in life after arriving from a peaceful demonstration against the Maduro regime. Suddenly he said to me, "Hey, man, there is a group of police officers standing right in my front door. What should I do now?" I read this, I was horrified, and I said to him, "Well, do not open the door. Go hiding and remain quiet." But after this, I didn't receive any single text message back. Just a terrifying silence.

So how did we get from Venezuela being a nice place to live in to where we are now? Where you see all of this political violence, and where young people just like me and you are being hit by a military truck in the middle of the road. How does that happen? And can you imagine something like that happening here in America?

Well, today, I'm going to try to give you an explanation about how they have reached this point in Venezuela, but before that I'm going to share with you a little bit of my personal experience of how it is to live under Venezuelan dictatorship. I come from a middle-class family. We were never rich, but I really think that in the past we used to have a really decent life and a happy one.



MY EARLY YEARS

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We used to go to restaurants, and I used to have great birthday parties when I was a child. I also used to have the latest versions of my favorite video games. So, it was never a perfect life. We had our troubles, but it was okay. Now, and thanks to the collapse of the system, that situation has changed almost completely. To the point where in my house we don't even have a constant water supply anymore.



So, me and my mom need to drive to certain place in Caracas at least three or four times a week to fill up some big water containers in order to do the regular activities that need to be done at home, say, cooking or cleaning.

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Electricity's always failing. Every time there is one of these massive blackouts in Venezuela, internet connection always fails, as well.

So, me and my mom cannot talk for days or even for weeks. If the whole country's dead, you cannot talk with anybody there. And even food is hard to come by.

Eventually. Not even a year ago one of my main desires in life was to be able to eat a piece of hamburger again or pizza because all of those things became luxury to me.

And actually, if you for some crazy reason decide to visit Venezuela, let's say, tomorrow and you meet a girl down there, and you want to impress her, take her on a date to a McDonald.



But do not believe that this whole situation with me and my family is somehow isolated. Actually, if you compare my family situation with the rest of the Venezuelan population, you would probably think that we are still privileged among society. And let me explain to you why. For example, my grandma she suffers from high blood pressure problems. And she needs to take a medication on a daily basis in order to control her condition. And there was a time when in Venezuela in my house we were running out of the pills that she needs to take, right?

So, when we went out to the marketplace to try to locate new pills for her, those pills were nowhere to be found. And we'd drive through the entire city of Caracas day after day, looking at every pharmacy, and the pill was not there. But after months, and after receiving a lot of help even from outside the country, we were able to find the pills. But for majority of

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Venezuelans, these kinds of stories do not end well at all. And we're seeing how thousands of people are dying because they just cannot find the medicine that they need to treat their conditions. We're seeing diabetic people dying because they cannot find the insulin they need.

People with high blood pressure problems, they die because they cannot find the pills. It's really chaotic. And let's not even talk about worse diseases, like cancer, for example, because this is how Venezuelan hospitals look nowadays.

And you cannot expect to receive any kind of treatment in a place like this, right? And these are only a couple of examples, but if you read the news about Venezuela, you will realize with headline after headline how desperate the situation currently is in Venezuela. And because of that, we have already seen how more than four million people, actually, I think this number has already hit five million, so I have to update this. They have left the country. And they are going to far places, like Argentina, like Chile, like Peru, and many of them go by foot because they cannot afford to buy an airline ticket, not even a bus ticket. So, they walk the whole continent. And many of them have died because they faced terrible weather conditions. But they'd rather have that destiny than stay in Maduro's Venezuela.

For me, the danger didn't stop there. As I mentioned before, I was a political activist down there. And in the year 2014, I joined the student movement of my university. Those are pictures of me.



And I also joined a small political party named Vente Venezuela, which in Spanish stands for Come Venezuela. It is a small political party that advocates for freedom of economy, freedom of religions, every great individual right that makes it possible to live in a prosperous and free society, right? But in Venezuela, in order to do these kinds of things, you have to be a risk taker. And a big one because the political police is always out there trying to locate opposition leaders that are trying to make something against the Maduro regime. And I'm not even talking about violent people, I'm talking about songwriters, I'm talking about bloggers, I'm talking about

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influencers, I'm talking about YouTubers, people on Twitter. Those are the kind of people that are being targeted by the political police in Venezuela.



In the image above you can see Inés González Árraga, she was sent to jail because she wrote a couple of tweets against the Maduro regime. They didn't like what she wrote, and she was sent to jail.

We don't have a lot of freedom of speech in Venezuela, as you can see. The other guy, his name is Joshua Hold. He is an American citizen and he was doing a missionary trip in Venezuela to help the poor. So, he was doing a good thing, right? But he was accused of being an American spy on Venezuelan soil and he was sent to jail. Maria Lourdes Afiuni is also shown. She is a judge who ruled a sentence against the dictatorship in Venezuela. And, of course, they didn't like what she wrote in that sentence. So, she was sent to jail because of that. So, as you can see, not a lot of divisions between powers in Venezuela.

And this is exactly what happened to me and my friend that I was just talking to you about at the beginning of the conversation. An hour after that episode, I spoke to his mother and she confirmed to me that he was taken by police. And when I knew about this, I was terrified because I knew that the next in line in order to be captured was me because he and I were doing the same things at exactly the same time at exactly the same location. And at the moment when he was captured, both of us were texting through our phones. So, the police was able to read whatever we were saying at the moment. So, I needed to disappear. And I went into some religious place, which I don't want to say to you the name of the place, the location of the place, and not even the religion that they follow in this place because I don't want to compromise the safety of those people.

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I was in total isolation for a long period of time. I needed to shut down all of my social media accounts, turn off my cellphone. I was not able to speak with anybody in my family... Not with my mom, with my dad, not with my friends, of course. And it was a really life changing situation for me because one day I was a student, probably just like you, attending my classes, worrying about my next day exam, worrying about the girl I like maybe, and all of a sudden, I saw myself involved in all of this hiding situation as if I was some kind of criminal. And, of course, I was not. And during these days, I was extremely worried. You can see here a poster with a sign. His family decided to create awareness between the society about what was going on with him.



It is in Spanish, but it says he is from Caracas, he was 21 years old by the time, he was a student. You can see his leg all wounded by rubber bullets. So, I was extremely worried about him because even though I was not having the best situation in my life, of course, because I was isolated, I was outside my home, but he was taking the worst of the situation. He was in prison. And he told me how he was beaten on a daily basis. He was forced to eat food in really bad shape, he shared a cell room with the worst of the Venezuelan population, meaning murders, kidnappers, rapists. Any kind of violent criminal that you could possibly think of. He actually told me how he saw a guy planning a kidnapping just beside him through his cellphone.

And he was horrified, of course. And I was there, I wanted to help him, but I was stuck, as well. And nothing for me to do to help him, but I was also worried about myself because I didn't see a light at the end of the tunnel. I didn't know for how long that hiding situation was going to be in place. I thought, will I even be able to go out to see my mom again? Will I ever finish my law degree? Will I need to escape through the border, hiding under a truck? Those were the kind of things that were surrounding my head. And it was really horrible, but thankfully after three really long months. It was easy to say, but it is actually really long, after three months he was released. And because of that, I was also able to go out again, little by little, and retake my ordinary life.

But I never got to be the same after that. I needed to live after that with the constant fear of expecting the police to appear at my front door. Just like what happened to him. And I decided to stay during the year 2018 away from politics not because I stopped believing in what I

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believe right now, but because I didn't want to compromise the safety of my family because my mom almost lost her mind. She calls me every hour. She might be calling me right now. Yeah, and can you imagine for someone like her? I'm her only son to not be able to talk with me for three months. She was completely desperate, and I didn't want her to go through that again.

Thanks to that decision I made, I was able to finish my law degree in Venezuela.



And I applied for this great leadership program named Project Arizona, which was held in the city of Phoenix at Arizona State University. And I was elected to do that and that's basically the reason I'm here. I was supposed to go back to Venezuela May 1st because the program already ended, but when I was doing this, this was happening in Venezuela. I don't know how many of you are aware with the news of my country, but Juan Guaido appeared onto the scene. And thanks to that, I started to receive a lot of invitations from students' groups at ASU and people from the local media that wanted to know more of what was going on Venezuela. So, I was the perfect choice for them to speak about that.

So basically, I retook my activism while I was here in the US. And, of course, while I was doing that, the regime in Venezuela knew what I was doing. So, I decided to claim asylum because I know for a fact that if I return, I soon as I put out a step into Venezuela, I will be in jail.

Anyway, how did we reach this point? Did it all begin in 1999 when we first elected Hugo Chavez as our national president? Maybe we have to look even further into the past to understand the costs of all of this political and economic nightmare. While I was doing this leadership program, I used to talk a lot with progressives in the room. And I said to them, "Listen, I know all of you have really good intentions and you want the best for this country, but your proposals are going to create the very same environment that led Venezuela into all of this political and economic crisis.

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And every time I said that, they got mad at me and they said, "No, you don't know what you're talking about." The progressive movement here in America doesn't stand for the very same policies followed by Hugo Chavez and then Nicolas Maduro. And when I heard this, I thought to myself, "These guys, they have a point," because Hugo Chavez, for example, he came from the military. He, as well as Maduro, they incarcerated many of his political opponents. They created this paramilitary group named Colectivos which is basically a group of civilians carrying long weapons and opening fire against society to avoid any kind of political opposition.

So, they confiscated thousands of private enterprises in Venezuela. So, in that sense, we definitely agree that the progressive moment here in America is not necessary the same to Nicolas Maduro and to Hugo Chavez in Venezuela. That is true but let me ask you once again what happened to us. What did we have before Hugo Chavez? Did we have a balance budget with fiscally responsible government or maybe we actually have something much more similar to the kind of welfare state that progressives in America are advocating for. And in order to answer that question, let's focus this talk for a while in the year 1970. Until that year, that decade, Venezuela was used to economic growth every single year. We were the biggest economy in Latin America, we used to have a greater GDP than countries like Spain, like Greece.

So, Venezuela was doing okay, but then in the year 1975, something happened. Under the administration of this guy, Carlos Andres Perez, two things happened that completely reshaped the Venezuelan history. The first of those things was the nationalization of the oil industry. And the second thing was that we saw a huge boom in the oil prices in the global market. So, the combination of these two factors allowed the government to spend much more because they wanted to help the poor. There was still a lot of poverty in Venezuela and they wanted to do something about it, right? So, the government, his administration, created thousands of new social programs and subsidies for the population.

And I'm going to give to you some examples of one of the kinds of social programs. These are only a couple examples because if I show you a whole list, we would probably stay here for two days. I don't think you really want that, but one of the things they created, free college for everybody.

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FREE COLLEGE

The government created this great social program where basically any Venezuelan who wanted to pursue studies at the university level, they could do it for free, right? And all they needed was to have an admission letter from any major university, even around the world. And that was it. None of them were required to pay back a single penny to the state.

So, because of that, we saw thousands of Venezuelans going to study to the very best universities around the world. Meaning Oxford, Harvard, or any other that you could possibly think of for free. Other thing that we saw, free healthcare for everybody.



FREE HEALTHCARE

The government created more than 20 public hospitals, where any Venezuelan could go regardless of their income. You could be rich, you could be poor. It didn't matter, you only have to attend one of these places and that was it. You will receive free medical attention and free medical treatment.

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(ALMOST) **FREE GASOLINE**

And even the gasoline was being subsidized by the time. Venezuela has always been famous for having the cheapest gasoline rates around the world, but this was never because of free market prices competition, but because of this big government subsidy, that even today under the current collapse that subsidy still exists.

But then what happened? In the year 1978, that huge boom in the oil prices came to an end. And because of that, three things happened that, in my opinion, were the most important things. The first of those things that we saw, inflation. A lot of new levels of inflation, which is really sad because our national currency bolivar until this date was famous for being really strong and stable among the continent. When the oil prices came down, the politicians were really committed to the idea of not making any single cut to the existing social programs and subsidies. And even beyond that, they were elected under the promise of expanding the existing social program that were already in place. And the only way to do that without all the revenue was through creating new money, printing it, and borrowing it. Well, because of that, we saw a lot of new levels of inflation in Venezuela.

And what that means is that if you go, let's say, to some restaurant and you get a burger. Let's say it will cost you one day five bolivars, but if you go to the very same restaurant, let's say, the next week, you will find that this very same hamburger for, let's say, \$10 bolivar and your salary is remaining at the very same level. So, society in general was becoming poorer and poorer. The second thing that happened was we saw how it created a culture of dependency in Venezuela. In the year 1989, Venezuela elected this guy again for a second term of government. They believed if he was the mastermind behind all of this great social progress, maybe if we put him back in power, we will recover the way of life that we were used to in 1975, right?

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But surprisingly enough, this guy came with new ideas. And he realized that the levels of spending in Venezuela were no longer sustainable. So, he decided to pursue some great reforms that were pointing in the right directions. He tried to cut some of the subsidies that he created in the past, he tried to remove some of the social progress that he created in the past. So, basically, he was trying to roll back what he did in the first administration, right? But sadly, when he decided to do that, it was already too late. The population was already dependent in all of these programs and subsidies. Many of the people of Venezuela didn't have a clue about how to make a living without the government assistance of all of these social programs.

WHAT HAPPENED NEXT?

So, at the very next day, when he announced the reforms, this happened, the Caracas revolt.



Which was basically one of the most violent episodes in our modern history, where hundreds of Venezuelans lost their life because of the clashes between the military forces and the civilian population. They were rioting, they were looting private businesses because they didn't like the

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reforms. And the third thing that happened in Venezuela was the rise of Hugo Chavez himself. He tried to overtake the government by the use of force. He failed at the beginning, but it worked for him because that attempt gave him a lot of popularity among the Venezuelan society.

He was actually rooting for the very same ideas that were popular at the time. Which he said to the population, "Listen, if you are seeing cuts right now in the levels of spending, if you're seeing your social programs and

subsidies being taken away, it's being of the greedy of the capitalistic sector and because of the corruption of the politicians. You are entitled to all of this and in Venezuela we have all the resources in the world. So, we are endlessly reached, so you can have whatever you want." Right? That was the speech he gave to the population and Venezuelans believed that. Then he received a pardon from the presidency for what he did that allowed him to compete in the 1998 elections. And he won.

And then he, as a president, confiscated thousands of private enterprises. He created this paramilitary group that I told you about before. He incarcerated many of his political opponents. He changed the Constitution, he changed the name of the country, he changed the flag. And now, after 20 years, and now under Maduro, we haven't been able to remove the system that he created. So, I definitely believe that the progressive movement here in America is not necessarily the same to Nicolas Maduro and to Hugo Chavez, but I also believe that they are going to create, if their proposals ever get to be in place, are going to create the very same environment that led Venezuela into all of this political and economic crisis.



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It worries to me a lot to see how the levels of spending here in America continues to grow every single year regardless of who is in power. Apparently, it doesn't matter anymore whether the Republicans or the Democrats control the Congress, or the presidency. It keeps flipping between parties and levels of spending just keep rolling every single year. And that is extremely worrying because I really believe that if you don't manage to find a way to put a break in all of this crazy spending, you will probably see yourself in a really bad situation in the future. Will you end up like Venezuela? Maybe, maybe not, but you could end up like Greece, like Argentina, which are really bad places, as well. And nobody wants to emulate those economies.

So if I were you, and I know that you would do the same because you are a conservative audience, but you have to stay away from politicians that offer you free things, like free college tuition, free healthcare, free whatever. In Venezuela, we used to have all of that, but it was never free. It costed us billions of dollars and ultimately our own democracy and freedom. And before I finish, I would like to share with you the story behind this little bracelet that you see right here. This was made by my friend doing his jail time. It is all made of plastic bag. And when we were able to meet again, he gave it to me. And for me, it's the most symbolic gift I have ever received because it works as a reminder of my purpose in life.



Which is no other than keep fighting for justice and for liberty wherever I am. This was the product of an injustice. And I just cannot stand waking up every morning and see this without taking any kind of action to improve this world. So, thank you very much. Thank you to YAF organization for inviting me here, and thank you TFAS, The Fund for American Studies, for making it possible for me to share my story.