

From Hero to Villain: My True Story of the Citgo6 by Jose Pereira

CHAPTER 1: THE JOURNEY TO FREEDOM

Today is Sunday, April 30, 2023, and it marks the start of my long-awaited journey after five years of captivity in Venezuela. As I was at the airport preparing to board a flight to Washington, D.C., my heart was filled with many emotions.

I'm going with my wife, and I say here:

-Mommie, I'm nervous and emotional, and I was waiting for this moment. When I go back and see all that I have been going through these seven months we have come back, for me, it's like we have already been here for years.

-I was thinking that only one month after I came back, I was in Washington, D.C., at the Georgetown Mural, and I had been doing all those interviews and writing on this Hostage Situation and barely had a few months since I came back.

Mervis replies to me.

-Yes, but take it easy; you think you are a Superman, and you know that isn't true; you have been going through several PTSD episodes, and you are still in the process of healing.

-Your kids told you that the other day, they understand you want to cover the time lost and want to help others, but you need to slow down and take it easier.

I conveyed to Mervis that I must take more care of myself to help others and be calm and focused to enjoy this trip to D.C.

The purpose of my trip to the capital of the United States was significant,

It is the first week of May, and various foundations have organized Hostage Week with events dedicated to raising awareness of hostages' plight and supporting their families.

It invited me to attend the Hostage U.S. and Foley Foundation Galas, where I would share my story and honor the resilience of those who have faced similar trials.

In addition, I was thrilled to be present at the dedication of the new offices of the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs (SPEHA) at the State Department in Washington D.C. office that is under the leadership of Ambassador Roger Carstens, the person who brought us back home, and that during our captivity we decided to call him "Captain America."

Memories of my capture on November 21, 2017, flooded my mind. I worked as CEO of Citgo Petroleum, the subsidiary of PDVSA (Petroleos de Venezuela), the Venezuelan state-owned oil and gas multinational based in Houston, Texas, in the United States, which manages several refineries and gasoline distribution

chains. Armed men took us away from the meeting in Caracas in handcuffs. I vividly remembered the chaos, the fear that gripped my heart, and the uncertainty that hung over all of us. I took us as hostages, torn from our families and thrown into a life of unimaginable hardship. An hour turned two days, days into months, and months into two years, and the outside world kept spinning, oblivious to our plight.

But that fateful day ended when our dream of freedom finally came true, and a new chapter began, filled with possibilities and the chance to rebuild what had been taken from us.

As I left, I was aware of those still held hostage. Their loved ones remain captive, not physically imprisoned, their lives put on hold, and their pain continues to reverberate through every fiber of my being.

I vowed to carry their stories with me, to give voice to their silent suffering. As I walked through the airport terminal, my footsteps echoed with determination. I was not just a former hostage. I was a survivor. And with Mervis, the families, and the organizations dedicated to our cause, we could be a change agent for this terrible situation.

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The announcement of the start of boarding for our flight finally came through the loudspeakers in lounge A25, bringing me back to the present. I took a deep breath, gripping Mervis' hand tighter, drawing strength from his presence. The journey ahead would be emotionally charged, but I knew that sharing our stories, supporting the families of the hostages, and raising awareness were essential steps toward change.

As I boarded the plane, the engines roared and propelled me forward into a week of remembrance, advocacy, and solidarity.

As the plane touched down in Washington, D.C., a sense of anticipation filled the air, the city bursting with life and purpose, welcoming us with open arms.

The flight was delayed due to the intense storms hitting DC that Sunday, which prophesied it would be a very stormy week, as my life has been for the past few years.

We arrived after midnight and headed to our hotel, eager to begin our journey of remembrance and solidarity.

My true hero, Mervis, my wife and my rock, accompanied me on this journey. Her unwavering support and her endless love got me through the darkest moments of captivity. Together, we embark on this pilgrimage holding hands tightly, fingers entwined. Gratitude overwhelmed me as I realized how lucky I was to be there, preparing to attend these events and speaking out for those still caught in the grip of captivity and supporting families still living through this nightmare.

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On Monday, May 1, 2023, we attended the reception cocktail offered by Hostage U.S. This is an organization dedicated to supporting former hostages and their families once I return them. There, I had the privilege of meeting several people who had gone through the same harrowing experiences that I had but in different corners of the world. We traded stories of survival, finding solace in the shared understanding that only fellow hostages could provide. At those times, the bonds we forged were unbreakable, a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. And sadly, you ended up joining a club you never wanted to belong to, and now you are part of that club.

I will never forget the collective photo we took that night; it was a mixture of joy and pain at the same time.

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The next morning, we gathered for breakfast, joining the Hostage U.S. organization once again and over our coffee, listening intently to the moving and compelling stories of families who still had loved ones held captive in hostile foreign countries or languishing in prisons. Each story was a heartbreaking reminder of the ongoing struggles facing the hostages and their families, a reminder that their pain was far from over.

The weight of their stories hung in the air, and tears welled in my eyes as I witnessed the strength and determination of these families. His unwavering love and hope touched me deeply, igniting a fire within me to do whatever it took to bring his loved one home and end this nightmare quickly.

In the afternoon, Mervis and I headed to an important event: the hearing in the House of Representatives, where an amendment to the Robert Levison Act was being discussed. This amendment is intended to provide greater support for the families of the hostages, a cause close to my heart. It was an honor to be invited to speak, share my experiences, and advocate for the changes needed to help those left behind.

As we entered the hallowed halls of the House of Representatives, the gravity of the situation washed over us. Staff members and congresspeople scrambled to engage in intense discussions, their minds focused on finding solutions. In this charged atmosphere, I stepped forward, ready to deliver a speech that would become the cornerstone of my future legacy. The hostage community has become a national security issue.

I raised my clear and determined voice while I went to the room.

- Dear staffers and congressmen, we urgently need legislative action because this is becoming a national security issue because Americans are not being taken from the battlefield but by hostile regimes as political pawns and bargaining chips for favors and relief from sanctions.

- American Government to provide comprehensive support to the hostages and their families. I stressed the importance of incorporating logistical, physical, and mental support, as well as financial assistance, both before and after the release of the hostages.

- I appealed to your sense of moral courage and to put political differences aside in favor of a bipartisan decision to bring all Americans home. The room fell silent as my words echoed through the room, touching the hearts and minds of those present. It was a watershed moment that would shape the dialogue around hostage issues for years to come.

Late in the afternoon, we attended an event that meant immensely to me: the mural vigil in Georgetown, DC. This mural is a testament to the strength and determination of the BOFH ("Bring Our Family Home" campaign), a movement started by our families and loved ones just over a year ago. Faced with uncertainty, they rallied, tirelessly advocating for our release and the safe return of all hostages. The mural stands tall in Georgetown, a beacon of hope and a reminder that no one should be forgotten, and it has become a sanctuary for the entire hostage community.

The mural has stood tall and mighty as a testament to the unity and resilience of those who have returned and those who still face captivity. Nineteen faces, including mine, stared back at us, each telling a story of struggle, resistance, hope, Faith, and love.

There was a moment in the night when the stickers of those recently released were put up. It was fun for me and, at the same time, creepy since I found out that day that the sticker that they put up in October 2022 when I was released and where it reflected the 1775 days of unjust imprisonment had been stolen or torn off and I will never know why. This happened, and I had the privilege of placing the sticker for the second time with my wife, Mervis, since the first Mickey Bergman (CEO of the Richardson Center) had put it on. Mickey is another excellent fighter for bringing hostages back home.

I made a speech with other recently released former hostages, such as Paul Rusesabagina, Trevor Reed, Mathew Heath, Jorge Toledo, and Britney Griner's family representatives.

When it was my turn to stand before them, I spoke from the bottom of my soul,

-I want to share my gratitude for the chance to be on the other side of captivity and vow to fight tirelessly for the safe return of each hostage.