

## My Story: Angelica Gabriela Santiago Queiros

My name is Angelica Gabriela Queiros (Gaby), and I am a Venezuelan citizen living in exile, in Peru, where I have official status as an asylum seeker. My thirteen- year- old daughter, Anastasia (Ani) and my mother (Valentina) are with me but have not been successful in obtaining their asylum seeker permits and are at risk of becoming illegal. We cannot return to Venezuela because my family is blacklisted as anti-Chavez/Maduro and our lives have been threatened, but our lives in Peru are becoming more and more dangerous and uncertain. There is no employment available for us in Peru and I refuse to participate in the sex trade. I am now being supported by Canadian friends who are willing to sponsor my family to move to Canada. This is the story of how I came to seek asylum in Peru, how my daughter and mother joined me here, and the circumstances that have led us to seek asylum in Canada.

### **Why I had to leave Venezuela**

Starting in 2014, I participated in several protests to demand food, clean water, better living conditions, and the de-militarization of schools. I openly opposed Chavez and Maduro, which meant that I was blacklisted and my passport number used monitor and track me. Everything I did was under suspicion, and even buying food became difficult.

My family was not allowed to leave our city of Valencia, and government officials would not issue us the Homeland Card we needed to access supermarkets, schools, and healthcare. Obtaining work was almost impossible, because employers could be fined if their employees did not have Homeland Cards.

My brother, Daniel, and his friends were arrested simply walking home from work because the national guard saw them on the street and thought they were protestors. He was detained and tortured, and when I tried to visit him, I was beaten by the guards and threatened with rape. Daniel's lawyer warned us that we would likely be tortured or killed if we were too vocal about trying to visit or help him. Pressure from Human Rights Watch, the international media and the press finally led to his release, but by 2017, it was clear we were not safe, and we saved enough money to plan our escapes. I felt I could no longer provide for my daughter and mother and keep them safe. Daniel escaped to Chile and I to Peru in 2017. The plan was for Ani and my mother to join me when I was able to support them.

### **My journey and arrival in Peru as a Venezuelan Asylum Seeker**

My six-day escape to Peru was difficult and risky, especially at border crossings where I was always at risk. I traveled by bus, van and foot to Trujillo, Peru, because it was a smaller and I thought it would be safer than the capital city of Lima. I had no idea how vulnerable I would be.

On arriving in Peru my bags were stolen and I became very ill with pneumonia. After arriving, I sold sweets on the street, worked odd jobs at restaurants, and cleaned discos at night. Peruvians in these places often beat and verbally abused me and other Venezuelan women and our employers would not protect or stand up for us. But I was able to support my family in

Venezuela, and save enough to travel home to bring my daughter and mother to Peru. The week I left Venezuela my daughter began to have epileptic seizures , and I knew I had to bring her to be with me where I could care for her as soon as I was able.

### **Bringing my daughter and mother to Peru**

I knew my mother and daughter would not be able to do the underground routes out of Venezuela alone. My mother had become fragile and depressed, seeing my brother tortured, her children suffering, her country in ruins, and she couldn't pay her own rent, and Ani had become sad and withdrawn without her mother close by. My mother and Ani succeeded in crossing the border, but I was detained, beaten and called a traitor, and only released after my mother bribed them with her \$300 savings.

### **Our life in Peru and why we now have to leave**

Life has been far from easy in Peru where I have no hope of permanent status and my mother and daughter have been denied the same asylum seeker status I obtained. It has been almost impossible for us to obtain health care, employment, or access to education. When I tried to register Ani for school the head administrator said that it was not possible to register her because parents had pressured them not to admit starving Venezuelans. I was finally able to enrol her in a private school where she has been bullied every day for being Venezuelan. I could not pay for Ani's exams, which were additional to her tuition, which was very disappointing for her and contributed to her isolating herself more and more. In 2019, Ani had a bad seizure at school, and was refused three hospitals' emergency rooms until a bystander at a fourth heard us and intervened. We have not been able to see any doctor who can explain to us whether the seizures can be cured but have been managing them with costly drugs which are becoming more difficult for me to get. I desperately need to get Ani the medical care she needs and stability and help to heal from the trauma.

Also in 2019, I met a family from Nova Scotia, Canada, who were in Huanchaco, Peru for four months and needed a nanny for their one- and- a- half year-old daughter. We became very close and their kindness and respect were such a bright spot for my family. When they returned in 2020, I worked for them again until they had to leave early because of COVID-19. During our time with them, Ani made friends nearby, found some biology textbooks she started studying to learn about bio-analysis, and found a math tutor. My mother even had a brief job for two months in social services until Covid-19 struck. I could see the change in my little family, and knew I needed to get us to a safer place if we were to thrive.

Xenophobia towards Venezuelans has become far worse during COVID-19. On my last day of work with the Canadian family a taxi driver beat me and tried to rob me of my final pay. My mother has been robbed several times, and I have been beaten when out to buy food or medicine for Ani. My friends, who I now call my Canadian family, are now our only source of support.

### **Our hopes for life in Canada**

My only wish is to be safe and to see my daughter grow up, study, and be happy. My Canadian family gave me the opportunity to believe in myself and what I am capable of. I have hope again.

I am 31, strong, resilient, and determined to build a better life for my daughter and my mother. We are smart and resourceful, so I know we will succeed. I dream about studying at the Nova Scotia Community College to become an Early Childhood educator or a long-term care provider. My daughter dreams of going to school without discrimination, making friends, and studying biology at university. My mother dreams of resuming her career. We deserve a life where we no longer must flee, where we can live in a safe home and in a community that loves us and we love back. We know that life won't be easy at first in Canada, but that it will be safer, kinder, healthier and full of potential.