

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Students from afar find home in Mount Pleasant

Sundays are relaxing. Sundays are quiet. Sundays are easy. But on a Sunday she will never forget, **Renata Aristimuno** fled her country.

In spring of 2018, the junior was told that she had to evacuate her home in Caracas, Venezuela—a nation embroiled in turmoil, revolution, and oppression—and move 1,800 miles away to Mount Pleasant.

"My parents and my brother and I discussed the possibility of leaving two years ago, but we never really came to terms with it until earlier this year. My brother and I had just gotten home from a school trip, and our parents sat us down and told us that we were finally leaving," Aristimuno said.

Aristimuno and her family were forced to leave because of the political and economic unrest in Venezuela. They were joined by many other citizens in the same situation.

"[My friends and I] were a bunch of kids who came from families who had been in politics or really successful businesses," Aristimuno said. "All of the families were really taking a blow from the current economic situation, so everyone discussed the possibility of leaving the country at some point.

In the last four years we have lost almost half of our country's population." Aristimuno and her family faced life-threatening situations in Venezuela that reinforced the urgency of their move. Traumatic and dangerous experiences were common for all Venezuelans because of the environment that the government had created.

"I was once held at gunpoint, but I think everyone in Venezuela has been held at gunpoint," Aristimuno said. "I was walking down the street with my mom and my brother. We were parked outside my aunt's house and we just had to walk two minutes to get to her building. Some guy walked right between my mom and I and he pointed the gun right at me. He told my mom to give him her phone and all of the money that she had. My mom had just lost her phone, and her engagement ring had already been stolen, so she didn't have anything to give him. My mom started screaming and it

freaked the guy out. He wasn't a bad person, he was just an idiot with a gun who needed money. He told us he needed to feed his kids, and then he left after my mom started yelling."

The current socialist governmental system in Venezuela has failed to the point of driving a vast majority of their citizens away.

"It's a very delicate situation, and we've had very bad leadership in the government. It has been building up for a couple of years and it really exploded in 2013 when Nicolas Maduro got elected because he thinks of himself as Jesus or the Messiah. We didn't exactly deserve the situation we were in, but we kind of had it coming. We brought it upon ourselves by not knowing who to elect to call the best shots," Aristimuno said.

As glad as Aristimuno was to be out of the corruption and chaos of

Venezuela, she was not naive to the potential hurdles and hardships that could come with being uprooted from the only place she had ever known. She still looks on the bright side despite the complications, and is thankful for her prior knowledge of English to help with her schooling.

"We came over here because it made more sense, but with current immigration laws it can be scary

sometimes," Aristimuno said. "We're trying to do this whole entire process legally. Charleston is a really nice city though, and everyone has been so nice to us. Schools here are amazing."

Charleston is a stark contrast from Caracas in the language, the people, and the schools. Part of her will always be in Venezuela.

"My school in Caracas is my biggest home," Aristimuno said. "I spent 10 years there, and my last day there was brutal. Most of my best memories were in that school, and all of my friends were there. I have a good circle of friends here at Wando, but my true friends are still the ones in Venezuela, and I think they always will be. We've worked so hard for where we are now though, and this whole thing has been easier because of my family. We've become a lot closer as a family recently, and at the end of the day, if I have my family I'll be fine."

Venezuela Renata Aristimuno

By Merritt Redden



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