Feet in 2 Worlds

Colorado Welcomed Venezuelans. Many Now Live in Fear.

Over the past couple of years, around 40,000 Venezuelans arrived in Denver fleeing political and economic instability, eager to work while their immigration statuses played out. Initially, with help from the city and non-profit organizations, many were able to find stable housing and jobs. However, with all the recent changes in immigration policy, they now face an uncertain future and finding work has become more difficult.

Producers Ann Marie Awad and Andrés Pacheco-Girón explore how the rules of the hustle have changed for one Venezuelan couple in Denver.

Shaka Mali Tafari: You know, I get the sense that the Trump administration was put in place to troll people like me. My name is Shaka Mali Tafari, and I'm the son of Jamaican immigrants who worked hard. As an '80s baby, I was born into their struggle to make the best of their opportunities in the United States.

My mama was a shop owner in Venice Beach CA, and when the shop wasn't earning enough to put food on the table, she took the hustle on the go! We would pack a basket of the shop's most sellable items — oils, incense, and soaps, which she balanced on her head while we strolled the Venice Beach Boardwalk engaging with tourists. To mama, everybody was a customer.

I used to love those days on the boardwalk; it was on the beach where I learned the value of hard work. Mama taught me that a closed mouth doesn't get fed and more importantly, she taught me never to be ashamed of my hustle...

That's why I empathize with immigrant workers in their struggles across the United States — past and present. And in this new podcast, we'll be hearing directly from them.

We'll bring you stories from the past — about immigrant workers who faced off against big industry and, despite seemingly impossible odds, succeeded. Whether they wanted better pay, dignity at work, or even political representation, they ultimately reshaped the landscape of U.S. labor for all workers.

On this show, you'll hear their voices and we'll unearth their legacies. And we don't just stay in the past. We'll visit five different states across the country to explore the challenges that immigrant workers face today, their relationships with labor unions, their roles in big business, and what the hustle looks like under the threat of mass deportations, and ask why it matters now, more than ever.

I'm Shaka Tafari, and this is the first installment of a new series from Feet in 2 Worlds...The Hustle, where we share stories about the ways immigrants navigate a changing economy — today and throughout history. And there's perhaps no better illustration of big changes to that hustle than what the city of Denver, Colorado, has witnessed recently.

Over the last couple of years, more than 40,000 Venezuelan immigrants seeking asylum, fleeing political and economic instability have arrived in Denver...and as of 2024, about half of them have chosen to stick around. When these Venezuelan immigrants arrived in Denver, they were seriously hustling to make a living — shoveling snow, washing windshields, selling candy. Some Denverites saw a group of people who were struggling...so they decided to help. But the warm welcome these Venezuelan immigrants received was a feel-good story that turned sour when the city found itself right in the middle of the new administration's immigration crackdown. The same immigrants who felt welcome only months ago are now looking over their shoulders. And their ability to provide for themselves and their families is slipping out of reach.

Feet in Two Worlds producers Ann Marie Awad and Andrés Pacheco-Girón have the story.

Ann Marie Awad: I'm sitting in Juan and Maria's kitchen while Maria cooks dinner. She shapes little rounds of dough in her palms and drops them into a skillet of hot oil, making golden brown arepas for us.

Ann Marie Awad: Could you tell me what you're cooking?

V Reeves: Quiere saber qué estás cocinando...

Maria: Eh, pollito con... pollito al horno. Con papas y arepitas fritas.

Ann: That's V Reeves translating for me. Reeves is a tenants rights activist who helped Juan and Maria move into this apartment in Denver only a few weeks ago.

For weeks, I had been trying to interview people who had recently come to Denver from Venezuela. I started working on this story before President Trump took office. But once he did, immigration policies changed dramatically and quickly. It got harder to find people who wanted to sit down for an interview.

But thanks to Reeves, now I'm here just in time for dinner.

V: Chicken with potatoes and fried arepas.

Ann: Is that your favorite meal?

V: ¿Qué crees tú sobre su comida? ¿Eso es su favorita o qué?

Maria: No, eso fue una comida especial porque vinieron ustedes.

V: Gracias! She says, this is a food specially made for us because we were coming.

Ann: Aw, gracias, gracias!

Ann: Originally, this story was supposed to be about the more than 40,000 Venezuelans who arrived in Denver over the last two to three years. And how a lot of those people found work. About how they hustled.

I'm Ann Marie Awad.

Andrés Pacheco-Girón: And I'm Andrés Pacheco-Girón.

Ann and I worked together from the start, reaching out to Venezuelans in Denver. We wanted to hear the stories of people who had fled instability.

Ann: People like Juan and Maria, who are a couple. (By the way, for safety reasons, we're not using their real names for this story.)

In 2023, Juan came to the United States on his own, hoping to get settled so that Maria could follow. And then later on, their children.

Juan: En realidad, yo desde que llegué aquí, yo estaba en la cancha de Central Park, que era un centro de emigrantes cuando llegaban aquí.

Andrés: Juan says he arrived in mid January of 2023. At first, he was living in an encampment with lots of other new arrivals in the Denver neighborhood of Central Park.

New immigrants like Juan were living outside in pockets all over the city. Denver's mayor at the time had previously declared a state of emergency, and set up shelters to get people indoors. Juan made it into one of those shelters. It was set up in a rec center and he slept on the basketball court.

Juan: El alcalde nos llegó ahí y nos dio la bienvenida, nos atendió muy bien.

Ann: Juan says he felt welcome. He stayed in Central Park for 21 days. Thanks to a local non-profit organization he was able to get into a hotel. Shortly after, he moved into an apartment in Aurora, a suburb east of Denver.Once Juan got himself settled, he

told Maria it was time for her to come. She left behind her five children in Venezuela, and started her journey.

Maria: Salí de mi casa y tuvimos que comenzar la travesía, como quien dice, desde Colombia.

Andrés: Maria says she did what a lot of immigrants have to do to travel to the U.S. She undertook a long and dangerous journey that meant crossing seven countries, mostly by foot. Maria crossed to Colombia from Venezuela, and then walked across the Darien Gap to Panama.

That 60 mile stretch of jungle is known to be one of the most dangerous places in the world. If you're lucky, you'll only find mosquitos and snakes. If you're not, the armed groups that control the territory will find you.Usually, these groups take advantage of the thousands of migrants who cross the jungle and extort them.

Once Maria arrived in Mexico, she got on a train to Ciudad Juárez, hoping to avoid cartels who also prey on immigrants. In Juárez, the waiting game began.

Maria: Ocho meses esperando que me saliera la cita. En Juárez...

V: I waited eight months waiting for my appointment to happen.

Maria: Hasta que pasé acá el 10 de mayo.

Andrés: She waited eight months just to get legal entry into the United States. Maria arrived in Denver in May 2024. She was finally reunited with Juan. Although the waiting game was not over.

Applying for asylum is a long process. And to hustle without breaking the rules...she had to wait even longer.

Maria: Y no trabajar sin ningún documento ni nada. Y, me salieron mis documentos. Teniendo aquí dos meses y algo, pero conseguí trabajo cuando ya tenía casi los seis meses aquí, porque no conseguía, ya gracias a Dios pues nos encontramos estable y, y con trabajo.

Andrés: Two more months to get her work permit. Then, four months more to land a formal job. During that time, they hustled to survive.

Juan: Bueno, salimos por ahí a, a limpiar cualquier cosa, a hacer, cualquier cosa que hace familia.

Andrés: They took whatever job they found. Mostly cleaning jobs. And when there weren't any jobs for Maria, she stayed at home and took care of household chores while Juan worked in construction.

Ann: Months later, when winter came and construction work dried up, they looked for additional work and were both hired by a maintenance company to do snow cleanup.

And that's what our story was supposed to be about. How people like Juan and Maria came to the United States with nothing, and somehow eked out a living.

The story was also supposed to be about how the city of Denver opened up its arms to newcomers, and helped a lot of people narrowly avoid poverty. I live in Denver, and I saw this happen with my own eyes. It wasn't just city offices and nonprofits who were leading the charge to help, but residents, too.

And that could have been the whole story. But while Andrés and I were reporting, it felt like the ground kept shifting under our feet. In just the first week of the Trump presidency, so much happened.

> Al Jazeera: As soon as Donald Trump became president, the U.S.'s online asylum system suspended.
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> MSNBC: Declaring a national emergency at the southern border, suspending refugee resettlement in the United States, declaring Mexican cartels and two Latin American gangs foreign terrorist organizations.

Andrés: I was supposed to travel from New York to Denver to report this story with Ann. Our plan was to interview people on the street. A lot of recent immigrants were at intersections cleaning windshields or selling candy.

But when the new administration started to crack down, these workers began to disappear from Denver's intersections. Talking to a reporter was probably the smallest of their priorities.

As a Colombian journalist who has reported on Venezuelan immigrants back home, I thought it would be relatively easy to talk to people remotely. I connected with non-profits and joined messaging groups. But as the fear escalated, everyone stopped responding to my messages.

Ann: Before we get into that, we should probably take a few steps back, and explain why so many Venezuelans have ended up in Denver.

Over the last decade, millions of people have left Venezuela in search of a better life. Most of them went to Colombia and Peru. Next to those countries, the U.S. has the third highest population of Venezuelan immigrants.

The repressive regime of Nicolas Maduro has led to deep economic insecurity. About eighty percent of Venezuela's population lives in poverty. Up until recently, the nation had one of the highest inflation rates in the world.

Andrés: I remember when I was living in Colombia, the Venezuelan Bolívar, their currency, was worth less than money from the board game Monopoly. In Colombia, it's

common for people from Venezuela to sell crafts made out of Bolivars. On the street, you could find anything from large origami animals, to purses and wallets made of money. That's because the bills are more valuable that way.

Ann: Over the last several years, the United States has sort of flip-flopped when it comes to what side it takes in Venezuela's domestic politics. The first Trump administration harshly opposed Maduro. At the time, Trump excluded Venezuela from American financial markets, and imposed sanctions on Venezuelan officials. But this time, his tune seems to have changed. At least for now.

Andrés: I spoke with Adelys Ferro, the director of the Venezuelan American Caucus. She says a lot of Venezuelans feel forced out of their country. And she says part of what kept Maduro's dictatorship in check was U.S. support of the opposition. But now, that's changing.

> Adelys Ferro: Trump que de hecho ha reconocido en palabras de su enviado especial, Richard Grenell. Que ellos no tienen ninguna intención de cambiar gobierno en Venezuela.

Ann: By the way, Ferro speaks English. But she wanted to do this interview in Spanish. And what she is hinting at is a long political history.

When Joe Biden took office, Adelys says he kept up the pressure on Maduro, and supported opposition leaders in Venezuela's 2024 presidential election. She says it's actually Trump's harsh stance against the Maduro government that might have won Trump a lot of Venezuelan American votes in the U.S. 2024 presidential election.

However, since taking office again, Trump's policy on Venezuela has actually shifted. This time around, the administration is more open to working with the Maduro government. And in late January 2025, Trump sent his envoy for special missions, Richard Grenell, to meet and negotiate with Maduro himself.

> Adelys: Mi comunidad, sí apoyó. Mayoritariamente en números bien grandes.

Andrés: The Venezuelan-American Caucus spent a lot of time educating voters on how Trump's policies might negatively impact them. However, nationwide, some media outlets have reported that as many as 90% of Venezuelan-Americans voted for Trump, according to El País. Now that he's in office, he has moved to dramatically step up immigration enforcement against Venezuelans in particular. This, Adelys says, has made many of those same voters feel betrayed.

> Adelys: Y mira, mira lo caro que nos está costando, eh? Hay mucha gente, mucha gente que está en este momento muy desilusionada, muy defraudada.

Andrés: She says the price Venezuelans are paying now is big.

> Adelys: Y mi comunidad se siente muy traicionada, pero él realmente nunca nos engañó.

Andrés: But — she says — the thing is…Trump never really deceived them. How can it be a betrayal if all along, Trump was pretty clear about what he thought of Venezuelans? Instead, says Adelys, Trump only spoke about Venezuelans on the campaign trail in reference to the gang Tren de Aragua.

If you've never heard that name, Tren de Aragua is Venezuela's most powerful criminal group. They're known to be in the business of human trafficking for sexual exploitation. They are also the only Venezuelan gang that has successfully projected its power abroad — to Colombia, Peru, Chile, and now, possibly the United States.

And I say possibly because it's still unclear if the gang has an actual presence in the U.S. Most proof about this is still vague. Experts suggest that folks arrested in the United States are likely impostors or have no connection to the organization. Tren de Aragua started their career taking advantage of their fellow countrymen. Specifically those trying to flee the country. Escaping the economic collapse.

Ann: Venezuelans coming to the United States undertook an incredibly dangerous journey to make it to the U.S.-Mexico border. Then, in 2021, Texas Governor Greg Abbott launched Operation Lone Star. Part of this program involved busing immigrants to so-called sanctuary cities like Denver, Chicago, New York, and D.C.

Here he is bragging about it at the 2024 Republican National Convention.

> Greg Abbott: We have continued busing migrants to sanctuary cities across the entire country, and those buses will continue to roll until we finally secure our border.

Ann: Whenever Abbott talks about this "operation," he refers to these people as "illegal immigrants," even though many are coming here for asylum. Asylum is not only legal, it's a right protected by international law. The U.S. has an obligation to facilitate asylum. That's part of the reason why in 2024, the Biden administration expanded access to the CBP One app. That app was supposed to make it easier to get an asylum appointment, allowing more people to be paroled into the country while they waited for their cases to play out. Getting an appointment still took months — it took eight months for Maria while she was waiting in Juarez.

But once inside the country, many people found themselves in a pickle: if you are applying for asylum, you can't legally work in the United States for at least six months. So a lot of people parked in Texas, and continued to wait.

While they waited, government officials encouraged them to get on buses, but didn't tell them where the buses were going. Over the course of 2023 and 2024, tens of thousands of immigrants were dropped off in Denver. Some of them in the middle of winter in below freezing weather.

The state of Texas did not give any other states some kind of heads up that these people were coming. Most Coloradans found out from the nightly news. And it was

those images of families and children, standing outside in the snow, many of them in t-shirts and flip flops, that triggered Denver's huge humanitarian response.

Part of that response? Violeta Chapin, associate dean for the law school at the University of Colorado Boulder. She also runs the school's immigration law clinic.

> Violeta Chapin: We have a number of, of different organizations that are helping with what is essentially refugee resettlement. It felt like an all hands on deck response, which I was happy to see, right?

Ann: Hers was one of many clinics set up to guide immigrants through the super complicated process of applying for immigration benefits. As it is, asylum tends to be more for those who are fleeing persecution based on a number of factors, including their race or beliefs. But that doesn't really capture the situation of many Venezuelans, who were fleeing economic collapse.

> Violeta: They were essentially unable to feed their families if they remained there. And I certainly think that could or should be a basis for asylum, but it's unfortunately not a basis for asylum under our immigration laws.

Ann: That's why President Biden also granted what's called Temporary Protected Status — or TPS — to Venezuelans for the first time in 2021. And then he extended it in 2023.

> Violeta: It doesn't give them any permanent lawful immigration status, but it does allow them to have protection from removal during the time that their country is still in this upheaval and to remain in the United States with work authorization.

Ann: That is maybe the biggest distinction between asylum and TPS: TPS allows people to work here legally on a much faster timetable. Here is José Palma, National Coordinator of the National TPS Alliance.

> José Palma: TPS is granted for people who are coming from countries that are in the middle of a civil war, from countries that suffer natural disasters or special circumstances that cannot guarantee the safety of their citizens to come back to those countries. Venezuela, whether we agree or not in the political point of view: the reality is that the country is unsafe, is not providing for the citizen that people are fleeing Venezuela and coming to the US.

Ann: Another big distinction between TPS and asylum? Asylum cases take years to work their way through the courts — but TPS provides relief from deportation today. That's why Chapin and her students were part of a massive effort to help newcomers apply for TPS. By the time many people reached the clinic, they had already applied for asylum.

When V met them, Juan and Maria had already applied for asylum through a law firm. And after that, they were also able to get help applying for TPS.

Andrés: The U.S. immigration system is a labyrinth with lots of dead-ends. The few legal pathways to citizenship often involve a lot of waiting, due to court backlogs. It can take years to get an asylum determination. Three and a half years, on average, but many wait longer. Many people get by on temporary stopgap measures like TPS. But the meaning of temporary gets murky.

TPS provides a few years of relief from deportation. But due to extensions, some groups of people have been here on "temporary" status for decades. And then there's the big elephant in the room here. Temporary Protected Status is given by executive action. Only the president can do it.

Before leaving office, Joe Biden extended TPS protections for nearly one million immigrants. Trump is trying to roll that back. Potentially affecting not just Venezuelans, but also Haitians, Salvadorians, Ukrainians,, and Sudanese.

José: Racism is part of the motivation to cancel TPS.

Andrés: Jose Palma says the National TPS Alliance is suing the Trump administration to stop the cancellation.

José: If nothing happened, around 350,000 people will lose their immigration protection and become undocumented, and therefore, at risk of deportation.

Andrés: As of March 31st, 2025, a judge has paused the Trump administration's attempt to revoke protections for Venezuelans after the National TPS Alliance filed suit. But the administration is continuing to deport folks.

Ann: But all of this adds up. The waiting. The uncertainty. And most of all, the cost. That's why so many Venezuelans have had to hustle — no matter where they are in the process.

In 2024, that hustle was almost everywhere you looked. Most major intersections in Denver would be full of new immigrants, trying to earn money. I got my windshield cleaned a lot. Sometimes people would walk in between cars, selling candy — sometimes those people were children. On social media and elsewhere, residents really began to sour on this sort of informal economy. A lot of people called the cops.

After the break, one employer in the suburbs who wanted to help.

[BREAK]

Andrés: In late 2023, Julie Echter felt like she was watching a crisis unfold on her doorstep. She lived close to a hotel where the city was temporarily placing newly arrived immigrants.

Julie Echter: So I was watching all of these people kind of like shuttle into there and then getting kicked out and then ending up on the street right outside.

It was cold, it was snowing, and there was all these kids running around outside without, like, jackets and shoes.

Ann: Echter is the vice president of Echter's Nursery & Garden Center in Arvada, a suburb of Denver. Around that time, several neighborhood Facebook groups sprang up organically, full of Denverites who wanted to help their new neighbors find food and shelter. Echter joined the group in her neighborhood, and quickly learned that a lot of new arrivals also really needed a way to earn money.

Andrés: She had an idea. Not only does Echter run one of the region's largest nurseries. But she's also the president of Colorado's Nursery and Greenhouse Association. That trade group represents what Echter called Colorado's "green industry." Which basically means all the people in the business of plants.

Julie: In Colorado, it's...it's a really big industry, but it's also, um, kind of a very short season here. We do about 80 percent of our business in three months.

Ann: Echter says this is an industry that is constantly desperate to hire. It's not uncommon for farms or nurseries like Echter's to rely on seasonal workers who come to the States through certain visa programs. But these days, even those kinds of workers are hard to come by. Visa programs often require employers to provide housing, which is pretty much a non-starter here where housing prices are really high.

So Julie saw a natural fit: newly arriving immigrants eager to hustle, and Colorado's green industry. But the next step was connecting those dots.Echter gathered basic information from new arrivals who were in the process of getting their work permits. And then businesses could sign up to hire people from a pool of workers who had obtained permits.

But after a few months, this whole plan started to fall apart. Julie doesn't speak Spanish so she had a hard time keeping in contact with job seekers. And the businesses started to go cold.

Julie: I would ask them like a series of questions, and it would just be radio silence. Um, and the ones that did respond, it was like there was, I think just a, maybe a fear.

Ann: As the busy season got underway, she ultimately handed the database off to a local non-profit. But none of this has stopped Echter from hiring new arrivals at her own business. Because businesses like hers still face challenges hiring enough people.

She still genuinely sees it as a win-win: employers like her have jobs, and new immigrants want jobs.

Andrés: By summer of 2024, new arrivals started to decline. By this point, half of all those arrivals — about 20,000 people — had decided to make the Denver metro area their home. Thanks to the all-hands response of Denverites, many of them were able to get stable housing and jobs.

But then the presidential campaign season crash landed on Denver's doorstep. Trump shined a harsh spotlight on Aurora, that suburb just east of Denver.

> Donald Trump: November 5th, 2024 will be Liberation Day in America. Will be Liberation Day. I will rescue Aurora and every town that has been invaded and conquered.

Ann: This is Trump speaking at a campaign stop in early October 2024 in Aurora. Over the summer, he had been spreading this lie that the suburb had been taken over by a gang, specifically the Venezuelan prison gang Tren de Aragua.

But he didn't come up with that whole fantasy on his own.

Andrés: And at the center of this lie is a complex of apartment buildings called The Edge at Lowry. A complex where a lot of recent immigrants happened to be living.

If you believed the stories, Tren de Aragua had made the buildings their headquarters. Here's Kyle Harris, a reporter for the local news site Denverite. He says not only was that not true but…

> Kyle Harris: The entire media narrative around those apartment buildings was, um, pushed by CBZ management and their PR firm from Florida.

Ann: CBZ Management was the company overseeing these buildings. They spent much of 2024 in court.

Because the rumor about a criminal takeover was a cover for the real story: The Edge at Lowry was basically a slum. Residents complained that the buildings were run down, full of mold and bugs, and that CBZ rarely fixed anything.

> Kyle: And if they could say, Hey, we didn't abandon the tenants. A Venezuelan gang took over these buildings. They can excuse themselves for failing to clean up the mold, deal with the rats, deal with the incredibly dangerous conditions people were living in.

Ann: That narrative caught on like wildfire. While local reporters like Harris were doing their best to find answers, Tiktok and other social media sites were already flooded with sensational videos echoing that claim.

Andrés: Residents of The Edge at Lowry even held their own press conference at one point…in an attempt to correct the record. They said it was not gangs putting them at the biggest risk. It was the management.

Ann: Juan and Maria lived in one of these buildings up until late last year. That's where the couple met V Reeves, the tenants rights activist who introduced me to them.

I asked Juan and Maria to tell me about what it was like living at The Edge at Lowry.

Juan: Y la cosa se fue deteriorando poco a poco. Las tuberías. Se botaba el agua. Se botaba el agua. Los pisos se rompían. Se cayó la mitad del techo del baño. Tubería. ¿Tubería es cual?

V: There were leaks. There were... was, um, there was water leaking from... The floor above.

Juan: El piso todo deteriorado.

V: The floor completely was deteriorating.

Ann: Juan says for six months, they complained and complained, and no one ever came to fix a thing.

Reeves shakes their head in disgust as they translate for me. Reeves is an organizer with the tenants rights group Housekeys Action Network Denver, or HAND. They met Juan, Maria, and many other families living at the Edge at Lowry last year. That's because Reeves says HAND received an anonymous tip from a city employee that people in these buildings — who were predominantly new arrivals — were living in squalor.

V: It was, you know, rumored and said that these were very unsafe buildings. And my heart immediately sunk when I showed up for the first day and realized that these were packed with families and children and just the sound of kids running around and laughing and playing.

Ann: HAND was one of several groups working to help tenants move out of the Edge at Lowry. After months of legal battles, Aurora city officials ordered CBZ to shut the buildings down by February 18, 2025.

That morning, I met with Reeves to see the buildings boarded up for good. We sat in my car watching workers put up fencing in the heavy snow and freezing temperatures.

V: We are outside the Edge of Lowry buildings. Um, we are currently parked right next to a fence that they just put up. On the other side, a similar fence has barbed wire around the top of it as if it's guarding a prison.

Ann: Reeves is adamant that they didn't see any evidence of gang activity over the months they spent at the Edge at Lowry. And more than that, they feel like these residents truly got a raw deal every step of the way.

V: These people, uh, never asked for that kind of negative attention, never asked for their families to be subjected to that spotlight. and yet, until the very last day, they still lived in squalor, despite all that national attention.

Andrés: These buildings became a target before Trump even took office in January. Local law enforcement detained about 16 people here in December 2024. And handed some of them over to ICE.

ICE carried out a raid here in January, even as many apartments were already empty. Reeves says the increased attention from ICE has had a deep chilling effect.

> V: People are afraid to go to their jobs. They are being fired from their jobs for being Venezuelan or they're told not to say that they're Venezuelan at work. They are having their pay withheld because the employers the way that they're thinking is, Well, if you're going to be deported soon anyways, why would I bother paying you for the hours that you've done?

Ann: This is triggering a domino effect. Reeves says now some of these families are at risk for eviction because they can't pay their rent. Kyle Harris, the reporter with Denverite, has been following around a family who is in this situation.

> Kyle: I was over at their house for a few hours yesterday, and talked to them about their fear. And every time someone walks by the window, they fear it's the police. They fear it's ICE. They fear it's La Migra.

Ann: Other families have told Harris they aren't leaving the house at all.

Andrés: These fears are heightened now that Trump is in office. But some people, like Juan and Maria, have been feeling this fear for longer. They remember one night in December 2024, while they were still living at the Edge at Lowry...

> Maria: Yo, yo escuchaba unos gritos muy lejos. Porque estaba dormida. Pero llegó un momento que yo sentí que alumbraron mi cara.

Andrés: Maria says she woke up to screams coming from a neighbor's apartment. Her bed is right next to the window. And she says after a short while, she felt someone shining a flashlight through the window, directly onto her face. Then she heard knocks on the door.

It was the police. The couple opened the door and let them in, thinking that they had nothing to hide.

> Maria: Y solo nos gritaban que bajáramos la cara y nos posaron así. Nos lanzaron en el piso.

Andrés: The officers cuffed them and separated them. Maria was taken to a police station. While Juan, along with a handful of others, was handed off to ICE and detained for hours with no explanation.

Eventually, they let Juan go. But two of his nephews, who also made the journey to Denver, were still in detention. Both of them were in the process of applying for asylum. But a deportation order was already in the works.

Juan: Sí, no, pero él, él viene y le dice que si él se pone a luchar un proceso de asilo hay detenidos un año, y él tiene niños en Venezuela, tiene cuatro niños en Venezuela que dependen de él.

Ann: Juan says by this point, his nephew had already given up on asylum. The process was costing the nephew too much money — money he needed to send back home to his four children and his mother. His lawyer had told him it would take at least a year, a year Juan says his nephew didn't have.

At the time we spoke, Juan said he wasn't sure about the other nephew. They hardly heard from him, but Juan told me the last time they did, he was in immigration detention in Texas.

Meanwhile, the nephew's mother — Juan's sister — was desperate to know what was happening to him. While Maria made arepas, Juan took out his phone and played us a voicemail from his sister as Reeves translated for me.

Voicemail: Hola manito, buenas tardes, ¿cómo estás?

V: Hello, good afternoon, how are you?

Voicemail: Manito, manito, dame razón de mi hijo, manito. ¿Qué sabes de mi hijo? Por favor. Si sabes algo, avísame. Cuídense, Dios los bendiga, los quiero mucho.

V: Listen, God will bless you, I love you.

Ann: During our interview, Juan and Maria told me that when they didn't have any information, they sometimes lied to Juan's sister and told her that her son was doing well.

Weeks later, the couple found out that the nephew was deported. He called them from Venezuela, told them he was taken to Guantanamo, and later sent to Caracas.

Juan and Maria say it has been hard to return to normal life after the raid. Juan said he could barely sleep at night up until they were finally able to move out.

Andrés: With Reeves's help, that happened a few weeks later in late December. Their new home falls within the city limits of Denver. That gives them some relief, since they know Denver police don't coordinate with ICE. At least not as much as the police did in Aurora.

Ann: But they're still fearful. They lost more than just sleep after the raid. They lost their car because it was in the shop and the guy who was fixing it was also detained by ICE. They say they've been afraid to open their front door. Maria told me they're even afraid to take public transit. But they have to get to work somehow.

Maria: Ahorita la idea de estos problemas de inmigración fue que nosotros nos íbamos en bus, y nos veníamos en bus porque no había ningún tipo de problema.

Andrés: Since the raid, they say they feel like they're being watched. And they're not alone. Both Juan and Maria work for the same maintenance company. They say that several of their coworkers have expressed the same fears. But they're lucky. Their employer came up with a plan to protect them. Maria says they carpool to and from work, and have a warning system in place if ICE ever shows up. At the maintenance shop, they've started locking the doors.

The tides changed dramatically for Juan and Maria. Only last year, they felt welcome in Denver. More than once during this interview, they thanked God for all the help they received when they first arrived.

Ann: But that gratitude is tinged with worry. The couple are reconsidering their plans for a future in the United States.

Maria: Mis hijos me decían que se querían venir para acá.

V: ¿Quieren venir para acá?

Maria: Sí, pero ya con todas las noticias que ven, no, mamá, yo no me quiero ir pa allá.

Andrés: Maria says her children back in Venezuela used to keep asking her when they could move to the United States, too. But she says they hear the news about what's happening here and they've changed their minds. Maria frames the family's doubts in terms of dollars and cents. She and Juan need to earn enough money to support themselves here in the States. And to send to their families back home.

Juan has been able to file his asylum case, and get TPS, but Maria is still in the process. It will cost another $1800 to pursue her case. Asylum was hard and expensive before. Now it seems like a door that's quickly closing.

Maria: Y yo digo, a veces me pongo a pensar, yo digo, o sea, ¿será seguir pagando eso o agarrar esa plata y irme pa' y regresarme?

Andrés: Maria wonders if it's even worth it to spend almost $2000 on something that may never happen. She says maybe they should save their money and go back to Venezuela.

Maria: Pero no todavía manteniendo las esperanzas de que, de que venimos acá a lograr algo más.

Andrés: In February 2025, Maria told Ann that she was still hopeful about remaining in the United States. She and Juan came here to achieve something bigger, she said. But since then, the seasons have changed, and Maria told me it has become even harder

to find work. Not earning as much money means that continuing to pay an immigration attorney is no longer an option. She plans to return to Venezuela by the end of the year, and Juan will stay behind to continue supporting them from the United States.

For them, and for every other immigrant in this limbo, the rules of the hustle have changed.

Ann: And almost every day, they keep changing. And worst of all, the future is unclear. No one knows what's going to happen. The only thing anyone can be sure of, the only thing that's guaranteed to still be there tomorrow, is the hustle.

For Feet in 2 Worlds, this is Ann Marie Awad.

Andrés: And Andrés Pacheco-Girón.

Shaka: The Hustle is hosted by me, Shaka Tafari. Today's episode was produced by Andrés Pacheco-Girón and Ann Marie Awad. It was edited by Feet in 2 Worlds' editing fellow, with additional editing by Mia Warren and Quincy Surasmith.

Feet in 2 Worlds' Managing Director is Mia Warren. Our Managing Editor is Quincy Surasmith. Our Development Coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer. Jocelyn Gonzalez is our technical director and engineer. Sharon Bardales is our assistant engineer. Fact-check is by Julie Schwietert Collazo. Original theme music by Gautam Srikishan. Additional Music from Blue Dot Sessions.

Visit our website at Fi2W.org to listen to more stories about immigrants. Thank you for listening.

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