

The Mother Deported Without Her Kids

When Maribis Beleño was sent back to Venezuela, she was desperate to bring her kids. Instead, they were left behind—and ended up in the care of a Trump-voting pastor with a plan to get them home.



MARIBIS BELEÑO'S CHILDREN—VICTORIA, CARLIANNYS, AND MOISÉS—PICTURED NOVEMBER 4, 2025, IN MIDLAND, TEXAS. (TRACE THOMAS FOR *THE FREE PRESS*, INSTAGRAM: @TRACETHOM)

By Carrie McKean

When Maribis Beleño boarded the chartered deportation flight in El Paso, Texas, on August 8, 2025, she remembers frantically scanning the rows of seats. During her month in the detention facility, she says, she had reminded the guards and immigration officers—anyone who would

listen—that if she was going to be deported, she couldn't leave without her three young children, who had entered the United States with her.

"Each day, I gave them the address of my cousin who was looking after my children," Maribis, 27, told me, through an interpreter. She says she'd write directions to the small apartment in Dallas on any scrap of paper she could find. "Each time the guards told me, 'Don't worry! When you are deported, your children will meet you at the airport.'"

She told me the immigration judge at her final hearing had told her the same thing.

But when she got to the airport, her children—who are 5, 10, and 12—weren't there. And they weren't on the plane, either.

"I was crying, hysterical," Maribis remembers. "They told me to calm down."

She says she was not the only parent on the plane who had been expecting to find their child on board—and some of the others were making a scene. "People were shouting: 'But my children! They aren't here!'" Maribis recalls. "But no one listened."

Instead, she told me, the immigration officers on the plane threatened to shackle anyone who refused to settle down—and said those who resisted deportation would be charged with a felony and sent to "solitary confinement in a cold room"—where they'd be unable to communicate with their families.

The stricken parents, Maribis said, had no choice but to take their seats and fasten their seatbelts. "I didn't want to lose contact with my children," she told me. She returned to Venezuela without them. She told me there was no indication that anyone within the U.S. government was planning to deport the kids; no evidence that anyone within the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) was concerned about where

they might be, even though they had no legally appointed guardians in the U.S.

Maribis says she had no idea how to get her kids back: The children didn't have passports, and she didn't have enough money for their plane fares. There have not been direct commercial flights to Venezuela from the U.S. since 2019, because of the political tensions that have recently exploded, and her kids were too young to navigate a connecting flight alone. And Maribis had been banned from reentering the U.S. for the foreseeable future; even if she could find the money, she couldn't fly to the United States to pick up her children herself.



Maribis's children—who are 10, 12, and 5—photographed on November 4, 2025, in Midland, Texas. (Trace Thomas for *The Free Press*, Instagram: @tracethom)

I asked DHS about all of Maribis's claims; they confirmed her date of deportation but did not comment on her description of how immigration officers behaved on her deportation flight, nor on what U.S. officials had told Maribis would happen to her children. But in

November, in response to similar allegations, a spokesperson for DHS gave *The New York Times* a statement: “ICE does not separate families,” it read. “Parents are asked if they want to be removed with their children, or ICE will place the children with a safe person the parent designates.” According to internal guidelines, the policy of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) requires that “enforcement actions do not unnecessarily infringe upon the legal parental or guardianship rights and obligations” of immigrants.

And yet the U.S. immigration system does have a history of separating children from their families, sometimes leading children to become “permanently orphaned” if parents are deported without them. It’s been documented since at least 2011, when Barack Obama was president. And in 2018, during the first Trump administration, there was bipartisan outrage in response to pictures of kids separated from their parents at the border being kept in cages in Texas. “Nobody likes seeing babies ripped from their mothers’ arms,” said Kellyanne Conway, then an adviser to the president. “As a mother, as a Catholic, as somebody who has got a conscience . . . I will tell you that nobody likes this.” Indeed, a poll found that two-thirds of American voters oppose the separation of children from their parents at the border.

“I do not see a nameless immigration problem. I see these three children. I see their mother. I see individual people.” —Elias Rodriguez

Shortly after Joe Biden was inaugurated, he criticized the practice and signed an executive order to reunite families. But he also oversaw a border policy that most Americans now recognize as far too permissive: During his tenure, an unprecedented number of people crossed the southern border, flooding an already overwhelmed and under-resourced system—and a lot of children went missing. With the return of Donald

Trump came the return of hyper-strict immigration policies, which many Americans supported in the voting booth.

But now, that support is waning, because the way in which some of these policies are being executed has troubled even those who are in favor of strong immigration reforms.

One man who lives with this tension on a day-to-day basis is Elias Rodriguez, 56, an evangelical pastor who was born and raised in West Texas and spent his childhood going back and forth across the border to visit family in Mexico. Elias is conservative in every way; he's pro-life and thinks marriage should be between a man and a woman. He has supported Trump each time he's been on the ballot. When it comes to immigration, Elias is in favor of tough border laws, and he thinks it's obvious who's responsible for the border crisis. "This would not have even happened if people hadn't been motivated to come, especially under the Biden administration," he told me. "We're dealing with a problem that wouldn't have happened if [immigrants] had not been invited in."

But Elias also comes face-to-face with the human beings caught up in this crisis: For decades, he has led a Spanish-speaking evangelical mission called Hope En Accion with outposts and churches in several Mexican border towns, as well as in Midland, Texas—where I live.



Elias Rodriguez, photographed on December 21, 2025, at his church in Midland, Texas. (Anthony Prieto / The Oilfield Photographer, Inc. for *The Free Press*, Instagram: @theoilfieldphotographer)

In 2022, on a trip to Juárez—just across the border from El Paso—he says he noticed that the crowd of migrants camping near the border was growing larger and larger while the weather grew colder and colder. Elias told me he felt called by God to help them—and led an effort to renovate an abandoned building into a migrant shelter, providing hot meals, a warm place to sleep, showers, and bathrooms to those in need.

In the years since, he's gained a reputation for giving aid to migrants who are in trouble.

That's how he crossed paths with Maribis.

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While Maribis was detained last summer, then deported, her kids stayed with her cousin in Dallas. But by September, that cousin was reaching the late stages of a high-risk pregnancy. She called Maribis to say she was going to be hospitalized for the remaining weeks of her pregnancy and that the three kids were home alone. Desperate and more than 2,000 miles from her children, Maribis reached out to Elias, who she'd heard about through an acquaintance but never met.

Then came the miracle: The pastor and his wife, Sandy, agreed to drive five hours across the state to pick up the children.

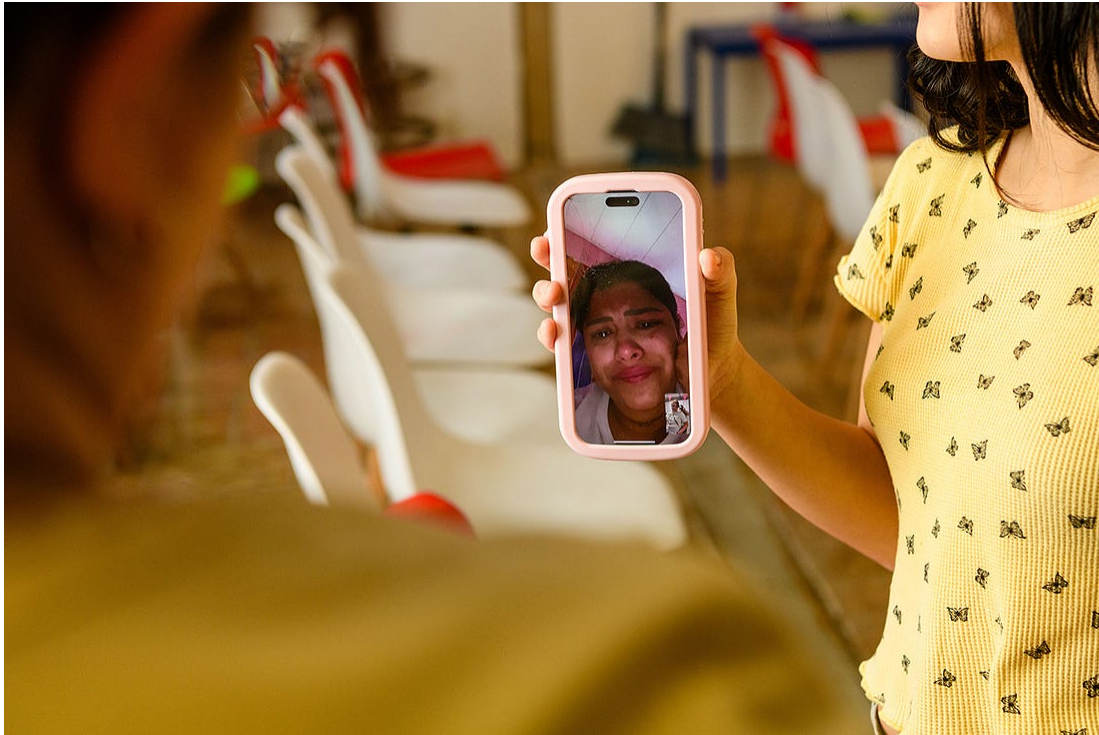
"I do not see a nameless *immigration problem*," he told me. "I see these three children. I see their mother. I see individual people." And his faith compels him to help them.

According to DHS, Maribis was deported after having been arrested for shoplifting and pickpocketing multiple times. "I'm totally for the United State government deporting people who have broken our laws and have committed crimes," Elias told me. "But at the same time: Why are we penalizing children who are 5 and 10 and 12 for anything that they are not involved in?"

With the support of church members, Elias and Sandy took the kids into their own home. That's where I met them, nearly three months ago.



I'm sitting at a folding table in late October, listening to Maribis tell her story. She's in Venezuela, speaking through WhatsApp, which she uses multiple times a day to video-chat with her children. It's been four months since she last saw them; they're here in Midland, Texas—sitting in the room with me.



Maribis used WhatsApp multiple times a day to video-call her children. (Trace Thomas for *The Free Press*)

Maribis has two daughters and a son. Her littlest girl, Victoria, is 5. She's clutching a doll that's almost as big as she is. Her older brother Moisés, 10, steers a remote control car in circles, smiling mischievously as he tries to goad one of his sisters into shrieking. The eldest, Carliannys, who's 12, teeters precariously between being a child, a teen, and a full-blown substitute mother. She watches TikTok videos on her cell phone and chews her nails. When her little sister trots past, she reaches out to pull her close—straightening her hair and wiping a smudge off her cheek. She nervously chews her lip, trying to keep tears at bay, as she listens to her mother speak to me.

"I am emotionally lost right now," Maribis is saying. "I cannot work. I cannot sleep. I cannot eat. All I can do is think about getting my children back to me."

Maribis told me she is part of a support group in Venezuela for recently deported mothers whose children are still in the U.S. They host

demonstrations to raise awareness of their plight, begging both the Venezuelan and American governments for help getting their kids back. It's hard to know how many parents are in this position. When I asked Elias last month, he said: "A person working for the Venezuelan government told me that, as of November, they know of 80 mothers whose children were left behind when they were deported from the United States." He added that many of those mothers have several kids.

Though each person's situation is unique, a lot of these parents decided to make the dangerous and expensive journey to America because they were seeking a better, safer, more prosperous life for their children. Since 2013, when the recently-arrested Nicolás Maduro ascended to the presidency, everything from violent crime to inflation has ballooned in Venezuela—and roughly 8 million Venezuelans have left the country. That's about a quarter of the population. In 2021, Venezuelans were granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS) in the U.S., meaning it was deemed not safe to deport them back to their home nation. Though many migrants arriving in the U.S. may not have been in immediate danger, many of them claimed asylum upon crossing the border, because it was effectively their only path to legal immigration.

This is what Maribis says she did, in 2022—along with approximately 264,000 other Venezuelans.



Maribis told me she wanted her kids to have better lives, away from the corruption and poverty of their native Venezuela. (Her children's father lives in Spain, and Maribis said he hasn't been involved in the family's life for many years.) And so, she said, she banded together with some other Venezuelans and traveled to Colombia, then spent 12 days crossing the Darién Gap, a roadless stretch of rainforest in southern Panama, before traveling on to Mexico. She says 1-year-old Victoria was in a backpack the whole time.

Maribis arrived in the United States on August 14, 2022, and says she immediately turned herself and her three children into authorities in Eagle Pass, Texas, claiming asylum. DHS confirmed the date but said Maribis "illegally entered the United States near Big Bend, Texas" and "was RELEASED into the country by the Biden administration." (The capital letters were the spokesperson's own.)

After someone claims asylum, they can freely and legally move about the country until their court hearing. Maribis headed to New York City, she said, to work.

“Although Maribis used the asylum process, which is the only path she had available to her, I think she was really an economic migrant,” Elias told me. In other words, she’s exactly the sort of immigrant that Trump, and supporters of his policy, believe shouldn’t be allowed to enter or stay in the country.

Elias agrees with the president. “Not everyone who is poor or has a hard life can come to America. No country can absorb that many people,” said Elias. Sending a message that this kind of immigration is feasible, which he believes the Biden administration did, “hurts the migrants themselves,” he went on. “They cut themselves off from their families and communities. So many of them are very lonely.”

Maribis says she settled her kids into one of the publicly funded hotels that served as migrant shelters in New York City, and started selling food from a street cart. Business didn’t boom, she told me, so she moved on to Montreal, Canada, but only lasted eight months (“too cold and rainy; my children were sick all the time”) before returning to the U.S., crossing at border checkpoints by foot both times. She says she moved back to the shelter in New York and did odd jobs—delivering food via bicycle, housekeeping at a hotel—but began to hear rumors that ICE was going to start emptying New York’s migrant shelters and sending people home. So in January 2025, she told me, she left for Dallas, where she moved in with her cousin—who had four children of her own and was expecting a fifth—and borrowed a car from an acquaintance so she could work as an Uber Eats delivery driver, using a friend’s account. For six months, she says, she made a decent living.



Maribis's children, from left to right: Carliannys, age 12, Victoria, age 5, and Moisés, age 10. (Trace Thomas for *The Free Press*)

Then, on July 8, 2025, Maribis was arrested at a Walmart in Irving, Texas. According to the local police department's report, she was caught along with another Venezuelan woman attempting to steal \$176 worth of shoes, clothes, leggings, shirts, and pajamas. In an email, a DHS spokesperson told me: "Following her arrest by Irving Police Department for theft in July 2025, she was turned over to ICE law enforcement."

When Maribis was detained, she says, her elder two children were at summer school—and only found out what had happened when they got back to her cousin's apartment that evening. "When I think about it, I cry," is all Carliannys could say.

Her mother remembers spending about two weeks in the Bluebonnet Detention Facility in Anson, Texas, about 200 miles west of Dallas, before being transferred by bus to Prairieland Detention Facility in Alvarado, Texas, and then flown to El Paso. Here, Maribis says, she

“slept 14 days on the floor in the white tents” at Camp East Montana before being deported. According to DHS, “an immigration judge issued her a final order of removal on October 10, 2024. She received full due process.” Maribis told me she was one of 259 deportees on a GlobalX Airlines flight that went directly from El Paso to Caracas, Venezuela.



It’s not easy to verify Maribis’s story. She told me she’d had very few belongings on her person when she was detained in the U.S. and that when her deportation flight landed, the Venezuelan government confiscated them—so that she lost her cell phone, various important documents, and any record of her A-Number, which is the identification code that U.S. immigration services issue to non-citizens so they can keep track of their cases. Maribis did not have an immigration lawyer to corroborate her story. (This tracks with the experience of other migrants: The American Immigration Council has observed that many deportees lose their belongings in the chaos of being bounced between authorities, which leaves them vulnerable; in 2024, it was reported that about 70 percent of migrants are unable to find a lawyer to represent them.)

When I asked DHS officials if they could provide any comment to help make sense of Maribis’s story, the department did not answer any questions regarding the whereabouts or well-being of her children, only stating that Maribis is “a criminal illegal alien from Venezuela with multiple arrests for **larceny, theft, and pick pocketing.**” (The emphasis was their own; there was no mention of any conviction.) When I asked DHS for information about what—besides the shoplifting incident in Irving—Maribis had been arrested for, they provided me with no further information.



"At the end of the day, the law states that you cannot leave children without the care of an adult because that would be considered child abuse," said Elias Rodriguez. (Trace Thomas for *The Free Press*)

This raises the question: Is her family's punishment proportionate to her alleged crimes? Not according to Elias. "Even if the issue is that she shoplifted or pickpocketed, in the scheme of things, what would be the greatest evil?" he said. "Her crimes? Or depriving her children of the right to their mother?"

Leaving them without a guardian, he added, "makes them even more vulnerable to people who do have evil intentions."

The DHS regulations would appear to agree. According to ICE's own internal protocol, agents must secure a written or sworn statement from a parent being deported without their kids, affirming that the parent wishes to leave their children behind. Agents also have to ensure the kids are left in the custody of a specific person or organization, such as a child welfare agency. "At the end of the day, the law states that you cannot leave children without the care of an adult because that would

be considered child abuse,” Elias said. As *The Free Press* has previously reported, many unaccompanied migrant children end up in the hands of criminal gangs, and suffer horrors ranging from a lack of food to sexual assault.

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In the email it sent me, DHS said: “Just like American citizens who break the law, illegal alien parents who have criminal histories may have their children placed in the custody of someone else for the children’s safety.” But the agency did not respond to questions about what steps it had taken to guarantee the safety of Maribis’s children. There’s no evidence that DHS knew where they were, or who was looking after them.

“I thought America was better and more careful than this,” Maribis told me. “I understand that the United States has the right to deport us. But at least deport us with the children that we arrived with. It is our children who suffer. It is not just or righteous that they separate us from our children.”



In Venezuela in late September 2025, Maribis got the call she’d been dreading: Her cousin said she was going into the hospital, at that moment and possibly for several weeks, and had left Maribis’s kids alone in her Dallas apartment—having told 12-year-old Carliannys to look after her two younger siblings and asked a neighbor to check on them. Someone needed to come get them, fast.

Maribis says she could only think of one person to call on. A mutual friend had told her about another Venezuelan man named Rolando who—upon arriving in the U.S.—had stayed with a pastor in Midland, a city 330 miles west of Dallas. Not knowing what else to do, she called Rolando, who called the pastor, and asked: *Could he drop everything and drive five hours to pick up three children he'd never met and take care of them indefinitely?*

“At the beginning, I was not gung ho about it,” said Elias. “I knew they could be with us for a long time, and what a big responsibility. But then I heard the Lord say, ‘You have to go pick them up,’ and I had no other choice.”

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Back when he started setting up migrant shelters, he said: “God told me, ‘Do not ask me why they are here. Ask me, What should I do now that they are here?’” The answer to that question has always been clear to him, found in Matthew 25: “I was a stranger and you invited me in.”

The same conviction led him to get in the car and go pick up the children. Meanwhile, his congregation and the broader community rallied. This is a deep-red county. Most people here want expansive immigration reform—strict border enforcement, deportation of criminals, an overhaul of the asylum and TPS system to prevent abuse, and an annual cap on visas. Yet people who heard the story of these children looked for ways to help: donating clothes and toys, making meals, paying expenses, even offering to help care for them. When I met the children, I asked Carliannys what it had been like, living with the

pastor and his wife for a month, being part of the Midland community. “I feel safe here,” she said, in Spanish. “But I really miss my mom.”

Elias shakes his head sadly as she speaks. “It’s been too long,” he said. “Children need to be with their mothers. It isn’t good for their hearts or souls to be separated like this.”

But American authorities had apparently washed their hands of the kids. “Many people who hear what happened, they want the government to solve it,” Elias told me. “They ask: Shouldn’t immigration have a way of sending them back?”



Maribis's children stayed with Elias Rodriguez in Midland, Texas, before being reunited with their mother. (Trace Thomas for *The Free Press*)

To this, he says: “I understand that the government *should* do it, but guess what? They are not doing it. So what is the church going to do? Are we just going to stand idly by and watch children and mothers hurt?”

When I first met the children, Elias was hashing out an unlikely plan to reunite them with their mother. He told me he was going to drive them to Miami—which takes 24 hours from Midland—to avoid possible hiccups with the Transportation Security Administration (TSA) on a domestic flight. Then he would chaperone them all the way home, flying first to Curaçao, the Dutch Caribbean island, before going on to Caracas, the capital of Venezuela. (American citizens can't easily get the visa required to enter the country, because of political tensions, so Elias planned to travel on his Mexican passport.)

Elias asked friends in Midland to help pay for the family's travel expenses and quickly raised close to \$6,000 to sponsor the trip. When he set off, a few days before Thanksgiving, those who had helped waited anxiously for updates. No one was sure if the plan would work. Would the emailed travel documents Maribis had managed to get issued in Venezuela get them onto an international flight? Would the children, even though their mom had been deported, be allowed to leave the country in the company of a non-relative?

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At each juncture, a flurry of celebratory texts was exchanged—the kids were allowed to check in; they'd boarded in Miami; they'd successfully changed flights in Curaçao.

"When we were waiting for the flight, Moisés began to pray that angels would protect the plane so that they could see their mom again," said Elias. On the LASER Airlines plane to Caracas, Elias says, he spoke to the chaperones of four other children on the same flight who were being returned to parents who had been deported without them. In each

case, he said, the children's families or friends had fortunately had the resources to arrange the trip.

When they finally landed in Caracas, Elias and the kids had to wait for more than an hour while immigration authorities checked their documents and confirmed Maribis was waiting for them on the other side of customs. With each passing minute, Elias said, the children grew more anxious and excited.

"After that, the doors opened," he told me. "Moisés took off running and when he saw his mother, he jumped into her arms and she began to weep uncontrollably." It had been nearly five months since she'd seen her children.

"Victoria came next and wrapped her hands around her mama's leg, and when Carliannys got to her, all four of them fell to the floor and they all began to cry," Elias remembers. "Maribis was saying, 'I love you. I love you. I love you. This is the greatest miracle I've ever received. I get to have you in my arms again.'"



Maribis's children were reunited with their mother in Caracas, Venezuela, in late November 2025. (Courtesy of Elias Rodriguez)



Word has spread in Venezuela about the Texas pastor who might be able to help get children back to their parents. Elias told me his phone keeps ringing, desperate calls coming from mothers in Venezuela.

He told me about two children—both under 10—who spend hours alone in an apartment in Tennessee; their mom was deported and now they live with a young man, a friend of hers, who works all day. He also told me about a 9-month-old and his 10-year-old sister in Chicago, living with an aunt after their mother—her C-section scar still raw—was deported a month after giving birth. Two new children arrived at Thanksgiving here in Midland, living with another family that volunteered to host them—a 5-year-old girl and her 1-year-old little sister, who was born in the United States. Elias told me that their parents were deported to Venezuela last year, and are trying to get travel documents for the kids, but it's more complicated than it was for Maribis because their baby is a U.S. citizen.

The pastor has spoken to so many mothers who are as desperate and frantic and stubbornly hopeful as Maribis was just a few months ago. Since Maribis was deported, the Trump administration has moved to end TPS for about 600,000 Venezuelans. (On January 14, a federal appeals court heard arguments about whether to uphold a lower court's decision to block this action, but no ruling has been issued yet.) This begs the question: Are a lot more parents about to be deported without their kids? With increased instability in Venezuela, Elias is unsure what the future holds, and whether he'd be allowed to make the same trip again, to take more kids home.

"I'm available to help, as the Lord opens doors," he said. Last week, he drove to San Antonio to pick up a 5-year-old boy who has autism; his Venezuelan mother was deported to Mexico four months ago, Elias told me, and the child had been staying with her former neighbor ever since.

While he was there, Elias said, he discovered that the boy's 3-year-old cousin was staying with the neighbor, too—her mother had also been

deported without her, but to Venezuela—so he brought her back to Midland as well, at her mother's request. "I'll take the boy to be with his mom in Mexico soon," Elias says. He's not yet sure how to get the little girl back to her mother in Venezuela.

In the meantime, there are people in Midland helping to care for these kids. "These are the angels God sent to help me get my children back," said Maribis. "Now I hope these will be the angels who can help the other mothers."

