00:10

I'm an immigrant from Venezuela, and I've lived in the US for six years. If you ask me about my life as an expatriate, I would say that I've been lucky. But it hasn't been easy.

00:24

Growing up, I never thought that I was going to leave my homeland. I participated in my first student protest in 2007, when the president shut down one of the most important news networks. I was getting my bachelor's degree in communications, and that was the first time I realized I couldn't take free speech for granted.

00:45

We knew things were getting bad, but we never saw what was coming: an economic crisis, infrastructure breaking down, citywide electrical blackouts, the decline of public health care and shortage of medicines, disease outbreaks and starvation. I moved to Canada with my husband in 2013, and we always thought we'd move back home when the crisis improved. But we never did. Nearly all my childhood friends have left the country, but my parents are still there. There have been moments where I've called my mom, and I could hear people screaming and crying in the background as teargas bombs exploded in the streets. And my mom, as if I couldn't hear it, would always tell me,

01:30

(Speaking Spanish)

01:33

"We're fine, don't worry." But of course, I worry. It's my parents, and I'm 4,000 miles away.

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Today, I'm just one of more than four million Venezuelans who have left their home country. A lot of my friends are Venezuelan immigrants, and in the last few years, we've begun talking about how we could make a difference when we live so far away. That is how Code for Venezuela was born in 2019.

02:01

It began with a hackathon, because we are experts in tech, and we thought we could use our tech skills to create solutions for people on the ground. But first, we needed to find some experts actually living inside Venezuela to guide us. We'd see so many other hackathons that came up with wily, ambitious, incredible technological solutions that sounded great in theory but ultimately failed to work in the actual countries they were intended to help. Many of us have been living abroad for years, and we are detached from the day-to-day problems that people are facing in Venezuela. So we turned to the experts actually living inside of the country.

02:43

For example, Julio Castro, a doctor and one of the leaders of Médicos por la Salud. When the government stopped publishing official health care data in 2015, Dr. Julio began collecting information himself, using an informal but coordinated system of cell phone communications. They track available personnel, medical supplies, mortality data, disease outbreaks; compile it into a report; and then share that on Twitter. He became our go-to expert on health care in Venezuela.

03:19

Luis Carlos Díaz, a widely recognized journalist who reports acts of censorship and human rights violations suffered by the people of Venezuela, he helps us make sense of what is happening there, since the news is controlled by the government.

03:36

We call these people our heroes on the ground. With their expert advice, we came up with a series of challenges for hackathon participants. In that first hackathon, we had 300 participants from seven countries come up with 16 different project submissions. We picked the projects with the most potential and continued working on them after the event. Today, I'll share two of our most successful projects to give you a taste of the impact we are having so far. They're called MediTweet and Blackout Tracker.

04:09

MediTweet is an intelligent Twitter bot that helps Venezuelans find the medicine they need. Right now in Venezuela, if you get sick and you go to a hospital, there is a good chance they won't have the right medical supplies to treat you. The situation is so bad that patients often get a "shopping list" from the doctor instead of a prescription.

04:33

I live the need for this firsthand. My mom was diagnosed with cancer in 2015. She needed to have a lumbar puncture to get a final diagnosis and treatment plan. But the needle for this procedure wasn't available. I was in Venezuela at that time, and I was seeing my mom getting worse in front of me every day. After looking everywhere, we found the needle in a site that is like the eBay of Latin America. I met the seller in a local bakery, and it was like buying something on the black market. My mom brought the needle to her doctor, and he did the procedure. Without this, she could have died.

05:15

But it's not just medical supplies, it's medicines, too. When she was first diagnosed, we bought her treatment in a state pharmacy, and it was, like, practically free. But then the state pharmacy ran out, and we still had six months of treatment ahead. Six months of treatment ahead. We bought some medicines online and the rest in Mexico. Now she's in her third year of remission, and every time that I call, she tells me, "I'm fine, don't worry."

05:47

But not everyone can afford to leave the country, and many aren't healthy enough to travel. That is why people turn to Twitter, buying and selling medicines using the hashtag #ServicioPublico, meaning "public service." Our Twitter bot scans Twitter for the hashtag #ServicioPublico and connects users who are asking for specific medicines with those who are selling their private leftovers. We also pool the location data of those Twitter users and use it for a visualization tool. It gives local organizations like Médicos por la Salud a sense of where they have a shortage. We can also apply machine learning algorithms to detect clusters of disease. If they've received humanitarian aid, this could help them to make better decisions about the distributions of the supplies.

06:40

Our second project, is called Blackout Tracker. Venezuela is currently going through an electricity crisis. Last year, Venezuela suffered what some people consider the worst power failures in Venezuelan history. I had two long days without communication with my parents. Some cities experienced blackouts every day. But you only know about this on social media. The government won't report blackouts on the news. When the power goes out, many Venezuelans, we quickly tweet out the location with the hashtag #SinLuz, meaning "without electricity," before their phones ran out of battery, so people around the country know what is happening. Like MediTweet, Blackout Tracker scans Twitter for the hashtag #SinLuz and creates a map using the location data of those users. You can quickly see where the blackouts are happening today and how many blackouts have happened over time.

07:45

People want to know what is happening, and this is our answer. But it's also a way of holding the government accountable. It's easy for them to deny that the problem exists or make excuses, because there is no official data on it. Blackout Tracker shows how bad the problem really is.

08:03

Now, some people in Silicon Valley may look at these projects and say that there are no major technological innovations. But that is the point. These projects are not insanely advanced, but it's what the people of Venezuela need, and they can have a tremendous impact. Beyond these projects, perhaps our most significant accomplishment is that a movement has been created, one where people around the world are coming together to use their professional skills to create solutions for the people of Venezuela. And because we are partnering with locals, we are creating the solutions that people want and need.

08:42

What is so great about this is that we are using our professional skills, so it comes easily and naturally. It's not that hard for us to make a difference. If someone from San Francisco were to hire professionals to create solutions like MediTweet or Blackout Tracker, it would cost a small fortune. By donating our services, we are making a bigger impact than if we were just to donate money.

09:08

And you can do the same thing -- not in Venezuela, necessarily, but in your own community. In a world that is more connected than ever, we still see how specialized communities can be living isolated or in silos. There are so many great ways to help, but I believe that you can use your professional skills to connect diverse communities and create effective solutions through those relationships.

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Anyone with knowledge and professional skills has a powerful force to bring hope to a community. For us at Code for Venezuela, this is just the beginning.

09:48

Thank you.

09:49

(Applause)