INTERVIEW: Altamont Teacher 50 Miles From Maduro's Surprise Capture

By Madison Chandler

Altamont English teacher Susan Huffman was scuba diving at night with her family when her sister noticed a naval ship and what she first thought were meteorites, but were actually strike aircraft. Huffman was on the island of Bonaire, roughly 50 miles away from Caracas where Venezuelan President Nicholás Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores, were captured in January by United States forces under the command of President Donald Trump in an operation codenamed "Absolute Resolve." The U.S. would later indict Maduro and Flores on several charges related to narco-terrorism. Huffman shared her experience and knowledge of the area with *The Acta Diurna:*



How close were you to the raid?

"Okay, so if you're talking about when Trump stole the Venezuelan president and his wife, I was on an island called Bonaire. It is fifty miles off the coast of Venezuela. Aruba, Curaçao, and Bonaire [are the] ABC islands and it's the closest one to Venezuela, so it's fifty miles."

Were you there the day or night when the news broke?

"It was over Christmas break, and I was [in Bonaire,] scuba diving with my family. We were actually night-diving, and you always leave somebody on the boat when you night-dive. So, my sister and a friend were on the boat, I was with my kids, and we were all scuba diving. When we came up, they said, 'Oh, we saw this really weird asteroid star thing.' We [thought] we saw a navy ship flash its lights and everybody's like, 'Oh well that's so weird.' But [the U.S.] had Bonaire in their flight path, so they had a lot of drone activity … a lot of times people had seen U.S. drones going across the island. I don't think that anybody thought it was too unusual to see something that looked like a warship or any kind of rockets, because they've had so much drone activity. Then the next morning, we get up and I'm looking at my phone and I'm thinking, 'Oh, wait, I think the headline says they took the president of Venezuela.' That was the first we really knew about it, just by looking at social media."

Did you know anything about the president, his wife, or any politics relating to Venezuela?

"I did. I have to give you a little backstory. My family has been diving in Bonaire every year since I was eighteen years old. We've made a lot of friends with locals and have a lot of people we care about there, and they are so close to Venezuela that they are dependent on it. Their food either comes from Venezuela and South America or it comes from the Netherlands on an

airplane. Things had gotten so terrible they were eating their pets. They were starving, the financial situation fell apart, [and] money was worthless.

… Really this had all started before Trump did anything. The Venezuelan president was just so terrible for the country and their finances, and [their] economy had just completely collapsed. When you hear them talking about their loved ones having to eat pets, it's just truly a horrible situation. You would see people trying to escape. Bonaire doesn't have a refugee issue, but you would find people trying to get out of Cuba and Venezuela. They would come over in the craziest kind of boats, and it would be in the news. Bonaire never had a crime problem, [but], when you have a collapsed economy like in Venezuela, they started having a lot more drug crime that bled over into Bonaire. There were mafia style hits on people and their houses, so Bonaire was picking up the peripheral issues that come with a collapsed economy."



Has this experience changed your perspective on U.S. foreign intervention? If so, how did you feel about it before? In the past we've seen interventions in Iraq, Iran, Somalia, parts of Africa, and the Middle East. What was your perspective before and how has it changed?

"I will say that being down there, when it happened you had a lot of locals who were so glad it happened, because they had family members who were truly suffering under the Venezuelan president. But then, you had a lot of Americans and Europeans on the island who were like, 'This guy is nuts if he would do this. If he would steal a sitting president and his wife and make them disappear, what will he *not* do?' I feel like I can feel both sides of that issue, and I don't particularly love how it happened. But I feel like now, giving the more global picture, Trump probably knew that we were going to bomb Iran and change how oil is distributed in the world, so he secured his own oil country first. It does make me skeptical about U.S. politics and U.S. policies."

Did you feel immediate danger or that you had to leave in a rush?

"I was on a beautiful tropical island, and the only true danger is that it is an island, and they are completely dependent on other sources for food. Immediately the Netherlands stopped sending airplanes, so all of the fresh food from the Netherlands and frozen foods stopped. Then with the embargo against Venezuela, their oil stopped coming. I was able to leave two days after the event."

Since news sources are different, how did *Venezuelan* media explain the events, compared to international or U.S. news?

“Our internet service was very limited, so we did not have a Venezuelan news source. They do have them on the island, but I don’t know whether they cut them. I don’t really know. I can’t tell you exactly what happened. Island politics can be kind of crazy. The only things I got were things people were sending me after that initial morning of sitting at the table and seeing it on my phone. We didn’t really have what I would call excellent internet service. Was that on purpose or just because of natural disruptions? It’s hard to say. It’s a small island.”

Did you hear any bombs or explosions or see anything unusual?

“Other than my sister and my friends seeing the warship light up and seeing something that looked like rockets, we could not hear anything or see any smoke. But, as I said, a lot of Bonaireans, for maybe a month or longer, had seen a lot of U.S. drones going over at a low altitude. I think they were not unexpected. They were also using Curacao in the ABC islands as one of the bases … A lot of Bonaireans have families in Curacao as well and they would hear from their family members how many ordinances have been delivered through Curacao.”

Do you believe that the intervention in Venezuela was justified, or do you believe it violates Venezuela’s sovereignty?

“I think that’s a very difficult question. I do think that you can’t take a sitting president and his wife and make them disappear, and yet that is exactly what happened. So, I think that is a very scary precedent for the U.S. to set. At the same time, I am sorry we hadn’t intervened in Venezuelan politics prior to this, because those people have suffered horrifically at the collapse of the economy. Venezuela was a beautiful country when I was younger … when I was eighteen. That was the flight path to Bonaire. When I was a teenager, we always went through Caracas, and it was beautiful. It is very hard to watch something like [the recent intervention] and know we had the power to intervene and we didn’t. I don’t necessarily love how we did it, but I am glad that Venezuela has an opportunity now to move forward in a different direction.”

Is there anything you would like to say that I did not ask you?

“No, I would just encourage [people] to get out there and follow this story. Don’t let this Venezuelan president and his wife just disappear into New York City. Keep following the story and keep up with what’s happening with them. I want to see if true change happens.”