

BOSTONIAN OF THE YEAR: HONORABLE MENTION

A political stunt sent 49 migrants to Martha's Vineyard. Open arms welcomed them.

Even without infrastructure in place to help such a large group of people, islanders instantly mobilized to help.

By **Neil Swidey** Globe Correspondent, Updated December 16, 2022, 5:45 a.m.



From left: The Rev. Cathlin Baker, Andressa Da Trindade, Jackie Stallings, Rachel Self, Larkin Stallings, the Rev. Vincent "Chip" Seadale of St. Andrew's, and Lisa Belcastro in front of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Edgartown. CARLIN STIEHL FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

LISA BELCASTRO HAD JUST finished teaching a karate class when she checked her phone and saw an urgent text. It was from a friend at Martha's Vineyard Community Services, the island's safety-net nonprofit. "We have about 50 Venezuelans here," her friend said. "We don't know why they're here or how they got here, but we have to take care of them."

The Venezuelans knew even less. They'd [mysteriously landed at Martha's Vineyard Airport](#) on two chartered jets the afternoon of September 14 before ending up at Community Services. Staffers led the migrants across the street to the high school cafeteria to get some food and figure out what to do next.

The Rev. Cathlin Baker, pastor of the First Congregational Church of West Tisbury, heard from her sister, who works at Community Services and whose husband works at the airport. Baker's husband is the managing editor of the *Vineyard Gazette* and their daughter is a ninth-grader at the high school. ("Small-town life!" Baker says with a laugh.)

At the start of the sleepy off-season, all of these year-round islanders were about to be thrust into an international news story.

Baker next heard from her friend who is pastor of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Edgartown. He was at a conference in North Carolina and fielding panicked calls. The two clergy members had been instrumental years earlier in starting a winter homeless shelter on the island, which Belcastro runs. The arrival of migrants was happening months before the shelter's scheduled start — they'd need to move quickly to prepare the St. Andrew's parish hall to house the unexpected visitors.



Over in the halls of the high school, staff had begun tapping Advanced Placement Spanish students to help as impromptu translators. Senior Andressa Da Trindade, whose family had emigrated from Brazil six years earlier, was eager to assist. Told she needed parental permission, Da Trindade contacted her father with clear instructions in Portuguese: “Dad, just write, ‘Andressa can go,’ and I’ll translate it.” He did, and she headed over to St. Andrew’s.

Rachel Self, an immigration attorney and year-round resident of Chappaquiddick, was in Boston preparing for a hearing when she noticed she had four missed calls from a friend on the Vineyard. After reaching that person and learning about the influx of Venezuelans, she called a ship captain for help getting her back to the island ahead of the ferry schedule.

In the summer, the Vineyard is the playground of the high powered and high profile, with a population that can swell to nearly 200,000. But in the offseason, it shrinks to one-tenth of that, and news travels fast among those interconnected, decidedly lower-profile souls. As Belcastro, Baker, and other volunteers dusted off cots and inflated air mattresses in St. Andrew’s basement, reports of the surprise visitors began to ripple across the island. That attracted residents to the church with the same urgency that an Obama sighting mobilizes tourists in the summer.

Larkin Stallings was grabbing a bite with his wife, Jackie, at The Ritz Cafe, the bar they own in Oak Bluffs. As soon as they heard the news, Larkin, vice president of the Community Services board, and his Spanish-speaking, Mexican-American wife made a beeline for St. Andrew's 6 miles away. They'd barely leave there for the next 48 hours.

Nathan Briggs was born and raised in Venezuela and, as far as he knows, he and his mother are the only Vineyard year-rounders from that South American country. The restaurant manager was working at Rockfish in Edgartown when his co-workers heard about the migrants' arrival. A few of them cracked: "Looks like your family is here." He brushed that off and, during a lull, made the 2-minute walk to St. Andrew's. There, he saw clusters of young, tired guys who seemed either disoriented or downright scared. "Qué pasó, pana?" he said, using Venezuelan vernacular for "What's up, dude?" Comforted by the sound of home, the migrants opened up. None of them could explain why they were on the Vineyard, and a few didn't even realize they were on an island. Briggs reassured them, "This was probably the best place you could have landed."

In these early hours, neither the 49 migrants nor the roughly 20,000 Vineyard year-rounders understood what forces had thrust them into one another's lives — or that both groups had been set up to fail.

THERE'S AT LEAST one point of agreement for opponents in the nation's immigration debate: Our system is broken, and opportunists are exploiting the crisis. *Who* the opportunists are is up for grabs. Some fault all the migrants pouring over our porous Southern border; others fault hard-right lawmakers for being indifferent to human suffering, focusing instead on scoring political points.

Now, the nation had a new Rorschach test on immigration. Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and his team had orchestrated the flights of the Venezuelans from Texas to

Martha's Vineyard, using taxpayer money and scheduling [brief stops in the Florida Panhandle](#). Migrants said that someone outside a shelter in Texas had lured them to board a plane with the promise of a job and housing elsewhere in the country. DeSantis fans [cheered his stunt](#), but even some self-described border-security hawks called it indefensibly cruel.

AT THE ST. ANDREW'S SHELTER, manager Lisa Belcastro raced around for two days straight, overseeing logistics — not just feeding and housing the migrants but also keeping up with the rapidly growing mountain of clothes, food, and supplies that islanders were donating. When she asked one migrant what he needed, he replied, “Trabajo!” He desperately wanted to work and was confused why the job he'd been promised in Texas wasn't materializing.

When Andressa Da Trindade overheard a Portuguese-speaking volunteer struggle to understand the Spanish-speaking migrants, the high school student leveraged her trilingual skills. She helped female migrants find donated undergarments in their size, then entertained a group of five migrant children. Hearing that some of the adult migrants wanted to appeal for God's help, she enlisted her father — pastor of the island's Brazilian church — to lead a service in Spanish at St. Andrew's. Although she was hungry and there were mounds of donated food, Da Trindade didn't take a bite all day or night. “I eat every day. They're the ones who need it.”

After closing up the restaurant at 1 a.m., Nathan Briggs returned to the church and stayed a few hours before heading home. He was back around 7 a.m. and put the frightened migrants at ease as only a fellow Venezuelan could. When one asked for help finding a size-13 shoe, Briggs called a big-footed friend. “Hey, Lance,” he said, “you need to swing by with a couple of pairs of your shoes.” Even Briggs' co-workers

who'd initially teased him were now texting to see how they could help.

Rachel Self set up in the back of the church, meeting individually with migrants (a couple of them turned out to be from Peru) to review the papers they'd received in Texas. When the migrants had announced themselves at the US-Mexico border, Border Patrol agents in Texas had "paroled" them in, giving them a date and place where they should report for a check-in. Self says that because the "Kafkaesque" immigration system is so broken, and the computer system requires agents to fill in a physical address for each person, the migrants' papers listed random cities. One migrant was supposed to show up at an immigration office in Yakima, Washington, just a few days after landing on the Vineyard. By flying these desperate migrants to a remote island, Self says, "They had been set up for failure." She and other lawyers furiously worked the phones to get them extensions.

DeSantis had wagered that making the migrant crisis real, instead of theoretical, would unleash a spasm of NIMBYism among the island's pampered progressives. But it was precisely because the migrants who had been flown there under false pretenses were real human beings, and not props, that the Vineyard's year-rounders rushed in to help. (Also: the pampered people tend to clear out by Labor Day.)

By the time Governor Charlie Baker's administration [moved the migrants to a military base](#) on Cape Cod because of the extensive facilities there, many islanders had formed tight bonds with their Venezuelan visitors. Larkin Stallings and his wife had grown so close to four related migrants that they visited them at the base. The four Venezuelans later moved in with the Stallings before Larkin arranged for them to live in a friend's empty cottage. They joined the Stallings to celebrate Thanksgiving.

It didn't take long for Larkin to realize that "the warm glow of brotherhood" on the Vineyard wasn't universal. A stranger who'd learned about him from cable news and social media e-mailed to say how appalled she was by his role in what she referred to

as illegal immigration. She hurled insults at him, but he suppressed the urge to fight back with his own. Instead, he tried to explain that what she'd heard about the Vineyard and the Venezuelans wasn't accurate. They went back and forth. "I'll be damned," he says, "if, by our 10th exchange, we didn't agree." The common ground they found? Immigration is too complex to get right through tweets and sound bites.

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