

Civic Engagement

When I first embarked in learning more about the current immigration issues that people were having and to learn about their experiences, I thought it was going to be a simple task. I thought if I went to the right channels I could get answers to all my questions and be able to interview people easily. This was not the case. However, at the end of my quest I feel that I manage to get a more in-depth view of what goes on in the underbelly of society and the hidden community that is composed of illegal immigrants, a community that is very much struggling with what is currently going on in, not only on these elections, but have been struggling terribly for the last decades.

Now, allow me to share my own personal story so that you may understand a little bit from where I'm coming from and why I was surprised about what I learned. I am originally from Mexico from a small rural town with a population of no more than 200 people. When I was six years old my father lost his job due to the economic fallout that happened at that time. He then came here to the United States to find what he could not in Mexico. Everyone down there had heard of how it is so great to be here and to find a job and such, The American Dream they called it. My father left our family when I was six years old, and little did I know that I was not going to see him again for a very long time. My mother soon followed him a year later, leaving me in the care of my older sister.

Both my Father and Mother would call me on birthdays and holidays and would always send money for my school and living expenses, as well as gifts. However, what I wanted most in the world was to see them. When I turned 11 years old, my sister told me that we were going to go see our parents. Finally after five years, I would see my father again. We traveled by bus to Mexico City and took an airplane to the border of Mexico and the US, Nogales. I was so excited to finally see my parents, but I had no idea of the hardship I would have to endure in order to do so. I was explained to follow this guy and to not leave my sister's and brother's side. We were told that we had to leave everything behind. We were given nothing but a gallon of water and packaged snacks like trail mix and pastries. We late at night, hiding through shrubbery and rocks. We traveled for two and a half days, only resting for an hour or so. I was not aware of the danger, and I was so naïve that I didn't really give a thought as to what I was doing, to what we were all doing. All that I could think of was that I would see my parents soon. After walking for days we reached a town, I was exhausted and sleep deprived but by looking at my sister's face of relieve I knew it was over.

We were picked up by a van and they introduced themselves as friends of our parents. They were kind to us and took us to a motel room where we were fed and were allowed to rest for a few hours. We then traveled to phoenix, Arizona where we stayed at their house for a couple of days, till "things died down" is what they said. I later learned that, they were doing check points in the road and we could not passed through because

we would be deported if we were found. A week later after we embarked in our Journey from our hometown, I remember looking out the window and seeing snow for the first time. I remember seeing the Great Salt Lake, and the city was as bright as a star. We arrived to our new house, I remember I could no longer wait my heart was beating faster than ever before, I was so anxious to finally see my parents. I was so angry at them, but at the same time so happy I would finally see them. When we walked out of the van and I saw my mother for the first time in five years, I saw tears in her face she rushed over to me and held me in her arms and wouldn't let go, I wouldn't let go either. My father standing over us embracing us as well. I was finally home, my family was reunited once more.

After everything that we went through I thought I was ready for everything, but I was wrong. While I never experienced violence towards me for being an immigrant, I do remember being looked down on and people under their breath saying slur terms towards me. I had a hard time adjusting to life here, mainly because, well living in a rural area was a bit more vulgar and harsh. Also, there being a language barrier didn't help me in making friends. But now, 16 years have passed and I believe I have adjusted relatively fine. All these years living here, never have I thought of myself differently. I was raised with the idea that we're all humans and we should collaborate to make humanity better. I was blind to all the social issues that plague humanity. Never did I think to treat people differently because of their sexual preferences or race or color of their skin or beliefs. I always thought that one of the tenets of this country is to let people pursue their happiness and to not discriminate based on said things. At least that is what I learned in history class.

But as I grew much older, right about senior year in High School. I experienced something that I didn't before. I was discriminated against by a girl's parent for being well, Mexican. I remember the look of disdain her father gave me when she introduced me to them, and how he pulled her away from me and hastily left with her. I later answered a call from her, explaining to me what had happened and how her father was a bigot and how she wasn't like that. When reality really hit me though, it was after my second year in college. This is where I learned of my limitations, limitations put on me by the government. I worked so hard and studied my hardest, I believed I could accomplish anything I set my mind to and after working so hard I had done it. A full ride to an Ivy League school, Dartmouth College, I was picked from hundreds of people, they only picked five, for their graduate program in Theoretical Physics. But to my dismay I received a letter from them, telling me how I could not receive the scholarship because of my legal status. After that I learned that no matter how hard I had tried I would always have to work much harder than anyone else to get to where I wanted to be and the blow from this actually shattered the bubble of ignorance I had lived in for so many years. In a way, it was a blessing because I had learned about a whole world that I had been secretly been a part of, but never really knew existed.

Now we're here, I had learned and studied about immigration law, but there is simply no way for me to become a citizen of a country that I have lived for more than half my life now. A country where I have develop friendships and created a home for myself. But let me digress a little, there is no easy way for me to become a citizen. In fact as it stands right now there are only three ways for me to be able to do it, but in fact not just me. People in my situation that have entered the country illegally without inspection, meaning I didn't enter through a check point in the border, have very limited options on becoming citizens. One is to marry an US citizen, however because of all the fraud marriages that had been going on for the last few decades they have become extremely strict. Even if I were to marry someone with citizenship I would be required to leave the country for as many years as I have been illegal up to a maximum of 10 years. So, for me that have been here for so long would mean I would have to leave for 10 years and then be allow to re-enter and would not get citizenship, just residency and then 5 years later I could apply for citizenship. Second way would be if a company were to sponsor me into the country and thirdly is for me to receive a PhD and I could sponsor myself into the country by showing that I have something to contribute to the scientific community, so basically I would have to be on the top end of research for this to happen.

I visited the Mexican council to see if I could find more information about this, and unfortunately they told me things I had already knew. However, because of the recent executive order from Obama, DACA people can actually "cheat" the system. Because the premises of people in DACA is that the government cannot take action against people for being illegal, People with DACA are getting married and because they are protected from being penalized for being here illegally, they can stay in the country without having to leave for upwards of 10 years. However, it is still not an easy task and you would definitely have to fight the courts on this, but it is very much doable. Then I decided to get some stories from other people that have lived here illegally for years. This was not an easy task. Every single time I approached people, first I had a hard time on phrasing the question, are you here illegally? Because, well I knew exactly what I would say if I were asked that before. No. Only a few people, after I explained to them what I was doing agreed to talk to me. The first person, was a Chinese girl I met in a restaurant. She told me about how she was brought into the country by plane assuming the identity of someone else that looked like her. She arrived in California, but did not stay there for more than a week. She left the state and came here to Utah, to escape the people that brought her into the country. She explained to me how, the deal was she was to work of them, till she paid her debt to them. But they would charge her for everything. So not only did she have to work for them and pay them living expenses, they would not tell her how much they were paying her so she had no idea how long it would take to repay them.

I had heard stories about this, but as she would tell me more about it I was shocked by what they had done to her. They would use her as a maid in their house and have her work at the tailor shop they ran. She lived with them for a week, till she met a guy that said would help her. He brought her here to Utah and left her with his family. It was a family of Mexicans. They helped her get a job and establish a life here. They never

charged her for any living expenses and she was actually happy to tell me all about it, but did not want to mention her life with the family that brought her into the country and I felt I shouldn't inquire more about it. She just like me gain her work permit through DACA. It then hit me, I did not realize this before and felt so ignorant. There are more than just Mexican or Latinos illegally here in the US. There are people from all over the world that have stories similar to mine. I came across a man from, El Salvador who told me about his life in his country and how he came to the US as a refugee, he told me of all the things he was forced to do as a kid, when he was drafted by the Salvadorian Army during their war. But he too could not get a path to citizenship, and he as well only has a work permit and the same ways to get citizenship as all of us DACA. I wish I had more time to do more interviews and research, maybe if I could find the right words to phrase and explain to people why I'm doing this it would have turned out a little better. But, these were the only two people I could get to sit with me and talk for about 2 hours and tell me their stories.

I learned a lot about myself and about what other people go through. I had a moment where I realize I'm not alone in this and another one where I noticed that people come from all over the world and experience things that I did. The readings from the book were made more alive because of this, I know I could relate to the "How to tame a wild tongue" personally and talking with Hsiang-hua, the Chinese girl, made me understand a little bit about the reading "Growing up Asian in America" while she herself didn't grow up Asian here. She made me understand some of the stress that she goes through being Asian and having the mentality that they are expected to do better, I got this from her saying how her parents do not talk to her because she is not successful. I think this experience became more alive when I started to talk with people, although a lot refuse to talk to me, I could see in their eyes the fear and/or shame every time I asked the question, "what's your legal status?". While I expected people to be more open to me and talk to me about their experiences, I think it turned out okay and I learned a lot more than if I had just read it in a book.