The day started out completely ordinary. As usual, my mom and I arrived at the food bank for our regular weekly trip. While we waited for our number to be called, I noticed there was a woman who I didn’t recognize working behind the check-in counter. When our turn came, we ended up in the new worker’s line.

Immediately something felt different compared to our previous visits. The woman began asking complicated questions that my mom didn’t know how to answer due to her very limited English. I will never forget my 7-year-old self trying to help translate the best that I could. But how was a young child supposed to know my father's monthly income, or what our taxes looked like? I do not recall the exact questions that were asked, but I do remember noticing the tears of shame and frustration forming in my mom's eyes. I felt like all the air was taken out of my body as this woman continued to harshly question our right to access the food bank, and even challenged my mom's right to be in the United States. We left empty handed, with my mom in tears.

The events of that day changed the way I viewed myself and my identity for many years to come. Up to that point it had never occurred to me that my ethnicity and where my parents came from might be perceived as something negative. For the first time I began noticing the profound differences in the way my family was treated compared to the Caucasians around us. Suddenly I became jealous of the “perfect” white families I saw. My race, my parents' immigration status, my language of origin, and my family’s financial situation all became things I felt like I needed to hide.

Throughout elementary and middle school I tried to mask as much as I could about my life. Growing up in a small white town only added to my fear of sharing my background and my story with others. I would never invite my friends over to my home, and I would avoid telling my family about school events because I didn’t want to deal with the awkwardness of having to translate everything for them. My ethnic background became the thing that I hated the most about myself. I was constantly embarrassed by my brown skin tone and dark hair, my lisp that came with English being my second language, and the deep brown eyes I was born with.

As I grew older, however, things began to change. Once in high school, I started to understand myself and my cultural identity more and began to embrace every aspect of my heritage. I proudly posted my favorite songs in Spanish on Instagram, boasted to my friends about the delicious Mexican food my mom made, and took every opportunity I could to share my story and my background.

Though it has been a long journey, I am finally able to confidently say that I am a proud first generation Mexican-American daughter of immigrants. I love my native language, I adore my tan skin, I cherish my thick dark hair and I love my small mobile home that represents the sacrifices my parents have made. Most of all, I treasure my ability to take the most difficult parts of my life and turn them into motivation for my future. The poverty my family has experienced has helped me to appreciate the little things in life and understand the importance of working hard. The racism that my family faced has taught me to have compassion for and be accepting of everyone I meet. I wouldn’t be who I am today without these hardships, and I honestly wouldn’t change any aspect of my story even if I could.