

**Topic:** The journey of an immigrant

**Abstract:** I was ignorant once, not fully understanding how lucky I was to have certain privileges until I met her. An individual who accepted the changes that was pushed upon her when her life was turned upside down as she slowly made her way across the border into a foreign land. She like many others want only one thing: to find acceptance in this country.

**Key Words:** Privilege, Education, Life and Acceptance

### I Am Who I Am

There will always be people you encounter in your life who have stories to tell us about their heritage and who they perceive themselves to be. Some of these stories stay with us for a long time perhaps because; they are similar to our own. No one should tell us that we do not belong based on our race. No law should eliminate us from certain privileges because we were not born here or there. Yet, such notions and laws exist.

Here is another of those stories that's been heard and told many times but few ever really listen. This story comes from a person very close to me whose voice joins that of many in their quest to be recognized as equals. Her journey began when she was six years old near the U.S./Mexican border one night. She, her two brothers and her mother were smuggled into the United States by a paid coyote. Her father migrated a few years prior to the United States like many of the migrant workers lured here by promises of better living and better pay.

In the early 1980's, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that children who were illegal residents had the right to public school education (Frontline World). A few years later in 1986, Congress passed more legislation with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (Frontline World). The act also granted an amnesty to illegal workers already in the United States, giving more than 2.7 million people legal status (Frontline World). Her father was among those who fell under this

new Reform Act. It was during this time that he sent for his family to the U.S. After the family reunited they settled into their new life in Los Angeles, California. Life there was not easy, but they did their best to get by and she did her part by accepting the changes that had been thrust upon her.

She grew up in L.A.; her childhood resembled that of many American children despite not really being one of them. Because she came here at an early age, she assimilated well into the western culture. Knowing that she had to do so in hiding, not knowing when her family might be deported back to Mexico. The constant threat made her extremely cautious and taught her to blend in well, almost invincible one might say. Life in middle school and junior high went by fast; however when she became a freshman in high school a series of events took place that changed her life. When her English instructor asked the whole class one day who would like to go to college, the majority of the class raised their hands. She refrained from raising hers because she was confused. She knew that college education was very expensive and her parents could ill afford to send her to college. Grants and Financial Aid were out of the question and yet, she desperately wanted to raise her hand. She realized that no matter how hard she tried to fit in, she would always be seen as an outsider.

She began to despise who she was and what she represented to the rest of the world. Which in turn made her resent her father for bringing her to a country that did not seem to want or accept her. Filled with so much self loathing and anger, high school became a challenge. There was a lot of frustration over the fact that she never had any say whether she wanted to come here or not. The fact was that she saw herself as more of an American than a Mexican. Not because she chose to be one and not the other, but because she had lost her ties to her Mexican roots. Her lifestyle was that of an American. The only thing that linked her to her Mexican

heritage was her physical biology and Spanish. Although, a traditional Mexican would say that her Spanish was not Spanish at all but “Spang-lish.”

After high school she moved to Hollister where she found work as a waitress. Now more mature and older, she knew she did not want to waitress forever. The racial treatments and stereotypes she received from work showed her that she needed to do something better with her life. After a couple of years of saving she then attended Gavilan College where she aimed to get a degree. College life was a little bumpy in the beginning, but she slowly warmed up to it, foreseeing a bright future ahead. She had everything planned out, but was not prepared for the next obstacle that would challenge her determination whether to stay in school or drop out.

While she attended college it never occurred to her that a degree would not get her the career that she desired, because according to the state law she was still considered an undocumented individual. “There’s no point going back to school, spending money on an education that’s not worth anything,” she told me one day. “Why don’t you get your papers?” I asked not really understanding how long and expensive such a process would be. If I’d known back then what I know now, I would have undoubtedly asked something else. I’d like to think that I would have been able to provide her with the understanding that she needed at the time. I often found myself comparing my life to hers. How different and yet so alike our circumstances were. I too, am not from this great country, but unlike my friend, I have more rights and privileges.

Acceptance is an emotion that all humans need to feel equal and wanted. When one finds themselves lacking this emotional need from society, they are not likely to get over it. Which in the case of my friend became too much and forced her to quit college before she was able to get

her degree. The physical and emotional stress that accompanied that difficult decision cannot be described. She went back to waitressing long hours earning no more than minimum wage. Not long after that she got into an accident on her way to work. Without medical insurance and a license she ended up with a medical bill and a fine. The incident injured her knee forcing her to walk on crutches for several months. She lost her job as a result. For most people when such events occur, the stress alone can be unbearable. But not for her, it acted as a wakeup call, giving her the determination she needed to get back on her feet. She found a job that did not require her to move around so much and started saving up for school again, and more importantly to hire a lawyer to help her with her documents. Starting over wasn't easy, but it gave her a sense of purpose she didn't have before and an opportunity to change her life and learn from her mistakes. At the same time it also gave her comfort knowing that if she tried hard enough eventually everything will be okay.

Bits and pieces of her life in Mexico before crossing the border still remains with her even today. She often wonders what her life would have been like if she had stayed there. Sure she might not have all the comforts she has now in Mexico, but for once she would like to get to know new people without lying about who she really was. If a person can die from choking on their lies she'd be that individual. Having to live like this is a little daunting. People need to understand that undocumented immigrants are people too. They deserve to be treated as such. She understands that others do not like the idea of millions of undocumented immigrants pouring into the United States daily. Perhaps now we have a sense of how the Native Americans felt when the Europeans decided to migrate here without their papers, not that it really mattered then. The life of an immigrant is never paved straight in other words it's very difficult especially if they *had* to come here. For her, there was never a choice. She might not have the freedom to do

certain things but she is thankful for what she has. The challenges that bombarded her every step of the way never stopped her from believing in what she thought was right. Getting her papers will give her an opportunity to help those like her.

Two decades have passed since she began her journey across the border not really anticipating the path that she would have to undertake to tell her story and get her voice heard among all the scattering sounds of the media, the screeching noises of the capital and the unrelenting doubts she often encounters. “I am an American in my mind and heart. A signed paper is only a symbol. I am who I am where it’s important.”

*“Give me your tired, your poor,  
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,  
The wretched refuse of your teeming shores.  
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me  
I lift my lamp beside the golden door”*



