

SIN VERGÜENZA



Art by Sindy Tapia

ILLA ZINE

2025



QUINCEAÑERA COHORT

LLA ZINE | 2025 EDITION

OUR VISION

To unapologetically affirm the leadership, resilience, and enduring contributions of immigrants as forces shaping America's past, present, and future.

Photography by Xochilt Borja



Our immigrant communities shape America's past, present, and future.

Join us as we unapologetically affirm the leadership, resilience, and enduring contributions of Latino/a/e/x immigrants and their descendants.

The Last Supper of Chicano Heroes Mural
by Jose Antonio Burciaga (1989)



CHANGING THE NARRATIVE *Sin Vergüenza*

Immigrant communities are not just impacted by policy—they are under attack by narrative. We are erased, criminalized, and dehumanized. These policies don't exist in a vacuum—they are born from the stories this country shares and omits about who belongs, who deserves care, and whose lives matter. Narrative change is not an option—it is central to the fight for immigrant justice.

This zine, *Sin Vergüenza*, plays on a phrase deeply familiar in our culture—at once a sharp critique and a daring declaration. Here, we embrace its dual meaning: a refusal to hide and a celebration of living boldly, without apology. It captures the spirit of these pages—voices of alumni from previous LLA cohorts—leaders in Education, Non-Profit, Government, and Business. Their stories are proof of the power, presence, and impact of immigrants in our communities. Together, they reveal how immigrants build, lead, and enrich every part of our collective life. This goes beyond the standards of storytelling; it is narrative justice.

A zine is a mini maga**Zine**, made to be copied, shared, and passed hand to hand. Zines are full of art, stories, and emotions, just like the people who create them. For decades, zines have been tools of resistance, created by communities on the margins who tell the stories others tried to oppress. We choose this format because it is accessible, powerful, and rooted in movement work: carrying forward a legacy of activism, care, and collective change.

This project is the work of many hands. **Thank you** to the Quinceañera Cohort, the LLA Alumni who shared their stories, and the LLA Board and staff whose support and leadership made this possible.

♥ With love and solidarity,
The Quinceañera Cohort

Yadira Antonio, Xochilt Borja, Deandra Lee, Vanessa Grijalva, Ozzy Guzman, Renzo Lujan, Diana Manriquez, Kiana Munoz, Robert Negrete, Rubyd Olvera, Omar Perez, Victoria Ramirez, Minerva Sarellano, & Sendy Tapia

LLA FORWARD.



My involvement with the Latino Leadership Alliance began in 2008. I was a young assistant professor of sociology at Stanford University when Professor Al Camarillo invited me to share my research with participants in a new group of emerging leaders in the Bay Area. He told me that LLA was a new initiative led by Eddie Garcia and George Shirakawa, both veterans of San Jose politics. LLA was forming a partnership with Stanford University, led by Al, where participants in the year-long leadership program would spend a weekend at Stanford and attend five seminars with Stanford faculty who focus on Latino-related issues.

The brief description intrigued me enough to say “yes.” Additionally, Al is a long-time mentor and someone I look up to, so I agree to almost anything he requests. To say that I’m happy that I accepted. His invitation is an understatement. That Saturday presentation during the summer of 2008 marked the launch of my 15-year relationship with LLA. For the first five years of my relationship with LLA, my role was to give one of the seminars during the weekend program. Starting 11 years ago, I took over for Al, organizing the summer program at Stanford. Over the past 15 years, having interacted with dozens of participants and consistently committed LLA leadership, here is what I’ve seen.

I’ve seen participants in the program be ignited by their passion for improving the lives of their communities, whether they work in the public sector, private sector, or the nonprofit world. As we go through each of the five seminars over a Saturday and Sunday, their commitment shines through, along with their curiosity, their ability to be vulnerable with one another, and their desire to look out for each other. Every time we wrap up another Stanford summer program, I leave inspired by the participants.

I’ve seen that LLA leadership walks the walk. From the board members to the volunteers, LLA doesn’t just talk about how to lead; they show people how to lead with vision, competence, and a servant-leader mindset. I have seen this firsthand in the preparation that the Stanford program participants bring to the weekend. I’ve also seen it because I’ve worked with members of the board to organize the weekend, most recently Erika Bustamante. Each of those individuals I’ve worked with has taught me through their actions about how to lead.

I’ve seen an alum network that gives back because they believe in LLA. They also lead by example. Through their time, talent, and treasure, they have taken a pay-it-forward approach to their ongoing involvement with LLA. The importance of LLA’s work is clearer than ever. The region, the state, the country, and the world need leaders. LLA and its participants are stepping up in ways that give me hope, even during times that are especially challenging for Latinos across the United States.

Thank you, LLA, for elevating the leaders in our community so that they can, in turn, uplift our community. Here is to 15 years...



Tomás R. Jiménez
Stanford, CA



Art by Sindy Tapia



JORGE CASAS

CUELLAR

STANDING IN SOLIDARITY

In 1991, at the age of four, a boy and his family crossed from Jalisco, Mexico, into the United States of America. At such a young age, this boy was drawn to public service. In fact, he had a goal in mind: to join the military, establish his career, and then become a politician. Jorge Casas Cuellar, a former LLA alumnus of cohort 11, came to understand that his family came here, “in search of something better,” he says.

Life doesn’t always follow a path we can understand when we’re young. Some people move smoothly from A to B to C, while others might go from A to Z and back to B. Everyone’s timeline is unique. Although Jorge’s dream of joining the military didn’t come true, he knew he wanted to make a difference in his community, which is where his passion for social justice took root.

At age 28, Jorge moved from Marina, California, to San Jose, California. San Jose was Jorge’s first exposure to activism, where he worked as a Board member with Latinos United for a New America (LUNA), which focused its efforts and initiatives on community engagement to address underrepresented issues in the Latino Community. Jorge shared that the most gratifying part of the experience was the immersion in the community to help organize and hear others’ stories.

After LUNA, Jorge gained an internship with Magdalena Carrasco, a former council member representing District 5 in East San Jose. During this time, Jorge gained knowledge on the intricacies of bureaucracy, which he explained as “challenging because [he] went from one space of advocating for the community to another space of advocating for an

elected official.” Nevertheless, Jorge shares that it was very satisfying when there was an opportunity to achieve mutual wins for both the community and the local government.

“I [now] work in the Community Housing Division for a non-profit,” says Jorge. This non-profit is the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley, where Jorge works as a Community Housing Advocate. The work he performs is analogous to the experience many first-generation children face, having to navigate legal paperwork on behalf of their parents. Jorge shares, “I answer [the tenants’] calls, take their information, and determine if they qualify for our service; building a case.” Tenants call regarding eviction notices, potential harassment, or rent increases. “I grew up in low-income housing until I was 19, when my family got evicted. Housing is a basic necessity; it helps me care and passionate about

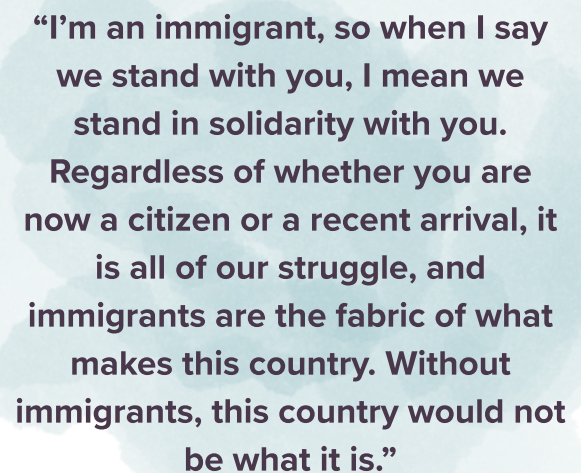
the work I do. Putting in my little part in the world against one of the many injustices in the world. It helps me to know that I’m doing something to make a better world,” says Jorge. He shares that those small wins on behalf of tenants are the most fulfilling.

Jorge joined Cohort 11 during the Pandemic, where the cohort was unable to meet in person. Still, Jorge found the experience to be enriching, as it introduced him to the diverse identities of Latinidad that his fellow cohort members experienced and opened up a space for professional networking. One experience he shared was a dialogue with a fellow cohort member, during which he was able to reframe his disdain for capitalism into a perspective on how it can be used for the greater good.

While the cohort was not able to meet in person, fortunately, they were able to graduate in person and had a members' mixer the following year. “If you’re considering joining a leadership group, I think LLA is a great program to consider,” says Jorge.

Jorge’s message to the immigrant community is clear: “I’m an immigrant, so when I say we stand with you, I mean we stand in solidarity with you. Regardless of whether you are now a citizen or a recent arrival, it is all of our struggle, and immigrants are the fabric of what makes this country. Without immigrants, this country would not be what it is.” He reminds us that it is crucial for us to stay connected with our community and work with organizations that offer services to our community.

Jorge’s story reminds us that, while the trajectory of our lives may not always be straightforward, immigrants possess the tenacity to create a meaningful life, regardless of the circumstances in which they arrive or are born. Jorge exemplifies the positive contributions and impact immigrants can have in their communities. Currently, he continues to work at the Law Foundation of Silicon Valley, helping low-income tenants navigate a challenging landscape to ensure that they can continue to receive housing and address their housing-related concerns.



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RELENTLESS & RESILIENT

ESME BAUTISTA



Esmeralda Bautista doesn't remember much about Mexico—she was just eight months old when her parents left everything behind to start a new life in California. But the weight of her parents' decision has shaped every step of her journey.

Born in Mexico and raised in Stockton, Esmeralda grew up knowing two things: her family had sacrificed everything for a chance at opportunity, and her dreams were bigger than the city she called home. "I always knew I wanted to leave," she says. "I just felt like my dreams were so much bigger than what Stockton had to offer me."

That drive took her to San Jose State University, where she majored in journalism. Right out of college, Esmeralda landed a role at Telemundo in San Jose, working alongside what she calls "some of the most brilliant individuals ever" in one of the nation's top media markets. But her career soon took an unexpected turn.

After winning a fellowship in then-Mayor Sam Liccardo's office, Esmeralda was forced to leave Telemundo due to a conflict of interest. She leaped into politics—and fell in love with public service. "I never worked in politics before," she says. "But I learned so much, and I was surrounded by some of the smartest people I've ever met."

Over the years, Esmeralda rose from fellow to communications director, earning five promotions along the way. In that role, she became the mayor's liaison to San Jose's Spanish-speaking community, building relationships with nonprofits, community leaders, and residents—connecting with individuals eager to drive change and voicing frustrations.

It was a responsibility she took seriously. “I had to make sure I was representing our community authentically,” Esmeralda says. “I wasn’t born in San Jose, so I had a lot to learn.” She joined the Latino Leadership Alliance (LLA), where she found not only professional growth but a deeper connection to her own identity.

As part of Cohort 11—during the pandemic, entirely online—Esmeralda made a conscious choice to be vulnerable in her first introduction, speaking about imposter syndrome and growing up caught between cultures. The conversation sparked an outpouring from her peers. She wanted to ensure everyone felt safe to be vulnerable. “We were all crying by the end,” she says. “It was beautiful. We all felt seen.”

Her involvement with LLA was a launchpad. Esmeralda went on to join the Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley’s Board Leadership Academy, preparing her for her first board role with the Latino Coalition of Silicon Valley. Three years later, she now serves as the board’s vice president. Throughout her

“**Don’t let anybody box you in. Go against the grain. Be a change-maker all day, every day. And do whatever makes you happy, as long as it’s in a positive way.**”

career, Esmeralda has carried lessons from her parents’ immigration journey. “They weren’t afraid to bet on themselves,” she says. “So I’m never afraid to bet on myself. Even if it takes longer, even if I make mistakes, I know I’ll get there.”

That mindset—paired with what she calls grit and relentless persistence—has shaped her approach to leadership. “A lot of times, I’m the only Latina in the room. I want to make sure our voice is heard, that people know we’re here,” she says. “Every Latino matters—whether you work in agriculture, as a street vendor, in a hospital—every single one of us matters.”

Her message to the next generation of immigrants is simple, but fierce: “Don’t let anybody box you in. Go against the grain. Be a change-maker all day, every day. And do whatever makes you happy, as long as it’s in a positive way.”



Cherry Orchards outside Santa Nella, CA
Photography by Sindy Tapia



For my community, especially

farmworkers

I want to say

Thank you

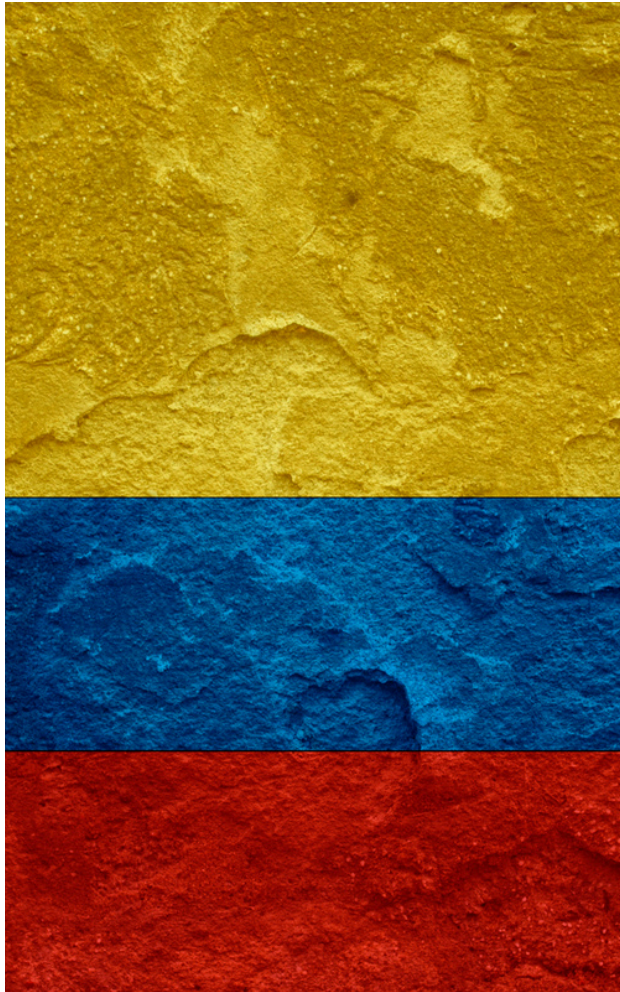
for your sacrifices, for feeding us through storms, fires, pandemics, and every hardship. You deserve dignity and respect, not to be chased or treated less than.



Blanca Garza

MELISSA GONZALEZ

FROM COLOMBIA TO THE WORLD, FINDING PURPOSE IN SERVICE



Melissa Gonzalez's journey began in Colombia, where she was born and raised. Twelve years ago, she made the bold decision to leave her home country and travel alone to the United States in pursuit of what she calls the "American Dream." At the time, her plan was simple — learn English, return to Colombia, and finish her degree in physiology.

Things didn't go as planned. After transferring her coursework from Colombia to an American university, Melissa discovered she would need to repeat many classes.

What should have been a straightforward path took longer than expected. But persistence paid off. She eventually graduated in the U.S., transferred to Palo Alto University to study business, and later earned a master's degree in international business in Europe — a move that allowed her to travel the world.

Her studies didn't stop there. Melissa returned to Boston for a second degree, this time in international marketing. She fully expected to enter the corporate world, but life had other plans. While waiting for a corporate job offer, she began working for a nonprofit in Watsonville. When the offer finally came, she surprised herself by turning it down.

“It was curious for me,” she says, “that even though I went to business school, we never learned about nonprofits, which operate so similarly to a business.” That curiosity turned into a calling. The work opened her eyes to social impact and inequities in the U.S., and she realized she wanted to dedicate her skills to something bigger than profit margins. Melissa credits her global travels with giving her perspective. “The opportunity to travel opens your eyes to different things. You get to know other perspectives,” she says.

Conversations with friends in corporate and research sectors sharpened her understanding of systemic inequities. “The systems are made for other people,” she explains. Being a great leader requires you to have great impact — and learning from other people is the most impactful way to grow.”

Her leadership journey also draws from home. “Even though my parents didn’t come with me, there’s a lot of learning in your household,” Melissa says. Her mother, who dedicated her life to ensuring her children had an education, is the person she admires most. Her father’s discipline and ability to provide for the family also left a deep impression. “They’ve always thought about how we can build community between each other and have what we need,” she says. “With few resources, they built a home.”

Her message to the next generation is clear:



**It’s always the moment for us to be united.
We already have a system that is not
adequate for us. We need the support of
Latinos for each other — not competition.
LLA is a great space to collaborate, ask
questions, and receive multiple perspectives
to help navigate your path. It’s not just
about networking for careers; it’s about
truly connecting and learning from each
other.**





BUILDING BEYOND SETBACKS: **MAURICIO MEJIA'S RELENTLESS PURSUIT OF MORE**

Mauricio Mejia has lived his life in cycles of rise, collapse, and reinvention. Each pivot traces back to a drive that started in childhood—a single-minded belief that if he worked hard enough, stayed consistent, and refused to quit, he could carve out a different future for himself.

Born in San Francisco to Salvadoran immigrants fleeing civil war, Mauricio grew up in Highland Park, Los Angeles, during the 1980s. His mother raised him and his younger sister alone, working constantly just to cover the basics. “It was rough,” he recalls. “But as kids, you don’t know any different. You adapt.” Adaptation soon gave way to ambition. At 13, he started washing cars in the neighborhood, pitching his service with an offer few could refuse: “If you don’t like it, you don’t have to pay me. But if you do, it’s 20 bucks.”

By 15, he was hustling stickers outside a 7-Eleven to play arcade games. That’s when a sharply dressed stranger gave him words that would stick for life: “You have an entrepreneurial spirit. Keep doing what you’re doing, and you’ll be successful one day.” “That was the moment,” Mauricio says. “From then on, I believed the hustle was in me.”

Mauricio’s entrepreneurial drive began early. As a teenager, he was throwing parties that drew thousands, and by the age of 25, he had raised capital, launched his first ultra-lounge, and earned his first million. However, when the 2008 financial crisis struck, he was overextended in both real estate and nightlife. The crash cost him cars, property, and stability. He filed for bankruptcy and lived “couch to couch” for nearly two years. “That’s when I went from Ferrari to Ford Focus,” he says. “It was brutal. But it was also the reset I needed.”

He rebuilt through real estate, staffing, and later media. In 2014, he co-founded California Labor Force, a staffing company, and Latin Life, a Latino-owned media company that became a national player. By 2020, Latin Life was on track to become a billion-dollar Silicon Valley unicorn—until COVID shut everything down. “Friday the 13th, March 2020—I’ll never forget it,” Mauricio says. “Within days, every concert, every live event we promoted was canceled.” By August, he had pivoted again, launching CalX, one of Silicon Valley’s first COVID-19 cleanup companies.

Today, he’s back to his “roots,” as he puts it—real estate development and long-term projects aimed at building wealth and impact. Mauricio once dipped into politics, running for the San Jose City Council in 2014. He lost, but he calls it the best thing that could have happened. “I realized I was cut out to be a businessman, not a politician,” he says. “I want to get things done. From the outside, I can make a bigger impact.”

That mindset sharpened his vision: not just to succeed, but to become one of the first Latino billionaires rooted in Silicon Valley. “It’s not about the zeros,” he says. “It’s about having the resources to make real change.”

When asked what advice he’d give children of immigrants today, Mauricio shared: “Keep following your dream and never give up. Do everything con ganas—with energy, with enthusiasm. Quiet the noise and stay focused.” He rejects the “crabs in the bucket” mentality: “I’m the guy who throws the rope into the bucket. I’ll pull you out, but you’ve got to hold on and then pay it forward.”

For Mauricio, reinvention isn’t just survival—it’s the way forward. “Life’s always going to throw distractions and challenges at you. The question is, do you stay focused, or do you let it take you out? Every time, I choose to keep going.”

“

Keep following your dream and never give up. Do everything con ganas—with energy, with enthusiasm. Quiet the noise and stay focused.

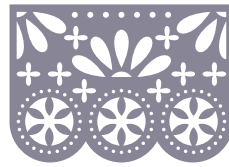
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My parents own and operate a restaurant in San Jose called El Papucho. They've had it for 46 years. I basically grew up in that restaurant as unpaid labor — bussing tables, running the register, taking out trash. My dad is turning 82 this fall, and he still works there part-time because we can't keep him away. My mom is there full-time. They are the definition of hard work. That's the biggest thing I've inherited from them: determination.

Jose Lopez



ANTONIO MENDOZA



BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH LEADERSHIP AND SERVICE



Antonio Mendoza's career began in academia, but today he serves as the executive director of the Community Food Bank of San Benito County. His path to leadership has been shaped by a deep connection to his family's Chicano roots and a commitment to giving back to the community that raised him.

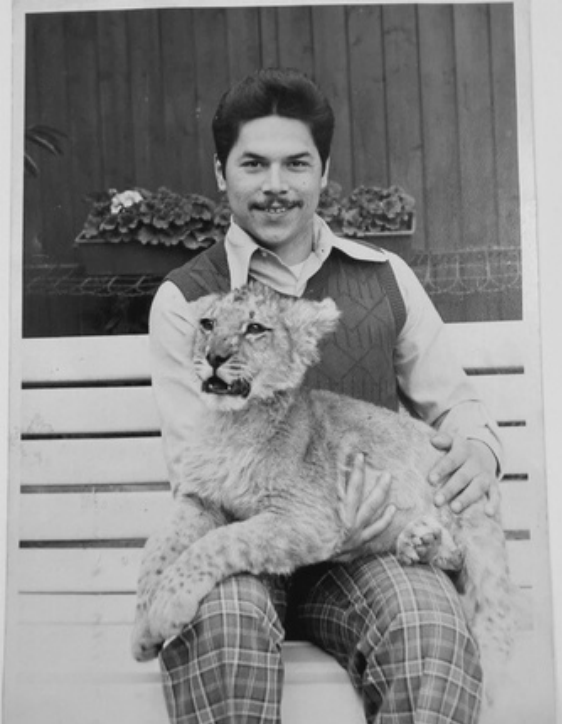
Antonio comes from a Southern California Chicano family that has been in the United States for more than a century. His upbringing was steeped in close family ties — relatives lived within walking distance, and gatherings were a constant part of life. "Family was a huge part of my life," he says. One of the reasons I work so hard to give back is I know the difference having community made for me growing up."

His family's story is one of perseverance. Antonio's father, a Vietnam veteran, went to college on the GI Bill and found a stable job — a step up from many of his siblings. His grandmother worked in canneries and continued cleaning houses until her children insisted she retire at 85. Other relatives navigated the challenges of the criminal justice system. These experiences shaped Antonio's understanding of systemic inequities. "As I got older and became a historian, I saw the contrast between the hurdles my community faced versus the opportunities other communities had handed to them," he says.

Four years ago, Antonio transitioned from academia to the nonprofit sector. His first role was as a program manager at Breakthrough, his first full-time job in the U.S. That move set the stage for rapid growth — from entry-level to executive director in less than four years. He credits much of that trajectory to the Latino Leadership Alliance (LLA).

Antonio first learned about LLA through the Hispanic Foundation of Silicon Valley's Latino Board Leadership Academy. Struggling at the time with imposter syndrome, he found the program a valuable boost in confidence. A colleague's glowing post about LLA convinced him to join. "I've always been attracted to the power of building a network of people who open doors for each other," Antonio says. "LLA offered that training and that community before I even knew all the details."

For the next generation of immigrants, Antonio's message is clear: "This country is for you. We need your leadership and your heart. It is worse without you. LLA will always be here to grow the leaders who come from the next generation of immigrants in the Bay Area. Regardless of the struggles, know that you are valuable and needed — and we will support you however we can."



roots





cultura

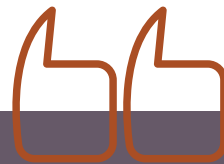


RAISED IN SCARCITY, ROOTED IN RESILIENCE

MAYRA PELAGIO'S PATH TO LEADERSHIP

It is 5 am, and I am woken up by my grandma's soft hands handing me a plate with oatmeal, my regular breakfast. I struggle to get down from the bunk bed I share with my aunt. My uniform is laid out for me, and under the dim yellow light, I hurry to finish eating and get dressed. My aunt, who is my age, does the same, still sleepy but aware of the time. It has been raining, and as soon as we step out, the streets remind us of it. We walk three blocks through puddles and mud to reach the bus stop, weaving around the edges of houses where the elevation is higher and the ground a little drier. I focus on keeping my white socks pristine, part of the school uniform, though every step threatens to stain them. By the time we reach the stop, there are already other children waiting.

When the bus arrives, it is already packed, students crammed together like sardines, some of whom had woken up at 3 am to make the journey. We push our way in, hand the driver a couple of coins, and try to find space near the door. For the next thirty minutes, I breathe in the little air available, just trying to survive the ride to school, conscious of the fact that other children my age will not be as fortunate. They are either staying home to help with household chores, or are in the fields helping with their family's cosecha. Even though it feels like a sacrifice, I'm grateful I get to go to school this morning.



Through LLA, I found encouragement to lead unapologetically, to trust my voice, and to champion the voices of others who, like me, come from journeys marked by struggle and resilience.

To the next generation of immigrants, I want to say this: your story is powerful, and it matters.



This was the rhythm of my childhood in Guanajuato, Mexico, a life shaped by lack of housing, insecurity, and survival. Raised by a single mother, we faced many barriers, including limited access to food, stable shelter, and basic services. Yet we also carried resilience, creativity, and the beauty of a community that, even in scarcity, offered love and vitality. I remember the calm of eating elote on the porch during tiempo de cosecha [Harvest Season], the joy of simplicity. By the time I left Mexico at thirteen, most of my classmates had already gotten married and started families. I know my fate would have been different if I had stayed.

When we migrated to East San Jose, I was struck by the abundance of this country: paved streets, running water, buses, and the sense that we no longer had to struggle for every necessity. What captured me most, however, was access to education. In Mexico, the journey to school was grueling and uncertain, but in the United States, I was given an opportunity I could not take for granted. I learned English in my first year in the country, which was also my first year of high school. By junior year, I was taking Advanced Placement classes.

My story of migration is one of possibility. My experience as an immigrant shaped my love for learning, my determination to work hard, and my understanding that education is a lifeline for immigrant families like mine.

This understanding guided me into leadership. As Executive Director of Latinos United for a New America, I carried with me the memory of those early struggles. I knew firsthand what it meant to grow up without resources, and I wanted to create a different future for families in East San Jose. Through campaigns supporting immigrant rights, housing, and environmental justice, I witnessed the power of community to transform conditions of scarcity into spaces of strength and belonging.

The Latino Leadership Alliance (LLA) became a turning point in my journey. It provided me with a network of peers who understood and celebrated the immigrant experience, and opened up space for leadership that reflected us, not just in theory, but in practice. LLA affirmed that immigrant stories are not deficits but sources of wisdom and vision. Through LLA, I found encouragement to lead unapologetically, to trust my voice, and to champion the voices of others who, like me, come from journeys marked by struggle and resilience.

To the next generation of immigrants, I want to say this: your story is powerful, and it matters. Remember that your presence is a testament to resilience, your voice is a symbol of belonging, and your dreams are proof of possibility. Carry with you the love and strength of your ancestors, and know that you have the power to shape a more equitable and joyful future.

To all my relations

I.

With each strand you braid,
ancestors smile, I am yours -
you, mine, sacred keeper.

II.

Seeds I sow remember,
from their struggle, roots take hold,
fed by dignity.

III.

Harvest time is here,
for those becoming, yet to be,
a labor of love.

 Xochilt

SEEDS OF RESILIENCE, ROOTS OF SERVICE

XOCHILT BORJA

I was born into two worlds: the resilience each of my parents carried, rooted deeply in the soil of their origins, and the U.S. immigrant experience rich with dreams littered inequities. Inequities that shaped me long before I had the words to name them.

I witnessed this most starkly in my father's experience. When I was young he lost his job, the safety nets meant to protect families like ours proved thin. His chronic illnesses worsened as he struggled to obtain the medications he needed. The burden weighed not only on his body, but on his spirit, his ability to work, and our family's well-being. His struggle was personal, but also systemic. It revealed to us the failures in the system that make dignity conditional, where health and stability depend on circumstances beyond one's control.

I carry the resilience and love of my parents and the valuable perspective they gifted me as immigrants in this country—that in service we do not simply provide, we humanize, we affirm and preserve dignity, and we plant seeds of community and justice for those who come after us.

Like my father, my mother's life was also reshaped by inequity. My mother was the eldest of ten and the first in our family to attend college in Peru, where she earned her bachelor's degree in chemical engineering. In the United States, her degree did not translate. The career she had worked for was suddenly inaccessible. She was forced to start from scratch, piecing together a patchwork of jobs while carrying the indignity of all her potential that was lost in translation. Her sacrifice was profound—a reminder that inequities don't just deny resources; they erase possibilities, silence knowledge, and dismiss immigrant talent.

Even our pursuit of education carried this tension. My parents, determined to give us access to better opportunities, enrolled us in affluent public schools, which starkly contrasted the low-income neighborhoods we called home. The academics were strong, but the microaggressions—both implicit and explicit—were relentless. Assimilation carried its own pain. I lived with the fear that while my grades offered me a shield, my sister's could not protect her from the bullying her skin color invited. Shame and anger braided themselves into my childhood, teaching me early that belonging could be conditional, and that excellence was never quite enough to erase difference.

Amid this dissonance, I often felt powerless. Yet what steadied me were the protective anchors my parents gave me: moments of joy and play, the strength of community, and the cultural

values that kept us whole. From them, I learned that service is a way to turn struggle into agency. Service, they showed me, is a seed planted for the community to harvest—one that grows to protect, to humanize, to preserve dignity. And there was always more wisdom and power in the collective, even when forgotten by some and invisible to others.

What I learned in childhood became my compass. Resilience is not passive—it is leadership. I carry the resilience and love of my parents, as well as the valuable perspective they gifted me, being immigrants in this country. They taught me that in service, we do not simply provide; we humanize, we affirm, and preserve dignity, and we plant seeds of community and justice for those who come after us.





AUNDRAYA MARTINEZ

ROOTS THAT ORGANIZE

Aundraya Martinez's story begins in East San Jose, where her family's multigenerational roots run deep into the soil of California's fields and the fabric of immigrant neighborhoods. Growing up Mexican and Filipino, she came to see her own path as part of a continuum of migration, resilience, and service.

On her father's side, Martinez's ancestors lived along the northern Mexico border before settling in Santa Paula, California, and later San Jose. Generations worked in the fields, and her grandparents built their lives in East Side neighborhoods like Mayfair and Lanai. On her mother's side, her grandmother emigrated from the Ilocos region of the Philippines to Watsonville through family petitions, where she too labored in the fields. Both families experienced the same hardships of migration, discrimination, and survival. "I think about that a lot," Martinez reflects. "Both sides were farmworkers. Both were unwelcome at times. But both built community here."



The parallels between her Mexican and Filipino heritage shaped her outlook. Her Mexican grandparents recalled being punished in school for speaking Spanish, while her Filipino grandparents carried the weight of the American Dream alongside the reality of exclusion. Both passed down values of hard work and activism. "I grew up seeing the East Side as a launching pad for immigrant families, no matter their origin," she says.

Her grandparents also instilled the importance of education and choice. Her grandfather worked for the City of San Jose for thirty years, her grandmother earned her GED after factory jobs, and both pushed their children and grandchildren to go further. "My grandma used to say she never had a job she chose—only jobs she had to do," Martinez recalls. "What she wanted most for us was to have a choice."

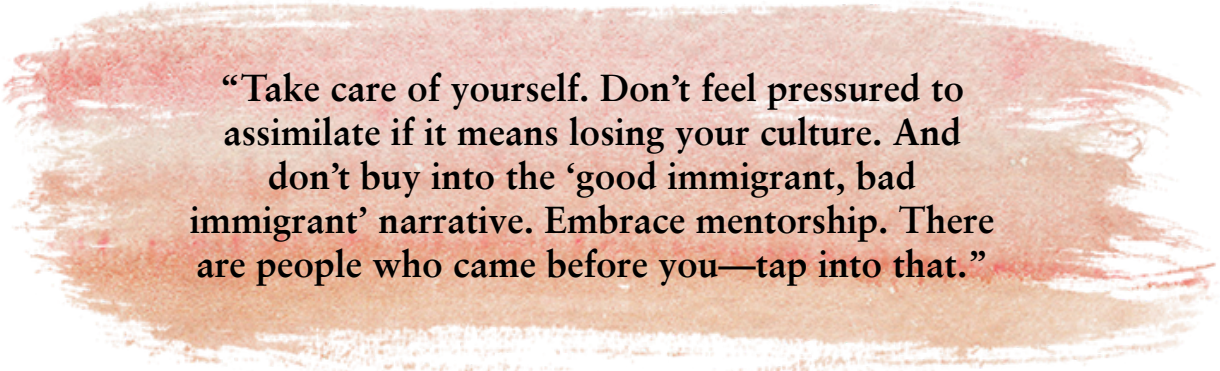
That principle guided Martinez when she turned down the expected path of law school to begin tenant organizing in Valley Palms, an East San Jose apartment complex with a history of disinvestment. To her surprise, her grandmother supported the decision. “She told me, ‘If that’s your choice, then I stand by it,’” Martinez says. “That meant everything.” In Valley Palms, Martinez found her calling. Working with immigrant families from Oaxaca, El Salvador, Vietnam, and Polynesian communities, she helped launch a tenant association, secure \$16 million in property reinvestments, build a soccer field and family resource center, and even start a worker-owned cooperative. “It was incredible to see immigrant moms leading that effort,” she reflects. “They became the inspiration behind every career decision I’ve made since.”

Her trajectory carried her from grassroots organizing into public service. At the County of Santa Clara, she worked in violence prevention and later in the Office of Immigrant Relations, applying lessons from Valley Palms on a countywide level. Today, in philanthropy at Sobrato, she supports immigrant families through economic opportunity initiatives, expanding the impact of her work.

At every step, Martinez credits mentorship and networks like the Latino Leadership Alliance (LLA) for shaping her path. Introduced to the program by a mentor during her early organizing work, she found in her cohort a circle of peers navigating similar leaps in their careers. “We still gather, even years later,” she says. “Those relationships have been critical for support, collaboration, and solidarity.”

For Martinez, the work is never abstract. It always returns to her family’s history and the values passed down across generations. She is mindful of the “bootstrap mentality” that shaped immigrant communities, but she pushes back against the myth that hard work alone is enough. “It can obscure the structural barriers people face,” she explains. “Yes, our families worked hard. But they also organized, built community, and created change.”

Her message to the next generation of immigrant leaders reflects that balance of resilience and realism:



“Take care of yourself. Don’t feel pressured to assimilate if it means losing your culture. And don’t buy into the ‘good immigrant, bad immigrant’ narrative. Embrace mentorship. There are people who came before you—tap into that.”

In that guidance, Martinez echoes her grandmother, who labored so Aundraya could choose her own path. And through her work—from Valley Palms to county policy to philanthropy—Martinez ensures that others, too, will inherit not only opportunity, but the power of choice.



Photography by Xochilt Borja



Recognize your own beauty, and keep doing good. Advocate and fight for your home if needed. We're living in a contentious time where immigrants are being told they don't belong, where their value is being minimized. Don't believe that. You belong. You matter. You are not alone. There are so many of us who see you, love you, and will fight alongside you.

“

Being bilingual and bicultural is my ‘secret weapon.’ When I walk into a room, I bring a different kind of credibility. I am the child that immigrant parents are working so hard for. Growing up, I watched my parents and community struggle to interact with government systems—forms they didn’t understand, services they couldn’t access because of language or cultural barriers. As a kid, I had to translate and ‘advise’ my parents, which was awkward and unfair. That experience made me determined to work in public service, to provide dignity, and to break down those barriers for others.

Jacqui Guzman



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RENZO LUJAN



IMMIGRANT ROOTS, COMMUNITY IMPACT

In October of 1991, my family and I left Peru and came to San Francisco. I was 8 years old. My brothers Alonso and Julio were 14 and 17. We left Peru due to the country's political and economic instability, coming to the United States for the opportunity to live out the "American Dream".



My grandmother, whom we called Mamita, had been living in San Francisco for many years, and she petitioned for our family to join her in the US. Mamita was an amazing woman who believed in our potential. That first summer state-side, I was nine and just wanted to lounge around. My grandmother had other plans. She handed me a book about an inch thick and told me I had the summer to retype it. While I definitely was not a fan of it at the time, I became an excellent typist early on, and it taught me the value of hard work.

My dad, Julio, embodies the definition of work ethic. For many years, he worked multiple jobs, often taking on graveyard shifts. We always had to be quiet at home since he only got a few hours of sleep. He worked so hard to provide for our family, and not once did we ever hear him complain. There were times when the hard work meant the whole family pitched in. I remember napping on two chairs pushed together at a veterinary clinic late at night while my family cleaned because they couldn't leave me home alone. Another time, in high school, when I was struggling with math, my father stayed up almost all night learning the material so that he could walk me through it. He barely slept at all that night. Those are just a couple of examples of who he is. I'm thankful to have had that type of role model growing up.

My mom was a devoted stay-at-home mom who made sure our family was cared for. She would walk me to school and chaperone my school field trips in elementary school. It didn't matter that she didn't speak the language. She would make it work. By the time I reached middle school and wanted to be more independent and walk on my own, she would still be there, speed walking behind me. No matter how much I picked up the pace, I couldn't quite shake her, no matter how hard I tried. And I did try. We look back and laugh. I didn't realize until later in life the positive impact that she had by showing me that I was always safe and supported.

I am fortunate to have had two very devoted parents. Seeing their hard work and dedication to our family gave me the confidence I carry with me in my professional life. As a Senior Vice President and Managing Director at Five Star Bank, I bring those values of hard work and community into everything I do. In my role, I help businesses and community organizations, helping them thrive just like my family did when we first arrived. As a father of two young daughters, it's essential to show them the importance of giving back to the community that welcomed us. I proudly bring my immigrant story and experiences into my work and life.



THE STRENGTH OF TOGETHERNESS

LEO CORTEZ & THE LEGACY OF HIS FATHER'S WORDS

There's a humbling relationship created between human hands and the soil of our Earth during every seasonal harvest. The opportunities for growth that rich, fertile soil can offer a family are as powerful as one can imagine—opportunities for prosperity, stability, unity, and new adventures in foreign lands. At the tender age of 10, Leo Cortez knew that the fertile grounds his father worked on would be the same fertile grounds that built him into the service-based leader he is today.

Born in Mexico to a family of 13 - 15, including his parents, the hardships of having a family split between borders were enough to motivate his father to unite his family again in the arable land of the Salinas Valley.

"He [Leo's father] saw how his nephews were thriving in school, they were learning

English and that was part of his motivation to try to bring us all here so that we can have a better education because in Mexico at that time, everybody had to pay for everything." With a large family, the financial burden of paying for education can be overwhelming and disadvantageous.

With a large family, collaboration is key to success. Everyone had to contribute to the work, housekeeping, cooking, and taking care of each other. "My father, he would always say, 'You can move a lot of stuff with one finger, but imagine how much you can move by using your whole hand.'" As Leo explained, there's a lot of power in people working together. The more people come together, the stronger the messages and the stronger the amplification of said message resides within the community.

“One of the messages I’ve always pushed in my career and in my lifetime has been education---the power of educating yourself, whether it’s through formal or informal education, once you educate yourself, nobody can take that away from you.” Along the path towards achieving higher education, Leo built his toolbox of resources on the foundation of collaboration.

“The journey of being an immigrant teaches humility... when I was younger, we did it for the family, not for ourselves. Now, as a leader, I try to make sure that I’m making decisions that are best for the team, not what’s best for me.”

From the initial wisdom of his father to later rallying with fellow peers to champion the presently well-established Latino Alumni Network (LAN) at his alma mater, San Jose State University (SJSU), it is through dedicated strength, vision, and unified endeavors that he continues to reinforce his commitment to servant-based leadership.

“We want our students to graduate...we want to make sure that our students understand the concept of community within their university.” Leo expressed with a humble tone dipped in the passion of a son who took their father’s opportunity for education and ran.

As a leader, it is essential to have a strong anchor of what and where professional and personal values lie. “The journey of being an immigrant teaches humility, and it’s easier to show that when you’ve already experienced it compared to someone who has never experienced that; they may never apologize or take on responsibilities for their actions.” Leo tied his values back to his youth, “when I was younger, we did it for the family, not for ourselves. Now, as a leader, I try to make sure that I’m making decisions that are best for the team, not what’s best for me.

As the cafecito grew cold, Leo embedded a final cafecito bean of wisdom, “As an immigrant, there are a lot of barriers and obstacles that are thrown your way, and that’s what helps build your character. And it’s that character that’s going to help you thrive in your personal life, in your professional life, and when you establish your family, when you go out to the community and you try to influence others, it’s that character that’s going to come across. Stay focused, and believe in ourselves so that we can push forward.”



Being born and raised here is a huge part of my identity. My maternal grandmother came from Mexico as a migrant farmworker and raised five kids as a single mom. My mom became the bridge between those two worlds, and both my parents—who have passed—believed deeply in education and stability.

I was the first in my family to go directly to a four-year university. My mom graduated from college after me, which was such a proud moment for all of us. Everything I do—my values, my priorities—comes from that foundation of family and community.


My family's sacrifices are always with me. When I feel tired or overwhelmed, I think of my grandmother—raising five children, settling here, doing the impossible in the 1940s and '50s. That legacy pushes me to keep going.

I also live in this 'in-between' space. I'm not an immigrant myself, but I have many relatives who are—some documented, some not. We are a mixed-status family. That gives me a deep understanding of both the privilege I have and the responsibility to speak out.



Carla Collins





Parents are the hidden heroes in the immigrant story. We often focus on students, but those students wouldn't be where they are without the sacrifices of their parents.

Their voices are just as important — sometimes more so.... Your identity, heritage, and background hold power. There's power in what you've overcome and accomplished — even in the struggles.

Keep showing up as yourself. Don't hide. You never know who you're inspiring.

Rossmeri Albaro



**OUR POWER IS
ROOTED IN OUR
STORY**

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

“OUR STORIES ARE THE KEY TO IMAGINING A BETTER AND BRIGHTER TOMORROW THAT SEVEN GENERATIONS BEFORE US ONLY DREAMED ABOUT AND THAT ONLY SEVEN GENERATIONS TO COME WILL HARVEST.”

Sandy Tapia

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