



A MEXICAN IMMIGRANT'S AUTOBIOGRAPHY

THE SENSE OF BELONGING

INVESTING IN YOURSELF, BELIEVING IN YOURSELF



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INTRODUCTION

This book is based on my own reflections and experiences living in Mexico and then later in the United States (US). In it, I share the cultural, linguistic, political, workforce, and academic challenges I endured as an immigrant and how I managed to overcome marginalization to enter mainstream American culture.

I immigrated to the US three months prior to my sixteenth birthday; this transition was challenging and exciting for me. My mother, my four siblings, and I settled in Southern California in Boyle Heights in the summer of 1979. Most people know where East Los Angeles is located, but only a few know about Boyle Heights. Therefore, when asked, I tell people I'm from East Los, a local term I still use today when I refer to East Los Angeles. This area is known for its high concentration of Latinos; however, while we were also Latinos, my family was different in so many ways. How was I different as a Latina immigrant? I didn't speak English and my Spanish at times was difficult for non-native Spanish speakers to understand, plus I learned that the Spanish I used in Mexico often was different from the Spanish I heard in the United States from Latinos.

Nevertheless, I learned to understand Chicanismo (SpanEnglish), a linguistic practice used by Native Chicanos (Mexican-Americans) who attempted to speak Spanish with me, a Mexican immigrant. I learned that their version of speaking Spanish was to mix Spanish and English words in their sentences. For example: "Hey, where were you? Te fui a buscar, pero. I didn't find you." What they really meant was "Hey, donde estabas? Te fui a buscar pero no te encontré." or "Hey, where were you? I went looking for you, but I didn't find you." I also learned that teens didn't shake hands;

when I first tried to shake their hands to greet them, they would make fun of me. Handshaking was a common practice I had used while living in Mexico, inculcated and reinforced by my parents.

Other linguistic lessons I learned included that this population had its own version of Spanish words; they literally translated English sentences word-for-word, such as saying "ven pa tras" when they meant "regresa," which is the proper way in Spanish to say, "Come back."

Another thing I noticed was that living in East Los, one is most likely to be among gang members, and living there I was exposed to their language known as Calo. One phrase I quickly became familiar with was "Orale vato," or "Hey, homie," as a way to greet each other. I also noticed their unique mannerisms and tones of voice when they communicated among themselves; they would have serious facial expressions and stiffen their bodies. To my surprise, I noticed that they did shake hands, but in a little different and more sophisticated way. They would begin with a traditional handshake, which was followed by quickly shifting hand positions while holding hands, and after about three variations of hand-shifting, they would let go and end their greeting by bumping each other's fists. I don't know what that means, but I do know Calo is Spanish slang and originated during the Zoot-suit, Pachuco era in the 1930s and 1940s in

the southwest of the United States. East Los was my first exposure to American life, an experience that humbled me, but for which I will forever be grateful because it made my life experience much richer.

As for my high school experience at Roosevelt High, I can truly say that, overall, it was a great experience. Even though I was a new and Spanish-speaking immigrant to the United States, during my freshman year, I was elected homeroom representative, joined student government in the House of Representatives, ran for President of the English as a Second Language (ESL) Club, and joined both the cheerleading squad and tall flags. I also took advantage of other student programs and went on field trips to four-year colleges such as California State University Los Angeles (CSULA) and the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA). I also INTRODUCTION

visited the old Coca-Cola Building in South Central LA to learn about possible jobs available for high school graduates. On the weekends, I took the public bus to go work downtown at Leed's Shoe Store to pay for my cheerleading expenses and my Women's Varsity jacket, which I still wear on special occasions today.

I never paid much attention to bullying because we never used that term when I was in high school; plus, I didn't know enough English to understand the inside jokes some girls would make, and besides I was really busy with my studies and student activities. I loved my high school, my teachers, my student government activities, and the culture of high school in general, which kept me occupied and focused in school.

But one day, without any warning, all my dreams were shattered. After my PE class, a number of students assaulted my sister and me in the gym; since the dean of discipline only spoke English, she asked one of the girls who assaulted us to translate for her. This girl obviously lied about what had happened because, at the end of the meeting, the dean suspended both my sister and me for a week. Upon our return from the suspension, my sister was removed from PE and placed in the Army Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC), a program for student cadets, to learn character, education, student achievement, wellness, leadership, and the value of diversity. I was told to stay in the PE class, but the harassment continued. One day, I couldn't bring myself to get ready to go to school. I told my mom I was quitting school and going to look for a full-time job. My mother didn't oppose me, and no one from my high school ever looked for me.

While out of high school, I quickly secured a full-time job at a fast-food restaurant and worked 6-7 days a week. I made enough money to purchase my first car with my savings, a Blue 1972 Chevy Impala. I helped my family financially, and I stayed with my high school sweetheart, whom I was very much in love with. In 1983, when I was nineteen, we had a child, but soon after our daughter was born, I became a single parent.

Seven years after quitting high school and approaching my twenty-third birthday, I realized that if I couldn't speak English and 12

didn't have an education, I would remain trapped in low-income jobs, and be short of money for emergencies regardless of how many hours I worked. In the summer of 1986, I walked to East Los Angeles College to complete a college application. In those days, no one ever questioned whether you had a high school diploma or GED or requested proof; I was fortunate because I never got either one. That same day I enrolled in the only open class I could find (a history class). After successfully failing my first class in college, I met with a counselor, who directed me to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes in the fall semester. From then on, I followed that path until I earned my master's degree in May of 1999.

In short, I spent thirteen years in college and held part-time and fulltime jobs in between with only one short interruption, but I managed to complete a master's degree and, consequently, a doctoral degree.

I wrote this book to share my story and hopefully motivate and inspire others to make positive changes for themselves. I'm also sharing stories from my imperfect past to highlight lessons learned as an example that life is here to teach us something; we just need to be open to learn and make changes as needed.

Finally, I am printing stories in these pages from my college experience and offering resources and tips to help others get an inside look at attending community college or taking advantage of the other options life offers. Your life does not have to be on pause. Your past does not dictate your future. Today, you have the ability to say, "I'm changing how my story ends, and I'm doing something about it." I hope you enjoy this book.

With gratitude,

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