

Jessica Is An Immigrant

huffingtonpost.com/2013/11/20/jessica-is-an-immigrant_n_4304636.html



Nearly 40 million people in America were born in another country and came here for a better life. Jessica is one of them. This is her story.

By Jessica Hernandez, as told to Jane Bianchi

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I'll never forget being the new kid in my second grade class in Silver Spring, Maryland, and asking the teacher for a "shoe." Everyone laughed at me, because I had meant to say "tissue." I was so embarrassed that I turned bright red. My mom and I had immigrated to the U.S. that year from Morelia, a city in Mexico, in the middle of the country. So my English wasn't great at first.

I don't remember Mexico well because I left when I was young. My mom says that we left because it's hard to find work there. She brought me to the U.S. so I could go to a great school and get an excellent job someday.

But not being able to speak English well in elementary school made it hard to make friends and understand my teachers. Besides, I have dark skin, dark hair, and dark eyes, but in America, there are so many white people with different-colored eyes. I didn't just sound different -- I looked different. I cried every day. I felt like such a loner, like I didn't belong or deserve anything. Nobody would talk to me, and even though I'm an outgoing person by

nature, I kept everything bottled up inside because I didn't know how to say what I wanted to say. It was so frustrating. It was difficult getting used to the little things too. I remember seeing a sloppy joe in the cafeteria for the first time and thinking: "What is that? It looks nasty!"

During elementary school, my family's immigration status was illegal, so things weren't easy. It was hard for my mom to find a job. She eventually found work as a hotel maid, but she wasn't getting paid well. She couldn't speak up about it, because she didn't want to cause a stir and risk getting fired or deported. Since we didn't have a lot of money, my mom and I had to live in a small apartment that we split with another family that we didn't know. It was crowded, and I hated having to share a kitchen and bathroom with strangers. The other people were nice, but we didn't know if we could trust them. At that point, if anyone told the police about us, we might get deported. So most nights, my mom and I holed up in our room and watched TV.

Fitting in

In middle school, everything began to change. By then I was speaking English fluently, so it was easier to communicate. I told myself: I'm not going to be laughed at anymore. I started making friends. I met a girl named Nora, and I liked her because she kept everything to herself. I could trust her. And I met Walter, who is one of those homeboys who gives you advice. I finally felt like I fit in -- like I was a real American. They are still my best friends today.

Most importantly, middle school is when my mom and I gained legal status. We didn't throw a party, but we were excited. We kept saying "congrats" to each other. It was a relief, because my mom got paid more, and we moved into a one-bedroom apartment that we didn't have to share. That was also when my mom gave birth to my baby sister, Mia.

I feel lucky that I'm Mexican and American. Most of my relatives are still in Morelia. I'm finally going back -- it'll be my first trip there since I emigrated. I'm excited to see my grandmother and the rest of my family. It's hard to be so far away from them. Since they haven't seen me since I was little, I'm nervous, but mostly I can't wait to give them hugs.

Future dreams

After high school, I want to stay in the U.S. and go to college and get a good job. I want to make my mom proud. I'll probably try to get into Harvard. I get straight A's now, and my teachers keep telling me that I'm a leader. They say that when I do my work, it makes the other kids around me want to do their work too. That makes me feel special. I want to be a psychologist, because I love helping people with their problems.

You see me, and you don't think I've been through things, because a smile hides a thousand feelings. Being an immigrant has made me stronger -- it taught me how to be determined, work twice as hard, and overcome obstacles.

If I look back at my second grade self and compare that person to who I am now, I'm like a butterfly. At first, I was in a shell. I didn't want to talk to anyone -- I didn't want people to make fun of me. But once I learned English and got comfortable, I couldn't stop. I spread my wings, and now I feel like I can fly. If I were playing soccer in the park today and saw those kids who laughed at me in second grade, I would say, "Hi, remember me? Look at me now!"

Things Jessica Wants You to Know:

1. Have patience. If you're an immigrant and you're new to this country, don't give up. Things may be hard at first, but your parents put a lot of effort into getting you here, so just remember that everything will get easier in time.

2. Be kind. Everybody deserves respect and should be treated equally. It shouldn't matter
□ what they look like or how well they speak English.

3. Don't judge. You might look at me and think I'm different because I'm an immigrant, but the reality is that we are all immigrants in this country. The founders of this country all came from other countries. So remember that before you think less of somebody.

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