

LORENA

AGE: 22

COUNTRY OF ORIGIN: *Mexico*

OCCUPATION: *Student, office worker*

HOME: *Fresno, California*

SABRINA NEEDS HER IDENTITY BACK

Lorena is a twenty-two-year-old college student who hopes to study medicine. She left her home in Puebla, Mexico at the age of six, walking across the desert with her mother, stepfather, and two brothers. The family now lives in Fresno, California. In addition to being a student, she works full-time in a real estate office. The interview for this story took place on a weekday afternoon, while Lorena was working. The first part was conducted in her car, as she drove from her office to a warehouse. At the warehouse, Lorena continued to tell her story in English as she sifted through boxes, trying to locate an old file her boss had requested.

I have a very young mom. I'm twenty-two and she's thirty-eight. She had just turned sixteen when she had me. She had my brother that very next year, a few days before I turned one. Then two years later, she had my youngest brother. She's really like my sister. I've never missed having a sister. I always hear everybody else saying that they wish they had a sister that they could talk to, and I never really had that need.

My biological dad was, or is, an alcoholic. He used to beat my

mom and us, so my mom took us to stay with my grandparents, in Puebla, Mexico. They had a very poor house, very basic, just cement walls. It was a two-story house, but it was open. You went into the house, and the first floor was the patio area. You walked directly to the stairs, which went up to the kitchen, and then a bedroom. But downstairs to your right was another bedroom. That's where my great-grandpa and my mom and the kids, us, slept.

One time, my father kidnapped me to get back at my mom. My mom had gone to a party or a dance, and she left our door open slightly, because we didn't like it completely closed. If she had left it closed, we would have woken up and flipped out. I remember my little brothers were asleep. The youngest was two, and my other brother was four. So we were very little. And my father came in in the middle of the night. I remember I was in shorts and a little tank top or something. No shoes, no sweater. I don't remember where he took me that night, but I do remember the next day he took me to a bar. Before that, we went to somebody's house, and he asked for a pair of shoes for me. The shoes were gargantuan, like clown shoes. That next day, we went to his sister's house, and we just happened to get there when my grandma was there, too. So that was the end of that. But I remember when we got home, everyone kept making fun of me because I had big, huge clown shoes.

I remember my little brother, the one that's just one year younger, telling me, "You know the reason why he took you? It's because you don't sleep with your head covered." That's a four-year-old's explanation. My brother always slept with his whole body covered.

To get away from my father, and to try to do something for us, my mom decided that she needed to come to this country. She came here by herself the first time, when she was twenty-one. She crossed the border, just went through the desert, like so many do.

I remember that period when she was gone. And I specifically remember one time that my grandmother was walking me to school.

I heard an airplane go by, and she told me, “Oh look, there goes your mom.” And I said, “I know, she’s been gone a long time. Two years is a really long time.” She was only gone for two months, but I was just thinking it was two years because I was so young. I was six years old at that time.

There was a lot of blackmailing from my dad while she was gone, with him trying to take us all from my grandmother. So when my mom met my stepdad while she was here in the U.S., she married him right away. Not married legally, but married like the Mexican way—just move in together. My stepdad fell in love with my mom very quickly, and when he found out that she might lose her kids, he said, “Well, we can go to Mexico and pick them up. Then we can just come back and live here.”

I remember when my mom came to get us. It was in the middle of the night. That was the first car I had ever seen. I don’t even remember what kind of car it was, but I remember the color exactly. It was brown, like a chocolate brown, and it was really shiny. I was just enamored with the car. I was like, “Wow, that’s a real car, and it’s here. We’re really cool.” Of course, I wasn’t thinking “cool.” I don’t know what I was thinking, but it was the equivalent of “cool.”

My stepdad very rapidly took me in, more than my little brothers. He had me on his lap in no time, and we were just talking and talking. I don’t remember if my grandma or grandpa had told us anything about us leaving. I remember that by leaving, that meant that we got our mom back, but we would be losing our second mom. We called our grandma Mom for a long time, too.

I vividly remember how heartbroken my grandma was, knowing that we were leaving. We were like her children. And it was just like in the movies, when the little kids are waving bye from the back of the seat. I think about it still, and it just breaks my heart. I knew I wasn’t going to see them for a long time, but I didn’t think it would be sixteen years.

THE BOTTOM OF THE FOOD CHAIN

I remember walking through the desert. It was my mom, my stepdad, my two younger brothers, and me. I was six, so my brothers were five and three. I was so hungry. That is something I don't ever wish on anybody, that kind of hunger. And the only thing I could think of was, if I'm hungry, then my brothers must be hungry. I started getting worried. We were literally in the middle of the desert.

That night, we fell asleep in between bushes. It was early in the morning, like six or seven o'clock, when I woke up. We were in the middle of bushes on top of other bushes, so we were completely covered. It was all dry, so it was really noisy. And so nobody could move. I remember waking up, and I kind of jerked my foot to the side a little bit, so the bushes made a loud rustling noise. And there were actually INS agents on the other side of the bush. When they heard that rustle, they looked in the bush, and we got caught. There were other people with us. I think it was seven, eight of us. But they weren't family, so I don't remember who they were.

I felt horrible. This was totally my fault, and I knew it, and I just could not live with myself. I remember my mother and stepfather getting their hands tied with those plastic handcuffs. I wanted to kick the INS agents, because I was thinking, We are good people. People that get tied up are bad people.

They walked us to the van and they took us to a cement holding cell. It was a big room, and they were holding a lot of other people. There was this lady with a baby, a brand-new baby, like less than three months old, on her back. And my mom was begging her for a little bit of Gerber that she had for her baby, because we hadn't eaten or drank anything in I don't know how many days. At first, the lady didn't want to give us any because that's all she had. She didn't have very much more for her baby. But then she did give us some. And I remember my mom feeding us that Gerber with her finger.

That night they let us go, dropped us back across the border. Not even a day went by and we tried it again. Fortunately, the second time we were successful. I remember walking through a canal, but there was no water. One of the coyotes was holding my hand, and he asked me if I was tired, if I wanted him to carry me. And I said, "Oh no, I can do this. This is easy." I said, "This is as easy as the three-times tables. Three times one, three times two, three times three." I remember they were making fun of me because I said that.

We got to somebody's house, and they let us take a shower. My mom bathed us all. From there, we got to a little tiny trailer. A one-bedroom trailer. It was for the three kids and my stepdad and my mom. It was in Lamont, which is about twenty minutes from Bakersfield.

My youngest brother was crying. He didn't like my mom. When we got to Lamont, I forget what my little brother called my mom, but she said, "No, I'm your mom." And my brother said, "No, you're not my mom, my mom is Juana." That's my grandma's name. That broke my mom's heart, of course.

The first weeks, all we could afford to eat was soup and beans. I understood that we were poor, and I understood that we were kind of at the bottom of the food chain, so I never demanded stuff from my parents. My little brother, though, the one that was five, like the third time that we ate beans back to back, he was frustrated. He said, "Beans again?" But he said it in Spanish, and he said it like a little kid. We still make fun of him for that. He was just frustrated with beans.

I started school that very next day after we arrived at Lamont. And I remember being very scared, because as soon as I walked into the little school office, everyone was speaking English. Even though Lamont is more of a Hispanic-populated town now, back then it wasn't as much. Everyone was speaking English, and we didn't know English. So I really felt lost. But I got a wonderful teacher, who was the perfect American girl-next-door. Blond, blue-eyed, everything.

She tried so hard to speak Spanish and to try to make me understand. She really comforted me.

A lot of the kids were mean. Especially the girls were really mean, about me not knowing English and not being able to understand what the teacher was saying. We used to sit in groups. I think we were taking a spelling test, or a cursive test. I was writing something down, and I happened to look up to think, and one of the girls, I still remember her name—Laurie Greiger—she grabbed her paper, and she said, “Don’t copy off of my paper.” She said it really loud so everybody could hear. Little things like that. And little things like, “Oh, you’re not good enough to talk to me because you don’t know English.”

The very first years my mom and stepdad worked in the fields, picking everything that was in season. Everything from lettuce to grapes to cotton to carrots, everything. Soon after that, they got a job at the local packing house. That’s a step up from farm labor, so that was a really good thing. They were there for a long time.

Then my stepdad got a job doing construction stuff. And my mom started working at a clothing factory. She was working in that factory with a fake Social Security number. Her supervisor knew about it, but she was a really good worker, so the supervisor just said, “I’m not INS. It’s not my job to be verifying those, so as long as you don’t give me any problems.”

She was there for about five years, until one of the workers that was in the same situation got herself documentation and decided to make problems for everybody else. She kept telling the boss that if she didn’t do something about all the people that were working there without documentation, she would go to the police. So they had to let all of those people go, and my mom lost her job.

That’s when she started sewing for a lady who sells clothes at the local swap meet. She would start work at five o’clock in the morning, and sometimes she wouldn’t finish until eight, nine o’clock at night.

They made sweatpants and sweaters from really cheap cotton. Some of the clothes they made were knockoffs. Not really name-brand, like Louis Vuitton or anything, but Levi's, Ecko, Tommy Hilfiger. My mom got paid about ten cents per pair of pants, or ten cents per sweater, so she had to make hundreds and hundreds of pieces of clothing for it to even be worth it for the day. After that stopped working out, she got a job at a bakery, where she rings people up and cleans the bakery and stuff like that. That's where she's been ever since.

MY JOB AS A HUMAN BEING

My first job was working at that same bakery. I started when I was about sixteen. I did the exact same thing, just cleaned, swept and mopped, rang up people. That was really hard for me, because I had never done any type of physical labor, but I got over it, and it just became a routine. I was only there for a few months. They really liked me, but the owner of a Mexican meat market would go there to buy bread to sell at her store. She watched me ringing up people, and could see I was quick. She asked me if I would like to work for her on the weekends, and I said, "Sure." And for a while when I was in high school I was working the two jobs.

I was using my cousin Sabrina's name and Social.¹ Sabrina has good papers. She's my stepdad's niece, so she's really not related to me, just by marriage. She was in Mexico, so she didn't mind, since she wasn't using it. And she could use the tax return, because she has like three kids or something. She was helping me get work, and I was helping her out. I worked, she filed the taxes, and she got the tax return.

¹ The Internal Revenue Service requires employers to report wages using a Social Security number. Therefore, in order to be legitimately employed in the U.S., you must have or be in the process of applying for a Social Security number. While being a U.S. citizen is not necessary to obtain a number, foreign workers must have appropriate immigration documentation from the Department of Homeland Security.

I was still working at the meat market when I started college at Fresno State, in 2002, as a biology/premed major. I was lucky that I started college before Governor Gray Davis got booted out. He was the one who signed the law allowing undocumented immigrants to pay in-state tuition. So, actually, it's doable to go to school if you work. Otherwise it would have been extremely difficult. But if I wasn't undocumented, I would be getting financial aid. I probably wouldn't have had the need to work so much, and I would have finished school by now.

I had to sign an affidavit stating that I graduated from a California high school, that I'd been here a certain number of years, and that I would get legal residency as soon as I was able to. I think that last one is for those conservatives who think we're just educating terrorists. It's pretty ludicrous. I mean, who wouldn't want to get legal residency?

During my freshman year, my advisor, who is really the reason why I'm still in school, told me about this awesome internship in North Carolina, helping farmworkers. And I said, "I have to do this."

I've always reminded myself that the only reason why I'm in school and I have a good job is because my parents did backbreaking labor so that I could go to school. I've always felt like I need to give back to those people, because those laborers out there in the fields are like my parents.

I didn't get accepted the first year, but the second year I did. I almost backed out, though, because I was afraid I'd get detained at LAX, and possibly even sent back to Mexico. I kept telling my advisor, "Okay, what if they ask me for this? They'll ask me for an ID." He said, "No, you'll be fine. You deserve this. You need to go."

My parents didn't want me to go. My bosses at the time, the owners of the meat store, didn't want me to go, either. They told me that I was putting myself at risk for something that wasn't necessarily valuable. They told me they couldn't promise me my job when I came

back, even though I'd been there for three years, and I'd been a really good employee. I probably would still be there if it wasn't for the internship. I was trying to make something better, trying to broaden my horizons, and I had people telling me not to do it. So, I think that's why I did it, because people kept telling me not to do it.

I told my mom, "You know what, Mom? God's going to take care of me. I'll be fine." And LAX had absolutely no problems with me. I was picked up at the airport with another intern. We went to somebody's house and ate there. That was the first time I ever tasted tofu, and vegetarian something. It was horrible. I couldn't eat it. That first day was really difficult for me. It was all too hippie-ish.

But later, we went to the headquarters, and I met the other interns. We left for our training, which was up in the mountains, and it was beautiful. I loved it. They started training us on the causes we were going to fight for, like the Taco Bell boycott. We were fighting for a penny raise per pound for the tomato pickers in Immokalee, Florida. They told us we would be marching, and we would be picketing in front of Taco Bells,² and in front of stores to protest Mount Olive Pickles, too.³ And right away, I thought, I don't know if I want to do this. It was a little too much exposure for me, and I didn't know if I'd get into any trouble. I was nervous.

After that, we all left to our respective places. I was placed with another intern, and we stayed with a wonderful family. The wife's name was Rosa, and the husband's name was Francisco. They had a little girl and a little boy. The boy was about two or three. He was adorable. And the little girl was so smart. She reminded me of me

² The Coalition of Immokalee Workers backed a four-year boycott of Yum! Brands—the parent company of Taco Bell, KFC, Pizza Hut, and other chains—that resulted in Taco Bell agreeing to pay an extra \$100,000 per year to its tomato growers in Florida.

³ The Farm Labor Organizing Committee, a union representing 8,500 Mexican guest workers, sponsored a five-year boycott of the Mount Olive Pickle Company—the nation's second largest pickle company—which resulted in an agreement to raise workers' wages.

when I was little. I loved listening to everything she said. While we were there, she started school, and it was wonderful for me to be able to see that. That's like planting a seed to me.

So the organization I worked with helps farmworkers. They knew where to send you if you had legal trouble, if your boss was being bad to you, or if you needed food. We did food drives, too, distributing food baskets to farmworking families.

I was also placed with a medical school. They were just starting a research project about pesticides and the effect they have on children, even though the children are not the ones that are in the fields. The researchers wanted to see how much of the pesticides that the parents ingest and breathe in and get on their clothing and on their skin actually ends up on the kids. They also wanted to know how educated the families were with respect to pesticides. It was really eye-opening, because a lot of these families, they didn't even know what pesticides were. And they didn't even know that they were bad. One lady actually said, "Are they bad?" You just think that's common sense. But they don't know. They don't have access to the internet. They don't even have TVs to watch the news.

Part of my job was to educate people. I'd tell the women things like, "Make sure that when your husband comes home, he changes outside, that he doesn't come in and sit down on the couch with the kids or play with the kids in his work clothes." Or, "Make sure that you wash your husband's clothes separate from the baby clothes and your clothes. Make sure that the kids don't play with those clothes."

A lot of these people lived either in the middle of fields or in very close proximity to fields, so that when the airplanes sprayed, the people would get all the drift, even if they were inside. So I'd also say, "Make sure, if you hear the airplane, close your doors. Don't let your kids go outside. Wait a few hours before you let them go outside. Don't open your windows." A lot of common sense stuff.

And we were able to help in other ways. We were helping the

people from the medical school get their data by collecting urine samples from the kids. It was really surprising how many of the families were willing to help us out. They had to get the first urine of the day from the kid, then put it in a little bag that we gave them. And if we didn't come to pick it up, it had to be kept refrigerated. At first I thought, Oh, these people won't want to do all this, but they did. They were as interested as we were to find out how bad these pesticides really are, and how much they're affecting their families, even though the kids aren't directly exposed to it.

My experience at the internship opened my eyes to a lot of injustice that I didn't want to know about before. The way that farm labor is in North Carolina is very different from how it is here in California. In North Carolina, the men in the camps still live in barracks-style homes. When we visited families, those were people who lived there year-round, that rented either a trailer or a house in the middle of the field and made a life there. But the people in the camps are all men that have been brought over to North Carolina to work.

There's H-2A camps,⁴ where the workers who are here legally live, and there's undocumented camps. The undocumented part of it is so dark and kept in the back. It's like a "don't ask, don't tell" type of thing. And undocumented people are very scared in North Carolina to let anybody in. There were undocumented camps that were literally in the middle of tons of trees. Unless you knew that there was a little path through there, you wouldn't even know the camp was there.

We went to several of these camps, and it broke my heart the way that they lived. At the undocumented camps, we weren't able to go inside any of the dwellings. We were only able to go inside the H-2A camp dwellings. And they were horrible enough. Prisoners probably

⁴The H-2A program allows farmers to hire non-immigrant foreign workers for seasonal work. The employer is required by law to provide appropriate housing, reimbursement for transportation, tools, and other necessities. See Appendix D for more information.

live in better conditions and more comfortably than these people do. If you put any kind of animal in that type of dwelling, there would be riots. And just to see what legally is required for the grower to have for them... They're only required to have one toilet per fifteen people, and one showerhead per ten people. There are all these men, living in barracks-style homes with no privacy, just a bed. The mattresses are years and years old. They have bloodstains from other farmworkers that have been injured or even died. I heard horror stories of farmworkers that had died from heat exhaustion and tobacco illness.

When I saw all this, I told my supervisor that my mission is to change one person's life. Educate one person, so if their boss tries to be bad to them, they'll say, "No, I know you can't do that, that's against the law." If I can do that, then I've done my job as a human being. I at least wanted to give them knowledge to defend themselves with.

These people don't have transportation. The nearest store is literally miles away. The grower picks them up in a bus at whatever o'clock in the morning, before the sun is up, and takes them directly to where they're working. Then he drops them off when they're done. Once a week, on Sundays, they'd get picked up at a specific time to go into town and wash their clothes, buy groceries, buy whatever they need. So my supervisor and I would go to the camps to see if people needed anything. There were a lot of times we took people to the doctor because they didn't feel good. And there were a lot of times we took people to the store, so they could buy a calling card to call their family, who they hadn't seen in a year.

I still keep in contact with the family that hosted us. The husband, Francisco, was a farm laborer for a long time, so he knows all the farmworkers. All those farmworkers are pretty regular. They get called back every year, if they don't get blacklisted for causing problems. Francisco knows most of them, and they still ask about me by name. That's flattering.

GOD LETS US DRIVE

When I came back to California, I had to start looking for another job. I'd heard about a job as a runner at Benson-Thomas Real Estate, so I walked in and asked for an application. I'd never had an office job, and I was petrified. I didn't even know what a runner was.

They called me in for an interview that very next day. Both of the bosses were there, Grant Thomas and his partner Fred Benson, the quintessential Republican white male. And the office manager Geri was there too. It was a really intense interview. I expected them to call me the next day, whether yes or no, and they didn't. After a few days I didn't hear from them, and I thought, Oh great, I didn't get it. And it made me feel like people who are like me, in my situation, Hispanic people, we don't get office jobs. I was sure I needed to go get a job at another meat market, or maybe helping somebody clean houses, or babysitting.

Then Geri called me on the last Friday of August 2004, and offered me the job. I came in that Sunday, and Geri started training me and told me what I needed to wear.

Image was everything for Benson-Thomas. I had to wear heels. I had to wear slacks. And I just threw myself into the job. I would deliver flyers to all the listings, all the houses that we had for sale. Pick up closing packages. Pick up gifts. Pick up documents. Take documents to escrow. Take deposits to the bank. Anything that needs to leave the office or come to the office, the runner would do it.

I really didn't think I could be office material. I thought, I'm not refined enough, and I'm not the quality of person that they're looking for. The company was predominantly targeted toward white, upper-class real estate, so I kept thinking they'd eventually realize that I'm just this Mexican girl that doesn't know how to speak to people and conduct herself appropriately. I didn't think I would last. But I did. I ended up staying.

When I started working there, I was still pretending to be legal by using Sabrina's identity. At first, if they'd say "Sabrina," I would just keep working. I wouldn't pay attention until I realized, "Oh shit, that's me." I was working there for about four or five months, but then Sabrina decided to come back to the United States. My aunt, who was the middle person between the real Sabrina and me, called and said, "You need to quit. Sabrina needs her identity back." I was crushed. I loved my job. Sabrina's from New York. If she lived in California, we could both use her Social and pretend she was working two jobs or something. But she couldn't be working in New York and California at the same time.

So finally, one day, I came in with tears in my eyes. I couldn't even talk. I told Geri, "I need to talk to you." I felt guilty that I'd lied to them, and I was really scared of how they would take it. Everyone had been so helpful in training me. I didn't even know how to use a fax machine before I started there. They literally shaped me to be someone productive at an office. They treated me like family.

Geri and I went next door to a Mexican restaurant, where we used to hold meetings and interviews. I showed her my Fresno State ID and told her, "This is truly who I am. I'm really sorry that I lied to you. But I just want you to know that I didn't do it out of malice, or to hurt people. I did it because I had to, because I need to pay for school."

She asked me, "Did this girl know you were using her identity?" I said, "Yes," and I explained it to her.

I was amazed when she said, "Well, we'll see what we can do, but you're not going to have to quit." She said, "Grant won't have a problem. The only one we have to talk to is Fred." Because, like I said, he's the conservative one.

It was two days before Fred came into the office again. I was so petrified. I couldn't eat, I couldn't sleep. He came in for literally ten minutes, just to pick up some stuff. Geri said to him, "We need to talk to you."

We went over to the Mexican restaurant again. I just knew he was going to say, “Well, I’m sorry for your situation, but we can’t keep you.” Geri told him. She was like my lawyer. It’s like she was making the case for a saint, or an angel, or a virgin or something.

And Fred said to me, “Why don’t we just pay you cash?” Like he was saying, “Why don’t we go down the street and get a smoothie since it’s hot?”

My tears were just flowing down. I looked at him and said, “Fred, that’s a big deal. You can get in a lot of trouble for that, and I don’t want to put you in that position.”

He said, “You’ve been too good to us. We can’t let you go.” I think it was that day or the next day that Grant came in. I was up at the front doing something with flyers. He said, “Sabrina, come here.” I grabbed my notepad and my pen, and I went up to his desk. I was about ten feet away from his desk. I didn’t want to get any closer. He said, “Come closer.” I came right up front to his desk, and he said, “Come over here, come around.”

I thought, Is he going to hit me? He was sitting down, and I was standing right next to him. He reached over and hugged me. He said, “Don’t worry, we’re going to take care of you. You’re going to be okay.”

I couldn’t even explain how grateful I was. Pretty much everybody has left the company now that there have been money problems, including Geri. But I won’t leave him, because he literally risked his life for me. He still could go to jail for a long time. Because of me.

Not a lot of people there know that I’m undocumented. Fred and Grant know. Geri knew. As far as the other employees know, I’m on payroll. They pay me eleven dollars an hour. And I work about twelve hours a day, every day, seven days a week. There’s no overtime pay, though, no time and a half or anything like that. I can’t be on the company health plan, because I’m not a legal employee there. So I use the clinic at the university for my doctor’s visits. I usually only go

see them for a yearly check up. The only thing that I do have to visit every six months is an eye doctor, because I use contacts. I pay for it out of pocket, which is pricey, so I ended up shopping around for the cheapest place. Now I go to Sam's Club, which I know I shouldn't go to because they're a monopoly, but that's all I can afford without any health insurance.

I've never been sick enough not to go to work. In my family, you go to work, no matter what, unless you have to be hospitalized. I haven't even taken a vacation since I started working there. I do get holidays off, though, like Christmas or July Fourth.

My boss, Grant, is the most unselfish person I know. The car that I drive is actually a gift from him. It's a Volkswagen Beetle. He leased that car for me for two years, so that I wouldn't have to worry about a car payment or an insurance payment. And I use it to drive all over town for my job. I learned how to drive in North Carolina. One of my supervisors there taught me. I don't have a license, of course, so I'm always looking out my mirrors to make sure there's not a cop behind me. The way that my mom says it is that we have Jesus's license. God lets us drive.

I've been at this job for three years. Now, I do everything from being a runner to being office manager to being chief operations manager. I don't have a job title. If you ask anybody at that office what my job title is, I swear they will say, "Everything."

A lot of people at the office, like Geri and Fred, would always tell me, "You have to assimilate, you have to become American." And I'm all for that. I'm all for speaking English. I'm all for respecting this country, because I love it. It has given me opportunities that I couldn't have. In Mexico, I would have been a mom of three or four by now. I wouldn't have an education. I know that.

But it's really hard for me to keep my identity of being Mexican. I'm very proud of being Mexican, but being Mexican now is almost taboo. I don't describe myself as Hispanic. I don't like calling myself

Latina, either. Because Latina is like, Latina with an attitude. The fighter Latina, but not the good fighter. The troublemaker. Chicana, the same way. Chicana is, “Oh, you’re always protesting for something, you’re always angry at something or somebody.”

I really don’t know what to call myself now. I’m Mexican. That’s what I fill out on applications. That’s where I was born, and that’s legally my citizenship. Or, I guess I’m Mexican-American. I love both countries. I love my heritage. It’s beautiful, and it’s old. Its traditions have lasted for centuries. A lot of Americans wish that they had that. I get that a lot from my office, that they wish they had that much tradition, that much heritage and history. But I also love this country and the opportunities that I’ve been able to have from here.

WALKING TO THEIR DEATHS

A few weeks after I got the job at the real estate company, in September of 2004, I started an organization on campus to help local farmworkers. I glow a little when I talk about it because it’s something that I created.

I had come back from North Carolina full of fire and a revolutionary spirit. We’d had students selected for this internship every year before that, but no one had come back and done anything. I couldn’t understand, after seeing all that—what was going on in the fields—for ten weeks, that no one would want to come back and continue the fight. I said to myself, I have to do it. We have to keep educating people about the issues.

So I got some students together at school and talked to them about what I wanted to do. The Taco Bell boycott was still going on at that time, so we did a lot of demonstrations on campus. We visited classrooms and spoke at different events. And then, finally, Yum! Brands, which owns Taco Bell, agreed not to buy tomatoes from that particular grower any more.

We also helped with passing the Emergency Heat bill⁵ into law in California, to reduce the number of deaths from heat stress in farmworkers. So many farmworkers were dying from heat exhaustion. We helped organize a press conference with one of our state senators, and we were the only student organization there. It was in the middle of a field, at twelve o'clock noon, right when the sun is strongest. All these reporters had to walk through the dirt and sit on buckets and listen to a state senator talk about why it was so important to get this law passed.

Another student and I dressed up in all black. We were supposed to be grim reapers. We had crosses and flowers and candles for three men who had just passed away of heat exhaustion, one right after the other. We were basically representing that if the law didn't pass, then when the workers walked toward the field, they were walking to their deaths. We almost passed out from heat exhaustion ourselves, but it all went great.

As a result of the law, farmers had to provide a shaded area. And a shaded area is not a tree. They had to provide a canopy or something like that. And they had to provide drinking water for farmworkers. The law also said that farmworkers could not be penalized for taking breaks if they felt sick. Before that, farmworkers wouldn't take breaks for water or to rest for fear of being sent home or not being called to work the next day.

After that, we started getting up to thirty people or more at our meetings. But now the membership has dwindled. I was president for two years, but this past year somebody else has been president. I guess nobody runs something as well as the person who created it. A lot of the passion dies.

⁵ The Heat Illness Prevention section of the General Industry Safety Orders adopted in California on June 15, 2006.

IT'S ABOUT HELPING PEOPLE

I'm hoping and praying to be done with school next year, 2008. That would be my seventh year. It's just getting more and more difficult to keep going through this. I still love being in the classroom. I still love learning about biology. But I'm only taking one class right now. First, because that's all I could afford at the time when tuition was due. Second, with my job, there's no way I could take more than one class. That's an ongoing struggle, between work and school. I have to work a lot of hours so I can pay for school. But working so many hours takes tons of time away from schoolwork.

I used to be a straight-A student. But now, the time I have allotted after working twelve hours a day, seven days a week, is very minimal. No matter how much I want to read that chapter or how much I want to do extra research for that paper, my body just won't let me.

Last quarter, I did horribly. My job was being so demanding, and so was school, that I got really sick. I started developing ulcer symptoms. I became anemic. I was having anxiety attacks. I started thinking that I need to choose, either work or school, but my fiancé insisted that I can't quit school. And I know I can't. I have to do it for myself. Because I know I can.

After college, I'll hopefully go to medical school. I know I have what it takes to be a doctor. I have two legs and two hands. I have eyes, and I can read. So, what's stopping me? My mom raised me to never think money is going to stop us.

A lot of people ask me how I'll pay for medical school. I can't apply for loans or scholarships. I'll just deal with that when it comes. I have never once thought about what kind of house I'll buy when I'm a doctor, or what kind of car I'm going to drive. It's not about money for me. It's about helping people, especially the farmworkers, who are the ones that need it so much.

After medical school, I'll probably do either neurology or ER

surgery—because I love fast-paced stuff—until I can open my own clinic. When I went to North Carolina, I decided that I want to have a mobile clinic, so I can go to those camps, and just help them. It was so painful being there. Everyone misses their kids and their wives. And then to be sick, too. Some of these people are diabetic, and so they need insulin. They need all kinds of stuff.

We risked our lives to come to this country, and I had the opportunity to go to school. Why not go all the way? I always thought I was pretty smart. Because I don't have very many tools to defend myself with, I know that knowledge is the only thing I can arm myself with. When you have an MD after your name, very few people are going to tell you no, for anything.