

Opportunity of a Lifetime

a Student's Perspective



If you were to see the world through my eyes, you would find yourself addressing hundreds of students on the importance of being a productive member of the La Puente community. I use my position as the student body president of my school as a platform to encourage and inspire my peers to graduate from high school, go to college and get involved in our community. Yet when I stand before my peers, few know about the journey of obstacles I have endured in my life.

My journey begins in Tequila, a small town of Mexico, with my cherished and young mother giving birth at the age of 16. I am the oldest and only son, in a family of two younger sisters and two hard-working parents. Poverty has been a reality for my family for generations. Often times my father finds comfort from our financial struggles through alcohol, which results in verbal and physical abuse in my home. However, the toughest challenge of my journey came when I was 10 years old. My father became unemployed after losing three jobs in two months. With little hope for decent living in Mexico, we found no other option but to move to the United States in search of a better future. We moved to the land of opportunity with what little possessions we had and went from sleeping on the floor of a living room to a garage that we now rent. There were times where my father's income could not cover our needs and my mother would take us to our local parish to receive food and clothes donations.

I arrived to in the United States full of dreams and aspirations of going to college. I set my problems aside and used them as motivation to never go back to living in poverty. I began to think positively on how I wanted to lead my life. I viewed the United States as a new beginning and I focused all my energy on school. I never lost faith; I quickly acculturated to a new lifestyle and fully developed a new language within months. It was my determination and passion for success that enabled me to overcome the challenges that so many immigrant youth face, like giving up because they see no hope or dropping out of school. I began to challenge myself with as many honors and AP courses as I could, and I physically challenged myself in competitive sports such as football, wrestling and track, all while graduating at the top of my class.

As the student body president and founder of two clubs, I serve as a mentor to students at my school. I share my experiences and em-

phasize the importance of a college education through our rallies and club activities. I reiterate the importance of education by serving as a peer minister at my Catholic church, where I help prepare lesson plans to teach confirmation candidates about their religion. Being involved in my church also enables me to be a part of an Archdiocesan committee that produced a skit for an annual youth conference that hosted nearly 15,000 youth.

I take advantage of the many opportunities that my community offers, including taking community college courses and being an active member of the educational enrichment program, GEAR-UP. GEAR-UP introduced me to an array of opportunities like summer residential programs at Berkeley, UCLA and UC Riverside, which taught me how to finance and apply to college. As I become more involved, I develop more dreams and aspirations. Initially, I wanted to attend a four-year university, but I now aspire to double major

in international business and obtain a Ph.D. in psychology. I plan to come back and serve the youth in my community and someday work for the US Embassy in France.

I will never forget that Friday evening while I was at school studying for my AP Physics test, when my mother called me and said I was placed on a waiting list for Pitzer and I had been denied by Occidental. I shed tears of frustration and lost a lot of hope. My mother and I cried together, but I admitted my reality and knew I had to be strong and I had to move on no matter what. That same night while I lay on my friend's couch, something forced me to check my email and there it was, the application for Santa Clara's scholarship. I had to submit the scholarship application by the following Friday. It was a week after the deadline, Good Friday, when I received a call saying that I had been one of the 18 out of 60 finalists who had been carefully reviewed and that they wanted to interview me on the upcoming Friday. With the little money my father had, he arranged bus tickets for me to go to my interview. I took an eight-hour bus ride from 11:00 p.m.–6:00 a.m. and once I was there, I felt really intense.

On the week of interviews, I received news that my 20-year-old cousin in Mexico had committed suicide. I felt really frustrated and anguished to know that I could not even be at my cousin's funeral due to my citizenship status, let alone with my loved ones. Yet, before me I had an opportunity of a lifetime and I did not want to lose it. I kept my faith and hopes higher than ever and I prayed to God that it would be his will whether I received this scholarship or not. After four intense interviews, I left the school with hopes that maybe I had been good enough for them. Three days later on April 21 at 2:00 p.m. I received a call that has changed my life and my family's. I had received the Hurtado Scholarship, my dream had finally come true.

My gate to the American Dream had finally been open, my prayers were answered, my hard work had paid off, and my gratitude had grown larger than ever. I believe in miracles and, to me, this was a miracle. On the day my college opportunities had gone from many to none, a Catholic school asked me to apply and soon it would become my future school.

At the same time, I am saddened to know how many good kids, who have college potential, will not be attending because this country requires a number to qualify for financial aid. It was not our decision to come here, and I find this an injustice of our society, and for that I will never forget where I come from, and I will dedicate myself to those in need.



CARLOS GOMEZ is a freshman at Santa Clara University (CA) majoring in psychology. He is involved on campus as an executive board member of the Multicultural Center and Freshman Representative for M.E.Ch.A. (Chicano Student Movement of Aztlán). He was recently selected as an ambassador to work with the admission office.

Talking to Undocumented Students about Sensitive Subjects

by **Katharine Gin** (biography on page 20)

What NOT to Say	What to Say
Going to college isn't really an option for you.	Going to college is going to be difficult for you, but it is possible. Thousands of other talented, hard-working undocumented students have already graduated from college.
You're not going to be able to get any money for college.	You're not eligible for most forms of government financial aid. However, you might be eligible for in-state tuition, and there are some private scholarships you can apply for.
Why don't you just legalize?	Have you talked to an immigration attorney to find out if you can legalize? There may be immigration remedies that you and your family don't know about already.
Even if you get a college degree, you're never going to be able to work legally.	Getting a college degree isn't going to change your immigration status, but it will open up many opportunities for you once you're able to legalize. The DREAM Act is a proposed federal bill that will give many undocumented students a path towards citizenship if they graduate from high school and go on to college. Because of strong bipartisan support in Congress and support from President Obama, the DREAM Act is very likely to pass in the near future.
Why don't you go back home and get a degree?	If you have family and connections in another country outside the United States, it might make sense for you to consider pursuing educational opportunities elsewhere. Remember, however, that you would be separated from your family in the U.S., and you could be barred from returning for 10 years.
In order to apply to college, you're going to have to reveal everything.	In order to apply to college, you're going to have to be honest about your immigration status. At first this may seem scary to you and your family. Remember that federal law (specifically FERPA) will protect your privacy and prevent colleges from releasing your information unless under court order.