

This is my country

Contributed by Elena Gaona
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I can't help but feel at home in Mexico. But that does not mean it is my country. I flicked my driver's license casually.

"Citizenship?" asked the border patrol agent.

"American," I said.

My best friend Cecilia and I were coming back from a fun weekend in Mexico and had just driven up to the U.S. entry gate at the Tijuana/San Diego border. I asked the uniformed man for the best route to northern San Diego, where I lived. He teased me about having to ask for directions. We both laughed.

Cecilia was not so at ease. She paused and was jittery when she answered the agent's questions, leading him to briefly inspect our trunk before telling me the best way home. I quickly left Mexico without another thought. But next to me, my friend Cecilia started to cry.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I can't believe it was that easy," she said.

This was one of Cecilia's first trips back to Mexico, her homeland. She had spent more than 15 years living as an illegal alien in the United States before finally becoming a legal resident. The first time she had crossed the Mexican border wasn't so easy. She had climbed into a tire, floated, and then waded across the cold waters of the Rio Grande into Texas. She'd walked overnight before landing in a safe house. Another time she'd hidden for hours inside the tiny secret compartment of a couple's truck, holding her breath while a border patrol dog sniffed the outside, its damp nose searching for illegal cargo.

Five years ago Cecilia married a U.S. citizen and became a legal resident. Now she can travel to Mexico freely. But she knows she will cry when she crosses the border. She can't help but think of the hundreds of thousands of people who did as she once did — risk their lives to live in this country.

"I didn't really think about that just now," I said. I then hugged her, an embrace for all the immigrants in this country, including my parents.

As a first-generation Mexican American, born and raised in Dallas, Texas, I basically grew up Mexican. My parents are often more traditional than families in Mexico — trapped in time, they are unaware that the country has moved beyond the 1950s and 1960s. While kids my age danced to Michael Jackson, I fell in love with romantic boleros from Mexican idols like Javier Solis. I became an expert on black-and-white film stars like Pedro Infante and Cantinflas.

Some parts of my culture I rejected. I was not allowed to go to sleepovers. I couldn't talk to boys. English was banned at home, and I ate tacos for lunch while classmates ate sandwiches. Most of all I hated the work. I had to help my parents clean offices at night, falling asleep in the van while they worked until morning. On the weekends, while my friends got to see movies or visit the park, my parents and I sold food out of our home, collected cans, cleaned houses, mass produced paper flowers, packaged gift tissue, sold toys at swap meets, painted apartments, and mowed lawns or buffed floors.

"I don't belong here," I'd thought. Only when I visited Mexico did I get the childhood I yearned for. I could hang out on streets without my parents beckoning me inside. I was free to flirt with boys and walk around the plaza arm-and-arm with my cousins.

Something magical happened to my parents in Mexico. They laughed louder, told funny stories, hugged relatives, enjoyed leisurely meals, and even danced.

"Why don't we stay here?" I wondered. When we came back stateside, I missed Mexico, with its big mountains and wide beaches, its loud cities and colorful fruit stands. But it always came to an end, and we dutifully headed home to work and to school. At the border, my mother and I would cross by car. My father would always disappear and take another route.

"He has something to buy," my mother would say. "He'll meet us on the other side."

We prayed while we waited for him to cross. I would absorb my mother's nervousness. We always felt relieved, and happy when my father walked up to us in Laredo, Texas — safe on the other side.

Today, my mother is a U.S. citizen and my father is a U.S. resident. They make few trips to Mexico now, ensconced by a lively Dallas lifestyle where they tend three small businesses. Mexico lives in my heart, but as I matured I began to embrace being American more.

Some of my relatives are very poor in Mexico, with little hope of getting ahead. Some of them are middle-class and believe keeping up appearances is the most important thing there is. I like it here where I can work hard to get ahead, and where it's okay to be me – 31 and unmarried, living on my own, working on a career, experiencing other cultures, traveling alone, going without makeup, speaking up when I want to, being unfashionable, hosting martini parties. My family in Mexico would forgive me for my small indiscretions too, I'm sure, though I do get a lot of lectures when I talk to relatives there.

No, I am lucky to live here. As a reporter in San Diego, I often cover stories about undocumented immigrants. I read mail from readers who accuse me of not telling the story of how illegal aliens are crippling California, not to mention the country. I am often told to go back to my country too. I laugh off the most offensive comments because I can.

I am American.

I look at the immigrants here – who stand on the corner looking for work, who live in makeshift shacks in canyons because they lack affordable housing, who pile into cars to go buy groceries, who work 12-hour days for little pay, somehow managing to save thousands to pay back the coyote who brought them – and I'm not afraid of them. They are here illegally, I know. But they are here. There are an estimated 8 to 11 million illegal immigrants in the United States. They are part of our society, and I am honored to tell their stories. Somebody has to. I approach them respectfully and I am glad when they talk to me.

Recently, U.S. border patrol agents began arresting immigrants in San Diego at bus stops, on corners and in grocery stores. I wonder if they will snatch me up if I somehow forget my I.D. – after all, I look so ethnic. It angers me that my civil rights as a U.S. citizen could be so easily violated. But then I return to my comfortable stateside apartment and do not think about immigration issues. I have that luxury.

Back in the car, my friend Cecilia cried. And when I hugged her, I began to cry too. I remembered the struggles my mother and father had gone through for me, the countless times they had risked their lives to cross the border, the dozens of jobs they held, the new language they studied, the hamburgers they learned to cook, the way they encouraged me to go to college, the soft words of love my father murmured when I told him I was moving away. They are proud of me, but I can only aspire to be as courageous.

My parents became American for me, just as millions of immigrants have done for decades and will continue to do so for their families. When Cecilia cried I could almost hear them panting, out of breath in the nearby deserts, walking through the night to reach a safe house somewhere in this country.

And I prayed for them.