

Driven to Succeed ***Aracela Dominguez:***

“N-no, no! It can’t be true!”

July 7, 2009 at eight o’clock in the evening. Teen-aged Aracela Dominguez is working on math homework on the dining room table of her home when she hears disbelief, anguish, and horror shake the usually solid voice of her mother. From the other end of the line on the Pacific coast of Mexico, her uncle delivers the news that they’ve all anticipated, yet no one wanted to hear. A man out walking his dog has discovered the partially buried body of her aunt, her mother’s only sister, after his black lab started chewing on something in the bushes.

The coroner called the family for the fourth time to come and identify another middle-aged woman . He had seen their flyers all around the city and heard their pleas for her return on the radio. This time, it did not take long for Aracela’s uncle to recognize his sister’s bruised body and face, despite the three bullet holes in her temple.

Aracela will soon be a high school graduate. After the last bell had rung in June, she met with two women who volunteer with Latinos in our community to speak of growing up undocumented in the U.S.

"It’s like when you go back to Mexico after being in the U.S. They think you have money and they kidnap you for ransom."

Aracela’s aunt was not a drug dealer, human trafficker, or thief. She was a school teacher who had volunteered to make party favors, napkin holders, and gifts to honor the *padrinos*, the godparents, at Aracela’s *quinceñera*, her fifteenth birthday celebration. Rather than buy the items locally, Aracela and her parents sent money to her aunt in Mexico so she could have a little extra cash to supplement her meager teacher’s salary, and so that she could be a part of this important family celebration, despite the distance from her niece. The day she was kidnapped, Aracela’s aunt had just cashed the check.

“We believe she was murdered because people thought she was rich... It’s like when you go back to Mexico after being in the U.S. They think you have money and they kidnap you for ransom. That’s why I don’t want to go back,” Aracela says.

Aracela does not want to be kidnapped. She does not want to be beaten or raped or shot. Her fear is palpable; it has a heartbeat.

Not only that, Aracela’s home is here in the U.S. She arrived here from Mexico as an infant and only returned once to visit her grandparents at age three.

“I don’t really remember much of the crossing, but sometimes I have flashbacks,” she says. Aracela remembers a train ride, potato chips and coke, and a temporary dad .

“I came as a child of another person who was a legal resident. I got on a train with a guy who told me he was my “temp” dad, that I should call him ‘Dad’ for a day. I was separated from my mother and father. When we got to the other side, my mom was kneeling on the ground with her arms stretched out. I ran to her.”

Aracela’s separation from her mother was short with a happy ending. Her mother’s other separations have been neither short nor happy.

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Isabel Cruz, grew up among the pineapple and coconuts of a coastal community in central Mexico. Her uncle, a teacher, took in a young boy named Tomás to work in the fields and attend school. He had lived in an impoverished inland town of naked hills, no streets, and mud houses where eleven brothers and sisters slept on mats in the dirt. Tomás met Isabel when she was only twelve, but it would be several years before their lives would take the same path. He married, had two children, and later separated from his first wife. On a visit to his former teacher’s home, he discovered Isabel again. She was no longer a young girl but a beautiful woman. They began a new life together and soon had a baby, Aracela.

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Yet, even on the relatively rich coast of Central Mexico, there was not enough work for the new family—no future. Although Isabel loved Sunday dinners and soccer games with her mother, sister, and brothers, she decided she had to think of herself and her children. She and Tomás heard there were jobs in the North. They decided to come to the U.S.

Tomás had been in the Mexican military. This allowed him to get a special visa to enter the country legally. Isabel was not so fortunate. She had to contact a *coyote*, crawl through the desert, jump a fence, and swim across a river.

Soon, most of the members of Tomás' family came north as well. The two children from his previous marriage accompanied their aunts and uncles. Sadly for Isabel, her family remained in Mexico. At this point, she cannot risk going back to see them at all.

"When I was in the third grade, my grandmother had cancer and was asking for my mom," Aracela says. "My mom bought a plane ticket and flew down there. She was gone for a month—the longest month ever—but finally returned on a fake visa. Two years later her mother died and she couldn't go to the funeral. Within another year and a half, her dad died. She was just devastated—and now she's lost her sister, her best friend.

"Some people say that immigrants are here to cause problems. But my parents are here to work full-time. They're here to take care of me and my two younger siblings. Every day they go off to work and we go to school. My brothers and sisters and I don't know if we will see them again...Every night when they get home we spend time together. They come and tuck us in, and we pray together."

Aracela has more to pray about that many teen girls.

"Whenever ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) is in town we find out. Other people call us. We're afraid to do anything. We pray to God that they (our parents) won't be caught and then we go to school or work but nowhere else."

Fortunately for Aracela, school has proven to be a great place to be. Perhaps because of its small size, perhaps because of the staff and supportive community, she has not experienced the discrimination that others have, despite having started kindergarten speaking only Spanish. (Now, her English sounds like that of any other American teen—with an extra dose of self-confidence.) She has a mentor who has guided her exploration of future educational options and will help her with college applications and essays next year.

“The teachers treat the students like one big family,” she says.

Aracela admits that some of her friends in larger schools have been harassed for their accents or skin color. They are no longer the polite and compliant students that many may have been in elementary school. “When you face discrimination day after day, you have to step up and defend yourself, and some kids may lose their politeness. It’s just so hard to fit in and be accepted,” she says.

Discrimination may be responsible for some Latino students’ decisions to drop out of high school. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, in 2008 the dropout rate on the national level among Latinos was four times that of whites and twice that of African Americans.

But discrimination is not the only cause of the exodus. There can be little doubt that many undocumented students leave because they see the wall ahead.

“Kids ask themselves, ‘Why should I keep trying?’ They can’t find a job or go to college without papers. Others find jobs in the fields, so they leave school to help their family’s finances,” Aracela says.

Aracela’s older sister dropped out at sixteen with a baby on the way, her brother left when he was a sophomore. Yet, Aracela is excelling. She’s a top student and won several academic awards. She digs through her backpack to find the mechanical pencil her teacher gave her as a reward. Beaming, she says, “He used this pencil all the way through college!”

Aracela hopes to become a nurse-midwife. “I love babies and I really enjoy the medical field. I thought about being a pediatrician, but it just takes too long, so I decided to be a nurse-midwife. Also, the salary is good.”

Other recent graduates have told Aracela that several schools, both public and private, go out of their way to help undocumented students. At one school, although private and expensive, if a student is willing to spend a couple of years working in a low-income community, the university pays the student’s nursing school tuition.

“When my dad dropped me off for school this morning, he said to me, ‘So, you’re graduating?’ ‘Yeah,’ I told him. And he just said, ‘Wow!’”

Aracela attributes her success to both her mother and father, yet for very different reasons. “I struggled my freshman year because I didn’t have my father’s support. He thought I’d just follow in the footsteps of my siblings. But my mom supported me and now I’m setting a *new* standard for my younger brother and sister...I wanted to prove to my dad that not all of us are the same. I’m stubborn—like my dad,” Aracela adds with a laugh.

Like many ambitious Latino youth and their families, Aracela hopes the *Dream Act* will pass. She is also seeking legal status by applying for a U-visa with the help of Catholic Charities.

This visa can take months or years to obtain and is only granted to those who have been a victim of or witness to a serious crime.

Meanwhile, she is looking forward to graduation. "When my dad dropped me off for school this morning, he said to me, 'So, you're graduating?' 'Yeah,' I told him. And he just said, 'Wow!'"