

Leadership Georgia  
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First of all, I want to express my gratitude for this invitation. I feel very humble to be able to share my immigrant experiences with such a distinguished group of people. I should apologize because my accent is still very strong.

### **Personal info**

My name is Maria Isabel Khote. I was born in Merida, Venezuela. My parents were in politics in my country, and later, my father was the Dean of Academics of a local University. But more importantly, they are hard working people with great values and principles.

### **First Immigration for Education**

I had the privilege to start my immigrant life at the age of 18, and United States is the third country and political government that I have experienced. I went from Venezuela to Cuba in 1988 to an international film School, 28 miles from Havana. I competed for a scholarship that was given to only two students per country from Central, South America, Africa and Asia. It was a wonderful time because I was able to experience Cuba as it was before the end of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin wall. I lived through the “Special Period” with two hours of power per day and the reduction of the very basic needs almost to zero. In spite of the dire circumstances, these were 4 years rich in learning lessons about what it means to live within “restricted and controlled” freedom and what the Communist way of life actually meant from the inside. It gave us perspective about being free here in the USA and about the unconditional significance of having recourse to the law – a law that tries to be equal and just to all.

### **Family Life**

I met my husband who is from India in Cuba. After we graduated, we moved to Venezuela with our bags full of dreams to live and work in our career of film making. He went to work as a Documentary film maker and I worked at the University of the Andes as a coordinator of production for the Film department and the Film and Television School. The three years in Venezuela were very productive in our professional and personal lives. We were close to my parents and lived as a very large, extended family. But there were tough times too. When I was

pregnant with my first child, there was a military coup a few weeks before my daughter was born. After this coup, the President was impeached and the political situation in the country declined very quickly and drastically until the election of the current president Hugo Chavez. The totalitarian power of the leftist Government and the extended corruption affected us in a very direct way. After my second child was born, he had repetitive ear infections and antibiotics were hard to come by because the President at the time decided to stop imports from American pharmaceutical companies. After that, I experienced the kidnapping of a very close cousin while he was filing gas in broad daylight. Besides the lack of security, the economic situation also deteriorated rapidly, and because of high inflation, my husband's once well-paying job was only paying enough rent to our apartment.

### **Immigrate to USA**

The decision to move to the States was the most difficult, and also the easiest one for my husband and me to make. We came for all the same reasons as the Pilgrims who reached Plymouth in 1620 or the Immigrants who landed at Ellis Island. We wanted a safer life, a superior education, and better opportunities for our children. We wanted for them to be able to achieve their full potential. We wanted a country where the rules are clear and your best recommendation is your work ethic and dedication. We wanted a country where we had the same rights as our neighbors in spite of our gender, color, race, political view, or religion. We wanted a country that would give an opportunity like this- to stand in front of you and share my story without being accused, or judged, or losing my freedom. Of course, we thought we knew everything about this country having read famous American authors, like Tennessee Williams, Maya Angelou, Poe, Hemingway and others. We also loved the music of Louis Armstrong, John Denver and Eric Clapton to name some. We had watched American Movies like Citizen Kane, 12 Angry Men, Gone with the Wind, and Forrest Gump. We thought we knew where we are going and we were confident we could make it here.

### **Moving decision: what to leave behind**

When we moved, we had to sell most of our belongings in Venezuela. We were allowed only 50 pounds baggage per person. That meant that all our lives were reduced to two hundred pounds - mostly pictures, books and little souvenirs from our families.

We came as we were, wholly and purely, with a mixed bag of Hispanic/Indian values and world views. Little did we know that this identity would have to transform and evolve for us to

achieve that American Dream. We were prepared to work, full of energy and positive attitudes. We first came to Birmingham, Alabama, in 1995, but we did not find work in the areas that we were familiar. The only offer my husband received was a low paying job in CNN which he turned down. My husband's family owned motels in the area and they leased us a 40 room Best Western in Fort Oglethorpe that we managed for a few years. We were in "survival mode" and having worked till late at night, we would wake up late in the morning (8:00 am) and dash off to drop off the kids to their elementary schools –LATE of course. We were afraid to send our little kids alone in the school bus because we were not familiar with the security that they offered. Soon we were called by the principal because our daughter had about 20 tardies in less than two months! We just did not know! We were surviving and bringing her to school on time everyday was not the priority! We had not made the cultural leap as yet. Immigrants in survival mode have different priorities- put food on the table and somehow pay the bills.

But what we didn't know was that this is a Nation of Allergies. I believe nobody sneezes in the movies or books. It is the best kept secret in the nation. During the beautiful spring time of Birmingham, I thought I came to this country to die from a sudden mysterious disease. We did not know about allergies or about the American health system and we ended up at the UAB Emergency room. After 4 hours we left with the same symptoms and the names of 4 over-the-counter allergy medications and no explanation of what was happening!

We were terrified when the kids fell sick because we would again land up at the emergency room for the smallest fever or throat infection. We had to learn about doctors, medicines, health insurance, and HMOs and PPOs. Later, we learned about insurance and paid through our noses about \$550.00 a month for Blue Cross Blue Shield! We never used it because we did not know about the \$1500 deductible which we never reached. It was a confusion of mis-communication and mixed messages. Some people were good to us and some people were mean.

### **Learning and living at the same time**

It was and continues to be a learning experience. We had to learn how to manage a bank account, mow the yard, repair the leaking faucet, change the blown fuse, and build credit. There was nobody to help us, nobody to explain to us the easier way, the less complicated procedure. We learned the hard way. We must have made a terrible impression on the local Americans and rightly so! What must they have thought of us- "Oh, these dumb foreigners! Why can't they be like us!" I heard that a lot, said to me and others. We were like Migrant workers moving many times looking

for better opportunities and had no Parental Involvement Support to help us. We were like many immigrants all over the nation from all over the world without the basic tools to survive in America and in survival mode the priorities are different. Worse still, we were stripped of that old support system of our very extended family all of whom would be at our doorstep in a heartbeat if we needed them back home.

### **Reaching the American Dream with Dignity and Honor**

But we had our Dream- buy a home, be stable at work, bring in enough to put food on the table and somehow pay for college for our kids.

We had our values and principles. When my third daughter was born here, we asked the hospital to break up our payments. They asked us how much we could pay and we said \$50 a month. We finished repaying that debt when she was five years old. We never asked for free lunch, nor free health care, nor food stamps, nor free anything for our kids. If we could work for it, we would pay for it. I believe most immigrants think like us and I know many of them- more than my hands can count. I visit families' everyday and the first question, after the greetings, is "How can I help you?" Almost always their reply is, "Can you please find me work?" They too have a sense of dignity and realize that they should not live off handouts from the government. That wasn't their plan when they first came here. Each time I stop at a gas station, Chinese restaurant, fast food, hotel/motel or in one of the mills, I only think that each of these immigrants are standing on their feet, sometimes 15 hours a day or more, to earn the bread on their tables honorably in spite of the language difficulties or their respective circumstances. Some of them may have been doctors, engineers or lawyers in their home countries but just like us, they cannot use their professional knowledge here in the USA. But they already know the value of hard work, and sacrifice and that's a good start!

### **Reprogramming our lives**

The first generation is the one that has to sacrifice everything. We have left behind not only a country, but all that goes along with it- the faces, the sights, the fragrances, the food, the fruit, and the architecture. But we have learned to find, and even replace these precious memories with new ones from here- sweet corn, chicken casserole, or my favorite -pecan pie. This replacement of memory is like reprogramming the computer. The old software is replaced with another, more effective one in a different setting. The immigrant has to reboot in the literal sense – change the soles of old worn shoes so he can walk a few more miles. Let me give an example of the Garcia

family that I serve. The Garcia's are a couple with four children, the oldest in high school, two in the middle school and one in elementary. They immigrated legally a year ago, and the father works the night shift in the mills for less than \$10 an hour. The wife cannot find a job because she is not trained. Since all that she knows is planting tomatoes and corn, she did that in her backyard. She works all day carrying buckets of water from the creek to make sure her crops don't shrivel and die. She is producing the only way she knows how! But the neighbors do not see it her way. They say that her backyard is untidy and disorderly! How un-American! Of course they are right! The problem is that the Garcia's have not yet made that cultural leap and have not yet got past the survival mode. But rest assured, with our help, she will get there. She too has to reprogram, and change her mental circuits. That will happen only when they have the financial stability and knowledge. At present, she does not have the time to be the perfect parent; she does not have the energy to be the ideal neighbor.

### **Reaching the Dreams through our Children**

What drove us on was the hope and consolation to watch our children grow, adapt, and acculturate in this setting. They do not remember nor acknowledge our native country, cannot appreciate the old customs and traditions, nor even sometimes understand the language. They slip into their new identity and it fits them like a new glove. They are American in every aspect. Meanwhile, after almost eleven years of struggling and keeping up with the demands of my immigrant life, only now do I have the time and the money to afford intensive classes in English, without sacrificing food on my table or heat during winter. I was too busy being in survival mode all these years. It is hard and I do have to face that difficult question that keeps cropping up time and again- Was it worth the sacrifice? Was it worth leaving all that I have left behind? I have to measure what I have lost and balance it with what I have gained. I do not have answers yet. Maybe if I see my daughter as successful architect or pharmacist, or see my son as an engineer, it will be worth it. But can I measure my life in terms of their success or failure? Would it be fair on them, would I guilt trip them, would I ask too much of them to be successful to justify our sacrifices. But at the same time, I don't think I can look at our life as immigrant in terms of our children's success. We have given them the opportunity- that was our duty and they will make or break with what they have. We can only measure our lives with what we have learned on the way.

### **Better persons**

Indeed my husband and I are wiser today; indeed this journey of reaching the American Dream has made us richer. And I am not talking of the home we now paying for, or of our dog, that we rescued from the pound. We are still healthy and we can still work. We have learned about the importance of education. My husband has worked through two undergraduate degrees, one master's degree and will now embark on his doctorate. I didn't go through College in America so that he could lead us ahead. We could only afford for one college education. We have learned to set the example to our kids through hard work, dedication, and perseverance. And that is the American way. We have learned never to give up despite all the obstacles. We have learned that the immigrant spirit is indomitable, unbreakable, and strong. This country has made us better persons and we cannot wait for the day next year when we will take the oath of allegiance and become citizens and celebrate with Apple Cider from George Washington's Mount Vernon distillery. But we will still have a long way to go and a lot of lessons to learn. The Immigrant life has blessed us by giving us the possibility to learn something new each day.

### **Put the experiences to the benefit of others**

In retrospect we have learned to transform all these wonderful experiences, good and hard, into knowledge that can be used for the benefit of others. I enjoy the privilege of working for immigrants and Migrant families, for the people with the most disadvantages. I have learned to value them for what they are, to understand the importance of each of them, and the importance of the continuity of the nation of immigrants, to thank God for each day and for each meal because some immigrant did the labor of having the harvest ready for us. I have learned to work with the parents and students to help them understand, educate, and give them new tools to reach their American Dream in spite of their immigration status.

It is my hope that we as a community can break this cycle of poverty and lack of knowledge by offering them the same benefits of American education. Each time they receive this opportunity, the fruit is not only for this parent, but also for their children, and for the generations to come. We hope that the Garcia children will not have to fill buckets of water or plant corn and tomatoes in their backyard because they have the potential to aspire to higher goals. Someday they too will break out of survival mode. When one generation breaks through the cycle of poverty, the fruit of their sacrifice trickles down to their future generations. As a caring community, that should be our

collective goal. Help them to be independent and self-sufficient. Given the right opportunities, they too can become our future leaders.

Therefore, I am so thankful for all the challenges I have had because these have given me a kaleidoscope of perspectives of life on the other side. I am also very thankful to be here safe and sound, living my freedom, and enjoying my rights. I made the leap. Home at last! To end with a quote from Tim Russert of NBC:

What a Country!!!

Thank you