

Leadership Georgia Speech

By Gabriela Torres

“No nos hemos convertido en un crisol sino en un mosaico con diferente gente, diferentes creencias, diferentes anhelos, esperanzas y sueños.”

This is a quote by Jimmy Carter which in English reads:

“We become not a melting pot but a beautiful mosaic; different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams.” – Jimmy Carter

“Fortunately, the time has long passed when people liked to regard the United States as some kind of melting pot, taking men and women from every part of the world and converting them into standardized, homogenized Americans. We are, I think, much more mature and wise today. Just as we welcome a world of diversity, so we glory in an America of Diversity.” – Hubert H. Humphrey

I am here today to the sake of diversity. I want to share with you why I left my country, what aspects were difficult and what opportunities I had by coming to the U.S., and finally what I would like to see different with respect to immigration; my purpose is simply to paint a better, more vivid, picture in your mind of what could be the life of an immigrant which will hopefully increase your appreciation for the great cultural diversity in our town, our state and our nation.

On a typical rainy day in Dalton Georgia I get up early in the morning and turn the TV on the Spanish channel to listen to the news while getting ready for work, then I get in my car and switch my brain to listen to an English radio station that way when I get to work my accent won't come so strong. During lunch I eat at a Japanese restaurant, or maybe I go the sandwich shop that's owned by the Vietnamese couple who have a hard time to take my order even though they also have an accent just like me. If I happen to take an afternoon walk I see those Indian ladies walking on the park dressed in

their full custom, those dresses that seem to move so fresh when the wind blows a little and I come to realize that staring at a little boy with big brown eyes who doesn't understand what I am saying because his native tongue is Urdu has become normal for me, that having my nails done by an Asian lady and then going to church with people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Peru is natural... and how can this be normal if it wasn't like this in the small town where I grew up....

I grew up in a place in the mountains where there are no immigration issues because nobody from another country wants to move in, except for the American missionaries who came to visit our church eight years ago for a summer. It was so fascinating listening to them speak and watching them have peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch. And it was also so frustrating not being able to communicate and to use a translator every time I wanted to know something about them. Having those people in our church and hosting the pastor and his family in my home made me realize that I was about to leave the rest of my life in a world so small, in a place that made my life feel like it had only one dimension. That feeling made me take the pastor's offer to come and live with his family and finish high school in this country; it made me leave my family dinners, and by saying family I mean aunts, uncles, cousins their spouses and all the kids getting together to eat at least once a week. That feeling took over me to the point that I didn't realize that never again would I have a two hour lunch with my mom, my dad and my brother and then maybe a siesta before the days kept going.

The American dream blinds you when you live in another country, but then culture shock wakes you up when you get to the US. Suddenly reading one page of a textbook becomes a four hour task punching words and letters in an electronic translator, ordering food turns into sticking to fast food places where you can say "number one" and get some kind of decent food back; forget places like subway where you have to pronounce every vegetable that's going to be in your turkey sandwich. Transportation becomes very difficult; you cannot just walk or ride a bike everywhere. In this country you need a car and a

license which takes passing a test in English. Nevertheless there are things that are easy to get used to like air-conditioning in the school, pervasive internet access, 24 hour customer service, or people calling you darling or hone wherever you go and drinking sweet tea any time of the day.

America is the land of opportunities; however, those opportunities depend on a person's legal status. I graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA; however, I wasn't eligible for Hope because I was not a resident of the state of Georgia. I couldn't apply to any kind of federal loans because since my parents were in Mexico I couldn't prove their income or send a "W2". So the only option left were to put aside the idea of pursuing higher education or pay out of state tuition and hope to get my residence before I completed my studies, keeping in mind that even when you are eligible to become a resident, the process is still very long. There are five major ways of attaining legal residence in the United States:

- 1- Family Based Immigration: which allows a permanent resident or citizen to petition their children, as long as they are younger than 18 years old, and their spouse or fiancé. The process might take up to ten years.
- 2- Study Visas: reserved for non-immigrants wishing to pursue academic studies and/or language training programs. This visa expires either after a predetermined period of time or once the individual completes the program of study when he or she is expected to return to their country of origin.
- 3- Work Visas Petition for Temporary Workers available to employers who wish to hire foreign workers to temporarily perform services or labor or to receive training. This visa is mainly used for non-immigrant categories; thus, in most cases, workers who enter the United States under this petition must depart the U.S. when their maximum period of stay has been reached.
- 4- Refugees. If you are currently in the United States and you have a risk of persecution for your political opinion or for belonging to a particular social group in your home country, you may be

eligible to apply for asylum. If you currently outside the United States and face a similar danger of persecution you may be eligible to apply for protection by the United States as a refugee. In order to qualify for asylum, you must establish that you are a refugee who is unable or unwilling to return to his or her country of nationality, or last habitual residence in the case of a person having no nationality, because of persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group or political opinion

- 5- Diversity Visas: The Diversity Visa Program is a congressionally mandated program that makes available 50,000 to 55,000 permanent resident visas annually, drawn from random selection among all entries to persons who meet strict eligibility requirements from countries with low rates of immigration to the United States.

There are a lot of situations; however, for which a well established process to become a US resident doesn't exist. For example there is the case of children who are brought to this country by their parents who are not permanent legal residents, the only way for them to attain higher education would be by paying out of state tuition, but then once graduated they wouldn't be able to work.

In my case it had already been seven years since we first applied for residence; so there was no guarantee that I would get my papers in the next four or five years. Nevertheless, I enrolled in Dalton State and started an associate's in Business Administration paying out of state tuition and working after school at a furniture store. I was fortunate to receive my residence a year later. A lot of opportunities came along with my change of legal status; I received a lot of scholarships including a studying abroad scholarship that allowed me to take classes in London. I finished my associates in Business Administrations and enrolled in a bachelor in Information Systems. The last summer in college I received one more scholarship to study abroad in Paris, and soon after my return I was offered a co-op

opportunity at J&J Industries as a programmer analyst. J&J offered me a full time position after I graduated and I have been working for J&J as a systems analyst for the last two year.

Even though becoming a legal resident change my life, it didn't change my roots. I am still one of the half a million Latinos living in the home of Martin Luther King, the state that gave us the Civil Rights Movement. Hispanic population has increased 300 percent in Georgia in the last decade. But sometimes it seems like this change instead of enhancing it is dividing communities. Crossing the river that separates the United State from South America is difficult, but crossing the gap that divides people in our towns is even worse. Being an immigrant is very uncomfortable because it allows people to stereotype who you are. It automatically places you in one side of gap and you become just one more foreigner in town, which puts me back where I came from, locked inside my own culture in a little tiny world, in a single dimension.

That's why I am so glad I am part of this event, because people like each one of you interested in hearing what a Mexican teacher or a Hispanic analyst have to say make me believe that a bridge between immigrants and native-born, Mexican and Americans can be built. That instead of stereotyping we can start appreciating everyone's differences. Makes me believe that more and more doors will be open regardless of somebody's race or accent and it makes me hope that we will realize that diversity is what has always made Georgia so unique.

"We Americans have the change to become someday a nation in which all radical stocks and classes can exist in their own selfhoods, but meet on a basis of respect and equality and live together, socially, economically, and politically. We can become a dynamic equilibrium, a harmony of many different elements, in which the whole will be greater than all its parts and greater than any society the world has seen before. It can still happen." – Shirley Anita Chislom

Thank you!