

The other side of the immigrant experience

Elon students share stories about immigrating to the United States

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Elon University sophomore Lucia Lozano always grew up with the expectation that at some point in her life, she would leave Colombia and live abroad. Her mother lived abroad when she was young and wanted to expose Lozano and her brother to the new perspectives, values and advantages one gains from coexisting with people from different cultures. Lozano moved when she was 12 years old.

"There was never the right time to do it because it was going to be a huge sacrifice, but when we did move, my brother had finished his first year of college there, and I was starting eighth grade. He didn't want to leave, he was happy in college with all his friends from school that he had known for 14 years," Lozano said. "It just worked out that way. My parent's jobs were not going well, and they just wanted to leave."

Carla, a senior at Elon whose name has been changed to protect her identity, moved to the U.S. from Mexico. Her eyes still tear up when she shares her story of how she and her family immigrated to the U.S. 19 years ago.

Carla and her family moved when she was only 3 years old. When they came to the U.S., her family started from scratch, owning nothing and working hard to find a better life. Carla and her family moved into a trailer park. Her parents worked prolonged hours for little money. Her mom worked mostly in the fields, and her dad had different jobs; he worked in restaurants for some time and then in a slaughterhouse.

"My family's story for me is an emotional one even though there are many parts of the story I don't know about," Carla said. "When I was younger, I guess I didn't understand a lot of things, but I just knew that my life was different than other people's. I could see the difference sometimes with teachers between us and other students in school. I learned English pretty fast, because my siblings taught me. But in school, we spoke Spanish and sometimes our teachers would tell us, 'Don't speak that language, you're in America,' and things like that. So I always knew there was something different about who I was and where I came from."

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SENIOR

Adapting to life in the United States

Both Lozano and Carla moved with their families to North Carolina – a state where, according to the Migration Policy Institute, 7.8 percent of the population is foreign-born, and 48.8 percent of people in that group are Latinos.

Lozano's family came to the U.S. with more securities. Lozano's mother found a good job in Chapel Hill as a teacher before they moved to the United States. They all entered the country with J-1 visas, while Carla's family didn't come into the country



The Lozano family hangs out during the holidays in their home.

PHOTO COURTESY OF LUCIA ROBLEDO

with legal documents or job security. However, both families had to make a lot of sacrifices in order to leave their homes, adjust to a new culture and environment and restart their lives in a new place.

"We made a very conscious choice of wanting to move our lives here. We are a family that had that choice and had securities of coming to stay with family members and my mom having a job, us having papers. In other words, we've had it so much easier than other people who have come here with less of a choice, with less securities and things waiting for them," Lozano said. "But even then, it's really hard. It takes a toll, and it's a lot of sacrifices. And even in the best cases, even in the places that you have the most waiting for you there, it's just always hard."

Since Lozano moved when she was 12, she was fully aware of everything she and her family had to sacrifice. She loves to learn but struggled in school in the beginning to the point that she didn't want to go. She wanted to stay home, watch movies and tune everything else out.

Lozano and her family went through anxiety, depression and hardship. They did have some family in the U.S., but most of Lozano's family was still in Colombia. She didn't have time to analyze her feelings. She knew she had to make it through, adapt, study hard and make her family proud. Lozano is still processing some of these feelings today.

"I'm the type of person that when big emotional things happen, I don't process in the moment, I process a month later," Lozano said.

Carla moved at a very young age. As she grew up, she realized she had different lifestyles at home and at school. She would go to school and be an excellent student, only thinking about her studies and how she could give back to her parents for all the sacrifices they've done for her by being a good student. Then, she would go home, where she only



Elon students attend the Collegiate Alliance for Immigration Reform in Harvard Conference Feb. 24.

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spoke Spanish and had to sometimes speak on the phone with relatives she had in Mexico who she had never met. She lived in two worlds at the same time. In one, she was encouraged to speak Spanish and embrace her heritage; in the other, she was encouraged to speak English and fit in.

Carla had to grow a very thick skin. She saw her parents work in jobs not worthy of their abilities, in places where people don't treat them right and in unhealthy conditions. Many times, people took advantage of them, and her parents couldn't say anything for fear of losing their jobs – something they couldn't afford.

"Being here is amazing, but I always have this feeling of just being really tired to keep seeing my parents go through things they don't deserve to go through," Carla said, "especially with everything that is going in the U.S. currently. There are a lot of stereotypes about immigrants, and so it's hard to see those things happening because not only does it attack me as a human but it attacks my parents most of all."

Challenges and overcoming obstacles

One of the roughest time periods for Carla was her senior year of high school. Carla said that is when she could understand what her parents had been living through during their time in the U.S. Senior year was a challenge for Carla because of the college application process. Due to her immigration status and being a first-generation college student with a lack of guidance, it was extremely difficult for her to apply to colleges.

"Primarily what made it really difficult is that we identify as undocumented. So I knew it was hard because I had kind of seen my brother go through that. But he was able to get a scholarship for international students in Chapel Hill. When I applied for the scholarship, I didn't get it, and I was like, 'What am I going to do now?' This is all I've ever wanted, and even beyond myself, I guess for my parents," Carla said. "I didn't want to fail them because they had literally given everything up for us."

Her college counselor helped her as much as she could through the exhausting process. Several of the schools she could and did apply to didn't give her enough scholarships.

But both Carla and Lozano applied to Elon University and received

scholarships that cover their full tuition every year.

"When I found out, honestly, I just kind of froze. I didn't know how to feel, I just couldn't believe it. All I kept thinking about was, I'm going to be able to go to school, I'm going to be able to do this, I'm doing this for my parents, I'm doing this for my family," Carla said. "I was really happy but at the same time it was so surreal to me."

Education played a big factor in why Lozano's family decided to move in the first place. Carla believes that by fully immersing herself in her studies, she can let her parents know that their sacrifices were worth it.

"Our parents are the original dreamers. ... They are the ones that first created a dream for us to have a better life than theirs, and if it weren't for them, I wouldn't be dreaming to have a better life, or to do better. I wouldn't be here, and wouldn't have done anything that I've done so far," Carla said. "In reality, they are the ones who have made us the people that we are today and currently we're just trying to do our best – to keep going but also to end up doing something that ends up benefiting them because they deserve more than what they receive."