

## STUDENT SHOWCASE

### The Journey for the American Dream

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Throughout the course we have talked about migration and the impacts of that decision not only for the individuals that are migrating but also their families.<sup>1</sup> We have read articles about different migrants, but we have not looked at personal stories that will make us understand why people decide to leave everything they know behind. For the Family Migration Stories Project, Diana was kind enough to share her mother's story. Some of the key points in the interview came from Diana explaining that her mother decided to migrate to find financial prosperity and stability and, ultimately, to find better options for her family. Some other key points were that this decision had a big impact not only for her, but also for her family. Something I found very interesting was the way in which Diana talked about how her experience compared to her expectations and the advice that she would give to someone who is thinking about migrating to the United States. The relationship that Diana's mother had with her siblings changed due to her migration and also her view of the United States changed upon arrival because the pretty picture of the American Dream that many people had painted for her turned out to be one of hardship and isolation. The one thing that kept her from throwing in the towel was her determination to build a better future for the family that she would later form with Diana's dad. Her resilience to build a better future for her and her future family is something to admire because the sacrifices and consequences that came from her decision were not easy.

Diana's mother is a good example of a transnational migrant. A transnational migrant is someone who maintains a connection with people in the country of origin while still settling in a new country. In the article "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society," Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller mention that initially scholars thought migrants in the United States had to give up their customs, language, values, and identities to move up the socioeconomic ladder, but now scholars have recognized that many migrants are still very much connected to and influenced by their ties to their homelands (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004, 1002-1003). One of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was prepared for Caitlin E. Fouratt's *Migration and Modernity* course. For more information about this assignment, see Fouratt's commentary in this issue.

things that we see very often in families of migrants is the impact that it has on them, and Diana's mother is no exception. She had to leave everything she knew, her family and her traditions, behind in order to gain financial stability and have a better socioeconomic position. However, she mentioned that coming here was a very hard decision because migrating without the right documentation was a one-way ticket, meaning that she might never be able to return to see the family she left behind. However, in order to participate in transnational processes migrants do not have to physically go back and forth between countries. Technology is a great example of a method through which people participate in transnational processes. Diana's mother was able to grow closer to her siblings in Mexico because she was able to keep in touch with them through social media. Even though it is not the same as being present, this transnational communication still allowed her to be a part of her siblings' lives. It is still not an easy process and migration affects every family member, whether they migrate or stay behind. Further, lack of legal status in the host country makes some migrants feel isolated or alone, and, in Diana's mother's case, this might have encouraged her to keep pushing to keep strong transnational ties with her family even though she could not visit. As Diana grew older, she noticed that continuing with these transnational ties meant a lot to her mother, therefore she continues to be a part of them and she knows that these ties will last a lifetime.

Another key point in the interview was when Diana compared her expectations and her experiences. Anderson's argument in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (1991) is that nations are imagined communities and therefore loyalty to one's country or any country is a social construction. When we discussed Anderson's book in class, we came up with elements or aspects that characterized U.S. national identity and one idea that was repeated by many students was that this country gives migrants the idea of the "American Dream." However, the "American Dream" is at least partly a myth. Her mother had big expectations because migrants from her hometown painted a pretty picture for her. She hoped to have independence and financial stability to also help out her parents and siblings back in Mexico. Once Diana's mother arrived in the United States, she realized that the friends who had encouraged her to migrate had lied about the "wonderful" life that people can have here, especially migrants. We see in Jennifer Hirsch's *A Courtship After Marriage* (2003) that many times migrants want to project happiness and success to their friends and relatives back home, hiding the struggles and challenges they face in the U.S. The financial stability and comfortable life that Diana's mother craved so much came with a price tag and it was that she had to work multiple and odd jobs and endless hours in order to maintain a proper lifestyle here and help out her family back in Mexico. While this decision did not come with a warning label, she hoped that working ten times harder would pay off for her entire family.

Working on this project made me realize that migration affects every single family member and the decision to leave everything and everyone behind is not an easy one, but it is sometimes necessary to better our lives. There are thousands of migrants in this

country that have done the same thing as Diana's mother. Her determination to seek a better life for her future came with great consequences and she was very disappointed with the jobs she had to take up, the discrimination she encountered, and the feeling of isolation she endured for many years. However, she did not break, and thanks to that, Diana and her family are able to tell their stories. Now that she knows how hard things can be, Diana's mother wants to give advice to someone who is thinking about coming here. She says that even though this is the land of opportunities, the only way you will be able to succeed and have those opportunities is to work extra hard and to be an outstanding citizen. The narrative seems to be the same one once again: migrants work hard to a lot of the time stay stuck in the same place.

The one thing we can take away from Diana's mother's story besides the whole idea of the "American Dream" is that there are faces behind these stories and while a lot of the stories sound very familiar in the hardships and adversities people have to endure, each and every person is their own individual and no one should ever generalize a group of people. One of the narratives of the American Dream is that you have to work hard to achieve it, but it seems like migrants have to work for this dream much harder than the average citizen and it is unfair because a lot of the time their legal status does not allow them to advance much. I believe that Diana's life has been affected in many ways, but the main thing that I believe has shaped her into the amazing woman she is today is that she appreciates and works as hard as her parents to better her future and to hopefully repay them for the sacrifices they have made. Migrants all over the world have a lot to bring to the table. It might be their intelligence, their labor, or their ideas and that is why we should welcome them with open arms regardless of the places they come from. The one thing that we see very often due to this political climate is that it does not matter if we prosper financially because at the end of the day we are still not accepted as Americans, so is this really the American Dream?

## References

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