

Who tells your story?

I had a great and unique experience growing up. My name is Cristan Omar Rodriguez. I am 28 years old, and I was born in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. In Mexico, *mi ama* would work some days in a *tamaleria* where they would make tamales, and other days she would stay home and take care of my abuela. *Mi apa* would work in *El Camion* in public transportation five days a week. He would transport people to the store, their house, and to school. He would also work as a mechanic at home.

I grew up in a neighborhood that was calm and silent. The streets were filled with empty chip bags and tumbleweeds just dragging themselves along the road because of how dry it was. You could see each house with their metal gates and bars. My house where I grew up was unique. While growing up I remember it had a *pila*, or tub, in the backyard that my dad and grandpa built for us. Whenever it was a hot day we would fill it up with water and start swimming and messing around. When it rained, there would be a lot of tadpoles in the *pila* and sometimes even in the house.



I grew up with three sisters. Each one was very different from each other. My oldest sister is Yazmin. She is very helpful with *mi ama* and *mi apa*. She helped *mi ama* by taking care of us when she was working or out of the house. She would also help *mi apa* with the mechanics on cars and *el camion*. The second oldest is Brenda. She would

help *mi ama* cook in the kitchen or make meals for the family. My sister would make delicious *bunuelos* for dessert and she would have a really good breakfast, *Chicharrón en Verde y tortillas de harina*. My youngest sister was Jessica. She would help clean the house and make sure there were no clothes laying around on the floor or trash on the floor. She would sweep, mop, and clean her room. I would help my dad outside with the mechanics on cars or usually stay inside and play video games. My favorite video games were Resident Evil.



Before I came to the U.S, I didn't have any thoughts or plans. *Mi apa* migrated to El Paso, Texas because he couldn't work in *El Camion* from all the violence that happened in Juarez. *Mi ama* would always go visit *mi apa* on the weekends. Sometimes I would go with her, and other times I would stay and take care of *mi abuelita*. After a year went by, I turned 14 years old and my parents decided that I would have to go live with my sister and brother-in-law in Denver.

My parents made the decision for me to go to the U.S. because there was so much violence everyday with drugs and murders in Juarez. *Mi ama* and I took *los paisanos* on our way here. This is a traveling bus that will take you places. In total the ride was twelve hours. I had a visa that made my immigration experience easier than others. **Before I got to the U.S. I thought it was going to be safe, unlike Ciudad Juarez. I thought there would be bigger places to go to, more job opportunities, and more events. I wasn't wrong, but I wasn't right.** When I first got here, I realized there was a lot of graffiti downtown

with a lot of homeless people. One of the first things that came to my mind was that it reminded me of *Juarez* because there would be people asking for money on the streets. I didn't think there would be homeless people in America.

After a while I started going to high school again. It was really hard understanding the students and teachers. After a few months I decided to start going to English classes to start learning how to speak it.

It was hard to adapt to learning English because of the words that sounded the same. Going to the store was still hard. I wasn't able to ask anyone for help, especially when I went by myself. There would be people just staring weirdly at me because I looked like I didn't know what I was doing. At some points I wanted to give up because I thought it was impossible to be here and to do anything. But I kept going to my English classes, and I got better and better. I finally started to understand a few words in English. In the year 2012 I graduated from high school. *Mi ama* came to my graduation in the U.S. She stayed for a week, then left back to go home. I am proud of being able to speak and understand English.

In the U.S. it was really hard to get a job or even to do anything if you did not have your papers. I tried to apply to Pima to have a career as a dental assistant, but they denied my entrance because I did not have my documents. I then applied to *Del Monte* where they would cut fruits to make canned fruit or trays with fresh fruit on them like watermelon, pineapple and cantaloupe. After working there for a while, I started to realize that they would discriminate against their workers and treat them badly. They were racist, and I would be mad most of the day. We wouldn't have the proper equipment that people would usually get because of our immigration status. We would also get treated very badly, and they would yell at us for doing something wrong. After a month, I decided to quit. I would stay home and take care of my nieces, Ashley and Azul, and nephew, Brandon.

When I was at home I got news from my older sister telling me that *mi ama* had gotten colon cancer. At that moment I was in shock, and I didn't know what to say. There were tears coming out of my eyes. *Mi ama* left the hospital after two days and they told her she had to go to a specialist. When

she went to her appointment they told her that she was going to need surgery to remove the cancer. On January 5th, 2017, she had her surgery for 18 hours. She went through the procedure and the doctors told us that she had a lot of tumors and one five pound tumor in her stomach. She stayed in the Intensive Care Unit for three days. After that they sent her home for recovery, and in two weeks she had to start getting chemotherapy. *Mi apa* would stay home and stay right by her side. He would feed her and take care of her. The chemo caused her to lose all of her hair, and she became very weak. She couldn't walk, and she lost a lot of weight and most of her muscles.

After six months of chemotherapy, she started feeling better and was starting to walk and eat a lot more than usual. But all of a sudden, the doctors told us that the cancer came back, and she had to go to the hospital once again. They ran a lot of blood tests and they said this time it was liver cancer. She started to have kidney failure and wasn't able to get more chemotherapy. In the hospital she would always sleep because she was super tired, and she would barely do anything.

On April 23, 2018, my sister and I sent her some flowers for her birthday without knowing this was going to be her last birthday. One month after her birthday, she passed away in my older sister's arms. My sisters and *mi apa* were really sad. I knew *mi apa* would be very sad, depressed, anxious and probably even more. He stayed at home alone with no one for him to talk to. The only people he had now were me and my sisters.

My heart was broken and torn apart. I wasn't able to see her and say my final goodbyes because I still didn't have papers. After that, nothing was the same anymore. I missed her so much because she would always come once or twice a year to see me. I was depressed most of the time knowing that I wasn't going to see my mom again. I would always cry at night because of how much I missed her. **I felt like I had left the most important person in my life behind. I felt like I needed to go back.**

After some time getting some rest at home, I got a job and started working at a restaurant in Cherry Creek called *Cocina Colores*. By this time I was making 17 dollars an hour, and I knew *mi ama y mi*

apa were really proud of me. This job helped me to pay for the car of my dreams. The car of my dreams was a black Dodge Charger STX. Soon enough, I got another job in construction. My experience while working in construction was hard. I had to go up ladders and try not to look down. I also had to place floors and walls. I was going up the ladder



on a snowy day and missed a step and fell 2-3 stories down. I injured my leg and had to place ice on it so it was able to heal.

Now that I have lived here for half of my life, I prefer the U.S. instead of Ciudad Juarez. There are a lot more supplies, jobs, events, and places. My goal was to come and live a better lifestyle here in

the U.S. I have achieved my goal by getting a job, talking to more people here, understanding them, and also being able to help my sister. I hope to have or even make a family in the future with someone who cares for their family and mine. I wish people knew that some immigrants have to face hard times traveling and leaving their home for a better place where they will be safe and have a better life. I hope one day I will finally be able to visit my family in Ciudad Juarez, especially my dad in El Paso, Texas.

story told by: Brandon