

CHAPTER 16

Lucia: Searching for the Elusive Light at the End of the Tunnel

Listening to Lucia's long list of educational accomplishments, it is hard to believe she made her way through the educational system with limited resources as an undocumented student. She is just one of the thousands of high-achieving immigrant students who graduate from American high schools each year, but have limited college prospects due to their legal status. Despite the many obstacles Lucia has faced, her story is one of a never-ending search to find the light of U.S. citizenship at the end of her tunnel.

Lucia's story is motivational and inspiring. She came to the United States with her parents when she was 7 years old. As she was about to finish second grade in Mexico, her parents told her they had decided to make the journey to the U.S. Although she was perfectly happy living in the small town in Mexico where she was born, her father felt that there were not enough opportunities to provide for his family, and much to Lucia's dismay, the family would be making the journey north in search of a better future. It was decided that her father would come first, and Lucia, her sister, and mother would follow.

Leaving everything familiar behind- her town, school, family, and friends- Lucia braced herself for her new life in the U.S. She was scared, as any child at the tender age of 7 would be, for what seemed like the mere blink of an eye, she was immersed in a new and unfamiliar place that often left her feeling like a fish out of water. Two of her toughest challenges laid ahead for young Lucia, starting school and mastering English.

From the moment she set foot in her new school, she knew that she was very different than her American classmates. Everything was so different from her school in Mexico where she completed second grade. Although she described her school in Mexico with feelings of joy, "I think school was fun. I loved it," her description of school in the U.S. was the exact opposite. In very vivid language, she described her early school days as "horrible," and feeling very out of place:

It was horrible. I remember the very first week of third grade, I always like to describe it as the Charlie Brown moment where the teacher's going 'whaa-whaa-whaa' and you don't understand a word she's saying. I sat in the back of the class and all my classmates were Anglo. My teacher was very, very mean. She didn't like us, and made sure we didn't speak Spanish in the classroom. Anytime she caught us speaking Spanish, she would knock

something down, like a ruler on the desk and she would say, "We do not speak Spanish here. You do that on your off-time!"

Learning in a new language was a challenge for Lucia. Her description of her initial schooling experience is interesting because she uses a reference to one of the quintessential American cartoons- Charlie Brown- to describe how she felt as an Spanish-speaking immigrant child thrown into the American educational system. Her Charlie Brown reference clearly speaks to her American cultural orientation. Knowing that she was in for one of the toughest challenges of her life, Lucia began to use the resourcefulness and determination that was so evident throughout her story. She immediately looked for allies, people who could assist her with learning English as quickly as possible. She describes how a classmate became her personal translator:

There was one girl who sat by me in the back and she kind of had a Mexican last name, but I thought, "She doesn't really look Mexican." She looked at me kind of weird, but then when I started talking to her, she told me she understands some Spanish and she would try to help me and so she was very friendly and she knew English. English was her first language, but her grandmother spoke Spanish and her grandmother was her baby-sitter and so she kind of knew some Spanish. She would help me try to understand as much as she could translate from the teacher and help me do some of the homework and understand it.

It is truly ironic that Lucia has worked so hard and has been so motivated to master aspects of American culture such as becoming fluent in English, yet she still finds herself on the fringes of American society due to her legal status. It is also quite amazing that even under negative circumstances, her love for school and learning persisted in the face of adversity. Even at such a young age, Lucia was hopeful that a reward awaited her, a bright light at the end of her educational tunnel.

It was not until her freshmen year in high school when Lucia was starting to prepare for college that she first had to face the reality of being undocumented. In the back of her mind, she said she always knew she was not here legally, but when she realized it would affect her dreams of going to college then it really sunk in. When she was filling-out the forms to take the SAT and asked her mom for her social security number her biggest fear was confirmed:

I always knew it, but I didn't want to accept it. Having my parents tell me was really hard because I thought, "Forget it then, I don't need to take the SATs and I don't need to take those things for college."

Although Lucia's spirits were down after learning about her undocumented status, she did not stop working hard and excelling in school. She forged on. Her academic

accomplishments in high school alone illuminate her persistence and hopefulness that she could still reach the light at the end of the tunnel. Lucia graduated in the top 50 of her class of 1,000 students with a GPA of 3.89. She also received numerous academic awards because she was such an outstanding student:

I got a lot of awards in high school. I won the Compact Scholarship, the Northside Impact Scholarship, and then I also got the “Friendliest Face in the Family” award because no matter what anybody said, I always kept a smile on my face. I also got the “Most Passionate in the Family” award because I always had something I was passionate about or a cause I was fighting for. I got Outstanding Student of the Year my senior year. They also gave me the “Multicultural Award” because I brought in a Chicano muralist from L.A. and together with MEChA and the community, we raised \$37,000 so we could put a really large multicultural mural on our campus.

Lucia was also very involved in extracurricular activities in high school often taking on leadership roles for which she received numerous distinctions:

I joined mock trial in high school and we won...we were state champions in 1998 and I was the lead prosecuting attorney and I was star witness. I got state awards for being the best defense witness. I joined speech and debate and I did academic decathlon.

In high school Lucia was also involved in Associated Student Body (ASB) and MEChA. It was during this time that she got more involved with volunteering, community service, and many other important civic activities:

I would go to the convalescent home and volunteer there every summer after that because I loved it. I loved working with the elderly and I was in charge of playing games with them, so that was even more fun for me because I got to play bingo with them and teach them new things.

Since high school and continuing to the day of my interview with her, Lucia has continued to volunteer and do community service. In fact, I interviewed her during a two-hour break she had running a weekend leadership workshop for high school students.

Lucia’s journey through the educational system has been anything but easy. When she graduated from high school, she was initially accepted to UC Berkeley, the best and arguably the most prestigious public university in the world. But when she could not provide them with a social security number, they withdrew her acceptance. Although this situation enraged her, it also renewed her motivation to succeed and continue to work toward her long-term career goals:

I was like, “I don’t care if Berkeley doesn’t want me. I’m going to do something else,” so I used my connections. I just talked to everybody and anybody I knew. I would tell them my story and they would follow-up with me and they would say, “I don’t know how we’re going to help you, but we’re going to help you,” and they would do things like give me scholarships and just things like that.

Similar to when Lucia was in elementary school, she skillfully sought out help from others. She is a social butterfly and so articulate that people cannot help but be sympathetic to her plight because she is so hard working and ambitious. Since high school, Lucia has often relied on the kindness of strangers to assist her. She explains some of the generous gifts she received from teachers at her high school:

They would be like, “here, we’re paying for your prom,” or just things that they knew would help me out. I got that from a whole bunch of people everywhere I went. My high school history teacher paid for my grad night ticket. My other high school teacher paid for my class ring.

At the community college she continued to meet other kind souls. They helped her pay for college because she had to pay higher tuition fees than everyone else. Due to her undocumented status she had to pay \$142 a unit while her U.S. born classmates only paid \$10 a unit. She explains the kindness of a woman she worked for who assisted her when she was enrolled in community college:

I met a really nice lady who I just ended up taking care of her kids. She was a blessing because I got to clean her house and take care of her kids and she would give me money for college. I always knew she paid me more than she should have and she knew that too, but she knew where the money was going so she would always tell me, “Don’t worry. I’ll pay for your first semester,” or “I’ll pay for your second semester.” She helped me get another job where they paid me in cash.

As this quote demonstrates, Lucia often had to find jobs that paid her “under the table” such as cleaning houses or taking care of people’s children because her status prevented her from getting a regular job. She always worked multiple jobs to make sure she had money for her tuition so she could stay in college:

I had to learn how to hustle. I had to do whatever I could do, anything to get a job. I would clean houses, take care of people’s kids, mow lawns, anything just to make sure I got that money to pay for the classes every quarter.

After a little over two years, Lucia was able to transfer to a local public, four-year university. Even though she was easily accepted to the university based upon her academic credentials, her challenge was paying the out-of-state tuition that was

required of her because she was not a U.S. citizen. Just as she had done before at the community college, she hustled to find jobs to pay her tuition each semester. Lucia always worked more than 40 hours a week juggling multiple jobs during college to earn enough money to attend school full-time:

I would take care of kids. I did a lot of tutoring for little kids and that helped me pay the bills. I even worked for a dotcom at some point doing college recruiting. It was like a college information website with free email for students or whatever and somehow I got hired. I don't even know how that happened, but I would be on campus posting up all these posters for students to sign up to this thing and I would just get paychecks every month and that was wonderful. I did whatever I could to hustle.

Even though she was working and going to school full-time, Lucia always found time to contribute to her community and become involved in social and political issues. Throughout her life, she has always been very involved in politics:

I was always talking to a legislator or a community official. I volunteered in every political campaign in my area. Any time there was an opportunity to help a Democratic candidate, I would help them. I even helped one Republican candidate because I just thought he was amazing and I didn't care he was a Republican. I helped in the elections for every congressperson in my area, every assemblyperson, every mayoral election. I even helped with the attorney general campaign and I did one of the Davis' campaigns. I was involved in school board elections like crazy. I did the whole painstaking labor of walking house-to-house and knocking on doors and telling people why they should vote for the candidate we were supporting. For my efforts, I got Outstanding Volunteer of the Campaign awards because I was there all the time and I didn't care if I had to take two buses to get to that campaign headquarters, I did it.

With numerous obstacles in her path, Lucia has managed to overcome them and accomplish many, but not all, of her educational goals. She has earned a Master's degree, but still hopes to attend law school and become a lawyer. For Lucia, the hardest part of being undocumented is that she has worked so hard in school, but her Bachelor's degree, and Master's degree cannot give her what she desperately needs and has rightfully earned with her countless contributions to American society:

The biggest disappointment is knowing that there's no light at the end of the tunnel. Knowing that it doesn't matter how many degrees you get, it doesn't matter, at the end of my degree, there was no job for me. There was no job for my family. There was no way of me putting all this education to use that I

had paid for by cleaning houses and taking care of people's kids. That has definitely been the most challenging part.

At the end of my conversation with Lucia, it seemed like the light at the end of the tunnel that seemed so bright when she was in elementary school had dimmed considerable, and sadly, may not rekindle. She feels as though she is being punished for a decision her parents made many years ago to come to the United States in pursuit of the American Dream:

I wasn't asked to be brought here. I didn't choose to come here. I didn't ask for my situation. I feel like it's a punishment. I did everything I was told to do. I stayed out of trouble. I stayed out of gangs. I didn't get pregnant at 16. I'm a great member of society. I know more of civic duty than most naturalized or US born citizens. I know more about politics than most US citizens. So why am I being punished?