

## YOUTH VOICES

### *Three Questions*

KRIZTYAN ALBERTO MORENO

*Esperanza Community Collegial Academy, Phoenix, Arizona*

Born at just six months and three weeks, my life has always been a struggle. I was born in Chihuahua, Mexico—a beautiful place. I can't say I remember much from my first years of life. I was brought to Phoenix, Arizona, at the mere age of three. My mother left Mexico in the hope that she could help provide my older brother and me with a better education than her own, away from drugs and violence. It has been her life's dream to see us graduate from high school. My grandmother's last words were "hurry back."

Borders don't stop people from going places. They just make it harder for them to get back. I guess death travels much faster and sees no borders. It has been thirteen years since my grandmother died, and we still haven't made it back. When she died, I saw my older brother and my mother crying, but my eyes were dry. I was seven years old. I knew how to cry. However, I had lost my emotional connection to her, so I could not understand their pain. It wasn't until later that year, in school, that I shed tears like rain. I was asked to write a story about my grandmother and I realized I didn't have one.

Those weren't the only things I had lost coming to the U.S. Soon I began to lose my sense of personal worth. The first time I was called an "illegal" I was confused. I believe that was the first time my mother realized that we had surrendered our status as citizens, and we were now undocumented immigrants. My struggle had just doubled. Little did I know, three questions would soon change my fate.

I remember the first time I walked into the so-called Honors English class at Paradise Valley High School during my freshman year. Everyone, including the teacher, looked at me as if I were in the wrong place. Perhaps it was for a different reason, but I had noticed right away that I was the only brown person in the room. I honestly felt very uncomfortable. That feeling of being different came from the fact that I could not identify with any of the other students in that class. The main reason for this was that we lived completely different lives outside of school. For instance, I could not relate to being excited about

getting my driving permit because I was not “eligible” for it. You have to have a Social Security number to obtain a driving permit or a driver’s license in this country. But I do have to mention that Mr. Van Buren, the teacher of the Honors English class, seemed pleased with the fact that I was in his class and that I was Mexican. He told me about how special that made me and encouraged me to try harder.

However, financial problems at home were beginning to interfere with my learning at school. I got a job at a pizza shop in order to stop being dependent on my parents. My mother told me that I should start saving money, and I asked her why. She then made the comment, “You should try to go to college.” I told her, “I won’t only try; I will go to college.” During my sophomore year in school, I took the Arizona Instrument to Measure Standards (AIMS) test. When the results came in, I was told that I was eligible for a scholarship because I had successfully passed every area. Since I had discovered I was illegal by this time, in the back of my head I knew I was not going to be able to take advantage of that. All of those negative experiences and the harsh anti-immigrant laws in Arizona did not help my situation. Eventually, my family and I were forced to leave the state, and I dropped out of high school.

However, there I was, eighteen years old with no hope, no reason to keep pushing on, and virtually no future. I could have given up. I could have sworn nothing could change my life. My mother’s face was the only thing circulating in my mind at the time. Growing up, she always kept my brother and me strong and did her very best to keep us happy; still, I could always see the sadness in her eyes. My mother, along with every one of my teachers, always told me I could do anything with my life. I come from a family where the most educated member has only graduated from middle school. As a child I could see murders, gangs, and drugs around me, but was told to always smile and keep my head up high. That’s exactly what I had done all my life. However, at this point, I had become a disappointment to my mother, my family, and, most importantly, myself. I began to get lost in a world of drugs and alcohol abuse.

Then, I was asked the most life-defining question I had been asked to that date, by my future wife—“Do you want to come to Arizona with me?” I thought about it for a week and came to the conclusion that I had nothing to lose, literally. I was on what you could call a leash: I was tied to a drug addiction and a past from which I could not free myself. I was a high school dropout and an illegal Mexican, and I had no way of earning a living.

My first couple of months back in Phoenix were depressing, but that was nothing new. I eventually got a job as a cook in a restaurant. The pay was low and I was working until midnight and on weekends. After a year or so, I was asked to provide a Social Security number and a state-issued ID. And guess what? I didn’t have either one, so I quit the next day.

It was August, and several of my cousins had moved here from Mexico. Two of them, Erick and Sinahi, enrolled in a high school that was in our commu-

nity. Then, the two of them came to me with the second question: “Why don’t you go check out Esperanza Community Collegial Academy?”

Walking into the school made me sweat; I was fretting about the idea of being rejected from a high school again. A week earlier I had attempted to reenroll at Paradise Valley High School, and the assistant principal had told me to go get a GED. *Esperanza* means “hope” in Spanish, and that’s exactly what I found at Esperanza. It is a door to a world that none of my past family members have ever been able to unlock or open.

At school I met a man named Salvador Reza; he opened my eyes to reality in a five-minute conversation. Because a couple of months ago I was doing nothing productive, I realized that what he was saying was true. Through stereotypes, society attempts to hold us down and shape who we are. We must stop calling ourselves “fools.” We must stop acting like fools. Basically, Salvador mentioned every internal conflict I had, and he told me how to fight those conflicts. He must have been the first person to make me feel like someone actually cared about me and about my people. “You changed my life today,” I said to him, on the verge of tearing up.

I have been blessed with a second chance to find myself and my place in this world. I have been lost all of my life, because not knowing where I come from is not knowing where I’m going. At Esperanza I am now part of a program that promotes higher education, MEXA (Movimiento Estudiantil Xicano de Aztlan). I am also part of the student council. Through MEXA I have learned that I am a human above anything. I have the natural right to educate myself. I am free to migrate to wherever I wish. I have learned about my ancestors, who were here over thirty thousand years ago versus the last six hundred years of colonization. This has helped me rethink what it means to be illegal. Because MEXA has helped me learn about where I come from, I now know where I’m going. However, all of this means nothing without the will to move forward in order to make a difference. Education is slowly helping me relinquish these chains with which society has tied me down.

I have been asked a third question, one that most Mexican students leave unanswered, or answer “no” to: Do you want to go to college? My response is, “I will go to college.”

This article has been reprinted with permission of the *Harvard Educational Review* (ISSN 0017-8055) for personal use only. Posting on a public website or on a listserv is not allowed. Any other use, print or electronic, will require written permission from the *Review*. You may subscribe to *HER* at [www.harvardeducationalreview.org](http://www.harvardeducationalreview.org). *HER* is published quarterly by the Harvard Education Publishing Group, 8 Story Street, Cambridge, MA 02138, tel. 617-495-3432. Copyright © by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.