Mariana Sarmiento was born in Mexico and came to Las Vegas when she was around four years old, some time around the year 2000. She spoke only Spanish when she attended school. At the time of the interview, she had recently completed her Master’s in Social Work from the University of Las Vegas and was working at the college. At the time of the interview she was somewhere in her mid-twenties and had Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status.

In her interview, Mariana recalls even as a little girl she knew she couldn’t waste any food. She remembers the long hot bus rides to pay the utility bills and other places her parents had to go in the hot Las Vegas summers because they had no car. There was never any talk of owning a house. She only remembers a couple of health checkups growing up. The community around her used herbs and other non-medical practices to cure ailments. She is grateful to her elementary school for the eye exams they provided her, since with it she discovered she needed glasses in the second grade. When she was of age to get a driver’s license and a job, she realized the determent of being undocumented. The most difficult time for her was not being able to talk to anyone about it until in a high school class, she produced a video about undocumented people. That was when her classmates began sharing their stories.

She knew she wanted to go to college but didn’t think she had a chance being undocumented as she was not allowed to hold a job and had no Social Security Number. Through a counselor, she found out that graduating from a Nevada high school, she was allowed to attend public university in the state (with in-state tuition). After one year, with a lot of help, she applied for DACA and then was able to work and help pay for her tuition. At the University of Las Vegas, she became very involved with immigrant students protesting and learning about the struggles of becoming a citizen. This experience shaped her future of becoming a social worker educating the faculty of UNLV on the struggles of immigration. She feels the critical activity for her future was becoming involved with the Congressional Spanish Caucus Institute while in college. They protested and participated in a Town Hall where they told their stories and developed a task force that led to the position of the Resource Coordinator.

Mariana thinks education is the most important component in making change. Her position as a coordinator is to focus on terminology, misconceptions, dos and don’ts of disclosure and the internal work examining policies to change within the college structure. Before 2017 people were hesitant in speaking about being undocumented. Things began to change while Mariana was an undergraduate and DACA came about. She emphasizes that DACA is NOT a pathway to citizenship. It protects a person from being deported and provides authorization to work. But the negative side of DACA is that it pits undocumented people against each other – those that have it and those who do not or the “good” and the “bad”. Also, providing all the documentation to apply for DACA along with engaging a lawyer and paying $500 is very difficult. The process is repeated periodically and must be adhered to by closing dates or one will lose the “privilege”.

Mariana is not sure where life will take her except she feels called to higher education. She explains that education is most important because people like her parents never had the opportunity. She is curious what the narrative will be around immigration in 50 years. Will it shift even though there will always be people moving to new places? Her call to action is changing the view that many have of black and brown immigrants.

Summary by Lois Bianchi, UUFNN Borderlands Justice Team