José Rodrigues, who is using alias for this interview, self identifies as an undocumented person from Mexico. He arrived in Nevada with family members in the 2016 as a high school student. Before arriving, his family lived a perfectly normal life in Mexico where everyone spoke the same language. He had friends and all his family there. He left everything to come to Reno, not speaking any English. At the time of the interview, he was in his twenties, attended the University of Nevada, Reno, and remained undocumented.

In his interview, he shares stories about arriving and adjusting to the U.S. He explains that his immediate family arrived by airplane; he acknowledged his voyage was not as difficult as those who cross the border on foot and without documentation. Like others, he explains, his family immigrated to the U.S. to escape economic problems and to find a better life. José found it very difficult at first. He saw the other students driving, working, and buying anything they wanted. “It was very, very difficult and very frustrating because, one comes here with the desire to excel but, the fact of not having documentation does affect a lot; it holds you back.” He believes the hardest thing for undocumented people is not having access to healthcare because a social security number is required. It is very expensive and they do not have the resources to cover medical expenses. He says all people need access to healthcare. If something serious happened in terms of health to any member of his family, they had to depend on family members or friends to help pay for the expenses. He didn’t think there would be any other resources. In Mexico the healthcare services are much more affordable. Additionally, undocumented people have to go through a lot of work gathering documents to gain work permits.

José shared his thoughts on education in Mexico and the U.S. In Mexico, he explained, you don’t have the choice of picking classes. “You simply take the indicated classes and that’s that, you do not have the liberty of choice.” The principal challenge coming to the U.S. as a student is the language and learning content in an unfamiliar language. When he arrived, he started high school and thought the U.S. was behind Mexico in terms of educational achievements because the middle schools there were comparable to high school here. But the facilities in the U.S., he commented, are maintained better. But in Mexico education is more accessible expense wise, while “the university here is quite expensive.”

José felt the most important need he had arriving in the U.S. was learning English that is what he focused on most. In high school he attended special English classes but found it frustrating because he felt like a baby having to start with learning words for colors, names of animals, the numbers and the days of the week. Primarily the first year was creating a string of basic vocabulary in order to speak in sentences. At UNR, José enjoyed meeting other Latinos and felt the importance of supporting one another. Learning about the available resources at UNR, however, was difficult for immigrant students. At UNR, he noticed there were many people who are in favor DACA but that still the topic of immigration seemed “taboo.” José feels it is important to talk about immigration and to let other Hispanic student know they are not alone. He would like to let it be known that immigrants are not bad people and do not turn into delinquents.

José thinks immigrants should be admired for leaving family, friends, their own language to come to the U.S. then working hard in learn a new language and face an uncertain future. He is sorry that many people don’t empathize with the border crossings saying after all, immigrants contribute to this country. He also laments that the biggest problem for university students is the majority of scholarships come from federal money having very few avenues for immigrant financial support.

José also spoke on immigration and politics. He remembers feeling very scared when Donald Trump became president and knows many colleagues who returned to their native countries for fear of deportation. He feels Donald Trump encourage white supremacy causing many immigrant students to feel isolated and scared. During this time José’s friend told him of racist incidents on campus against black students. He feels students are more tranquil with Biden. Addressing what has made him stronger mentally and emotionally, José said his experiences have molded him into a stronger person than if he had stayed in Mexico. For a final thought, José said the U.S. is constructed by immigrants…what better way to get along with everyone. Right?

Summary by Lois Bianchi, UUFNN Borderlands Justice Team