Summary of Taped Interview with Martha

Martha was born in Mexico sometime around the late 1980s. She decided to share only her first name for this interview. Her parents came to the U.S. in the early ‘90s from Mexico City, hoping to arrange a better life and more opportunities for their family. They left their children in the temporary care of their grandmother while completing arrangements to have her and the children join them in California. Martha was 6 or 7 when she came with her grandmother and her siblings to join her parents. She had three children in California before moving to Nevada as an adult and was working without documentation in the restaurant and service industries. At the time of the interview she was in her thirties and remained undocumented.

Martha explains that she has few memories of her life in Mexico. She recalls food and religious practices, especially around Christmas—traditions that her family continued to practice after relocating to the States. She shares that she attended school in California and, because she was so young when she arrived, became fluent in the new language with relative ease. As a young adult in California, Martha had three daughters. She explains that because her partner became abusive and because she had family in Nevada, she moved with her daughters to Reno where she was able to work in her aunt’s restaurant and, with help from various family members, get on her feet.

Martha observes that undocumented people largely are employed in poorly paid work, because of their need to stay hidden from the systems that come into play with the benefits that generally accompany better-paying jobs—health insurance, for example. She explains that although she feels she herself has been fortunate in her treatment by employers, she has seen many instances where other undocumented residents have not been treated as well. She explains how she has suffered the constant sense of living “in a dark place” because of her need to avoid drawing official attention to herself; and suffers as well the unrelenting stress and oppressive dread of discovery and deportation. She also explains that being separated from her daughters or having to take them out of the only home they have ever had and into a country they have never set foot in is her greatest fear, and one she is never free from. She recounts the difficulty of being ineligible for any assistance with health expenses for her citizen children (due to her income threshold just exceeding the qualifications). She shares that when she had to have surgery on one occasion and be out of work during recovery, she had to rely on assistance from her family. Then, after recovery, she had to work at two jobs to maintain a home and care for her girls, and consequently had far less than what would be optimum time to devote to parenting. She explains that she is nevertheless thankful that her children are thriving; her oldest daughter wants to be a pediatrician and has the grades to achieve her goal and to attract scholarship aid to get her there.

Martha shares that her dream is to further her education and make a contribution to her adopted country by assisting other women caught in her same dilemma of being single parents working at poorly-paid jobs. Her one message to legislators and policy makers would be that, if undocumented people were given more official support, they would be able to put themselves in a position to contribute far more to society, to the ultimate benefit of all of us.

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