This is the first of two RUIOH Project interviews with Erika Castro.

Erika Castro is from Mexico City, Mexico. In 1992, at the age of three, she came to the U.S. with her parents and her aunt. The family soon settled in Las Vegas, Nevada. At the time of the interview, at about age 32, Erika still lived in Las Vegas and with Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, was working for the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada as a community organizer for immigrants.

Since Erika cannot remember details of her life at such a young age, she starts her story by reflecting on the stories she’d heard about her parents and their life in Mexico before they left for the U.S. She explains that they lived a humble life in a small section of her grandparent’s home with her father working at her grandfather’s auto shop and her young mother working as both a resourceful housewife and helper to her mother and in-laws (making piñatas for extra cash at one point). She tells the story of the way in which her infant sister’s passing (due to the hospital’s error in medical prescription) led to her mother’s difficulty adjusting to the trauma and grief and then ultimately the decision for the family to make a fresh start in the U.S. The family sold everything and then, with the help of a “coyote,” came on foot through Arizona – Erika’s mother carrying her the whole way. And Erika shares with a laugh the other family story about her first visit to McDonalds on this side of the border, where she said, without a sense of American fast food, that she wanted a sope.

Erika then tells the story of her childhood in Las Vegas. She relates that because Spanish was their first language, her exposure to American entertainment and popular culture was limited. Instead of watching American TV shows, and English-language TV channels, and American movies, she watched Spanish-language TV stations (just Telemundo and Univision), cartoons in Spanish, and telenovelas from Mexico as a child. Instead of listening to American bands, she listened to Spanish rock, salsa, and Cumbias. She shares something of the Mexican traditions her family practiced in the U.S. Instead of writing to Santa and exchanging presents on Christmas, she wrote letters to the Tres Reyes Mago (The Three Magi) and celebrated El Día de Reyes. And, especially due to her sister’s passing, the family observed El Dia de los Muertos. She explains that the family also eventually celebrated Halloween and Thanksgiving but always added their own touch to it such as with a pot or olla of tamales.

She reflects on her parents’ dilemma of wanting a fresh start in the U.S. and wanting to return to Mexico, given the difficulties they faced. Their first challenge was finding remunerative work north of the border. She shares that her mother cared for her own and her sister’s children while her father found work with his brother-in-law. One of the bigger difficulties for the family, she explains, was the lack of full access to health care. Without health insurance, the family did not go to the hospital, she recounts, but instead had to depend on home remedies. She recounts the way that a bout of dehydration was exacerbated and complicated by her status of being undocumented. The biggest problem, she concluded, was the lack of adequate dental care which left her in a lot of pain as a child and with many problems she still struggles with today. Another problem for her family was language access – she spent a lot of time translating legal documents, contracts, and bills for her parents as a young child.

Erika also explains how she felt lost for the first few years after graduating high school, between 2007 and 2010, when “people weren’t really talking about being undocumented.” She shares that though she had wanted to join the army, after she realized she could not, she ended up in doing some of the domestic work she had hoped to avoid but also was a line cook. She relates that she saved enough money in that work to pay for even out-of-state tuition fees at College of Southern Nevada but then did not because somebody there told her (in error) that she was not eligible to enroll without a SSN. Also during this time she felt trapped in a relationship, unable to leave for fear of being undocumented and alone.

In about 2010, Erika explains, she started connecting to other undocumented people who were organizing for undocumented people’s rights. It was also that year that she started volunteering with the Progressive Leadership Alliance of Nevada (PLAN). She provides a history of the organization (which was established in 1996) and describes its goals, objectives, and achievements. Through this organizing and connecting, she recounts, she started to see the structural problems that were causing her difficulties and that she hadn’t done anything wrong. Shortly after she obtained DACA status, in 2015, she was hired as a community organizer for PLAN and, she explains, recently she has organized the Nevada Immigrant Coalition and has been fighting for legislative change at the state level to benefit undocumented immigrants. Her first call to action: to expand healthcare access for undocumented people, including, for example, older undocumented people like her parents during a pandemic. Her second call to action for legislators: set up more translation programs so that immigrant laborers do not have to depend upon their children to do this work for them. Her third call to action: to fund deportation defense for immigrants, especially since there are no public defenders for them and the cost is too high for most of the undocumented community (many of whom “barely make minimum wage”) and many have long roots and children here by the time they are “picked up.” Her fourth call to action: worker protections for undocumented workers, especially those who may need to report abuses. Her last call to action: more state funding for K-12 education overall, which would impact the lives of all kinds of immigrants and citizens.

Please also see the second RUIOH Project interview with Erika, where she discusses topics of immigration enforcement, stories of integration, her efforts to change her immigration status, and her current work for justice for immigrant communities in Nevada.

Summary by Jennifer Cullison, Director, RUIOH Project