“LaLo Montoya,” who is using an alias for this oral history, is from Jerez, Zacatecas, Mexico, which is a moderately-sized municipality located deep in a fertile valley of Zacatecas in central Mexico at 6,000 feet elevation with clean mountain air. In 1989, when he was two years old, his family and he left for the United States. He lived in California briefly but grew up mostly in Colorado, obtained DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) status in 2012, and came to Nevada in 2018. Since a teen, he has been an activist and organizer for undocumented immigrants. At the time of the recording of this interview, he was about 32 years old and working for Make The Road in Las Vegas, Nevada.

LaLo begins his story by sharing some memories of a trip to his hometown at a young age. LaLo explained that he does not recall Mexico from the first two years of his life but instead he remembers a couple of childhood trips home after that. Sometime around second grade his mother, brother, and he took a summer trip, leaving smoggy California and visiting Jerez, so that his mother would be able to breath cleaner air and get some needed medical attention. He shared how he remembers meeting his grandparents and being impressed with the artists in his family who showed him how to make pottery by hand (and they have a Facebook page [here](https://www.facebook.com/alfarerianunez?mibextid=LQQJ4d)). He was also struck by the hand-crafted adobe of the homes and the music (including drumming) of the area. He also reflects on the difficulty of the transition for the summer especially since he was attending school and was needing to polish his Spanish. After the summer ended and his mother had received the needed treatment, he explains, he and his mother, and his younger brother returned to the U.S. This trip across the Mexico-U.S. border, he shares, was confusing for him then, since he was separated from his mother and younger brother for a week and had to cross with a different family. He shared that he went to Jerez with his mother for the summer one more time as a child and though he was ready for the culture and language that time, he vividly remembers that due to increased border security, they had to return through the desert under traumatic conditions with duplicitous coyotes who took and never returned their valuables, with 30 people sardined in a pickup truck, then long days and hours of walking through the dessert carrying gallons of water and transfers between vehicles.

LaLo continues reflecting on the sacrifices that his undocumented father made for the family’s well-being in the U.S. He explains that his father was a welder and then a pipe-fitter who had migrated seasonally for many years before his birth. He should have qualified for amnesty and thus a path for citizenship following the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) signed into law by the US President in 1986 but faced employers who would not help with the needed historical documentation. Nonetheless, LaLo says, his father was smart and had a strong work ethic, so he continued with pipe-fitting in the U.S. and was eventually able to buy a home in Denver.

He then talks about growing up in North Denver. He relates relief and gratitude that his family landed in a part of Denver where the schools did not treat him differently due to his immigration status. He and his family were able to access resources in their community and benefit from support systems that community leaders had been building there for generations. He was fortunate enough to meet a key leader of the 1960s organization Crusade for Justice and the Chicano Movement, Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales and, his daughter, Nita Gonzales. And through the Veterans for Hope Project, he worked in Denver with African American historian, theologian, and activist, Dr. Vincent Harding. He was also inspired after getting involved in Padres y Jovenes Unidos. He then describes the way in which these elders, leading with love, had created space for the youth to learn about the community’s struggle and for him to “step into [his] own power,” creating a “positive movement for justice” and as “undocumented and unafraid.” He relates the way in which a career day at his high school wasn’t a dead end, as it might well have been, but instead there were teachers there that knew how to steer him toward the resources he’d need for college and career options. This also motivated him in the successful cause of reforms at his high school such as 1) getting the announcements to be bilingual, which opened the door to a lot more positive cultural integration at the school and 2) getting all of the teachers and the principal to reapply for their jobs. He soon had a job developing student leadership at his school, as students worked to fight against policing in the schools and better career advising, counseling, and health services. His activism and walk-outs at 16 Denver schools in 2006 attracted the attention of some anti-immigrant critics, he relates, such as U.S. Congressman Tom Tancredo who attacked the activists and sent ICE to their demonstrations to pick up and silence them. This was the first time, LaLo laments, that he felt the efforts of others, including the media, trying to erase undocumented people. He then reflects on the troubling connotations of “illegal,” “undocumented,” as well as “dreamer” – pointing to the way the first works to erase, the second to minimize urgency, and the third to exclude the dreams of older immigrants as well as U.S. born children of immigrants.

He then relates how demoralizing it was enrolling in community college and being charged out-of-state tuition, despite living in the U.S. since age two. He explained that he organized for ten years trying to get in-state tuition status for undocumented students in Colorado (which was finally put in place in 2013).

LaLo explains what Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is and what he described as the “arduous process” he went through to gain the status. He sees the program as problematic and a “Band-Aid to the larger wound” because: 1) the way that DACA divides the immigrant community into those who are good and those who are bad, i.e. those who don’t and do have “criminal” records, 2) the expensive renewals every two years, 3) the healthcare and educational gaps that persist despite DACA, and 4) the complications of traveling outside of the country while having DACA status.

After ten years of organizing and then getting DACA, LaLo explained, he took an opportunity to develop some social entrepreneurial projects but knowing that the political scene was changing and he could never go completely toward the private sector, he took a position with FWD.us in 2016. FWD.us is Mark Zuckerberg’s bipartisan organization for immigrants and it was, LaLo explains, what first took him to Las Vegas, Nevada. He moved back to Colorado after a short while but then returned to Las Vegas after the October 2017 Route 91 Harvest music festival (at which a shooter massacred 60 people and directly or indirectly injured nearly 900 others from his Mandalay Bay room overlooking the event). Following that event, where ~140 undocumented immigrant workers who were heroes and/or survivors fought for U visas (for immigrant victims of criminal activity in the US) or were otherwise turned away from help in a context of racialized bias, he took a job with the immigrant rights organization, Make the Road Nevada. He provides a history of the organization and describes his the work - canvasing and organizing for these causes and other progressive efforts (workers’ rights, health justice, raising minimum wage, allowing sick days, etc), especially those relating to Nevada’s legislative session, that would benefit these communities. He gives some time to some recent bills that the community was supporting and argues that organizing is a key part of survival for his community.

LaLo then reflects on a few distinct issues: 1) the space between digital organizing in the pandemic era and the need to protect people’s data and digital lives – including the data and lives of undocumented people, 2) the double-jeopardy of the criminal justice system and the immigrant court systems for immigrants, and 3) the need for undocumented workers to organize and fight for better treatment and conditions.

LaLo concludes by providing a few calls to actions for the RUIOH Project listeners: 1) remember we are still creating the country we want and thus take the opportunity in front of you to make needed change and 2) remember that we all need each other and so maybe now we can “turn the page” and focus on lifting each other up, connecting to each other, and putting (all) humans first.

Summary by Jennifer Cullison, RUIOH Project Director