This is the second 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.

Erika picks up from her first interview by telling us how she learned about and applied for the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program in 2012 and how the status really changed her life. Though she had the legal help of Hermandad Mexicana Transnacional, she explains, in 2012 it was still difficult to gather all the necessary paperwork to prove that she qualified. But once her DACA status was approved, she shares, she was quickly able to get a Social Security Number (SSN) and a driver’s license. Having the driver’s license helped a lot, she explained, because she knew it would protect her from deportation if pulled over and from scrutiny at the grocery store. And having the SSN opened doors to new possibilities for careers, she reflected, as she could finally apply to positions without immigration status limitations and look for work that brought not just a paycheck but joy as well. Having DACA, she continues, also helped her shed insecurity and build confidence about her potential in life and her ability to agitate for immigrants’ rights in her work. The liberation of DACA, she lamented, also came with the frustration and guilt that she was one who qualified while other undocumented people did not. In fact, she shared, the stress of being unable to unify some of her family members took a larger toll on her mental health. Then she shared, however, the story behind losing her DACA status in 2020 and, though she is working with lawyers to try to get it back, how that has led to resurfaced anxiety and trauma. She also reflects on the ways in which the merging of immigration and criminal law have led to what she sees as the good-versus-bad immigrant narrative, very exclusionary policy even for programs like DACA, and immigrants being punished a second time with deportation after already paying their debt to society through the criminal justice system. She also discusses 1) the limitations of DACA, since it is not much more than a work permit and is not a path to citizenship, 2) the over-policing and criminalization of communities of color that then results into “extending those racist policies into immigration policy,” and 3) the injustice of an immigration court system that provides neither public defenders nor due process.

Erika then explains how, with recent changes in Nevada law, she has been able to develop her own consulting business, continued to work in community organizing, and how her work has changed her mind on some fronts. She explains how empowering this recent development has been for her and how, despite her DACA renewal being in question, how the DACA program helped to put her in a position to build this direction in her career. She then reflects on the passion that keeps fueling her in the fight for justice for undocumented immigrants – putting real life stories behind the numbers and working for policy change. She shares that her community organizing work has, for one, caused her to change her mind about the military’s recruiting practices with mixed-status immigrant families, which she now sees as exploitative, and thus she no longer wishes to join the military. She also shares that she has become more concerned about the rights of Black and AAPI undocumented immigrants. She is especially concerned about undocumented immigrants from Haiti who are seeking asylum and then any Black immigrants that have to face threat of a white supremacist police system (with police brutality) and immigration systems in this country. She is also concerned about AAPI immigrants who have been made scapegoats during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Erika concludes with a few calls to action to RUIOH Project listeners. 1) educate yourself on multiple and different immigrant experiences – DACA and non-DACA; Latino, AAPI, and Black immigrants. 2) challenge the anti-immigrant rhetoric and narratives, and 3) reach out to your elected officials to let them know that you’re paying attention to the need for new programs of relief for undocumented immigrants.

Summary by Jennifer Cullison, RUIOH Project Director