“Jaime Carrillo,” who is using an alias for this oral history, is from the large city of Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico. In 2011, when he was 17 and fleeing violence in his hometown, he left for the U.S. and landed in Napa where he finished his high school education. In 2013, despite acceptances to several American universities, he was able neither to secure an educational visa nor to qualify for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status, so he continued his college education undocumented in California and resolved to find some way to pursue his dream of a college education and meaningful career. In 2016, after two years of junior college in California, at age 23 and as a junior in college he moved to Reno. At the time of the recording, he was in his late 20s and a PhD student at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR).

Jaime starts his story by recounting his early teen years in Mexico and his first stay in the United States. He reflects on the close-knit family life he had as a child and teen with his parents and two brothers in Torreón and the influence of the United States in his northern Mexican area. Starting at a young age, he shares, he had dreams of being a cowboy or a veterinarian and great potential for achieving that since he attended a private school and developed English fluency there early on. He then explains, however, that starting in 2008 and 2009 drug cartels were tearing apart his hometown– causing him and his brothers to stop their schooling and his parents to move southward to Mexico City. It was in 2011, he says, that he made the difficult decision to flee Torreón alone, leaving his family behind in Mexico, and head to the U.S. for his own safety and so that he might pursue his dream of a college education. He gives details of his arrival to Napa, California in September/October 2011 and his initial situation living with extended family there and finishing high school by the following summer before returning to Mexico. He then muses on culture shock and the differences between his private Mexican high school and the one he attended in Napa.

Picking up in 2013, Jaime then tells the story of his pursuit of his undergraduate degree. Though he could not get the student visa, he explains that he decided to head back to the U.S. again that year without any documentation. He says he enrolled in community college in California and then eventually enrolled as an undergraduate and then graduate student at UNR. He relates vivid stories of an administrator trying to drop him from a Napa Junior College class due to his immigration status, working three jobs at a time, not qualifying for most types of financial aid, paying out-of-state tuition ($6,000-$7,000/per semester) at community college, and not being able to establish residency in California or to qualify for in-state public college and university tuition as a Dreamer per California’s AB 540 (since he arrived at age 17 instead of 16). That was when, he says, he decided to go to UNR, since tuition there would be the most affordable. He explains that in order to pay for his university tuition in Nevada he commuted about 200 miles back to the SF Bay Area weekly, sleeping in cars and on couches, so that he could put in 30-40 hours of work each weekend. He shares the relief he felt when his brothers did eventually follow him to California (at least one of them with a prized student visa) and thus he has been able to re-establish some of his familial support network across the two states. He shares some of his experiences at UNR including struggles at times with people making statements that were “antagonistic towards undocumented populations,” navigating around whether to mention his immigration status to new people, and living without health insurance (including breaking his hand and injuring his eye). He also reflects on how he witnessed minds opening in the city, felt the relief of making friends thorough intramural rugby, and finally how with a scholarship in his senior year, he could lessen the long work commutes behind and participate in rugby tournaments as well as undergraduate lab research. He also details how he eventually formed a support system with his brothers in California, rugby friends, faculty mentors, and (eventually) social service coordinators on campus in Nevada. Jaime expresses his hope that the University will one day develop a center for undocumented student assistance (with more than one social worker).

Jaime finishes his story with thoughts on his studies in graduate programs at UNR, while still undocumented. He has completed an MS and is now pursuing a second MS in statistics as well as a PhD in an agricultural area. He finds it extremely rewarding to be participating in research in sustainable practices and cultures for the cattle industry, especially in light of the struggles of pastoral communities competing against big agribusiness around the world. He speaks of the attitudes, perspectives, and people that have sustained him: how he has come to understand closed and open doors in the bigger picture of his life; and how important supportive advisors have been. He relates that, despite waiting six years he did finally find a way to qualify for in-state tuition in Nevada and with the scholarships he finally received as a graduate student, he has also finally found a little free time to start to volunteer and help other undocumented students through attending various political gatherings and meetings with state university officials as well as efforts with student movements and storytelling. Finally, he details his understandings of his possibilities for becoming documented in the future and then reflects on recent changes in California and Nevada state law regarding undocumented students and higher education. Jaime closes the interview with a call to action to Nevada’s citizens, legislators, and the Nevada State Higher Education (NSHE) board: don’t wait for the federal government – include help for the undocumented immigrants in legislation as soon as possible so that they can continue to contribute to the state without so much difficulty.

Summary by Jennifer Cullison, RUIOH Project Director