Jose P., who is choosing not to share his whole name, is from Guadalajara, Mexico and came to Reno as an undocumented child at the age of 12. He is a graduate of UNR and teaches but did not say where or what he teaches. At the time of the interview, Jose was in his mid to late twenties and had Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) status.

In his interview, Jose recalls the difficulty of parents having to leave their families behind in Mexico such as mothers, sisters, and grandparents. After growing up he remembers his mother’s sorrow of her mother dying without ever being able to see her again. Jose started school in Reno by going to the Newcomers’ Center with 20 to 25 other non-English students just arriving in the United States, having an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. He explains the ESL program is now referred to as something for English Language Learners (ELL), because many students arrive in the U.S. knowing more than one language, so English is not their second language. As a teacher now, Jose said the school district is taking away the ELL teachers so the classroom teachers are dealing with cultural and academic learning for new English learners. The most difficult times for Jose was in middle school trying to fit in as a teenager not having an accent. In high school he realized the limitations of being undocumented as other kids were getting their driver’s licenses and stating to hold jobs which was out of reach for him. Again, as a teacher now himself, Jose feels being empathetic to his students is the most important thing he can do because he remembers how different the school culture is here from Mexico.

Jose explains that his father was never in the picture; instead, it was his mother who took care of the family. In the beginning he felt scared not knowing what would get him or his family in trouble. He was always trying to prove himself thinking he was never good enough. Being in a different culture not speaking English, adjusting to new school hours, riding a bus, and learning how to go through the lunch line were all scary. He didn’t understand the words “Hispanic” or “Latino,” having never heard them before. After a period of time at the Newcomers’ Center he had basic English, which allowed him to transfer to his neighborhood school. There he had the support of the classroom teacher and the ESL teacher.

Jose thinks the most important need of undocumented people is accessing resources such as health care, dental care and qualifying for low-income help. They are afraid of getting sick because of devastating cost. He says, “Everything that normal people have is a struggle for these people.” During the COVID-19 pandemic many people were laid off receiving unemployment checks bigger than their salaries while undocumented people received nothing. He thinks this is unfair because all workers pay into unemployment. It’s also difficult to understand which resources are available to students or to families. Once he was made aware of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), he applied with help and for the first time he felt like a normal person – being able to drive, work three or four jobs to pay for his education. He shares, “Without DACA I wouldn’t have been able to finish college.” But Jose does reveal a lot of people are afraid to apply for DACA because one has to give information about themselves and that causes them to be distrustful. There’s always the fear of being deported. He explained, “It is imperative to develop a pathway to citizenship for those who have only known their life in the U.S., speaking perfect English, graduating from high school and college, and owning their own businesses. They should be given the chance to be a resident.”

Summary by Lois Bianchi, UUFNN Borderlands Justice Team