Ariel Zaragoza is from Tepic, Nayarit Mexico. In late 2007, when he was six years old, he and his family left for the U.S. In about 2019, when he was 18 and with the assistance of a U visa, he was able to obtain a work permit and protection against deportation as a first success in waiting “in line” for a green card through family reunification with aunts and uncles (usually, form I-130). At the time of the interview, Ariel was a student at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR) and in his early twenties.

In his interview, Ariel relates his memories of leaving Mexico and his arrival in the Reno/Sparks area. He remembers that his parents had decided to pack up and move to join family in the U.S. and that he had to be separated from his mother to cross the border. He remembers that as a young child and in a family of five in the U.S., his parents worked long hours in hard labor and struggled with limited funds while he helped them with translating bills and legal paperwork. He explains that he was placed in English as a Second Language (ESL) classes for his first two years of elementary school but then was mainstreamed with the rest of the students after that. He kept out of trouble, fearing that if he did anything “bad,” he’d get sent back to Mexico. He shares a joy that his family is being able to get together every year for a couple of days around Christmas and explained that the extended family, including U.S.-born cousins, helped a lot with his adjustment to the Nevada community. He explains that he felt his undocumented status the most (before he got a work permit at age 18), when it came to applying for jobs and applying for financial aid for college – since he was legally ineligible. Reflecting on the COVID-19 pandemic, Ariel shares how difficult it was for his family as they got sick and were not eligible for the stimulus checks sent by the government.

The process of changing his status has been long and is continuing, he explained. He did not qualify for DACA since he first arrived in the U.S. just a few months after the [June 15, 2007] cut-off. He explains that his parents had worked with a very experienced immigration lawyer to put in the paperwork [again, probably an I-130 for family reunification green card] and it seemed in 2016 that their turn was coming soon but the Trump administration, as he remembers it, changed something [the Trump administration actively worked to delay the processing of green card applications, including I-130s for siblings]. This added a few years to his wait. He expressed some frustration about how long and expensive the various processes are, including DACA, but thinks the programs are helpful.

Ariel would like to see more financial resources as well as understanding for undocumented immigrants. He’d like to see more structures in place to help undocumented students understand what their resources can be (including UNR’s “Institutional Methodology” scholarships, for which undocumented students can apply). He’d also like to see people learn more about the realities of undocumented immigrants – that like him - they aren’t stealing jobs but instead are working hard, paying taxes, and contributing to society here in the U.S.

Summary by Jennifer Cullison, RUIOH Project Director