

Interview: UVA student who immigrated from Mexico

[00:00:02] Eric: The date is October 27th, 2018, and I am here in Charlottesville. The time is 11:30. So, to get started, why don't you just tell me a little bit about your family?

[00:00:12] Interviewee: Umm...I live in the U.S. with my dad, my mom, and my brother. My nanny also came with us. Uh...My brother is 2 years younger than. Umm...He's currently in high school, which is interesting. (laughing) And, yeah, both of my parents are Mexicans and they were raised there their whole lives.

[00:00:42] E: So, um, what kind of drove your parents to come to the U.S.? If you know.

[00:00:50] I: Insecurity. Like, um...there was an incident with someone breaking into our house, and stealing- like like trying to get information. And my parents were just worried about like potential kidnappings, of my brother and I because luckily we were in school at the time. Yeah it was just like an unsafe environment, and my parents just wanted to. Get out of the.

[00:01:26] E: Seems fair to me. Um, so what time were you born?

[00:01:31] I: I was born in Mexico City.

[00:01:34] E: Woah, Mexico City. Do you have any memories of it? Or was it too early?

[00:01:38] I: Yes! No, I lived there until I was seven. Um, so...not too, not too old, but enough to remember quite a bit. Um...(chuckles) I also go back there twice a year for extended periods to see my family. And...(chuckles) that's always been interesting (laughing).

[00:02:04] E: What kind of family still lives there?

[00:02:07] Ah, all of my dad's family lives in Mexico City. All of my mom's family lives in, um...Oaxaca, Mexico, which is in the southern part of Mexico.

[00:02:20] E: So when you go to visit I take it you visit both branches?

[00:02:22] I: Yes, one-hundred percent.

[00:02:25] E: Interesting! Um...so where did you first go to school

[00:02:33] I: Um...In Mexico? So in Mexico there was a French international school Whose name I honestly cannot recall (laughing). But, I started my schooling there from like pre-K up to...first grade. And so I moved here during second grade. Um...

[00:02:58] E: What were your first impressions upon making it to the United States? Did anything seem interesting, kind of stand out, or was it just sort of like, "We're here"?

[00:03:07] I: Um, It's very different because where I moved in Maryland it's like very green, and it's like very safe. Like, it's just the idea that I can walk by myself and, like, not have to be worried. It's very...like I have grown used to it, which is something that I am definitely very grateful for. Like, all the time. But it's definitely not a given. Especially not when I was younger. Um...also TV (laughing). I watched a lot of TV when I was younger, and the fact that, when I got here, I didn't know English, and like I could literally not understand what they were saying was very interesting.

[00:03:59] E: So, when you first came here, uh, what kind of school did you go to?

[00:04:04] I: I, uh, transferred to a French school in, uh, Maryland because my parents were worried about me going into an American school. Um...and that's where I stayed...until the end of middle school.

[00:04:23] E: So with English, were you explicitly taught it in school, did you pick it up as you went along? How did that work?

[00:04:29] I: So technically our school did offer English classes, but the main priority was French classes so you only had English like once or twice a week for maybe an hour. I mostly picked it up because my parents (chuckles) put me in a summer camp with only English speakers. And they were like: (claps) go! (laughing)

[00:04:55] E: (Amused) That sounds interesting. Tell me about that experience.

[00:04:59] I: (Laughing) It's more like, if you want to make friends, you gotta pick some stuff up (laughing). Um...And, obviously, my English was not...amazing after that, but it definitely got me to, um, to get out of my comfort zone and like to speak to other people. Um, So I grew very comfortable with English after that because it was like...once, once you go through that, you're not really afraid of making mistakes anymore, cause you're like (gesturing and laughter).

[00:05:42] E: That's really cool. Um, so when you first move to the U.S., Describe the neighborhood. What was it like?

[00:05:50] I: Oh,um, it's still the same neighborhood where my parents are still living in. And it's changed...a bit in the last few,um, in the last few years. Um...I- since I went to the French school, which was a private school, I didn't really know most of my neighbors at the time or like most of the people in my neighborhood. But, again, it's like...a very green space with like a lot of like really friendly people. Actually when I first moved in, our neighbors came by and like dropped off brownies, and my parents and I were really freaked out (laughing). Uh, we were like, "Who are these people and why are they talking to us?" Um...so we didn't talk to them for a couple of months (laughing). But, I Actually- I actually really appreciate them. They're quite funny. But, Yeah.

[00:06:49] E: That's really cool. Are there any neighbors in your head that kind of stick out as notable?

[00:06:58] Well, them, uh...quite frankly because...it's different. Like you do know your neighbors back in Mexico, but um...it's not. I mean, also I can't make generalizations of every single neighborhood. But, in my experience, people don't tend to like, have their neighbors over for dinner or like, go do stuff with their neighbors or community...like, just like a good sense of community, where you let people inside of your house just because they live next to you, you know. Um...I think that like has to be built on for a very long time before you have access to somebody's house. Um, Like you can enter. But...that was like very different when we first moved in, where our neighbors were like, "Oh you want to come have dinner, you wanna, like do you want to play, like, basketball together?" You know? It was...very odd. Yeah I don't- again, I didn't really talk to most of

my neighbors when I first moved in because I didn't go to school with our neighborhood kids or like, any of that.

[00:08:26] E: (Aside) Alrighty. Um, so when your parents first made it here, what jobs did they pick up?

[00:08:32] Um, well my mom, ah, was in the world bank and she still is. So she was able to transfer quite easily. My father used to work at um...at like this, like- He's also an economist- but, um, it was like this governmental, like it's not, like, in the government, but it works strongly with the government. It's like a corporation on oil and energy resources, but when he moved here, like, he like let that go in order to like get us safely, you know. Um...and so, for a while it was like...kind of uncertain. So he started like working for this one company. But...yeah so like it was um, for a while it was like, not super stable, but then it got better.

[00:09:31] E: So that means your parents are pretty well educated upon arriving?

[00:09:39] I: Yes, yes.

[00:09:44] E: Um, alright. So, is religion a big part of the household?

[00:09:52] I: (Chuckles) Um, ah, not entirely. Mmm...both of my parents' families are very religious, but my parents are not as much. So, if we are with the rest of our family, it's like, very strict (laughing) like what you can and cannot say, but...like within my household, in Maryland, it's, um....it's a good time. (Laughing) They definitely encouraged me to like, look into religion and they um, they did go with us to...to mass on Sundays. Um, but they didn't really push a belief on us, which is something that I appreciate, and has helped me like, make my own decisions about God which is very important. I think in faith like you have to believe. Somebody can't believe for you.

[00:11:04] E: So do you identify with any specific denomination or just a believer?

[00:11:08] No, I am...I am definitely Catholic. Um, I'm part of a Christian group here on grounds which is like non-denominational, which has been a very interesting um...experience. Because...I- I had interacted with like, Catholics but also, there was a

lot of Jewish people in my neighborhood. And there was like- and I knew like a fair amount of people in Islam. But um...not other, like, Christians (laughing). Uh...and, yeah, I think it's been good for me to like...learn about that, uh, cause if you don't, like, there's a lot of preconceptions if you don't have education. So I'm glad for the knowledge.

[00:12:10] E: How'd you get involved with the group?

[00:12:16] I: My roommate (laughing). Honestly, I thought I was joining- like I- I was not going to join a religious group on grounds because I'd had, like, my own conflicts with religion, um...prior to coming to UVA. And...(chuckles) my roommate was very involved with this Christian organization. And she never like, pressured me to join, by any means. She did extended an invitation to another event and I decided to go, to make her happy mostly. And, um...I really liked it. Honestly, I thought- I thought there were all Catholics (laughing) when I first joined. But...yeah. That was not the case (laughing).

[00:13:19] E: Let's go to some working and volunteering. What have you done in that regards?

[00:13:25] I: What do you define as working?

[00:13:27] E: Um, any kind of job. Something like that, something you did for an organization or whatever.

[00:13:33] I: During university or like in my life?

[00:13:36] E: In your life.

[00:13:37] I: Oh, okay, cool. Um, (under breath) where do I start? I...the first real job that I had was in high school, where I worked as a paid intern at the Natural History Museum, uh, mostly doing bug stuff (laughing). But, you know, like talking to people and visitors and just explaining a lot of specimens that we had and...just promoting knowledge, which is very important for me. I have done a lot of volunteering in the past. I think the first real volunteer experience that I had was, so my grandma, she, back like in Oaxaca, she and some of her friends started a children's shelter for, like, children

who are...who the state doesn't deem it, like, to be safe for them to stay in their households either because their parents are abusive or the families like too poor to actually take care of them, uh, correctly. Which is why it's completely voluntary like they don't, like, um...like there is an agreement, if the parents are alive, for them to stay there. And...I, uh, I would tutor the students there from- from everywhere in their elementary school. Um...and just like talk to them and play, because oftentimes I think people tend to forget that they're still kids and that they still...they've gone through like some pretty rough things. But it's important for them to still feel like normal kids, because their circumstances doesn't...doesn't dictate what they can be. Although it does heavily influence, but...that is a society issue not them. Um, And so I was very involved in volunteering all through middle school and high school, um, in organizations...like feeding the homeless, or I volunteered at the Natural History before I got my job. Um, I...picked up trash in a river once which is super interesting because then, like, you find out what people threw in the river and you're like "I'm sorry, what?" One of the best days of my life (laughing). Clearly. Um, then the REU we did over the summer, and I'm currently working as a research assistant for one of the professors at UVA. Um...Yeah.

[00:17:04] E: That's a good place to transition. So you're attending UVA right now.

[00:17:11] I: Yes.

[00:17:12] E: Why did you choose it?

[00:17:19] I: That's a fair question. I think, mostly because- I have known that I wanted to be a math, um, major, since I was in ninth grade. Um, and so one of the...and so I definitely wanted to go to Grad School for Mathematics and get a Ph.D. in that area. And one of the benefits of attending UVA is that there is a lot of, uh, help in that regard. There's like five different majors within the math department, like different concentrations, right. And one of them is graduate preparation which, um, does put a little bit more emphasis in the classes that you should take before attending grad school. And if you have the- like if you are done with all of your requirements, then it's kind- like before you have to graduate- then it's heavily, um...recommended that you take Grad classes, which is something that is offered here, and that I, in the foreseeable future, hope to do. So, yes, mostly because of their concentration, their, uh, dedication to help promote their students to graduate school in mathematics.

[00:19:04] E: That's good reasons. So you mentioned that since you were a freshman you wanted to be a math major. What inspired that?

[00:19:12] I: Um, When I first transferred from the French system to the American system like the first grade that I attended in the American system was, uh, ninth grade. I think I kind of hit a low in regards to my math schooling because I had to test into, like, my math class. Um...and so I studied for like a week trying to get all of the Algebra 1 and geometry curriculums down because the curriculum in the French school, in regards to everything including math, is very different than that of the American school. Um...So I technically hadn't finished Algebra 1 nor geometry because they were done around, like, at the same time. Um...and so...but I wanted to see in Algebra 2 in ninth grade. So I studied in order to get there, and I did. But once I was actually in algebra 2, there was a lot that I didn't know that...I needed to know in order to understand some of the, um...material that has been taught to us. And I think that was kind of a low in the sense that I was putting a lot of work in, but it was still very frustrating to not understand everything that everyone did simply because of my, uh...lack knowledge. But, it's then when I realized that, despite the fact that I was, like, clocking in three or four times the hours that the other- uh, my other classmates were, I still really liked mathematics. And...It wasn't necessarily that I loved it 'cause of the prestige it got me, because I obviously wasn't understanding it as well as some other people, and it wasn't that I found it easy so that's why I liked it. I just- I liked the way things worked, and I honestly couldn't have seen myself doing anything but that.

[00:21:42] E: That's Really cool. So on campus, What kind of organizations are involved in?

[00:21:53] I: So that's...So at the beginning of the school year I was involved with a lot more, but I had to- I had to step down because of my classwork and because of...how I was more involved with some organizations. Like, I am vice president of Native American Student Union which- which means I have to be attending a lot of meetings every two, three days. So that definitely takes away from a lot of time that I would spend on other organizations last year. I'm also, um, exec for American Women in Mathematics, which implies that I have two meetings and work on other stuff, which I've been slacking honestly, but (laughing), you know? And I'm part of, um, Chi Alpha, which

is a Christian organization, and that also takes quite a bit of time. Um...as part of my duties in NASU, Native American Student Union, I have to be involved in the MRC, which...I can remember exactly what it stands for but it's like the minority coalition group. So, I have to be involved in their council, uh, 'cause we all like to get together and we talk about different things that are going on in the university. Um, and those are really my main involvements because I've had to step away from the other things while I get every- because I don't believe in, um...not doing your best in what you're currently doing. So I didn't want to...take away the seat of somebody else in the other organizations that I used to be in knowing that I couldn't commit as much time as somebody else could. But I used to be involved in LSA because we used to have a committee that I was in, but then, like, things got restructured, which is fine (laughing). Um, I still participate in some of their events, but I wouldn't say that I'm...I'm not part of an, an executive board, which is very similar to a lot of the other LSA, um...organizations that I'm- I don't consider myself part of, since I'm not in the decision making. But, we all have like a group chat and when there is an event that...needs help, and it's something that I strongly believe in, I usually go and show my support. But yeah.

[00:24:53] E: And, uh, just to clarify the LSA is, uh...

[00:24:57] I: Latinx Student Association or Alliance. I'm not sure.

[00:25:02] E: Uh, busy schedule, busy schedule. So after you're done with your education, what are your career goals?

[00:25:13] I: Oh my gosh. Um...honestly, I'm not quite sure, uh, given that I definitely want to study a Ph.D. in mathematics, but I personally couldn't see myself as a teacher, nor as a professor, because I think those two are very challenging, um, in- in ways that are not necessarily my forte. Um, I personally...one of the things with being a math professor is that you have to...your research could take years, and you still couldn't come up with- like, you might still not come up with a result. Um, and I feel like I need more immediate gratification than that (laughing), because it takes very specific type of people to be able to, like, bang your head against a wall constantly and still keep going. Um...so I'm not quite sure, but I'm still making my mind up.

[00:26:33] E: One last question about the university. What do you think about the campus? Are the people friendly, competitive?

[00:26:43] That's a very complex question considering the amount of people that there is at UVA, like, just within my different social groups. Um, the people in each are very different to each other and have different priorities. Um...I would say that I've met good people and I've met not-so-good people (laughing). As in...I knew where you could go. Um, Unfortunately, I think, um, some of the not so good people seem to have a bigger voice than the general population, who is either neutral or like pro, uh...humanity, I'd like to say (laughing). Although neutral is not necessarily, like, the best stance on that point, but it is the truth. That's definitely something that...I, Would hope, change Yeah, it's- there's good people and bad people everywhere (laughing).

[00:28:13] E: Fair, very true. To transition to our last little part, here, um, what are your opinions on the U.S. political climate right now?

[00:28:26] I: Um, I think a lot of things are oversimplified, in the sense that...I think media plays a big part in that. That, things have to be spoon fed to the public, and I am, um...I'm not above that, either. I will gladly admit that, at times, I tend to not do my own research, and it is just convenient to read the first article, um, instead of like looking into various. Um, but I do think that's something that affects dearly what is going on, currently, in the U.S., and everywhere, if we're being honest. There's like a very...It's...it seems like people, ah...think that, since some other people who are more influential are able to say whatever they want, that, that is their god-given right as well, instead of holding others to higher standards, um, and just trying to care for their fellow neighbors. Um...It's, um, basically, I think a lot of people have been slacking off in, um, in doing their own research and that that also includes only reading things that correspond with your own political ideals. and... fact that, in the U.S., there's only- there's really only two main parties, is very much an issue because any issue should have more than two options. Uh, because there's a lot of intersectionality with everything really. For example, If you have, um, a lot of the environmental issues mostly affect minority races because they're not able to move away from the situations or they don't have as big as a, like, a these things happen. And that also goes along with education, like if you're in a place people don't want maybe that place also, like, have the best education system,

and it's just a very big cycle. Um, and people have to realize that any decision that you make will affect something else.

[00:31:26] E: Yeah, that's very true. Um...what's your opinion on this rising kind of anti-immigration sentiment? Is it...

[00:31:36] I: Um...I think it's...very dehumanizing, uh...because, I think, since a lot of things have- a lot of hatred, um...has come about this issue and this unders- like not really understanding where people are coming from, but also the fact that people who seem to understand also...don't want to, like, listen to people who don't understand and they don't want to listen to- there's a very big breach of communication between...between both sides of the political system. And I think that has harmed very much the immigration policies because it's no longer seen as people. It's more seen like a political issue. And, it's like, "Oh, no, we're just debating about ideas." We're not debating as whether people should not be locked up in camps (laughing). Because these are real people who have real families, and even if they didn't have families, they're still people, and they should be treated as such. I think it's less of a question about the immigration system as much as a question of...how unempathetic are we as a society in regards to, like, and it's not just how unempathetic are we to immigrants, but how unempathetic are we to people who don't understand the immigration problem we're just like, "Oh, you're just too dumb to understand." That's also very dehumanizing because not everyone has the same access to resources and understanding, uh, which by no means means that everyone who does understand must, um...is expected to teach others. You are a person. You have the right to live as you wish, you know? But...it's two sides of the same coin. If you want respect, you must give respect. And, right now, I don't really see either side doing that, and the immigration problem is just caught in the crossfires.

[00:34:34] E: That's a very good perspective, I like that. I guess...that about draws down. One last thing about politics: the, uh, DACA. How do you feel about that?

[00:34:54] I: Honestly...DACA was only a temporary solution, like, even from when it first was, um...written into law. It was only supposed to be used as a means to get these people to more...stable conditions, and, in that sense, I think that it's good that it was taken away. But it should have been taken away with, um, without leaving people in

limbo, right, and with providing people with actual opportunities who have contributed to the American society without, even like- 'cause DACA, recipients, right, it was either people who- it'd been people who lived here their, like whole life, basically- and who had either...who were either studying or working. So they were definitely people who were contributing to the American economy and society. And, even if they weren't, they're still people, like- you still deserved to be treated as such and not be treated as...illegal, because that...makes no sense. Like, how can a person be illegal? Like, perhaps your status is, but that does not define you as a person. Uh, and I think that that's also something that's happened a lot in our political climate, like labeling. Um...and just reducing someone to one word. And, really, the only word that should matter is that you're human. But apparently, that's not enough. Um...so, I think that, yes, DACA has been essentially taken away, but I think that that's also an opportunity to provide people with a more stable, uh...situation to stay here in the U.S. where they've contributed to society and could have their own families but definitely have their own communities.

[00:37:30] E: That's a really nice thought. That's about the end of this. Are there any closing remarks you'd like to make? Something you'd like the people to know?

[00:37:39] I: I think that people should be involved in all of these issues that we've talked about, regardless of whether you have...whether you're part of Latinx community. Um...'cause this is, at the end of the day, like, a people issue, not one section, "I am this by blood so I have the right to speak about this." Um, so, just empathy and involvement in the political climate regardless of who you are or which community you belong to. It's more about treating others as humans and not about treating them as a label and a stereotype.

[00:38:33] E: That's a very nice sentiment. So, that'll be the end of this, so, thank you so much for your time.

[00:38:37] I: Yes, thank you.