

El Sueño Americano

by

Kathleen Mejia

Submitted to the School of Art+Design
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Fine Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

January 2010

Accepted:

Sponsor

Bill Deere, Professor

Second Reader

Timothy Samara, Assistant Professor

When choosing a topic for my senior project I didn't know where to begin. I knew it had to be something that I was truly passionate about and wanted to share with the rest of my fellow classmates. So when I started planning I chose a topic that has always been very important to me, immigration. Coming from a family of immigrants, is an issue that affects my every day life. My sister and I are the first generation from my family born here in the United States. I knew I wanted my senior project to somehow share how immigration has affected my life and the people in it.

When I was brainstorming my first idea was to do an ad campaign about how immigrants are important in America. Countless immigrants are treated unfairly and are taken for granted simply because they don't have legal documents that would allow them to work legally in this country. Therefore, they are forced to work in jobs with dangerous and hazardous conditions and accept low wages. Many people just don't see the importance of the roles they play in our communities and lives.

Another idea that I came up with was to tell the stories of my family and friends who immigrated to America illegally. I believe that it is important for people to know what they have been through to pursue a better life and have the American Dream. I thought by sharing these stories with people it could possibly have an impact on their views of immigrants. I have heard my family's stories numerous times and they move me every time. The courage they had to leave their country and what they had to endure on their journey just for the chance of a better living seemed like a strong subject for my project.

I had so many strategies on how to present these two different ideas and choosing what direction I wanted to go in with this project was very difficult. I knew a decision

had to be made quickly so that I could get started right away. I decided to go with my family and friends personal stories about arriving to America. I really wanted people to see what it takes to immigrate to this country illegally and make people understand why they choose to go through it in order to get to a better life.

I conducted four interviews each at separate times so that I could hear the stories of how each person got to America. The first person I interviewed was my father. My father always told me when he was young he was very poor and life was really hard. I had heard part of his story before but this was the first time he told me the full version. My father had thirteen siblings making it hard for his family to afford toys and even some of the necessities like food and clothing. He would always tell me “Colombia is a beautiful country but it’s just so hard to make a good life there when there’s no money to be made.” My father told me his whole story in Spanish so I had to take detailed notes to later translate into English. The most difficult part of this project was translating everything into Spanish, especially because for some words there is no direct translation into English. Since my father had such a hard childhood, his goal was to come to America in search of a better life for himself. My father came to America in 1980 through the Bahamas. He was only 22 years old when he decided to leave Colombia.

The second person I interviewed was a close friend Mariela. Her story has a lot of twist and turns and was very shocking. Her parents migrated to America before Mariela was born and shortly after had their first son. Soon after her mother got pregnant with her they had to leave the states due to a series of unfortunate events and Mariela was born in Mexico. A few years passed and her mother gave birth to their third child in Mexico a daughter. When Mariela was 4 years old her parents decided to come back to the United

States. They left with their American born son and the newborn baby to America leaving Mariela behind. Three years passed and Mariela's mother wanted desperately for her to come to the United States and reunite her with the family. Mariela's journey began in 1993 when Mariela was only 7 years old she and her aunt attempted to cross the Mexican border into America. She remembers clearly every detail from the journey; she describes it as truly unforgettable. Since Mariela speaks English the story was much easier to write but then I remembered I had to translate it from English to Spanish, which was a difficult task.

The third person I chose to interview was my friend Carmen. She left Ecuador also in search of a better life and brighter future in the United States. In her case she had a 2-year-old daughter, which she had to leave behind because she didn't want to risk taking her on the dangerous voyage. She only hoped that one day she would be able to reunite with her and bring her back to the United States. Carmen told me that the only reason she left Ecuador was for her daughter. She wanted to give her daughter a much better life than the one she has and she knew living in the United States would provide that. So In 2001 she also crossed the Mexican border into the United States. Carmen speaks pretty good English but felt more comfortable telling me her story in Spanish. So I again had to translate this story from Spanish to English.

My final interview was on my best friend's mother, Rosalba. My friend told me her mother's story was really interesting and she suggested I interview her. I met up with Rosalba at her house so she could tell me her story. She left Colombia in 1980 and came through the Bahamas like my father. Rosalba's story was a little bit different from the

others because she got caught and was deported back to Colombia. Rosalba's story didn't end there; she was determined to make it to America and took the journey again.

In her travels she experienced a lot of struggles and moments where she thought she was going to lose her life. Her story was definitely one of the longest and most captivating ones. It was so long I had to bring a voice recorder and record her whole story, which she told in Spanish. Translating her story was definitely a very long process.

After I was done translating all four stories I knew I needed help editing them. I decided that I would ask my co-worker who happens to be a proof reader if she could read all of the stories and make any changes to spelling and grammar that was incorrect. She definitely took a lot of weight off my shoulders by helping proof read the stories. So while she did that I started designing a book layout for all four stories. I also decided to make four posters representing each person and their story.

My original plan was to just make four books but then I thought of my topic and I didn't want to just make it in English. How would my father, Rosalba or anyone that doesn't read English be able to read my book? I then knew I had to have both an English and Spanish version of the stories. Since my Spanish writing abilities are not great I asked my stepfather to help me translate the stories into Spanish. With his help doing the translating I continued to design the book layout. I came across some problems since I didn't have pictures of some of the people I interviewed. I decided to search the web as well as Flickr to search for some large images for free. Flickr definitely had a large range of great pictures to search from but it took a lot of time and patience to find the right images. When I started to design the book I created a few different versions to choose from. It took me about four different versions to get the layout style I would use.

Since I was doing four different stories for each person I decided to color code them. Each person would have their own color to make it easier for someone looking at my project to correlate the books with the corresponding posters. On the posters I included a quote that stood out to me from the each person's story. As I worked on my posters I realized that all my quotes for my posters were in English. I hadn't planned on making any in Spanish but I decided to do two in English and two in Spanish so I would have an equal amount in both Spanish and English.

As I continued to work on my books and posters I had a friend proofread my books again just to make sure everything looked and sounded good and I had my stepfather once again look at the Spanish versions to double check that there weren't any misspelled words or missing accents. Once I was done with all my work and it was finalized, a good friend of mine was able to get my posters printed. He also printed extra copies of my books and also printed the book covers on heavier paper. The extra copies will be given to all four people I interviewed. The copies that I used for my presentation were printed on the large printing format printer here at Purchase College. My goal was to make these into accordion fold books with the covers printed out on heavier paper and then mounted on the front of the accordion fold.

Overall I am very pleased with my outcome of my project. I feel like it came out better than what I imagined. I plan on displaying my project at the senior show in May. I will also be inviting all four people that I interviewed so they can see the final outcome of their stories come to life. I plan on hanging the four posters and have my books placed on a small table in front of them.

Coming from a family of immigrants has enlightened me on a topic that some people will never have to deal with. My main purpose and goal of this project was to bring some of that enlightenment to people who will never encounter the subject in their lifetime. I wanted to share these stories because I really feel that they represent immigration in a different light. I hope when people come to the senior show, read these stories and see my presentation they will really see immigration in another way and appreciate their lives here in America differently as I do.