

BRADFORD WRITES!  
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## “Normal”

by Alexandra Ochoa Centeno

Growing up as a first-generation Mexican American in a household where I had to navigate through the collision of two completely different cultures was honestly very challenging. My parents both made the courageous decision to cross the Mexican border for a better life - not just for themselves but for their future. Immigrating into a completely new territory, they brought their own culture to a place where they knew nothing. They didn't even know the language, which they still struggle with today. From a young age, I had to absorb both cultures to find my place while also discovering my own identity, I had to try and reconcile my Mexican heritage while also going through the demands of an American lifestyle. I was able to embrace my Mexican heritage through my parents, my language, my traditions, and my beliefs; moreover, the recipes for the amazing food, but so much more as well; I truly do love being part of such an amazing culture. Yet, despite my immense love for my Mexican culture, I knew that I wasn't *normal* to the people around me. My Mexican culture is foreign to them. I believed something was wrong with me for being *different* from them.

These feelings of alienation were further amplified by language barriers in school. I was surrounded by classmates who fluently spoke English, but I could barely understand let alone keep up. High school amplified this feeling of alienation; all my classmates had everything laid out in front of them. I was unfamiliar with homecoming, let alone prom. I've never been to a high school football game nor traveled in the summers like most of my classmates would. I felt disconnected from their world, as if I was in a completely different galaxy from them. I would hear all about their vacations nevertheless I couldn't help but be jealous of what they had. While my classmates enjoyed luxurious summer vacations, I spent my summer at home caring for my three younger siblings while my parents both worked long hours. But in all honesty, I didn't mind; after all, my parents were doing this for my siblings, for me, to give us a better life. Though, I still had the longing for a *normal* teenage experience. To be able to feel

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*normal*. To be able to get away from the small town I lived in and go somewhere far away. Experience new things, meet new people, but I couldn't. That type of wish was something that I could never have. And I learned to live with it.

The collection of all these experiences was most evident in my senior year of high school. I watched as my peers confidently know their next move in life, where they are headed off too. Some would just go straight into a job, some of my peers were headed into the military, but majority of them were heading to college. College symbolized the American dream that my parents strived for, the whole purpose of why they made the decision to cross into unknown territory. Taking a step into pursuing further education allowed me a chance to embrace the American aspect of my identity, to also fulfill my parents' dream. Yet, I had to realize that leaving for college meant that I'd leave my Mexican heritage behind, and my family, who have worked so hard to fulfill this dream.

Through this journey, I was able to discover that being a first-generation Mexican daughter has given me profound responsibility to honor both my cultures. I learned that I didn't have to pick between the two. It's about embracing both. Being a first-generation Mexican daughter has allowed me to embrace my independence. In my culture, women are to be submissive to men, they are to attend the house, do the housework, and take care of the children. But I didn't want this for myself. I put myself first. Although there are times where I do feel guilty for taking this opportunity, I've come to understand that embracing these opportunities that have been given to me is a way to honor both my heritage and to also finally do something for myself. It's okay to not be *normal*. I've learned to embrace my unique heritage as now it is one of my biggest strengths to this day.