

Making a Difference in the World

By Alejandro Lopez

The journey began when my parents, my oldest brother and my two sisters left the state of Guanajuato in the country of Mexico in 1975. Like many others who have migrated, my father (who was a construction worker) and mother heard from extended family members that were in the U.S. already that there were better opportunities in the workforce compared to Mexico. My parents also received news through social ties that they could make a better living in the U.S. My family crossed the Baja California border near Tijuana and arrived in a city called Compton. My father knew of this city because of a cousin who had recently moved there. There was a man Jose Garcia, who was a distant relative of my father's, and his life was already established in California. He played an integral role in facilitating the adjustment process for many "new arrivals." Through Mr. Garcia my father learned about where he could find employment, housing, and other services that he and my mother needed. The first job my dad started paid a salary of \$2.25 an hour, minimum wage in those days.

Immigration has shaped the lives of my parents and has impacted my life plans. Where one works determines what type of job you will have and what schools you will attend. This in turn has determined the quality of education I have obtained or did not obtain. Additionally, your father's occupation has also determined my socioeconomic status, and this interrelates to virtually every aspect of your life. It allows people to discriminate against you on the basis of race, ethnicity, class, etc. My parents were discriminated against because they did not speak English, because of their phenotype, and

because of how they dressed. My parents' decision to migrate has also determined the language I speak and the values and beliefs that have been reinforced through social institutions.

When I speak of history, I have to mention the relationship that the U.S. has had with the Chicano community. The U.S. likes our Mexican culture, our sexualized and exoticized women, our cuisine, our wage labor, and our music but hates everything else about us?! Over the course of history we have experienced social, economic, and cultural oppression. The Chicano community (like other communities of color) has been in a subordinate position at every level of society and under constant, systematic domination. It is imperative that we understand that these racist ideologies have ignited hatred towards anything that is not "American," in particular, towards immigrants. Henceforth, I am driven to organize communities in order to create an effective change in our society.

After settling down in the city of Compton near South Central Los Angeles in 1975, my mother gave birth to my brother Jose, and a year later I was born. This low-income community was predominately African American. The only whites I knew of were teachers and school administrators. My friends were mostly Latinos, blacks and a few Pacific Islanders; there were few Asians in the schools I attended. Because of the media many people have many misconceptions of Compton being a "violent, gang infested, poverty-stricken slum." I am accustomed to people's negative reactions and comments about where I grew up. I am consistently in a situation where I am defending my hometown; for example, last quarter I ran into a former classmate who is Latina and grew up in West L.A. I mentioned that I was going to commute to Compton because I had not moved to my new apartment yet. She raised her eyebrows and looked away and

said, “Good luck getting home!” Her reaction bothered me. I realized that many UCLA students have their head up their ass! I used to think that because people were the same ethnicity as me they would understand where I am coming from. I was wrong. No person is immune to ignorance, regardless of race or ethnicity. This only motivates me to want to educate students and those around me.

The most important thing in my life is my family they always come first, no matter what. If it were not for the love and support of my family I would not be here today. Thus, I am a family-oriented person. I am used to communal settings and prefer to share spaces with people unlike popular culture that emphasizes individuality. I am a community organizer and I also use art and writing as a medium to voice my opposition to dominant ideas these are my passions. I am also an advocate of social change, and I believe in transforming communities by empowering those who are underserved. I have gone through several stages in activism as I think many have. Initially, I was angry when I learned my true history and how the world works. I was impulsive and channeled my anger in an unproductive manner. Anger on its own will not transform communities for the better. Today my vision is clearer, and activism is an important part of my life and I intend to continue my contributions not only to my community but also to disadvantaged communities worldwide. I have also realized that my intentions must be done out of love for humanity...not hate.

The intersection of my life with history is a unique one. I must confess that when I was younger I was ashamed of my father and in some cases of being Mexican. Sometimes when I was in public places with my father he would talk in Spanish and it seems like the louder he spoke, the more embarrassed I felt. I remember the summers

when my family and I would go to Disneyland. I saw many people who were fair-skinned, blond and had blue eyes. To me they were attractive people, and some part of me wanted to be that. I thought, “Wow, it must be cool having blond hair and getting a lot of attention.” I also recall that when I would look for those souvenir name tags, I would always find “Alexander” and “Alex” but never my real name, “Alejandro.” I would describe this as a terrible lesson in history. There is something severely wrong when a xenophobic society makes a person hate his/her self for who they are. When a person experiences prejudice or racism, that person is devalued, dehumanized and degraded. It is a horrible feeling that I believe was the root of why I felt the way I did.

I believe that the magnificent lesson about my interrelatedness to history is that I have been able to impact the lives of many people. Aside from my dedication to activism, I have worked at a University High School for about two years now. I played an important role as a peer counselor there. Many students would come to me and tell me their problems. These issues were concerning sex, abortion, drugs, marriage, gangs and family problems. Because of my upbringing, my surroundings and life experiences, I am able to share valuable knowledge with the youth. Community organizing has taught me how to communicate with people, how to work collaboratively with an array of diverse people, how to reach deadlines, how to coordinate events, etc. My purpose in life is meaningful and rewarding to me, and soon my career in Education will begin and I thank the creator for knowing that I could overcome my obstacles. By educating Asian Americans on the contributions of their respective community to the economy and to labor movements, we will begin to see more progress. In addition, by mobilizing students to partake in activism such as this course, we will be making a difference in the world;

today this process involves evaluating and being critical of the role of Asian Americans in the U.S. Ultimately, a new consciousness will be formed, one that is entirely unique because of the changes we are currently creating in history.