

Gaining a Greater Ownership of Life

By Alejandra Ponce de León

Something powerful that I learned in my Chicana/o Studies classes has been how regular people make history happen. History is not developed by the Abraham Lincolns, Frida Khalos, Ghandis, and the Rosa Parks, although they hold great importance. Rather, people, like my parents, grandparents, etc., they act upon history, not the other way around. This thought gave me a greater sense of ownership of my life, and also of the historical events that take place around me that are transformed day to day by everyone.

I am a leader at heart, and I feel it is my responsibility to take action when there is a problem or where there is an issue that is being overlooked. As an International Development Studies major, I have become more aware about how the economic and public policies chosen by our government have had disastrous effects on developing nations. As a result, my passion is not only grounded to analyze economic/public policy, but more importantly, I am determined to take action locally and educate and organize the masses in order to enlighten others to take control of their government.

Both of my parents are from Mexico. My dad, Ángel Ponce de León, first immigrated here undocumented in the early 1980s to make a better living and return to marry my mom. Her name is Maria Eugenia de Dios. Like him, many others also immigrated for the lack of job opportunities in Mexico. It would be during this decade that thousands immigrated here due to the “Peso Crisis,” a period where the Mexican Peso plummeted in

value and inflation grew rampantly. My father originally believed his stay in the U.S. was temporary. However, as many other people like him, they end up staying once they started a family. Soon thereafter, my mother also decided to follow my father. Once together, I was the first born in the family in the United States on March 28, 1983.

Although living in the U.S. offered many opportunities, living in the U.S. also brought many challenges. My mother did not know anyone, and none of the family members that lived in the U.S. lived close by. My father would leave to work everyday at 5 A.M. to a machine shop, where to this day, he still works at. My mother would be alone the whole day with a baby who would not stop crying most of the time. Frustrated at the end, she would also cry with me. She was about 23 years old, my age now. After I was born, my mother had other children, who are my two younger brothers, Iván and Ángel Jr., who are 19 and 17 years old respectively. Iván will be graduating this year from high school, and Ángel will do so too in 2007.

As a Chicana, I am greatly affected by issues such as: immigration, discrimination, sexism/male privilege, racism, and the oppression and exploitation of minorities and people with low socio-economic status. Personally, I think of my family and how these issues are related to them as well. Because I have established a personal connection with these issues, I have gained a new sense of connection to all who are facing these kinds of issues here locally and also internationally. For this reason, I feel passionate about matters of development within Latin America and how they are affected by U.S. foreign and domestic policy.

My experience working in my community has allowed me to witness first-hand the detrimental affects of U.S. foreign policy on Latin America. For instance, as a Project Director for Project Day-Laborers, I work with many migrants who are here undocumented and work on a daily basis with the fear of being deported. This experience has allowed me to gain meaningful leadership skills and to make a difference in the lives of these individuals. Our program provides English classes to the immigrant workers, in Downtown and West Los Angeles. During the program I am able to have long meaningful discussions about issues that affect them most. For instance, we discuss issues such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Cold War that resulted in the U.S.'s military involvement in Central America, and social issues such as their lack of family networks here in the U.S.

In response to the hardships my family and my community have faced due to irresponsible economic/foreign U.S. policies in Latin America, I took a stance against the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) last year. Even though I am not Central American, I felt compelled to do something about it because I could relate to the future consequences of this agreement through the consequences that came about in Mexico with NAFTA. Since the implementation of NAFTA, immigration in Mexico increased towards the U.S., as well as unemployment, and poverty. I did not want to have the same results repeat themselves in other parts of Latin America. Therefore, I organized a forum where students from UCLA could be educated about CAFTA and the negative impact it would have on Latin America.

By attending meetings at the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN) in L.A., I became more aware of the implications that could come about the passage of CAFTA. I was shocked to learn how the leaders of the Central American nations and the Bush Administration believed that this was the best thing for the people, when they are well aware of the negative results in Mexico. More shockingly was to find out that the President of El Salvador, Antonio Saca, warned the U.S. Congress members that if any voted against the passage of CAFTA, they would be considered racist and anti-Latino. This produced a wave of public officials who backed down from publicly denouncing CAFTA.

I figured what better way to counter what President Saca said than by uniting a group of Congress members, especially Latinas/os, at UCLA and give a forum and press conference where they would attack CAFTA publicly with the support of UCLA students. And I did go about this. However, it did not turn out as I had dreamed it would. I was not able to get the Congress members to the forum, or the media. It was a very tough task I underwent being my first time I ever organized a forum. Even though I organized a committee of several students, the bulk of the work fell primarily on me and my friend Carolina. However, the forum itself was a great success. I filled the room with almost 100 people. The panel of speakers was very strong with the participation of members from Oxfam America; the field representatives of Congresswomen Hilda Solis and Linda Sanchez; representatives from the Salvadoran leftist political party, FMLN; a

sociologist from Guatemala; the General Consul of Guatemala; and the Director for the California Coalition for Fair Trade and Human Rights.

This was a magnificent experience. Here I was part of an international movement composed of different people and organizations, all striving to protect the rights of Central Americans who do not have a say in their governments. This was a concerted as well as a spontaneous effort world wide by different groups of people trying to protect those nations from the imminent exploitation from the U.S. and U.S. corporations whose interest is their own profit and not the conditions of the people there. Many events and forums were organized across the nation and in Latin America. I felt honored to have contributed to this as well.

However, this past summer, CAFTA was ratified by the U.S. Congress and the Central American countries involved. This was terrible to find out, especially when I was so involved in trying to keep it from passing. It shocked me how those who hold positions of power are truly deaf and blind to what these kinds of policies can produce in developing nations. So many people would lose their small businesses and so many farmers would lose their livelihoods because they will be unable to compete against bigger U.S. corporations. The rights of workers will not be respected, and the environment will be left without any protection from U.S. companies. But as long as a profit is being made, and the U.S. can use CAFTA as a stepping stone for the Free Trade of the Americas (FTAA), what do all these things matter, right?

They do to me. Although this was a great loss and a terrible thing to happen, this experience has fueled me even more to want to pursue a career in government. My goal is to get in a high position in office so that I can influence and fight for the policies that need to be implemented that benefit all, especially those with no access to power. I feel that my life experiences, the family I was born into, the ethnicity, and gender I have inherited gives me a better position to understand people who have suffered, who are made invisible, who are discriminated against, and who count with a low-level of education and socio-economic status. I see who in government works to represent the “interests of the people,” but it is obvious that it is a certain group of people and interests they represent. I want to break this. I want to challenge the dominant discourse and create an authentic sense of cooperation among different groups of people and among nations. I am aspiring very high, but I feel it is my responsibility to conquer this, especially when I am one of the few Latinas obtaining a higher education. I can’t wait for someone else to make things happen, as no one else should wait for this either; we all transform our present and make history happen.