

Introduction

It's true that human emotions and feelings are the same regardless of what one's race might be. Why, then, a book specifically about Latino young people and students? While feelings such as fear, joy, anger, and love may be no different just because a person is Latino, experiences and stories often are unique and different.

Today, Latinos make up the largest minority group in the United States. It is not always easy being a member of a minority, particularly if one is just learning the culture and customs of a new country. Sometimes it can make a person feel as though he or she doesn't fit in or that what he or she has to offer isn't important. However, the true stories presented in this book prove otherwise. From the teen mother who battles and eventually overcomes the deadly lure of drugs and gang membership, to the high school senior who discovers the touching truth about his immigrant grandfather—each personal story is very important. And so is each person who tells his or her story.

While all of the stories you are about to read are true, some of the names and locations of those telling the stories have been changed or omitted. This is particularly true when the individual telling his or her story presents details that are deeply personal or painful. Other times, the person telling the story may refer to relatives that are not legal residents of the United States. In any event, the privacy of those who have been generous enough to provide their stories but do not wish to reveal their identities has been respected. Yecenia and Diego, who agreed to share their photos as well as their stories are pictured on the front cover of the book.

These are, of course, only a handful of countless other stories of Latino lives throughout the United States—real human stories still waiting to be told.



Alvara

“It was so dark in the desert. There was no moon at all that night. One really clear memory I have is of my mother telling me not to sit down on the big flat rocks. The rocks were still warm from the day, so that’s where the rattlesnakes slept.” Alvara doesn’t make eye contact when she talks about the night she and her mother joined twenty-four others in the small border town of Naco in Sonora, Mexico, for what she simply refers to as “the crossing.”

“There’s a Naco on both sides of the border—one in Arizona and one in Mexico,” Alvara explains. “That’s how it got its name: *na* from the end of ‘Arizona’ and *co* from the end of ‘Mexico.’”

And on that night in 1996 when Alvara was ten years old, she held her mother’s hand tightly as the quiet group huddled together outside of an old hotel. The rundown and mostly boarded-up hotel was a common meeting spot for those who were planning to cross the Mexican/United States border illegally.

“We had to wait for a coyote to lead us to a safe place to cross,” Alvara continues. “There are a few miles of a tall wall that separates the two Nacos. And there are lots of border patrols right in that area. But a little further out . . .”

Here, Alvara’s voice trails off as she thinks back to that night. A “coyote” is a paid guide who knows the paths and trails that are safest to follow. He knows where the wall turns into a simple barbed-wire fence. And he knows where the holes in the fences are. Coyotes are paid a lot of money for their services—sometimes more than \$1,000 per person. Most of those being guided by the coyote are quite poor and must borrow from, or be given the money by, a friend or relative already in the U.S.

“My father had already been in the United States for almost two years, working very hard to save money so that we could all be together.

He worked two and sometimes three different jobs. During the day he did landscaping, and then he was on the line at a meat-packing factory at night.” Alvara pauses, a flash of anger darkening her face.

“You know, I often hear people say that what my father did, and then what my mother and I did . . . that we were wrong. We are criminals, some people say. But anyone who says that just doesn’t know.” Alvara takes a deep breath, trying to calm her emotions. “We didn’t have a choice. That’s just a fact. It was either stay and starve or take our chances coming north. You can see—we didn’t have a choice.”

Alvara was born in a rural village in the state of Oaxaca in southern coastal Mexico. Home was a roughly constructed adobe building with a thin roof that leaked when it rained. The floors were dirt, and there was no electricity and no plumbing. The “kitchen” for many people in the community was a stone oven and fire in the middle of the village. Every day, women of the village would meet to put together enough food for everyone to have at least one meal a day. That meal usually consisted of tortillas and a bowl of beans. Alvara’s family was fortunate enough to have their own stone oven and fireplace in their home.

Alvara was also luckier than many of the children in the village. Most of the children began working before they were even ten years old. But

Alvara's parents made sure that their daughter attended school.

"No education means you stay poor. That's what my parents always said. Neither of my parents even finished third grade, so they knew what they were talking about," Alvara says. "They could read and write, but just barely."

The school Alvara attended was constructed of four poles holding up a palm-leaf roof. Students of all ages sat together in a circle, stumps and rocks serving as chairs. But as rough as the surroundings were, Alvara was glad to be there. Her teacher was patient and generous, often spending his own money to supply students with the very few books, sheets of paper, and pencils they had. Alvara learned to read and write, and she even learned some basic English. Little did she know at the time how valuable this skill would become one day.

Alvara's father owned a fairly large bean field, but the soil was generally too rocky to get very good crops. Even though he worked from sunrise until dark, he rarely earned more than three dollars a day. This was barely enough to feed and take care of the family, but somehow Alvara and her parents managed to scrape by. However, one warm October night, something happened that destroyed even the small bit of security the family had.

"Since we were near the coast, we had lived through hurricanes before," Alvara remembers.

“But this one was like nothing we had ever seen. It just flattened everything.”

In 1997, Hurricane Pauline hit Oaxaca with its full force. Winds of more than 100 miles an hour tore through the small villages and towns. More than sixteen inches of rain in some areas caused severe flooding. More destructive than the winds and rain were the horrible mudslides. Hundreds of people were killed when entire hillsides collapsed, slid, and buried entire communities. But Alvara’s parents were wise. Unlike a number of their neighbors, they heeded the warnings about how dangerous this hurricane would be and took shelter inside a safe building in a nearby town. Huddled with dozens of other families inside the unlit brick building, Alvara remembers hearing the wind outside.

“It was shrieking and really spooky. Every now and then we would hear something hit the outside of the building with a big thump. Everyone just sat together holding hands and praying. It seemed like it went on forever, but I guess it was only a few hours.”

The next morning, Alvara walked with her parents up the hill and toward their village. It was a difficult walk through debris, fallen trees, and deep water in many spots. When they reached the village, what they saw shocked them. Hardly anything was left standing. But the most bizarre sight was the heavy mud that had

entirely covered the western side of the village, where the wind and rain had been strongest.

“It looked like a bomb had gone off or something. You could see a few trees sticking out of the mud, but that was about all . . . except . . .” Alvara remembers with a shake of her head. “My mother tried to keep me from seeing it, but twice I saw arms reaching out from the mud—arms of dead people. You could tell they had been trying to crawl out. It was like a nightmare.”

And the bean field, Alvara’s family’s only source of income, had been completely destroyed. Mud and water had washed away all the plants, and now the field was nothing more than a rocky pit.

“I was pretty young, so I didn’t understand exactly how bad it all was. But I remember looking at my father, and he had never looked so scared. I think he knew right away that we would have to do something drastic.”

One year later, Alvara’s father, Hernan, was living with several other men in a small apartment outside of Louisville, Kentucky. Hernan had had a close friend from childhood who had crossed the border into Arizona several years earlier. He had found seasonal work on farms throughout the Southwest, and eventually he heard about higher-paying construction jobs in Kentucky. This is where he had lived now for three years.

Hernan had always kept in touch with his

friend. In letters, his friend let him know that there was plenty of work, and that Hernan could stay with him if he ever decided to make the crossing. And most importantly, his friend told him he would lend him the money to pay the coyote at the border. *You will either get caught, or you will die in the desert if you don't have a coyote to show you the way*, Hernan's friend had once written. *Don't try to do this alone!*

And so, a few weeks after the hurricane, Hernan had written to his friend. For a while, Alvara and her parents had been living in a shelter provided by the Mexican Red Cross, but those days would be coming to an end. Nearly penniless, his home and land destroyed, and with no opportunities for work in his homeland, Hernan was desperate. He didn't like the idea of entering the United States illegally, but he could not just stand by and watch his daughter and wife go hungry. As any parent would, Hernan wanted a better life for his daughter.

"My father still believes that we would have been forced to beg in the streets if we had stayed," Alvara says quietly. "And the education that he and my mother demanded I receive was no longer available after the storm. If anything, my life would have been worse than my parents' lives if we had stayed. My father, particularly, would not stand for that."

Hernan borrowed money from his friend to cross the border, and then he hitchhiked to

Kentucky, mostly getting rides from truckers. Alvara recalls that her father knew next to no English, but, thankfully, he had learned “Louisville” and “Kentucky” so that the rides would take him in the right direction. When he arrived in Louisville, his friend had already lined up some work. But Hernan would need to work two and sometimes three jobs to repay his friend, send money to his wife and daughter, pay his own bills, *and* save enough money to pay another coyote to lead Alvara and her mother across the border.

“My mother would read me the letters my father sent, and he often wrote that he didn’t sleep more than a few hours a night. But then he’d always say that all the work would be worth it in the end. It would just take time.”

And finally the time came. Alvara’s mother received the one thousand dollars it would cost to pay the coyote. There was also money for the bus rides from Oaxaca to the Mexican/United States border and then from Arizona to Kentucky. It would be a very long journey for a ten-year-old girl—particularly a ten-year-old girl who had never been more than twenty miles from her home.

“It was more than 1,500 miles just to get to the border. We just slept and lived on the bus for three days. We’d stop in little towns along the way for food or to pick up and drop off other

travelers. Twice, we had to switch buses. Mostly I remember it being hot, but not boring. Since I'd never traveled anywhere, everything was new and interesting to me," Alvara recalls. "But even so, I guess I was ready to get off that bus after three days!"

The bus arrived at Naco, Sonora, Mexico in the middle of the afternoon. A dozen or more people were already sitting in the shade of the old hotel. Many of them held sacks of food and belongings, and everyone had one or two gallons of water in plastic jugs at their sides. Most were men, but there were also other women and children. Standing on the corners near the hotel, young men in dark sunglasses stood smoking and watching the group carefully. Every now and then, those who were waiting would wander over to one of the young men and talk quietly.

"These were the coyotes," Alvara explains. "People would talk to them, agree on a price, and find out when we'd be leaving. It was all done in a real quiet way, but not really hidden since, you know, there's no law against talking to a stranger. My mother talked to one, and then she and I walked over to the small store down the street to buy supplies. I kept asking why. Why did we need supplies? For what? My mother wouldn't really explain what we were going to have to do—probably because she thought it would scare me. And looking back, she was right."

The Sonoran Desert stretches up from Sonora, Mexico into Arizona. It is such a desolate, hot, and often deadly area of land that Spanish explorers in the 1500s named it *El Camino del Diablo*—The Devil’s Highway. For as far as anyone can see, there is nothing but rock bluffs, lava stone, prickly cactus, dust, and sand. In the summer, temperatures can soar as high as 130 degrees, and since there are no trees, there is no place to escape the scorching sun and heat.

It would be into this desert that Alvara and her mother would walk with the rest of their group for many miles. Once across the border, the closest highway was nearly twenty-five miles away. The coyote had arranged for vans to pick up the travelers at a designated point along the rarely-traveled highway. But they would have to get there on foot.

“People used to cross the border closer to cities, like from Tijuana to San Diego or from Juarez to El Paso. Once they were across, it was easy to find work nearby or transportation to somewhere else. But now, those areas are so closely patrolled that it’s hard to cross without getting caught. Out in a big empty area like the desert, people don’t get caught as often—but, then, there are other dangers.”

Just after dark, the coyote that Alvara’s mother had spoken to gathered his group together. He spoke quickly and quietly about

where they were headed, what to expect, and how extremely important it was for everyone to stick together. Then he led everyone down a dark dirt road, then onto a faint path, and then into the desert. The group walked silently for two miles until the few lights of Naco, Mexico disappeared completely. The only sounds were a high, whistling wind far out in the desert and the faint howling of coyotes (*real* coyotes) in the distance. Suddenly, the group made a sharp turn as they headed toward the border.

After a few more miles, the coyote stopped at an old wire fence. It was nearly six feet high, but part of it had been cut so that it could be pulled aside to create an opening just big enough for a person to squeeze through. As the coyote held the fencing aside, everyone slipped through one by one.

“I remember thinking, ‘That was easy.’ But I guess I still hadn’t understood that we were going to have to walk half the night and part of the next day,” Alvara says with a smile. “I thought that as soon as we crossed the border, everything would suddenly change.”

Alvara held on to her mother’s hand that entire night as the group made its way across the eerie desert. The coyote followed a very old path—one that may have been used even hundreds of years ago by natives, back before there were borders or separate countries. It was hard to see the path in the darkness, but every

now and then Alvara would see discarded water bottles, wrappers, or even clothing. It was clear that many people from Mexico had traveled this very same route.

Late into the night, the group stopped to rest for a few hours, huddling together in the chilly air of a desert night. But before the sun rose, they were back on the old path.

“We were pretty fortunate,” Alvara remembers. “It was still only May, so the desert was not terribly hot yet. When the sun finally did come up, it only got into the upper 80s. Since I’ve gotten older, I’ve heard some horrible stories. Hundreds and hundreds of people have died trying to cross that desert during the summer months. They run out of water, and then the desert just fries them. They roll around in the sand, trying to escape the sun. It’s a very painful way to die.”

Before noon, Alvara and her mother hid with the rest of the group behind large boulders near an empty two-lane gravel road. Within thirty minutes, two vans that would carry everyone to Tucson pulled up in a cloud of dust. A two-hour drive to Tucson, a long wait in a filthy bus station, and then a three-day bus ride from Tucson to Kentucky seemed like forever to a ten-year-old girl.

“I remember looking out the window of the bus at all these new things I had never seen before. It was amazing to me. I knew then that

I wasn't just headed to meet my father. I was heading into a new life."

When Alvara and her mother finally reached the Louisville bus station, they were dusty, exhausted, and wearing the same wrinkled clothes they had worn for many days. As they pulled into the station, Hernan came running out and jogged alongside the bus, waving and grinning until it came to a stop.

"I hadn't seen my dad in over two years, but the second I saw him running alongside the bus, it was like we'd never been apart," Alvara recalls with a shy smile. "My mother had been worried about looking so bad, but when Dad saw us, it was like we were the two most beautiful women in the world. He grabbed us when we got off the bus, and he started crying. I'd never seen my father cry before that, and I've never seen him cry since. He was just so happy to see us again."

Twelve years later, Alvara is a thoughtful, well-spoken, and determined young woman. Her memories of the crossing bring up mixed feelings. She is proud of what her parents went through to create a better life, but she is troubled by the fact that her parents are still illegal immigrants. Although Alvara was also an illegal immigrant when she first came to the United States, she recently gained legal status when she married a citizen of the United States.

“My mother and father live in constant fear of being sent back to Mexico,” she explains. “They are proud and happy to be here, but they often feel as though they have to hide. They want to learn English, but they think that if they go to a class, they will get arrested.”

But in spite of their fear, Alvara’s parents feel that every sacrifice they’ve made and continue to make is worth the one dream they had for their daughter—an education. Although her first few years in school here were difficult, Alvara worked hard and eventually graduated from high school near the top of her class.

“I know a lot of people think it’s unfair for children of illegal immigrants to be allowed to receive an education. But I’ve never understood how it would make things *more* fair to deny learning to anyone. That just doesn’t make sense.”

Today, Alvara is taking classes at a local community college and hoping to transfer to a four-year school before long. Some day, she would like to receive a degree in immigration law.

“There are so many questions, so many problems when it comes to immigration. There are a lot of changes to be made, and a lot of people to help.” Alvara pauses, possibly thinking back to that strange night so many years ago. Then she smiles and simply says, “I want to do what I can to help.”