



I think everybody who comes to the U.S. should be entitled to the American dream. That's the reason my mom brought five kids under the age of 15 - for us to have a better life.

Maritza

My name is Maritza. I came to the U.S. when I was nine. I have these hazy memories of big sand hills, the Tijuana River, and chain link fencing. I've been told that the border patrol agents just let everybody pass through, after they ran over somebody.

We arrived in August, and I started school in September. My mom was sending me to school in these patent leather shoes and knee-high socks and homemade skirts. If the kids made fun of me I really don't remember, because I didn't understand them.

I was in a mostly White school with few Hispanic students, and that forced me to learn English quickly. As an adult, my Mexican accent is very minimal, and when I speak Spanish it is with an American accent. I do feel more American than Mexican, even though I am not legally a U.S. citizen. I am living in this country as an undocumented immigrant.

I've come close to qualifying for legal status, but it's never happened. Like, when my mom was pregnant she was in the U.S., but she went back to Mexico a month before I was born. And if my family would have crossed in '88 instead of '89, I might have qualified for family unity benefits. Then in 2001 my mom and brothers qualified

for the LIFE Act, but I couldn't because dependents had to be under 21, and I was already 21. When DACA came you had to be under 31, and I was already 32.

The only reason I'm bringing up all of these missed opportunities is because each time a new program came out I got excited – Finally, this is gonna happen. I can live the American dream! And then, all of a sudden, “No, you don't qualify.” It's emotional.

Without papers I've had to work “under the table” – getting paid cash for dead-end jobs. For a long time I was getting 30 dollars a day for working probably 9 to 10 hours. Another employer just stopped paying me at all. You end up accepting whatever crumbs people are willing to give you.

In high school I worked in a shoe store. I left and got lucky with a great job in customer service. That company left town after ten years, so I went back to the shoe store. There were people who had seen me there as a teenager, and now in my thirties, and they would say things like, “What? You're still here?” And I would tell them, “No, I worked somewhere else, but I came back here.” But deep inside I was also questioning, “What are you doing here?”

I started feeling like, you know, “I'm worth



When Maritza graduated from CSUSB in 2016, she decorated her cap with symbolism and words to represent her journey as an undocumented immigrant.

more than this." I mean, yes, I don't have papers. But, I'm worth more than this. I don't see myself as a victim of my status, but what could I do?

And then the California Dream Act (AB 540) came in, and for that I did qualify. I may not be getting my papers, but I did qualify to go to school. I started at Riverside Community College in 2012, and I graduated from Cal State with a Bachelor's in Entrepreneurial Management in 2016.

While I was on campus I got involved with the Coyote Dreamers - a group to support undocumented students - and it was empowering! People were coming out, saying "Yes, I'm undocumented!"

I hadn't really shared my status with anyone before, but I started to, and it was really nice to show people that an undocumented individual could do so much. It's just like someone turned on my inner *chingona*. I don't know how else to describe it to you!

I'm still un-hirable. I have all the qualifications that you're looking for, but you can't legally hire me. I do own my own business. It's in my mom's name because I cannot legally own it. I pay my taxes, but it's with an ITIN, because I don't qualify for a

"'MG' is the logo for my business. 'Ladypreneur' is short for Lady Entrepreneur. It also has the Coyote Dreamers logo, and silhouettes of the American flag and a Cactus."

social security number. I'm trying to walk a straight line, but where there are all these locked doors sometimes you have to crawl through a few windows.

A lot of undocumented immigrants do everything in their power to stay off the radar. But, we're your neighbor, we're the person driving next to you, we are donating at the blood bank. We may not be in the system, but there are a lot of us here to live that American dream. And while there are always going to be a few bad apples, most of us haven't done anything wrong. We're just attempting to live a normal life.

Walk a day in our shoes. Actually, walk a year. And then imagine what it is like to walk a lifetime.