

# Sandra



My name is Sandra. I'm 37 years old. I'm a single parent. I was young when I had my daughter, so she's off at college now. I work for the Corona Unified School District, with English language learners, and I love what I do.

As a child, I was an English language learner myself. My parents are immigrants from Guanajuato, Mexico, and they didn't speak English. As a kid, I was always my parents' translator for parent-teacher conferences, at the bank, at the hospital ... everywhere.

I also went with my parents to vote, because they couldn't read the ballots. And I remember being treated like, you know, "Why are you even here? These people shouldn't even be allowed to vote if they don't speak the language." It was during that time that I started to resent being Mexican.

*There is this perception that if you speak a second language you are too dumb to be in a mainstream classroom. You can't understand the same material as everybody else.*

I was ashamed, and I was embarrassed of my parents. I didn't enjoy having to interpret. I didn't enjoy going places with them. I didn't like how White people looked at me when I would speak for them. It made me feel that not only was I kind of stupid because I was still learning English, but my parents were stupid as well, because they couldn't understand what was being said to them.

A lot of times in this country people assume that if you speak another language you are somehow inferior. I remember actually hearing my teacher in elementary school say in reference to me, "Oh, this poor, dumb, little Mexican girl." They were thinking I didn't understand. And I remember thinking, "Wow, that's who I am. I'm a poor, dumb, little Mexican girl."

People also assume that, if you're Mexican, not only can you not speak English and you're poor, but you're ignorant, or uneducated. And that you're also here illegally. That you're a criminal. That you don't belong here. That you're lazy. That you live off the system. I could go on and on, really.

None of these assumptions has necessarily limited my opportunities. But, as far as my own self-esteem, growing up it made me feel less than who I was. With all those labels I started to feel like, "Wow, being a Mexican-American is a horrible thing!" Instead of embracing my heritage and feeling empowered, I was really ashamed of who I was. I didn't want to speak Spanish. I didn't want to be my parents'

interpreter. I didn't even want to say I was Mexican.

It wasn't until high school that I embraced my Mexican roots. They started introducing us to literature that was written by minorities. Specifically, by Mexican-Americans, like Victor Villasenor and Sandra Cisneros. For the first time in my life I found something I identified with! And I saw that Mexicans were looked at in a different way – instead of being treated like gang members, or criminals, or field workers, or rapists, or people who just come to live off of the government.

In college I took Chicano Studies classes, and art classes. And today I do embrace my heritage. Well, most of it. My parents always raised the girls to cook, and clean, and cater to the men. I don't fit that typical female mold, and I raised my daughter not to fit into this idea of what people traditionally think Chicanas should be.

I do feel Mexican as much as I do American. But, there are many people in this country who are not accepting of anybody who does not fit their idea of what an "American" is supposed to be. Which is not myself. Which is not most people, actually.

I still see the same assumptions play out in elementary schools today as when I was a kid. There have been situations where I walk into a classroom and the teacher has made a comment like, "Okay, all of the kids who speak Spanish go with her." Well, just because a kid speaks Spanish they don't necessarily need my assistance as an English language learner. They assume that if you speak Spanish at all you've got to be too dumb for the mainstream classroom.

Before I started working in schools, I actually was a business major. And it wasn't until I started working with the students that I knew I wanted to teach. In these students, I see my siblings. I see myself. And I am able to relate to how they feel, and how difficult it is for them growing up in the same society that I did, being treated differently based on their last name, how dark their skin is, where their parents are from, the kind of food they eat, or because of a second or third language that they speak. We still don't value diversity here.



"I remember thinking, 'Wow, I actually live in a really nice neighborhood. And my parents probably have a nicer house than you do. But yet, I'm the poor one? Just because I choose not to speak English?'"



A small box featuring Frida Kahlo, along with two rings.