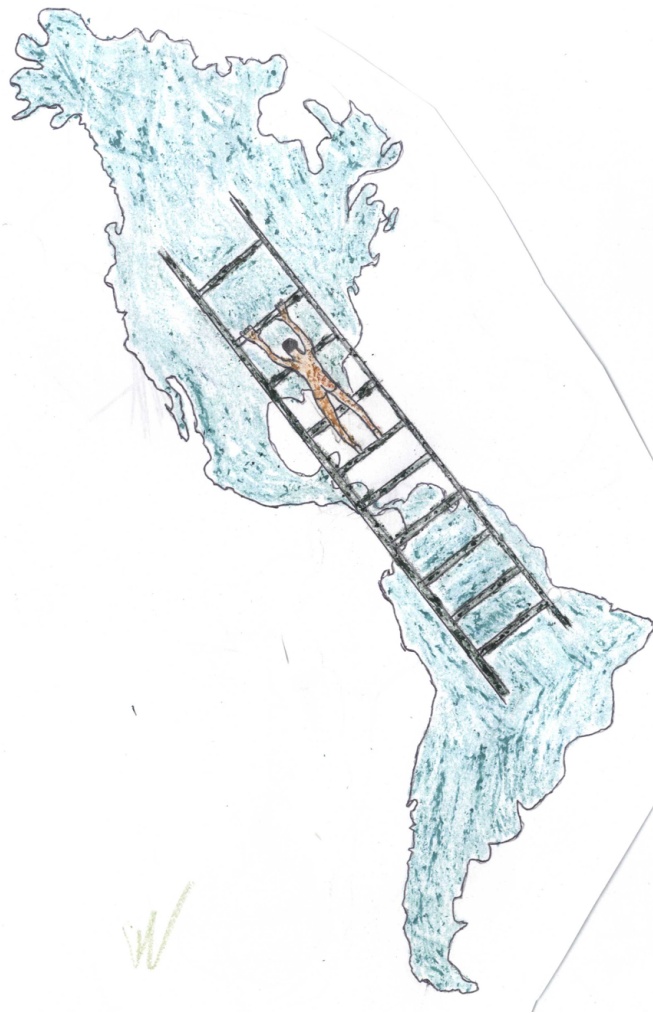


ONE DAY MY STORY GON' PAY

**My struggle with justifying my place
at the University of Washington**



Emmanuel Salinas

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Introduction

Stories are a powerful way to detail someone's struggle with themselves and their community. Stories can often inspire us to do great. They can also dampen our mood and give us anxiety about how we are living our lives. Some stories can do a little bit of both. Take Joe Lacob, majority owner of the Golden State Warriors in the National Basketball Association (NBA). Joe Lacob grew up a very poor man. No one in his family had ever graduated from college. He would go on to become the first person in his family to graduate from college, and become a billionaire and now owns a NBA team. This story should inspire anyone who aspires to be a successful person. However, even this story could question what we are doing with ourselves. One could look at Joe Lacob's story and ask themselves "If Joe Lacob was born a dirt-poor man but rose up and became a billionaire on his own, does that mean I am not doing enough since I had been born into a much better position in society than he was?".

My senior project involves my personal story about how my family rose up from poverty and how that resulted in me getting into the University of Washington (UW). You see, college was not expected of me. I don't mean that college was not expected of me by my parents. No. You see, my mother graduated from college. She is an

immigrant from Mexico, and if she could do it, that means the process should be a lot easier for someone like me who was raised in this country. So, in the eyes of my mother, college was always something that I would need to do. The part where I say “college was not expected of me” is in reference to myself.

I never once thought I would graduate from college growing up. In fact, I would often challenge my mother about the legitimacy about college. It was easy to challenge that notion when you are bouncing from house to house, one school district to another, living off government assistance, and being raised by a single mother. At the time, I didn't quite realize how unique and challenging my life circumstances were. As I am older now, it's easier to see why I saw the world in a different lens.

Today, my family is living the American Dream. We own a house in King county. Of 4 siblings raised by a single mother, 2 are about to have their college degrees before the age of 30. We are not living hand-to-mouth. My mother works in her dream job. Things could be a lot worse, but they're not. I could have been born in Mexico, or worse, El Salvador. I could have been recruited by a gang in Latin America or in this country like many other Latinos are. My mother could have stayed with her ex-husband, a violent criminal that would have made my life a lot worse than it has to be. Throughout my life, I have come

to recognize that I am quite privileged for some of the hard decisions my mother had to make. With all that being said, let me tell you a little about my senior project.

My senior project is the result of a lot of indecisiveness on my part. I originally wanted to talk about how Latinos at the UW were struggling to feel like they belonged here. And while that is true for many, not all Latinos struggle with that feeling. While interviewing 10 Latinos about their experience at the UW, I had become moved by their stories. Nearly all of them (9 of 10) don't have a parent who graduated from college. Many of them grew up in Eastern Washington having to help their parents pick fruits so they could pay bills at home. It is no wonder they felt like they deserved to be here. They worked their asses off to get here! They're not going to let the fact their parents did not go to college stop them from completing their dreams. After all, this is why their parents migrated to this country. So that their kids would not have to live hand-to-mouth like they did for most of their lives.

After being inspired from their stories, I considered writing a short story about a fictional character who had lived similar to many of the Latinos I interviewed. While that story would be powerful, I thought why not just write about myself? Don't I have a powerful story? Sure, my mother graduated from college, which is in contrast to

the 9 of the 10 students I interviewed. However, I still had an unstable childhood where the benefits of my mother's education were not fully reaped until I could drive a car. I guess better late than never. But still, I have story that can be read by people of all backgrounds. I believe that my story could really inspire others to do better. Oh, and the title of my story is called "One day my story gon' pay". This is a line from rapper Schoolboy Q's "break the bank". In this song, Schoolboy Q acknowledges that he has a powerful story to tell, and that it's part of the reason why he has a successful career in music.

Literature Review

My project involved research into a marginalized group of students, Latino Americans. In order to fully understand the issues that affect the Latino American community, I needed to conduct some contextual research. Some of that research included statistics on income levels, ownership of wealth, educational attainment, test scores in primary school, and other indicators that are used to measure the success of Latin Americans through a socioeconomic lens. After researching into the income and educational attainment levels of Latino Americans, I decided to research some of the history of Latino students at the UW. Areas of focus on the history of Latino students at the UW included: the first time a Latino club was created, when the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (OMAD) was created, when the first university-wide equity plan was made, any pressing issues today, Latino student and faculty population, and the current strategy being employed by the UW. I will now dive into the troubling wealth gap between Latino Americans and other Americans.

Wealth Gap

The median annual household income for Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in the United states are \$38,000 and \$36,000, respectively.¹ Keep in mind, that although Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in the United States don't comprise all of Latino Americans, these two groups do represent 75% of the Latino American population. Meanwhile, the median household income for the whole of the United States is \$51,400, or roughly a third more than that of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans.²

Another measure of wealth where Latino Americans are desperately behind other Americans are the amount of wealth they own. This could be in homes, businesses and any other commodity that is worth money. The average Latino American household had \$109,000 of accumulated wealth in 2010, while the average American (all races)

¹ Ferdman, Roberto A. "The Great American Hispanic Wealth Gap." The Washington Post. July 01, 2014. Accessed February 20, 2019.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/07/01/hispanics-make-up-more-than-16-of-the-u-s-population-but-own-less-than-2-3-of-its-wealth/?utm_term=.41bd96c971e5.

² Ferdman, Roberto A. "The Great American Hispanic Wealth Gap." The Washington Post. July 01, 2014. Accessed February 20, 2019.
https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/07/01/hispanics-make-up-more-than-16-of-the-u-s-population-but-own-less-than-2-3-of-its-wealth/?utm_term=.41bd96c971e5.

household had \$495,000 in 2010. This leaves many Latino American families no choice but to apply for financial aid, and often having to borrow loans.

Achievement Gap

In addition to the wealth gap between Latino Americans and White Americans is the achievement gap that still persists today in most schools in the United States. Latino Americans graduate high school less often (by percentage, not raw numbers) than all other racial groups. In particular, it is immigrants of from Latin America that really struggle to obtain an education. Only 53% of them aged 25 and older have graduated from high school, compared to 87% of all Americans.³ Meanwhile, only 11% of immigrants from Latin America aged 25 and over have a bachelor's degree compared to 31% of all Americans.⁴ Many Latinos are first generation Americans whose parents did not even graduate from high school. This makes it hard for Latinos to rely on their families for guidance while in college since their families have never been to college. This also means that many Latino students are the first in their family to go through college.

³ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/12/key-findings-on-the-rise-in-income-inequality-within-americas-racial-and-ethnic-groups/>

⁴ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/12/key-findings-on-the-rise-in-income-inequality-within-americas-racial-and-ethnic-groups/>

Latinos are also lagging behind other racial groups in test scores. In 2009, Latino students in the 4th grade were receiving a score of 227 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) main assessment in mathematics, the same score that their White peers had in 1992.⁵ On the reading assessment, Latino 4th graders scored 248 in 2009, while their White peers scored 271, giving White 4th graders a 24-point lead. In 1992, the first year these statistics on the reading assessment were available, White students had a 27-point lead (265 vs 238), indicating that the achievement gap has not narrowed in any significant way.⁶

More troubling is the achievement gap in states with a high percentage of Latinos. The states of California and Massachusetts recorded achievement gaps in the reading portion at 31 and 30 points, respectively, while the states of Louisiana and Ohio had achievement

⁵ "Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U.S. Department of Education. June 2011. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2011459.aspx>.

⁶ "Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U.S. Department of Education. June 2011. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2011459.aspx>.

gaps of 13 and 15 points, respectively.⁷ In all fairness, part of this disparity between the four aforementioned states is partly because White students score a lot higher in the states where there are more Latinos. The question remains, however, as to why are White students scoring a lot higher than their White peers who live in states with a lower percentage of Latinos while Latino students in many cases are scoring lower than their Latino peers who live in states with less Latinos?

⁷ "Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U.S. Department of Education. June 2011. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2011459.aspx>.

Resources at the UW

What can be done to remedy this? Latino students are lagging behind their White peers and it leaves them unprepared to be competitive in college and the job market, hence the lower incomes. Fortunately, when Latino students enter college, there are resources to help them feel as if they have every right to belong there. Many universities have ethnic clubs, ethnic courses and majors, equity plans, departments such as the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (OMAD) at the UW. In fact, one of the core values of OMAD is to promote social justice. To quote them, "We raise consciousness and advance critical thinking about racial equity, broad inclusion and diversity". This is a very bold statement. This should inspire anyone who wants to continue to work towards a more just and equal society. But exactly how does OMAD and the UW envision carrying out this plan?

One of the initiatives that was spearheaded by OMAD was the Diversity Blueprint. The Diversity Blueprint is a series of four-year

plans that attempt to tackle some of the most pressing social issues in regard to equity. Currently, the 2017-2021 Diversity Blueprint calls for cultivating an inclusive campus climate, attracting and retaining students, faculty and staff, and making sure all three campuses (Seattle, Bothell and Tacoma) are in sync with their solutions. In regard to attracting and retaining students, the plan calls for increased involvement between central recruitment and outreach services with K-12 schools and community colleges to ensure a diverse applicant pool. Not only does the plan call for further outreach to students of color, but the plan also calls for outreach to those who identify as LGBTQ+, students with disabilities, immigrants and low-income students. In addition to outreach, the plan calls for strengthening the mentoring of underrepresented minorities (URM) and utilizing early warning systems and interventions.

Another great resource affiliated with OMAD is the Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center (ECC). The facility, originally designed by Ben McAdoo, the first licensed African American Architect in Washington, is home to many of the UW's ethnic registered student

organizations (RSO).⁸ The ECC's mission is to "provide an inclusive space that fosters academic success." Some of their affiliated clubs, just to name a few, include the Latinx Student Union (LSU), the Black Student Union (BSU), Pakistani Student Association (PSA), Chinese Theater Club (CTC) and the Arts Diversity Council (ADC). The mission of these clubs is to give underrepresented groups their own space and to provide them a platform on which to speak about their challenges while at the UW. Many of these clubs have fundraisers that raise money for their clubs. Sometimes those clubs sell snacks and food that come from the country of origin that are represented by the students. The ECC has its own theater, which provides a stage to all artists at the UW and aims to increase awareness of all cultures through the performing arts. Another great resource at the ECC is Leadership Without Borders. This program offers resources to undocumented students that help them get the most out of their college experience. They have a lending library of over 550 textbooks that can be borrowed by any undocumented student. They offer scholarships in

⁸ "Samuel E. Kelly Ethnic Cultural Center | University of Washington." Rolluda Architects, Inc. Accessed February 21, 2019. <http://www.rolludaarchitects.com/?p=1684>.

partnership with La Raza, an umbrella organization that cooperates with all Latino RSOs, and work with major immigrant organizations like the Northwest Immigrant Rights Project.

There is a wealth of resources at the UW that is intended to help Latinos and other minorities feel more comfortable in their journey through college. The point of college is not to just “go through it”, but rather to thrive. These organizations are intended to help all students feel like this institution is theirs.

History of Latinos at the UW

Latino students at the UW is a relatively recent demographic shift. In 1967, there was only about a dozen students who were of Latin American descent.⁹ Some of them, including Erasmo Gamboa, would skip class and hang out at coffee shops in the University District.¹⁰ At the time, coffee shops were the only place Latinos could hang out because they had no formal club or meeting place on campus. Gamboa joined the Black Student Union (BSU) in 1968 and would soon go on to form the United Mexican American Students (UMAS) that same year. Gamboa was inspired by the way BSU was able to convince President Charles Odegard to create the Special Education Program (SEP). The SEP was aimed at increasing the enrollment of underrepresented students and provide them with assistance in adjusting to the university life. Bill Hilliard, who directed recruitment efforts at the time, was accompanied by eight BSU

⁹ Simer, Jeremy. "La Raza Comes to Campus." Chicano Movement Geography. 1998. Accessed February 24, 2019.

http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/la_raza2.htm#note32.

¹⁰ Simer, Jeremy. "La Raza Comes to Campus." Chicano Movement Geography. 1998. Accessed February 24, 2019.

http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/la_raza2.htm#note32.

members on trips around the state to recruit Black, Latino and Native American students to the UW. On November 1, 1968, the first meeting of UMAS took place in Lander Hall dormitory.¹¹ At the end of its first quarter into existence, members of UMAS was able to convince the College of Arts and Sciences, and the College of Romance Languages, to offer a course on Mexican-American history and a Spanish grammar course, respectively.

UMAS would go on to be a central force in the boycott of California grapes at the UW in the early months of 1969. At the time, federal law prevented grape pickers from unionizing. As a result, companies were able to set wages on their workers. Many grape pickers, who were overwhelmingly migrant workers from Mexico, were at the mercy of large companies when it came to their own work benefits and other rights. Companies like Giumarra Vineyards Corporation used illegal tactics like using the packing labels of other grape growers to sell their own grapes when the United Farm Workers

¹¹ Simer, Jeremy. "La Raza Comes to Campus." Chicano Movement Geography. 1998. Accessed February 24, 2019. http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/la_raza2.htm#note32.

Organizing Committee (UFWOC) organized a boycott of their grapes.¹²

As a result of all of this, many students at the UW called for a boycott

of all California grapes, with UMAS, BSU and the Students for a

Democratic Society (SDS) leading the way in organizing the boycott.

They were rivaled by the Young Republicans (YR) in their efforts to

remove Californian grapes from the HUB. UMAS was able to capture

the attention of the Seattle Times, which allowed for others across the

country to know learn about the boycott. According to Jeremy Simer, it

was UMAS' ability to build a coalition of various student groups to unite

on the campaign to remove California grapes from the UW. Ultimately,

the campaign to remove grapes was successful, despite the UW

president Odegard's hesitancy to get "political" and pick a side.

As of the winter quarter 2019, the UW student body is 7.7%

Latino.¹³ This is despite the fact that Washington State is 11.9%

¹² Simer, Jeremy. "La Raza Comes to Campus." Chicano Movement Geography. 1998. Accessed February 24, 2019.

http://depts.washington.edu/civilr/la_raza2.htm#note32.

¹³ "Quick Stats of Student Enrollment." Student Data. Accessed February 24, 2019. <https://studentdata.washington.edu/quick-stats/>.

Latino.¹⁴ However, there has been a steady rise of Latino students in the UW since at least 2010, when Latinos were only 5.5% of the student body. As for faculty, in 2013 there were 199 faculty that identified as Latino, out of 4,460 faculty that chose to report their race.¹⁵ This is 4.5% of all the faculty that chose to report their race. In the period starting with the 2012-2013 academic year and ending in the 2015-2016 academic year, Latino faculty represented 7.5% of new faculty hires that chose to report their race.¹⁶ This indicates that the UW is making efforts to make not only its student body more diverse, but also its faculty.

¹⁴ "Race and Ethnicity in Washington (State)." Educational Attainment in the United States - Statistical Atlas. Accessed February 24, 2019.
<https://statisticalatlas.com/state/Washington/Race-and-Ethnicity#figure/race-and-ethnicity>.

¹⁵ "Data/reports." Office of Minority Affairs Diversity. Accessed February 24, 2019.
<http://www.washington.edu/faculty/senate/diversity/datareports/>.

¹⁶ "Data/reports." Office of Minority Affairs Diversity. Accessed February 24, 2019.
<http://www.washington.edu/faculty/senate/diversity/datareports/>.

Previous work on this topic

The bulk of my work for this project involves getting to know the lives of other Latino students at the UW. The meat of my methods involves interviewing Latino students to get a story out of their lives. This sort of method has been done before at the UW. Ricardo Gomez, an associate professor at the Informatics School of UW interviewed hundreds Latino students, staff and faculty. Gomez put these stories into a book, *Latinx @ UW*, which was published in 2018.¹⁷ Much of the stories in the book relate to people's identities, and how they were raised, who in their family was significant to them and how they got to the United States. One thing that is somewhat missing in the people's stories that I hope to capture in my interviews with other Latinx students is to gauge if they truly feel like they belong at the UW.

¹⁷ Gomez, Ricardo. *LatinX @ UW: Historias E Imágenes De Latinas Y Latinos En La Universidad De Washington = Stories and Images of Latinos and Latinas at the University of Washington*. Seattle, WA: Latino Center for Health, University of Washington, 2018.

Filling the gap

Part of my project means that I have to define what it is to feel that an individual or group belongs to an institution like the UW. In formulating a definition for this, I rely on my experience as a student at the UW. Part of my experience at the UW that I can really draw from is the classroom. In the classroom, it is easy to identify the individuals who are more comfortable speaking up. This is one measure I used to ask students when assessing whether they are comfortable at the UW.

Other ways of asking students about their feeling of belonging is by asking them whether they feel like they can get along with other students and instructors. When I see that a student has a great relationship with the instructor or their peers, it is hard to ignore that it is because the student can relate to the instructor or their peers because of culture, socioeconomic status, gender, and race. It feels as if those students are able to really connect with them in a way that would make it harder for others that don't have those similarities with their instructors or peers.

I asked the stories of how Latino students and their families arrived in the United States the way Ricardo Gomez does in his book, *Latinx@UW*. In addition, I do want to emphasize on the current experience Latino students have at the UW to see if they believe if there is a comfort gap between their community and other groups.

Conclusion

Some of the literature I have reviewed thus far may seem grim; Latino Americans have lower test scores in schools, they graduate high school and college at lower rates than most other Americans, and their share of the total wealth in the United States is miniscule. By researching this I am able to inform myself and my peers about some of the lower income levels which deters them from attending expensive higher education, not being able to rely on their family members for guidance while going through school because their families are unfamiliar with the college process and struggling to find a community of their own culture.

The UW is thankfully aware of these issues and has prioritized making the campus more welcoming to not only Latino Americans but other underrepresented groups as well. OMAD has been instrumental in leading some of these efforts, including the four-year Diversity Blueprints which aim to address the underrepresentation of minority groups. The ECC has dozens of cultural RSOs that give people access

to a community of their own culture, as well as the opportunity to challenge institutional racism with a space of their own.

It was in the 1960's that a precursor, UMAS, to one of the RSOs that exist today, Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano/a de Aztlan (MEChA), was formed. Erasmo Gamboa, the founder of UMAS, knew that Latino students had to form a union to have stronger voice and influence. It was UMAS, along with other organizations, that were able to convince the UW to stop buying California grapes (despite the administration's hesitancy to get involved). Today, UW students and faculty has been increasingly more Latino, reflecting the State of Washington's Latino population growth over the years. One former student and current professor, Ricardo Gomez, was able to capture the stories of many Latino staff, faculty and students as the basis of his book, *Latinx @ UW*. This book could emphasize, however, more on the current experience of Latino students at the UW.

In the end, I want my peers to know that there is a great wealth of stories and perseverance that their Latino peers hold. Latinos have an enormous amount of potential. Allowing them to be full participants of

society by allowing them to feel more comfortable at an institution as prestigious as the UW will only unlock that potential further.

Methodology

To understand what it is that I really wanted to do, I had to look at many scholarly articles about the inequities in higher learning. What I mean by the inequities of college is how specifically are different groups experiencing their college experience. Is there a gap in comfort level across colleges? Is college more unnatural, or 'forced' experience by underrepresented minorities (URM)? Do URM feel like they belong on campus? Do they feel like they 'own' a piece of the institution they are studying at?

Instead of focusing on all URM, I chose to focus my study on students of Latin American descent. This could be any student who have ancestors from any of the Spanish or Portuguese speaking countries in the Americas. Why did I choose Latino students? Well, for one I am Salvadorian and Mexican-American. In addition, people that share my heritage are not very visible on campus. This is particularly true in Community Environment and Planning, where only I am 1 of 5 Latino students out of nearly 70. It's not just the representation of Latino students that bothers me. It is also the participation level that is important. I notice Latino students, as well as other minorities, are not participating in the classroom as much as their White peers. I often notice that Latin students take a back seat in the classroom and only

respond when they are asked to. This is in comparison to White students, who tend to dominate the conversation even when taking into account their numbers.

Before I could interview any Latino students, I wanted to do a literature review that focused on the overall socioeconomic state of Latino Americans, and the efforts that the University of Washington (UW) has aimed to close the gap. When looking at the socioeconomic state of Latino Americans, I researched average incomes and educational attainment rates. An interesting metric I found unintentionally was the amount of wealth owned by Latino Americans. This metric takes into account all the property that Latino households own. Next up was researching the history of Latino students and clubs at the UW. This helped me learn about the impacts Latino students have had on campus since the 1960's.

The UW has made attempts to bridge the gap between URM and Whites. Part of my research involved looking at the UW's response to the socioeconomic gap between Whites and other students. I was able to learn the four-year Diversity Blueprints that the Office of Minority Affairs and Diversity (OMAD) carries out. In addition, I learned the trends of demographic change for both students and faculty. The trends are positive, as both students and faculty are becoming increasingly more Latino and diverse.

After getting a good snapshot of what the socioeconomic state of Latino Americans was and the efforts the UW has been promoting, it was time for me to start interviewing students. The way I was able to reach out to students was primarily through students in my major and the UW boxing club. Only two students were not in the aforementioned groups. I interviewed a total of ten students, two women and eight men. Four of them were in STEM majors, who tended to have different opinions than the other students. Two of them were from immigrants from Mexico.

The way I organized the interviews was by dividing them into three sections. In the first part I asked about their family history and how their families migrated to the US. In the second part I asked about how they were able to get into college. To elaborate, I wanted to gauge how involved their families were with the process, and whether their families had always instilled into them that an education was vital. Finally, I wanted to ask about their experience here at the UW.

When asking about their experience, I asked questions like:

- *Do you feel as if other groups of people are more willing to raise their hands?*

- *Do you notice which groups take up the most speaking time, even when accounting into the overall composition of the classroom?*
- *Are you able to get along with the instructor as well as students from another ethnic group?*
- *Are you comfortable speaking up and criticizing or giving your take on the curriculum?*
- *Are you encouraged to share your unique experience, and do you feel as if your experience is valued by the UW?*

While I was asking students these questions, I would type up the responses. I did not record anyone. Most interviews took place in private rooms.

After I finished interviewing, I started writing down trends. The most profound trend was that only one of the ten students I interviewed had at least one parent who graduated from college. This really struck me, as the overall rate of adults who have bachelor's degrees in the United States is one in three.¹⁸ However, among the ten students I interviewed, only two out of twenty parents had a college

¹⁸ ["Profile of Undergraduate Students: 2011-12."](#) U.S. Department of Education, October 2014.

degree (one in ten ratio). Now keep in mind, that these are college students I interviewed, and that the rate of college students who are first gen students is probably not going to be very high. In fact, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 34% of undergraduates were the first in their families to go to college in the 2011-12 academic year. Compare this to the 90% of students I interviewed. The biggest trend that would end up inspiring me would be that 3 of the 10 students I interviewed had worked in the agricultural fields of Eastern Washington with their parents as children. This moved me. I became so inspired by their stories that I had shifted the focus of my project to talking about the interviews of ten students to my own personal story.

I decided to write my own biography as my final method and deliverable. I spoke to my mother about our family history in order to lay out why I am here in the first place. Next, I simply recalled my own experience growing up in single mother household. Nearly everything I wrote came from my own memory. I did not need to contact anyone to remember what had happened in my life. I wrote nearly 17 pages, single spaced, about my life. I did not need to include everything, obviously, but I wanted to be detailed enough so that the reader could get a really good idea of how I grew into the person that

I am today. After finishing my autobiography, I had a peer review it and give me feedback.

My methodology was mutli-faceted and could be divided into three phases. My first phase involved the research of Latinos in the United States and how they fare in income levels and educational attainment. In addition, I looked the UW's response to the achievement gap between Latinos and other groups in the United States. Next, I used some of the research I had learned in the first phase to help guide me develop a set of questions and a structure for how I would interview Latino students. Interviewing students was divided into three sections; family history, how they got into college, and how they felt while at the UW. Next, I wrote my story. My story came from my own memories. I only needed to ask my mother a few questions. My story is detailed and written over 17 pages.

Final Product

My final product are my excerpts from the interviews I conducted and my autobiography. I only used the first names of the interviewees, and some of those are not the correct ones for privacy.

Miguel

Miguel is an undocumented immigrant from Michoacán, Mexico. He moved to the United States when he was one, moved back to Mexico after a few months, and moved permanently back in 2001. His parents work in the fruit fields of Yakima, where Miguel helped them as a child. Miguel's dad was a Spanish teacher while in Mexico but decided to migrate to the United States to work at an auto body shop in California.

Growing up, Miguel was unaware that he would be able to attend college in the state of Washington because of his legal status. In high school, he got connected with the Dare To Dream, an academy devoted to migrant farm workers that helps their children get familiar with the college application process. The program allows him to live in low-income housing near campus and even connected him with a job.

Miguel, being the first in his family to attend college, feels he has set an example for his younger sister, who is a citizen, to attend college. Miguel has become involved with Leadership Without Borders, a space for undocumented immigrants at the Ethnic Cultural Center (ECC). It is because of cultural RSOs that Miguel feels that he has a space on campus. However, when asked if White students were more participatory in the classroom, Miguel said yes.

Marc

Marc is single child born to Mexican immigrants. His parents migrated to the United States for better economic opportunities and met at a doco fruit packing warehouse. His father sold gum, and shined shoes as a kid to make ends meet, while his mom worked in the fruit picking industry before they came to the United States. Both of Marc's parents are very formally uneducated, with his father making it only to the end of middle school while his mother never finished elementary school. As a child, Marc would pick fruits with his parents for about eight hours a week without pay. Eventually Marc got into martial arts and became a trainer at a local gym in Wenatchee, Washington.

This really helped Marc motivate himself, as he did not want to see himself working the same jobs as his parents when he was older. Growing up, Marc had friends whose parents had gone to college. He told me that he wanted to be like his friend's parents and not have to work in the fields. In high school, Marc kept good grades and became a part of the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program, which allows underprivileged students to get ready and familiarize them with college.

Marc was drawn by the UW because of its urban setting and because it offered an Honors program in engineering. He got accepted

into the program, which he is currently in the first of four years. The Honors program waived his tuition and board. When asked about whether he felt like he deserved to be at the UW, he said that he felt deserving to be at the UW but not deserving enough to be in the Honors program.

I asked Marc about race, and particularly Latinos in engineering and he told me that there are probably only five other Latinos in any of his engineering prep classes, which include physics and chemistry. Further, I asked Mark if Latinos are visible in the class and if they speak up and participate as much as he would like them to see. He told me no. He went on to tell me that Latinos and other minorities need to get out of their comfort zone and speak up in class to be more visible. Marc has experienced racist incidents on campus, but feels safe on campus nonetheless. He is in a majority Latino fraternity, Sigma Lambda Beta. Eventually, Marc wants to specialize in mechanical engineering.

Kevin

Kevin is a son of Salvadoran and Mexican immigrants. His mother had to convince gang members not to recruit her brothers. One of them would eventually immigrate to the United States. Kevin's maternal grandparents sent his mother to Canada so that she could learn English and have a better life when she was 16. Kevin was not raised by his father and his mother would eventually get remarried and have more kids.

Growing up, Kevin always wanted to go to college. When he was in high school, he started taking running start, a program in Washington State which allows high schoolers to take free college classes at a community college. This allowed Kevin to take some of the required pre-requisites he would need to take at the UW for any engineering tract. He also got enrolled in the College Bound Scholarship in high school, which allowed him to get scholarships in college as long as he maintained good grades in both high school and college and did not get arrested. Further, Kevin says that his mother really pushed him to succeed in school and to get a college degree.

Currently, Kevin is getting a bachelor's degree in industrial engineering. He and his brother are the first to go to college in his family. Kevin is an officer for the Society of Hispanic Professional

Engineers, or SHPE. Kevin was able to get an internship in his field because of the networking that SHPE allowed him to do. This is important to him, since he believes that Latinos are sorely underrepresented in engineering fields. As an officer of a cultural and networking RSO, Kevin recognizes the importance of SHPE and has even done outreach at high schools with high minority populations, with the aim of attracting students in a more interactive way.

John

John is a master's student at the UW studying architecture. His family is from El Salvador, including his parents and older sisters. His family moved to the United States to escape the civil war and to find more economic opportunities. Both of John's parents were farmers in El Salvador.

When John's family arrived in Los Angeles, his father worked in several restaurants until he met a trucker driver. After this, his father would become a truck driver until this day. Meanwhile, John's mother worked as a hospice until she got hurt on the job. John's father completed high school, while his mother never completed middle school.

It was during high school that John realized he wanted to attend college. Instead of going to a four university, John decided to attend Chafee Community College. During his time Chafee, he worked at restaurants and would end up taking more than two years he needed to do in order to transfer to a four university. It took some motivation for John to finally commit to school full time, and in his family there was no shortage of that. John's older sisters both graduated from college and it was during their graduation ceremonies where he realized he wanted to commit full time.

John would graduate from Chafee and transfer to the University of Colorado, Denver campus. There, he completed his bachelor's degree in architecture. When asked about his experience there, John felt that the campus was welcoming to non-traditional students like him. He did feel an initial cultural shock as Colorado is much less diverse than Southern California. John would directly transfer to the UW after he obtained his bachelor's degree where he is currently studying architecture with a focus in history and critical theory. He will also obtain a certificate in historical preservation. I asked John about why he likes architecture so much, and he responded "we spend 90% of our time inside buildings, so why not spend our time inside beautiful buildings.

Ivan

Ivan is a first generation American born to Mexican immigrants. His father grew up on a farm with nine other siblings. When he was 19, he migrated to the United States to make money, with the plan to eventually return home. His mother had already started a family in Mexico and brought over her son and would eventually have daughter in the United States. She split with her boyfriend and met Ivan's father about four years after migrating to the United States. When Ivan was two, he and his family moved to Mexico for four years. While wanting to avoid the harsh agriculture working conditions in Yakima, they would face high medical costs for Ivan's asthma while in Mexico. This prompted them to move back to the Yakima.

As a child, Ivan would help his family in the fields of Yakima make ends meet. This helped him realize that he wanted more out of education than his parents got. His dad had gone to trade school but had never finished, while mom never even finished elementary school. In high school, Ivan relied on counselors to help him decide on what college path he would take. He knew he wanted to study engineering since he loved doing math. He would choose the UW because its reputation and because of in-state scholarships.

Today, Ivan is studying to become an aerospace engineer. He is able to pay college through scholarships and financial aid. He is a part of the Society of Hispanic Professional Engineers (SHPE), which he credits as giving him access to a community of students who come from the same background. When asked if he felt like he belonged here, he said yes since he worked hard as a child and he knew he did not want to do that as an adult. As for race in the classroom, Ivan does note that White students are more vocal than minorities and that they tend to hold leadership positions more often. He says that minorities need to join clubs to help them ease into college and be more comfortable with their surroundings.

Isabel

Isabel is a first generation American, whose parents were born and raised in Mexico. Her father immigrated when he was 18 and wanted to provide and take care of his family, while her mom came to the US to get married with Isabel's dad. Isabel's parents were not sure if they wanted to stay in the United States, but once Isabel's older brother was born in 1995, Isabel's family had decided to stay in the US.

Isabel wanted to attend college in middle school, but in high school she started to have doubts. Isabel did running-start to avoid a traditional high school experience as it did not necessarily challenge her. Her running start experience challenged her because of the instructors. Isabel's high school counselor encouraged her to apply to different colleges and universities, and that counselor still acts as a mentor to Isabel today. Isabel's family was very supportive of her decision to attend college.

Isabel was hesitant to attend the University of Washington (UW) because of its size. She would go on to apply and get accepted by the UW because of the pre nursing major and in-state tuition. Her first year she paid for her tuition through her scholarship from OMAD. Currently in her second year, she is paying for her housing through her

RA position while paying for her tuition from savings made during the summer. Today Isabel is studying Community, Environment, and Planning.

Geovanni

Geovanni was born in Mexico City and came to the United States when he was eight for economic opportunities. His maternal grandpa started a auto detailing business that is now owned by Giovanni's parents. As a child, he would watch his family work and he was fortunate enough to not have to work until age fourteen. Geovanni is an only child, and because of this, his parents are able to pay for his tuition. Currently, Geovanni is undocumented.

Giovanni's parents encouraged him to do well in school at an early age. They monitored his grades and attended parent meetings, where his mother learned that he could go to college as an undocumented immigrant in the state of Washington. Right now, Geovanni is majoring in sociology and Spanish while minoring in entrepreneurship. When asked about his dream job, Geovanni said he was unsure, and he went on to say that he has considered getting a Master's in social work.

Cesar

Cesar is a first generation American born to Mexican parents. His father, of ten, could not even complete middle school as he had to work on his farm and take care of livestock. Cesar's father migrated to the United States in his teens to pick fruit. Currently, his father works as a groundskeeper.

Cesar struggled immensely in high school. He was often truant and did not bother to do his homework. He dropped out, got his GED, and started working minimum wage jobs. He

went into the air force reserve and got stationed in Fort Lewis-McChord. There, he attended Tacoma Community College, took physics courses and eventually transferred to the UW. He was able to pay for his tuition through the G.I. bill.

While at the UW, Cesar has found it difficult fitting in. Coming from the military, he believes a lot of students are undisciplined. When it asked if he deserved to be at the UW, he said no because he felt his grades were too low. When asked about race in the classroom, Cesar, definitively opposed affirmative action, saying that students should get into schools based on their merit and not their race.

Alejandro

Alejandro a junior at the UW who studies history. Alejandro does not know much about his Latino side, other than that his dad is from a border town from Texas and that he carries a Spanish last name. His father is currently in prison and because of this Alejandro has never meet his him, though he is open to visiting him in prison sometime in the future. Alejandro's mother is French Canadian and tried getting him to appreciate his father's Mexican side. During high school, Alejandro averaged a 3.9 GPA.

Although technically not a first-generation college student since his grandparents went to college, Alejandro feels as if there are characteristics in his life that makes him feel as if he is one. Growing up with a single mother is certainly one of those. When I asked him if he expected to get into the UW, he told me no because of its prestigious reputation. Alejandro feels as if he is out of place at the UW, and part of this may be because he comes from the small town of Colville in Eastern Washington. I then asked about his thoughts on race and participation in the classroom and he told me that White students are often more comfortable voicing their thoughts on a subject because they might have had better opportunities in the past to learn about the subject.

Ashley

Ashley is of Puerto Rican descent in the CEP program. Her paternal grandfather migrated to the mainland of the US when he was 18 to work at a factory making light switches. As a child, Maia's grandfather lived in a house with no electricity, no running water, and dirt floors. Their family sold moonshine to make a living.

Both of Ashley's parents have college degrees. However, the pathway for her father was not easy. He dropped out of high school, joined the military and eventually became an army ranger. Once he left the military, he went into the UW and got a bachelor's degree in history and a law degree. Ashley's mother went to college right after high school and would go on to get a law degree after undergraduate.

Growing up, Ashley was expected to go to college. She had prepared rigorously in high school and took AP courses. Eventually, she got accepted to study journalism in Boston. Ashley felt that there was an east coast elitist culture in Boston colleges, and after two years of studying there, she decided she wanted to return home. Ashley hopes to run for Seattle city council one day.

When asked about equity at the UW, Ashley had a few things to say. For one, she believes that White students are comfortable in the academic setting, and it is this that allows to be more vocal and

participatory in the classroom. When asked about potential solutions to making the academic environment more open to minorities, Ashley said that faculty needs to be aware of the gap between minorities and White students.

One Day My Story Gon' Pay

How did I get here? You know, the University of Washington? Ask anybody that knows me from secondary or primary school. I guarantee they will all be surprised. But why is it important that I write about myself? What significance does that do? How will writing about myself for my senior project contribute to academia? What good does it do for the world? It sounds very selfish. "What was your senior project?" "It was about me!" That just sounds very self-important.

Wasn't I supposed to write about how Latino students are being underserved in higher learning? About how White students are benefiting from education more so than other groups despite the fact that its minorities who have more to gain from college? Yeah, I tried doing that. But looking at endless stats about how White people own most of the wealth in this country and how most top earners today are children of successful people can be endless, boring and quite frankly, depressing. I am Latino. Looking at a stat that says the group of people I am in own less than 5% of this country's wealth (despite making up almost 20% of the population) and that it would take centuries for Latinos just to own an amount of wealth proportional to their population is really frightening. What are we doing here then? Don't we have a rich culture in Latin America full of biodiversity and a

humongous amount of resources that would make the White man drop his jaw in awe? We do. But I don't want to talk about that, honestly.

Talking about myself can inspire others who feel like me in college. Quite frankly, I feel like I got here on a fluke. You know the interception by Malcolm Butler in Super Bowl 49? The one that ended the Seattle Seahawks quest for the first consecutive super bowl win since the New England Patriots did it in the 2000s? Yeah, well, I feel like I am Malcolm Butler, while the ball is the University of Washington and the intended receiver (Ricardo Lockette) is some student who expected to get here because they were successful their entire school career. You see, I am a high school dropout. I have struggled immensely throughout my school career. My freshman year of high school, I passed 1 of 12 classes. I was so stubborn that I actually believed I was going to prove to my mom that I didn't need to graduate from even high school to fulfill myself. And here I am, on the cusp of getting a degree that roughly only one in three American adults get at the University of Washington! So, without further ado, here is my biography.

I was born in Santa Ana, California in December 1993. I don't know where exactly I lived, but it was probably an apartment according to my grandma. My mother is from Mexico, while my biological dad (Raul Salinas) is from El Salvador. He arrived in the

1970s, just before the civil war started over there. In case you have not heard, the Salvadoran Civil war was a bloody conflict that claimed the lives of many people. It, along with many other civil wars in Central America at the time, was part of a greater movement in Latin America to rid right-wing dictators by the use of guerilla warfare. The United States, under the leadership of republican Ronald Reagan, cooperated with dictatorships to repel the wave of communism that was spreading in the region. The Central American Crisis was the last major conflict of the Cold War in the Americas. Not much is known about my Raul, besides that fact that he was conceived through rape and that he himself was a dysfunctional and violent person.

My mother was born in Mexico. Her parents split up when she was young, and she lived with her mother. She has two older half-brothers, named Julio and Carlos, one younger sister named Maria, and one younger brother who died named Juan. My mother describes her childhood as poor. Her father, Manuel Estrada, was an educated man that was trained to be an accountant. Her father would go on to become an alcoholic and would cease being an accountant. My mother immigrated to the United States when she was 18. According to her, she arrived in the trunk of a car. She did not attend school but rather worked in a fiberglass factory where she would go on to meet the

father of her four children, me being one of them. All four of her children were born in Santa Ana.

I can't recall ever living with Raul, but my two older brothers can. Speaking of which, my two older brothers are named Cesar and Giovanni. Both witnessed domestic violence between our parents. My parents fought a lot when they lived together. One of the reasons my mom says this was normal was because Raul was an alcoholic and drug user. Furthermore, Raul did not get along with my mother's family. In fact, he snitched on their drug smuggling operation in order to get a deal with the government. That deal would have allowed Raul to get legal papers to stay in the United States. My mother, however, says she was not involved in the smuggling business.

A year after I was born, my mother got pregnant with Ashley, my younger sister. By that time, my parents had already split. My mother packed her bags and took us to Bakersfield, California. Meanwhile, her closest sibling Maria moved with her family to Toppenish, Washington and opened a bakery called El Porvenir ("the future" in English). I have a glimpse of memory from Bakersfield. Specifically, I was moving with my grandmother to Toppenish. We only stayed in Bakersfield for a year.

In Toppenish, at the top of a bakery lived nearly 10 people. My family, plus Maria's family, plus my tio (uncle in Spanish) Carlos. I recall that my tio Carlos made mini structures from popsicle sticks. One time I destroyed one and he gave me the belt. Many years later I told my mom about this and she told me that she disliked Carlos. In fact, she put him in jail because he was abusive towards his nieces and nephews. After a few months, my mom and her children all moved behind a pizza place a few blocks away. The only way you could drive to the driveway was via an alley. Not much occurred here, besides my uncle tickling me so hard that I peed and that one time he gave me a beer. It was during that year that I went to preschool. The preschool was located right next to Heritage College, a tribal college where my mom would go on to get her bachelor's degree. At the preschool, I would often have to get picked up by mother because I couldn't stop biting the teacher's asses. My mom must have been really embarrassed. It is at this preschool where my mom would go on to meet her best friend during the early 2000s. Monique Armijo, a Mexican-American, Toppenish native, would go on to be instrumental in the development of all our childhoods.

After preschool, I attended Garfield Elementary School along with my two older brothers. Most days after school, we would visit my brother's friends and jump on their trampoline. Toppenish is over 80%

Latino. Because of this, instruction at the public schools is in both English and Spanish. I remember struggling immensely with the letter H in Spanish (it's silent). My teacher would always give the shush sign, alluding to the letter's silence. After my kindergarten year at Garfield, my mother enrolled us at St Joseph Catholic School in Sunnyside.

St Joseph Sunnyside was a small Catholic school that attracted a lot of Latinos from the lower Yakima Valley. The lower Yakima Valley is different from the upper Yakima Valley. The upper Yakima is on higher ground and is mainly urban, with the city of Yakima dominating its footprint. The upper valley is also, socioeconomically, doing better as its economy is not based on only agriculture.

Life in St Joseph was mixed. The school was so small that its bus was not a bus, but rather a van. It was in this van where I came to appreciate my love for hip hop. The driver would play Hot 99.7, the local hip hop station. Here is where I first listened to *baby got back* by Sir-Mix-Alot, Ja Rule, Ashanti, Aaliyah, Jay Z, Outkast, and others. I made a good friend named Ivan, who lived in the small community of Granger, a city that has less than 4,000 people today¹⁹. My brothers and their friends would watch over us as we would wrestle behind the

¹⁹ 2010 United States Census, https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

school most mornings just to get some entertainment to their mornings.

My first-grade teacher was Mrs. Sherman. Mrs. Sherman was an older white woman who had curly hair and a thick frame. She was always on top of me. I remember this was around the time Harry Potter got released, and my brother's friends would joke that the movie ought to be called "Harry Pothead and Stoned Sorcerer". When I mentioned this in class, Mrs. Sherman gave me the look and said: "Emmanuel, please don't say that". At the time I didn't even know what the joke meant, but I knew it had to be funny since my older brothers were laughing when they first heard it. Mrs. Sherman would go on to write in my report card that I had a hard time staying focused in class.

During my first and second grade at the school, I got my first stint of suspensions for getting into fights. My first fight ever, I tackled a boy who was two years older than I was. From what I recall, the kid was picking on my classmates by throwing snowballs at them. I wanted to prove that I was a sort of hero by stopping that. I would end up getting suspended for this fight. The irony of this fight was that the person I attacked was the younger brother of my brother's girlfriend. My other fight involved one of my brother's friends. I can't

quite remember why this fight occurred, but it had become apparent that I had some behavioral problems at this point.

It was around this time that my mother moved us to a housing project in Wapato. Wapato is a small agricultural community of less than 5,000 people.²⁰ We were neighbors with a kid who was kind of a mentor to my older brothers. From what I recall, he went by “Lico”. Our time in Wapato was short lived but was nonetheless impactful. During the summer, my brothers and I would hang out with the neighbors and go to the irrigation canal and blow off firecrackers inside bottles. It was this same place where I had my first cigarette puff. One lucky day, the soda delivery person forgot to lock the vending machine and the neighborhood kids took complete advantage of it. I had a lot of sugar that day. It was in Wapato where my behavioral problems became even more obvious. I got into fights with my siblings there, and I even set our living room couch on fire.

My mother thought that by moving us out of these housing projects life might be a little better. So, we would move to an even smaller town called Zillah, which has less than 3,000 people²¹.

²⁰ 2010 United States Census,
https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

²¹ 2010 United States Census,
https://factfinder.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml?src=bkmk

Coinciding with this move, our Catholic school we attended had shut down because of funding. I remember seeing Mrs. Sherman crying during a teacher's meeting about the closure. We would continue to attend a Catholic school, this time in Yakima. The school, St. Joseph-Marquette, was larger and wealthier. The school's demographics were a lot whiter, and one of the biggest things I noticed about the school were the number of students who had braces.

Life in Zillah was a little bit better than in Wapato. We lived in a house, as opposed to an apartment. Yet the behavioral problems for me persisted. It was here where one of my worst behavioral incidents as a child occurred. At Hilton Elementary School, on a sunny summer day, my cousins, siblings and I were playing a game of tag. There were two groups, one older and one younger. The older group avoided tagging the younger group as it would be no fun since they were too slow. I however, was the exception. Everyone kept tagging me, and I struggled to keep up. Out of frustration, I picked up a rock and chucked it at my cousin Moises, who is 4 years younger than I am. At the time, I was about 9. My oldest brother rushes to me and starts pounding me. My older brother had to get him off of me. My cousin's older sisters are crying, and they lift him and take him to our house. This was a walk of shame for me. I felt so bad, but I also felt that I had needed to send a message that it was not okay for everyone else

to pick on me. Eventually, we arrived at our home, and I went straight to my room. My aunt, knowing that we would never be allowed over to her home if her husband finds out, had to lie and tell him something other than the truth.

Until this day, I have not spoken directly to my cousin about this incident. I think I should, but I sure hope I don't anger him. I don't really regret the incident, as I was very young at the time. It is just unfortunate that there was nothing that was really done as a result. In a way, I got away with this incident. But looking back, maybe I didn't get away with it. As you will hear later on in my life story, my struggles with behavior only got worse as time went on.

At St Joseph-Marquette, despite my much lower socioeconomic status than almost every other classmate, I somewhat fit in. I made good friends with several classmates. St Joseph Marquette was situated in downtown Yakima, right across the street from the Yakima Herald-Republic headquarters. Since I lived in the lower Yakima Valley, and my mom could not give us rides to school, we had to take the school bus. The bus driver, named Art, would put on this album by Cheech Marin called "My name is Cheech and I am a school bus driver". No *Hot 99.7* for us. It must have been too "urban" or for our ears. Art liked to drop us off at school 30 minutes before class started. For some messed up reason, all the kids that took the bus had to wait

outside, no matter how cold it was. You remember when I mentioned the Yakima Herald-Republic headquarters being right across the street from St Joseph? Well, suspended over the sidewalk was a temperature reading. During winter, that temperature often read -5 degrees Fahrenheit. Yes, Fahrenheit. No exceptions. We would have to stand outside in that temperature. It must have been good to have a parent who could drop you off right when class started. My principal, Gregg Pleger, one day noticed how thin the jackets my sister and I were wearing and took us to Target to buy us thicker jackets. This would not be the last time Mr. Pleger would show so much compassion. Mr. Pleger understood that my mother was struggling to raise us.

Around this time my brothers pulled off a legendary prank on me. They walked into my mom's bedroom and I see that they have found one of my mom's thongs. They both try it on and tell me that it is my turn. But before I could change, they tell me to wait as they have to use the bathroom. Finally, they tell me they're ready, so I change into my mom's thong and my mom's best friend Monique walks in and I start crying! I was so embarrassed and mad. Of course, I never told my mom, because that would just mean that I would not be able to hang out with my brothers later on.

In school, I struggled mightily with my grades and behavior. I went into cruise mode for a significant portion of my 3rd, 4th and 5th

grades. I did not fail my classes, but I did just the minimum amount of work I needed to do in order to pass. Behaviorally, I was in Mr. Pleger's office on a weekly basis. My oldest brother often joked that Mr. Pleger had my mother on speed dial because of how often I was in his office. The first time I got suspended at the St Joseph-Marquette was for saying something sexually inappropriate. I was only 9, and I felt like I did not deserve it. I told another classmate what "cock" meant in slang. This would be the first of many suspensions, many of them being for petty things like saying inappropriate comments in class.

During the summer right before fourth grade, my mother moved us back to Toppenish. This was a house on 12 Chehalis Ave. The neighborhood had a large collection of churches and was down the street from the Blue Sky Market. Since we were receiving food stamps, we would often borrow the food stamps card from our mother and go to the store and buy candy and burritos that made us fart badly. I would often go to the store without shoes and sometimes without a shirt and my brothers and cousins would be really embarrassed. Our first summer we became friends with our neighbors, who was a family of five (two parents, and three boys). The boys' names were Rafael, Mikey, and Luis. They were baseball players and wrestlers. It was really nice since we could have 3-on-3 baseball and basketball.

Toppenish, along with the rest of the Lower Yakima Valley, is majority Latino and very poor compared to the Seattle Metropolitan Area.²²²³ Income levels there are more comparable to Mexico than they are to Seattle.²⁴ With poverty often comes crime and violence, and in Toppenish there was no shortage of that. On a May night in 2005, right around 11PM, my brothers and I heard a gunshot. We knew better than to go outside. We would later find out that the gunshot was directed at a 15-year-old gang member, who would die from his wounds. An organization, which I don't know the name of, held a march to demand a safer environment. My mother knew that her lease on the house would expire at the end of the summer, so she wanted to make a move to a safer community.

My mother graduated that May from Heritage College and Eastern Washington University. She obtained her bachelor's degree from Heritage and her Master's degree from Eastern Washington, both in social work. At the time, she had been interning for Child Protection Services (CPS) in Toppenish. However, with the threat of gang

²² US Census, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/yakimacountywashington>

²³ US Census, <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/kingcountywashington>

²⁴ International Monetary Fund, <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2019/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?pr.x=58&pr.y=19&sy=2017&ey=2021&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=273&s=NGDPD%2CPPPGDP%2CNGDPDPC%2CPPPPC%2CPCPIPCH&grp=0&a=>

violence being ever so close to her children, she decided to bolt to the Seattle area.

Our family knew one person in the Seattle area. My cousin Rigo had a studio on Olive Way in Capitol Hill, Seattle. Our family would drive up to Rigo's apartment on weekends and spend the night in his studio. All five of us (plus Rigo). We would drive to South King County and look for homes. We were really close to buying a home Tukwila, but my mother found a home in Benson Hill, Renton. Our lives would have surely been different had we moved to Tukwila. We found a house on 16630 113th Ave SE Renton. It had five bedrooms, two and a half bathrooms and a lot of property in the back. Of course, we were just renting this house, so in the back of our minds, we knew we would have to move again. The house owners were Russian and owned several farm animals over the years. In fact, years later when I brought over a girlfriend, I had to chase a sheep back into the property as I did not want animal control to be called on us. But here we are. Renton. This would be were some of my most important years in my development as a person would occur.

Renton, compared to most places in Washington, is extremely diverse. I attended Nelsen Middle School. As a Latino, I was part of one of the smallest minority groups. I came from an area were Latinos were the largest minority group (in many settlements they were the

majority), to a place where they were outnumbered by African Americans, Asians and of course Whites.²⁵ It was a huge cultural shock. In addition to this cultural shock, I no longer attended a Catholic school. This meant that I would be getting a lot less attention from my teachers and administration staff.

My 6th grade year was kind of a transition year. I certainly was not getting in as much trouble as I had before. I was in a much more intimidating environment and I knew I would be vulnerable. However, my older brothers found a Latino community at Lindbergh High School. There, they would become a part of a gang known as “Brown Pride” (how original). At their school, there was somewhat of a race rivalry between Latinos and Blacks. One day my brothers were walking to go pick up my younger sister from school, and they got approached by teens from a rival gang. One of them had a gun and pointed it my oldest brother, but by the grace of good fortune the teen did not pull the trigger. Instead, he and his crew jumped my brothers. I was able to escape the gang life. I made friends with Crips, and had a feud with their rival Bloods, but I never was formerly a part of the Crips.

²⁵ US Census,
<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/rentoncitywashington/PST040218>

As for my academics, I was able to sustain that cruise control I had started in 3rd grade. I got a lot of D's and I managed to pass all my classes during 6th grade. I would get into fights my 6th grade year as well. My first one involved a 7th grader who had tried picking on me. I went up to him one day after school and asked if he wanted to settle it behind the school. He said sure. I got the better of him, but with that came some attention at school from the other middle schoolers. I was able to avoid any suspension, as the staff did not find out. Another fight involved a much larger 6th grader. This was in the boys' locker room. The boy got me in a headlock, and our gym teacher had to separate us. I can't remember if I got suspended for this. Perhaps the most memorable fight of my life, I fought with a 6th grader behind the school. We put on quite a show, as literally dozens of middle schoolers were spectating. The person I fought, Brian, decided it was a good idea to fight without a shirt. I, having been in fights before, knew this was bad for him since we were surrounded by tall grass and sticker bushes. The fight might have been a draw. But one thing for sure is that Brian looked like he had been in a fight. My brother showed up after that fight was over, saying "Brian looks like Jesus from Passion of the Christ!".

The summer between my 6th and 7th grade was rather uneventful. However, once I entered my 7th grade, we welcomed a

foreign exchange student into our family. Johnson, from Taiwan, was studying at Kennedy High School along with my brothers. That's right, my older brothers would be required to attend another Catholic school. Taking care of Johnson allowed for part of the tuition costs for my brothers to be covered. Johnson was a smart teen who enjoyed playing basketball with us. He would go on to get his bachelor's degree from Iowa State University.

My 7th grade year was my first year I started failing classes. I was getting in trouble a lot as well. I called one of my teachers a humpback whale. I got into detention and in-school suspension a lot for being disruptive in class. I used a gay slur against one of my teachers at the end of the year that got me nearly expelled. It got so bad that towards the end of the year my mother was called in for a meeting with all my teachers. The meeting was going as expected ("Manny needs to behave better!") up until my science teacher, Mr. Turner, raised concerns that I was not being a good role model to my Latino peers. That was it for me. I started crying. I never showed emotion like that in school before but hearing Mr. Turner say that was very sobering and emotional. It was quite ironic since I had generally avoided misbehaving around Mr. Turner, but I am guessing he knew how I behaved outside of his class.

Did my behavior change for the better after that intervention?

No. I would end up having to go to summer school that year because of how many classes I had failed. Outside of class, I had been hanging out with teenagers who had quite dysfunctional families. At the time, however, it was hard for me to realize that. As a kid and teenager, I often idolized my peers for what I perceived as having great families. It would take time for me to realize that I was relatively privileged to have a mother that could listen to me and respond to me.

At the end of my 7th grade, I had come to terms that I would need to go to my first summer school. It was not a really big deal to me, because at least I would be doing something. Oh, and a lot of my friends were going to be there.

The summer between my 7th and 8th grade was incredibly profound in my development as a person. I made really good friends with this group who lived in an apartment complex called "The Madison's". The Madison's were notorious for fights, of which I witnessed many. I made a really good friend named Daniel. Daniel had come from a dysfunctional family and had been in special education. He lived in a trailer across the street from the Madison's and so naturally I would have to go through the Madison's to get to Daniel's house. Over the summer, Daniel and I would hang out with a lot of teens from the Madison apartments. Daniel was able to attract a lot of

girls. In fact, I know of one who jumped off a three-story building for Daniel as they were running away from the police.

During this time, my oldest brother had gone off to California along with my sister for the summer. My other brother and I both had summer school. On a weekend, my mother chose to attend a global convention of Al-Anon, an organization that is dedicated to supporting family members of alcoholics. This meant my 14-year-old brother was supposed to take care of me. Except he did not, and instead he stayed at his friend's house from high school. I was alone in a house on a weekend when I was 12.

I had invited Daniel, along with other friends to spend the night at my house. We smoked marijuana, I think one of our friends lost her virginity on my mom's bed to a 17-year-old, and we stayed up all night. Around 2 A.M. we decided to go to the Madison apartments and skinny dip in the pool. The manager of the apartments, who was an intimidating Pacific Islander, yelled at us from his third-story window and told us to leave. As the short summer night ended, we stopped at a Bartell Drugs to get some food. As none of us have money, we had to ask our 17-year-old friend to walk into the store to steal candy for us. He came out with candy in his pants pockets, shoes, sweater pockets, you name it! That was our breakfast. To cap off one of the wildest weekends of my life, Daniel and I burned down a couch that was

placed in the middle of the pipeline by Cascade Park. As we walked away, we could see smoke from a mile away.

My 8th grade year had a lot of change in my family. I had met who would become my stepfather, Sergio, right outside Daniel's house. Sergio and my mother had met through Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous, where Sergio had been a recovering alcoholic. He and my mother started dating in the summer and Sergio would eventually propose to my mother. In fact, on the night he proposed to my mother, the very moment I should add, my mother had received a call from her nephew Jesus. Jesus, who had been living with his aunt for the past couple of years, decided he had enough with living there. Earlier in my story, I had mentioned that my grandmother had moved to Toppenish to run a bakery. Well, my aunt had forced Jesus (along with his two sisters) to work at the bakery since everyone that lived there, including her own children, had to work. Jesus had lived there because his father had died a few years before and his mother was incapable of taking care of her children.

In February of 2008, my mother would throw a small ceremony in our house to celebrate the marriage of her and Sergio. This would solidify him as my future father figure. At first, it was hard for me to accept him. After all, I was kind of a knucklehead. He and I would often argue, and it took me a while to realize his contributions to our

family. He is an extremely hard worker and has often had two jobs since he has been with my mom. Sergio did not have to get married to my mom and help raise her four children. However, Sergio recognizes the power that a family unit can have. He did not want to live the rest of his life alone.

During school, my behavior had changed somewhat. I was still failing classes, but I had calmed down when it came to being disruptive in class. One exception did come near the end of the year when I pantsed a classmate. This got me expelled from my school. However, I would return back when I had to attend summer school for the second year in a row. I would show a sign of control when a 7th grader when up to me one day in the middle of a hallway and demanded to fight me. I was wise enough to turn down the fight, despite making me look as if I was afraid to fight someone else.

Outside of school, I kept getting into fights. Another 8th grader, David, had called me out since he knew I had often projected my machoism in school. Initially, I had turned down the fight. But after realizing this somewhat hurt my reputation, I unwisely decided to fight David. During the fight, I had gotten on top of him and started hitting David. However, he told me something while that was going on. In fact, he yelled "I eat those!" so that everyone could hear. This struck

fear into me. He would flip me and go on to win the fight. This would set up a feud with my crew and his crew.

After a summer of school, I had entered high school. Lindbergh High School, named after the first person to fly across the Atlantic Ocean, reflects the diversity in Renton's Benson Hill. The feud between my crew and David's crew reignited when David had bumped into me. My best friend, Myles, called David out and so they set up a fight for that afternoon.

That afternoon, Myles fought David. David was much larger, but Myles had a lot of confidence going in his favor. The fight was pretty even for about two minutes. Then, all of sudden, one of David's crew members attacks Myles. Eventually, nearly 10 of David's crew start jumping Myles and me. They stomped on us, punched, kicked, whatever they could do to inflict pain and fear into us. Myles and I narrowly escaped. David and his crew got our backpacks, removed all of our papers and threw them everywhere. Of course, Myles and I did not really care since we did not do any of our homework.

During my freshman year, I failed 11 out of 12 of my classes. I thought I was cool, smart and above everyone else because I did not need to do my homework. In my high school, it seemed as if my teachers and the administrators did not care as much as they should

have about my trajectory. The graduation rate of Renton high schools in 2013 was only 75%.²⁶

Outside of class, I was hanging out with a crew of mostly White students. This was different from most other Latinos, as many of them hung out with other Latinos or persons of color. This is not to say that I did not hang out with other persons of color. It is just that my crew of five only included me that identified as a person of color. My crew and I would smoke weed very often. We would often go to class high. In fact, on my first day of finals, I had skipped out on lunch to smoke weed. On my way back to class, I had to stop at the main office because I was late on a finals day. On my way to class, I stopped in the restroom to see if I looked high. Looking at the mirror I saw a lost boy who clearly looked like he was high. Fearing that I would get suspended for being high while in class, I snuck through the back of the school and walked home. My oldest brother saw me along the way and I had to explain to him why I skipped out on one of my finals.

During my freshman year, I developed anxiety. The anxiety was especially pronounced when I would smoke weed. My brain would get flooded with thoughts about my place in my community. I was starting to realize that I was somewhat of degenerate. I was also very envious

²⁶ Renton Schools, <https://www.rentonschools.us/Page/3094>

of my friend Myles. You see, as a middle schooler, I was generally known as a badass for getting into fights with other middle schoolers. And while I was still getting into fights (at a lesser rate I should note), I felt like my friend Myles was getting more reputation as badass. It also did not help that he had appeared to have a more stable situation. After all, he lived in an owner-occupied house his entire life. He had both his biological parents living with him and his father was somewhat of a pushover who I viewed as a great father figure. The relationship Myles had with his father struck me as authentic and powerful. This was in contrast to my family, where we had just welcomed my stepfather a year prior.

During my sophomore year, I had realized that failing classes was not a smart thing to do. My best friend Myles had left school by this point. I know that it would be wrong to say that I failed classes the year prior because Myles had an influence on me, but I don't think it was a coincidence that once he dropped out of high school and I was no longer seeing him every day I actually started to do my homework. As I mentioned before, I was envious of Myles. Seeing him dropout of high school made me think he was doing the right thing. However, my mother would never allow that for me. Therefore, my logic was I might as well have tried to pass my classes.

My anxiety had picked up during my sophomore year. Every time I smoked weed, I had felt like I was a loser and that my crew was all doing better than me. I almost became obsessed in particular with my friend Myles. I had admired the way he would conduct himself in the streets. Not to say that people feared Myles, but people certainly respected him. Smoking weed would only exaggerate the feelings I had. One day my crew and I were smoking inside these condos that were being constructed. One of them had joked that I looked as if someone had punched me in the eyes. I had (and still have to this day) very noticeable eye bags. Smoking weed makes them more noticeable because my nervous system is working harder and that naturally gets me more tired. Later that day I went home and had a panic attack. I cannot say that it was caused because of what my crew said, but that became an important moment in my battle with anxiety.

In school, I had become attracted to a girl named Jocelyn. Jocelyn was a Latina that I shared two of my classes with. She was a very quiet girl in class, and it almost seemed if she had been suffering from some sort of depression. At the time, I had been battling with anxiety and I felt that we would be a match. Jocelyn and I would hang out after school, go on walks, and occasionally go to the mall together. As this was going on, my mother had announced that we were going to buy a home. I had mixed feelings about this, as I knew that would

mean that I would have to go to a new school. Great! I have to leave all my crew in Renton. And more importantly, my new girlfriend will now live five miles away.

My parents bought a new home in Covington. This home was in a relatively new neighborhood called Rainier Vista, where most of the homes look alike. I was not happy. I missed Renton. That is where I learned a lot about different people from different backgrounds. This is not to say that I did not appreciate how far my parents had come to get to this point. What I am saying is that at the time I had my head up my ass. I could not realize that my friends back in Renton were probably envious of me that my parents moved us into a much a better neighborhood. Moving to Covington meant I had to go to a new school. On the first day of class, instead of going to Kentlake High School, I went back to Lindbergh High School since I was still enrolled because the school district did not know I had moved to Covington. This meant I had to wake up around 4 AM to take three buses. This showed how much I would miss Renton.

Kentlake High School is a product of the explosive growth that South King County has witnessed over the last few decades. The school is located about five miles away from Rainier Vista. There was another high school, about a five-minute walk, in my neighborhood. However, that school, Tahoma High School, served the Tahoma School

District. A road separates the Kent and Tahoma school districts (SE 240 St). There was a high school, Kentwood, that was only two miles away. However, if all the kids in my neighborhood attended Kentwood this would have resulted in an imbalance of student populations between the two schools. Kentlake High School was in a much newer building than Lindbergh. The school had been built in 1997 and could fit over 2,000 students. The first few days of class were a little awkward for me. Do you remember how I mentioned that I was able to turn down a fight in my 8th grade year? Well, that student that had challenged me, Joseph, actually attended Kentlake. We would not fight, however. We became friends and I would sit with his crew during lunch.

Motivation to continue my high school became hard to find from within me. I had just switched schools, and with my being very behind, I would have to attend this school for at least three years. During lunch, I would leave Kentlake and take three (sometimes four) buses to see my girlfriend Jocelyn in Renton. We would hang out, and sometimes my mother would pick me up on her way home. Eventually, I came to the decision to drop out.

At this point, my mother knew she could not tell me to continue high school. I was over 16, and I had convinced her that I would get my GED the following month. She was skeptical, and she had every

reason to be. I went to a library, picked up a GED for Dummies book and studied. I wrote nearly a book of notes thinking that writing down information would help me store it better. I then went to Green River College and signed up for the GED test. The GED test took me two days to complete. On the first day, I worked on it for about eight hours, and on the second day, I worked on it for only two hours. I had passed the test with flying colors.

My mother had always wanted me to go to college. She knew I had struggled with school, but passing my GED gave her the confidence that she needed to enroll me into Green River College. Ultimately, it was up to me whether I wanted to go to college or not. However, when given a choice between more school or having to get a job, I chose to continue school. It's all I ever knew. In fact, I had anxiety about landing a job. I felt as if I was too immature to land and hold a job. After passing my GED, I set up a meeting with an academic advisor about my future in college. At this point, I knew that I wanted to study urban planning. However, before I could tell that to my academic advisor, my mother had intervened and told him that I wanted to be an engineer. Believe it or not, I did not argue and started my college career with an engineering path.

Over the summer of 2011, I had decided to volunteer for Covington's Park and Recreation Department. I wanted to get work

experience without the fear of getting fired. My volunteer experience involved picking up litter and trimming grass in parks and storm ponds. Once the summer was over, I got enrolled in pre-calculus at Green River College (GRC). I managed to get a D, which was passing, but not enough to get me into the next math class. This was enough for me to stop my engineering path and instead go on a transfer agreement pathway which would allow me to get my Associate in Arts Degree and transfer after my second year to a four-year university.

College went surprisingly well for the first year. I took it very slowly, only taking one or two courses per quarter. This meant I had a lot of free time since I was not working. I spent a lot of this time with my girlfriend Jocelyn, who was completing her final year of high school. I had come up with a very clever way of asking her to go to prom with me. I had made a crossword puzzle that would read "PROM?" once she had completed and highlighted all the words in the puzzle. Unfortunately, I would end up canceling prom because I wanted to focus on school. This caused a rift in our relationship.

My second year of college proved very difficult. I was taking full quarters, and in one of those I failed two courses out of three. On December 14, 2012, my friend had texted me to look at the news. The first thing I thought of was a school shooting. I turn on the TV, and I see the news about a horrific mass shooting in Connecticut. This really

put a damper on my mental health because I knew this could happen anywhere. I began to watch the news a lot more around this time and became sucked into all the negativity that comes with the news. The war in Syria. The Boston Marathon Bombing. My parents had warned me that I should stay away from such negative news. It did not help that around this time my relationship with Jocelyn had ended. My friendships with my crew from Renton begun to spiral into a set of dysfunctional relationships. With all the violence in the media, and with Barack Obama being inaugurated a second time, my political views had become apparently different than that of my friends. This gave them an opportunity to harass me. I tried fighting back, but this only made things worse. Eventually, we started making threats to each other, and one of them (Zach) actually recorded me and gave it to his father. At this point, I knew I was losing. There was no need for me to continue the feud with Zach, so I decided to stop contacting him.

It had become apparent that I needed some sort of help. I got an appointment with a therapist and a psychologist. I had gotten prescribed some antidepressants and mood stabilizers. My therapist and I identified some of the root causes of my anxiety. The biggest one had to be my fear of getting and holding a job. At this point, I was 19 and I had never gotten paid for a job. I was so anxious that my past behavior would not allow me to hold a job. Looking at my

biological father, a violent deadbeat who had gotten deported, I became scared that I would end up like him.

I eventually got a job at warehouse/plant in Kent that made beef jerky. This was my first job. I had gotten it through a temp agency. This meant that I was not an employee of the warehouse and that I could get fired at any moment for no reason. Eventually, I did get fired for being too slow on the job. This would put another damp on my self-esteem. I had decided I no longer wanted to continue school, so I stopped after obtaining 50 out of the 90 credits I needed to transfer.

After leaving school, I had a lot of free time. During this time, I became very unproductive. Instead of looking for jobs, I looked for ways to argue against my parents. They got so fed up that they wanted me to leave the house for some time. I was able to stay with my friend Ryan for a week. Ryan had gone to the same middle school as me a few years before. I would find a room on Craigslist and use that for a month. The owner of the house, a tall man with an accent, didn't even know I was renting the room. It was a tenant that had put the room on Craigslist. My mom got fed up and allowed me to come back home.

For the next six months, I would do next to nothing. I continued my therapy with my counselor. I continued to hang out with Ryan a

lot, including spending the night. This strengthened our relation and today I consider him a good friend. My mother had always been skeptical of him because of his tendencies to smoke marijuana. Nevertheless, he and I would hang out, take a bus to Seattle, go to parties, and do what friends normally do.

During the summer, I got a chance to go to California. While in California, I had stayed with my aunt in Bakersfield for a week. There, I worked with her husband, who owned a roofing company. I got paid the state minimum wage for 2014. This really got me back into the groove of work, as I would have to wake up in the morning and work for 8 hours a day in the hot sun. When I got back from California, I felt a bit more confident about my ability to hold down a job. Working on a roof in the hot sun taught me that making money could be fun and a lot easier.

The day I arrived back home my sister had just gotten hired to work at a Middle Eastern restaurant. This would be her third job, as she had two others! I got fed up! I told myself "Manny, you have no excuse to send out applications!". So that night, the very night I had returned from visiting my family in California, I applied. The very next day, I got an interview with McDonald's. The interview went really well, and the next thing you know I had gotten offered to work for McDonald's. To celebrate, Ryan and I went to Seattle and got drunk.

My phone had died, and I only slept for a few hours. I took the bus home, knowing that McDonald's may have wanted me to start work right away. When I arrived home, I charged my phone and I noticed the missing calls. I call back and I was asked to work that day. Hungover and sleep deprived, I showed up to work and learned how to cook fries.

I got offered work overnight, with the concession that I would get 40 hours a week. During the overnight shift, McDonald's is still serving guests. In addition to serving guests, the overnight crew had to clean the entire restaurant. I was tasked with washing the dishes. Growing up, I washed a lot of dishes for my family. My dishwashing role at McDonald's was easy.

My friend Ryan had taken note of my hard work. I was able to pay for my food and his food, movie tickets, clothes, everything I needed and desired. However, I had set a goal. I wanted to save \$5,000 to buy a car. At the time, I was taking a bus to work. This was not the hard part. The hard part was walking to the bus stop. The bus stop was 1.6 miles away from my house. This meant that I spent over an hour and a half commuting each way just to get to work, which was only 5 miles away.

I eventually got Ryan a job at McDonald's. He would work overnight shifts with me. This turned out to be bad, as I was moved to cleaning the grill overnight. Cleaning the grill also meant I had to assemble sandwiches. I was often struggling in this role. Eventually, they reduced Ryan's hours and gave me back my role as a dishwasher.

At the beginning of 2015, I had decided that I wanted to transfer to a store that was closer to me. The choice was based on my finances. I would be able to save more money since I would not have to pay bus fares any longer. Transitioning to a new store proved easy for me. I had made friends in the new restaurant. As for my work ethic, I had surprised myself. I had not missed a single day of work, and I often stayed late to help out the restaurant. I had developed a good relationship with the management of the restaurant, and it had become obvious that I would be tasked with a higher leadership role eventually. I was given the opportunity to become a manager, and I said yes without hesitation. I knew my pay would be higher, and this would get me closer to my goal of buying a car. At this point, I had already surpassed my goal of saving \$5,000. I had set a new goal of getting \$10,000 for a car. Seeing my sister struggle buying cheap and used cars had made me want to invest in a more reliable car.

The day had come when the management team had decided that they wanted me to train to become a manager. McDonald's manager

training involves a weekly class for about two months. Then, you are sent to Kirkland for a three-day event where you get to really learn about leadership, managing, and being a role model in the restaurant. I had become very proud of myself. I knew that it was my work ethic that had gotten me to this point. I had completely forgotten how I used to be very anxious about my ability to land and hold a job. I had finally felt like I had been living a happy life.

As soon as I became a manager, I had gotten very confident with myself. It was at this point where I thought I could return to school and finish what I started. I knew I wanted to get into a four-year university and get a degree in urban planning. The only two schools in Washington that offered urban planning were the UW and Eastern Washington University (EWU). My preferred choice was UW. However, I was not sure if I would be able to get in. I had saved up \$9,000 for a car. Instead of buying a car, however, I used my savings to pay for my tuition at Green River.

Returning to Green River needed no transition period. I picked off right where I left off three years prior. I attended every class, did all my assignments, picked up extra credit, raised my hand, and I made sure not to be that annoying degenerate I had once been. I did this, in addition to having to work three shifts a week as a manager at McDonald's. The management team was not happy that I had reduced

hours, but I did not care. After my first quarter, I had averaged a 3.9 GPA. I was incredibly proud of myself, but I knew I had to sustain these grades while working in order to get into the UW. The reason I had to keep working was that I still wanted to get a car by the time I would finish Green River and because I would have burned through my savings if I had not kept working.

My good grades had been sustained throughout the rest of my sophomore year. I had to make a gamble as I was approaching the end of my sophomore year. EWU would have been able to accept me during the winter quarter. However, for me to get into the UW I would have needed to wait until the fall. I would not complete my Associate in Arts degree until after fall, so I would need to wait another year if I wanted to get into the UW. I would end up gambling a year and hoping to get accepted into the UW. I finished Green River with a 3.2 GPA. I was able to raise my aggregate GPA a whole point up during my sophomore year. My sophomore year was finally done, but I knew I had two more years to my bachelor's degree.

Work had taken a toll on me. I had asked for a week off at the beginning of 2017, and I was granted that. Once I returned, I realized that my job was too much stress on me. I had to deal with incompetent employees who had called out, some would not even show up, employees gossiping, and people walking over me. I had

gotten into a feud with another manager who had a great reputation. Instead of acknowledging that I was in a team, I had become a part of a sect within the restaurant. The general manager still respected me, but I had felt as if I had lost respect from the other managers and the crew members. On a busy Saturday afternoon, I and another crew member had been tasked with making sandwiches for the entire restaurant. The manager I had been feuding with had demanded that I make sandwiches faster. I argued with the manager, and then the manager got into my face. I began to curse out the manager very loudly to where everyone in the restaurant could hear me. This would get me fired. Finding a job would prove to be a little difficult. My friend Sam would help me get a job where he worked, VIP floors. There, I learned how to clean grocery store floors and apply wax. The job was not very steady, as I was only working two to four days a week.

In June of that year, my stepdad had given me a piece of mail from UW. In it was my acceptance letter. I was mildly surprised. I did not believe I was going to get into the UW. However, I was not going to let that opportunity waste. Regardless if I felt like I believed I got accepted by a fluke, I accepted the UW's invitation to study there. Since I needed to pay off my car, I had to get a job that would provide me with 40 hours. Since I had restaurant experience, I applied for Wendy's.

I started the UW with a good amount of confidence, despite not fully believing I deserved to be there. Part of the reason I felt that way was because I had only done well for one year of my entire school career. I carried a lot of the failures of my life, such as dropping out of high school, with me. Nonetheless, I carried on. I would drive to the Angle Lake light rail station and take the light rail three times a week to class. This meant I had to wake up at 6:00 A.M. on those days. Community, Environment, and Planning (CEP), my major, has some really bright students. It is here where people challenge their privilege, something I have never really seen people do. During my first quarter at the UW, I was able to apply for a study abroad in Nepal. I missed the deadline for spring quarter, but the program lead was nice enough to extend the deadline for me. I consider it a privilege to get accepted into the program.

During winter quarter, I was able to move to an on-campus apartment. I had finally felt like a college student. I made friends in my apartment, whom I still talk to today. Winter quarter allowed me to experience the “true” college experience, whatever that means. I was now able to party without having to drive back to Covington. All I had to do was walk or take the bus. I was able to participate in events since I did not have to drive home and come back. As winter quarter ended, I prepared for the journey of a lifetime.

Before I arrived in Nepal, I stopped in Dubai. Dubai is an incredible city filled with modern skyscrapers, money, international visitors, and a laid-back culture. The locals there were very laid back, wearing their comfortable attire and looked happy. I could notice a class system. Filipino workers dominated the restaurant and janitorial services, while Indian nationals seemed to be working for businesses and other white-collar work. Meanwhile, the locals, who comprise less than half the population, were employed mainly in government work like armed forces at the airport.

One thing I really enjoyed about the United Arab Emirates (UAE) was that a lot of people thought I was a local. I have often been mistaken for being Middle Eastern and I feel as if it helps me when I am in a Middle Eastern country. I was able to visit the Burj Khalifa, which is the tallest human-made structure on earth! At that point, I knew I had become privileged. I had finally made it. From rags to riches. From welfare and poverty to international travel. I was alone in Dubai. But it did not matter. Everything I had done in the past, everything my family had done to that point, had gotten me to visit the world's tallest structure. I was incredibly happy.

Nepal was a cultural shock. As soon as I arrived at the airport, I had known that I was in a third world country. I saw this beautiful painting that depicted Nepalese society from over a century ago at the

airport. My professor and his cab driver picked me up and drove me to my apartment. On the way from the airport, I had thought of a scene from a video game called Call of Duty Modern Warfare. The taxi driver was driving fast, on the left side, without traffic signals, and farm animals like cows walking the streets. I had looked at the Bagmati River and could see the waste lining up its banks. I knew this would be quite a trip.

Nepal is a very poor country.²⁷ The average GDP is comparable to Sub-Saharan African countries.²⁸ The diet does not include a lot of meat, and the toilets require one to squat. Many of the restaurant and grocery workers there collect your cash while also handling food. This is probably one of the biggest reasons why I got sick a lot. The air was so dirty that when blew your nose, your snot was completely black with dust. You could stare directly at the sun during sunrise and sunset because of the amount of haze and smog in the Kathmandu Valley. Every morning I would wake up to the smell of burning trash,

²⁷ International Monetary Fund,
https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2018/01/weodata/weorept.aspx?sy=1980&key=2023&scsm=1&ssd=1&sort=country&ds=.&br=1&c=558&s=NGDP_RPCH,PPPGDP,PPPPC,PCIPCH,GGXWDG_NGDP&grp=0&a=&pr.x=96&pr.y=12

²⁸ The World Bank,
<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD?locations=ZG>

despite being in the “foreigner” part of town. A lot of people mistook me for being either a local or Middle Eastern.

My purpose in Nepal was to build park pods. Park pods are made of metal parts that can be configured to any use, such as a gathering space with benches or a jungle gym for kids. I helped sand the bamboo, transport the materials and put them together as best as I could. Our work site was not located in the neighborhood where the park pods would go. The neighborhood where the park pods would go, Hyumat, was located next to a river in a poorer part of town. Our group, consisting of six UW students and three instructors, went to Hyumat every Saturday to either install the park pods, make adjustments to them, or conduct studies about what the locals wanted out of the park pods.

It was the design and input process where I started to notice about differences in participation. That is participation from the UW students. I had noticed that the more engaged students had either come from wealthy backgrounds or had extensive travel experience. Meanwhile, the poorer students had a harder time being engaged and contributing to the whole process. This really struck me and reminded me of how back home it is the White students who I felt were more engaged in the classroom or could relate with the professor much easier. I wrote about this a lot in my journals and had plenty of

conversations with one of the instructors about this problem.

Unfortunately, I never quite had the confidence to talk directly to the program lead about it. I had felt like the program lead had come from a very wealthy family, and that it would be hard conveying how I felt to him.

Despite how bothered I was by some of the different levels of engagement among the students, I had the best time of my life in Nepal. I made great friends with whom I still stay in contact with today. I got to go on a three-day trek in Annapurna. I got swim with an elephant in a river. I explored the Kathmandu Valley and visited all sort of temples that were built on hills. I got to learn about a completely different culture. It was absolutely the time of my life. But it was also a place where I got to learn about other people's privilege and how that affects the dynamics of a group.

After the Nepal study abroad, I got to travel to India and Egypt. I was able to visit the Taj Mahal and local parks in Delhi. Unfortunately, I got sick during my time in India which meant I had to stay indoors for two days. In Egypt, I got to visit the Great Pyramids of Giza and see mummies that were thousands of years old. I stayed near Tahrir Square, which is near the seat of the Egyptian federal government. It took me a while to realize that I had become privileged. Sure, I put myself in a position to do all this traveling by

going to UW and studying abroad. But make no mistake, were it not for my parents' hard work, including my stepfather who is a janitor, I could not see pyramids built thousands of years ago.

Here I am writing out my Senior project. This is my story. I feel like it can be used to motivate others who may have walked similar paths. Owning up to being a student at the UW has proved to be difficult for me. It feels like UW has been a forced process. Like I am having to fake it. I know am not alone in this. If there is one lesson I could take from my time at UW, it is that I am not alone in feeling like this process feels unnatural. A lot of students, including my classmates, suffer from anxiety about completing college or getting a job afterward. I have to acknowledge that my past can't be changed. My family has gone through incredible change, and it shows in the way I interact with the world.

I came up with this analogy today that I think can be relevant to this project. Have you heard of seasonal lag? The longest day on in the Northern Hemisphere is usually not the hottest, despite the sun being at its highest angle. The hottest day is usually a month after, and in some places that are next to the ocean, it can be three months after the summer solstice. It takes time to warm up the Earth. This is how I feel when it comes to my family when we bought our home. Moving into our new home turned out to be the American Dream.

However, it didn't quite feel like that right away. There was some lag, you see. It took time, especially for me, to realize that our family has it really good.

Where will I go from here? Looking at my trajectory, I should be confident about my direction. I have come a long way. I only hope that I can keep it up. This project was intended for me to realize what place I am in my life, and where I am going. I became so inspired by some of the stories I had heard by other Latinos that I knew I had to tell my story. My story, just like theirs, involves a rags-to-riches trajectory. Sure, I never lived on the streets. But I certainly struggled with my behavior and was raised by a single mother for the majority of my childhood. So here I am, on the cusp of graduation. From high school dropout to UW graduate. My mom hates when I say that. She thinks people will use that against me. To my mother, and to anyone else reading this, I say "It does not matter whether I graduated from high school or not! I am a UW graduate!"

Conclusion

My senior project told my story from my family's history up to my senior year of college. I got inspired to tell my story after interviewing Latino students. Hearing their stories compelled me to tell my story, from start to finish, about how I ended up at the UW. But you see, I didn't just "end up" at the UW. I had to struggle for many years to get where I am at. I could probably point to the decision of my mother starting college as the reason I am here today, but that would not be enough. It was my personal struggles with mental health that really help me relaunch my school career.

I was able to capture the stories of ten other Latino students at the UW. Most of these students were first generation American and first-generation college students. They are all an inspiration to me and can be to others. Some of them come from very poor backgrounds, where they were required to pick fruit as children in order to make ends meet for their families. All their families came to this country to provide their children with better opportunities. The results are in, and they are that their family's sacrifices to uproot their lives in Latin America and migrate to the United States has paid off. These students are trailblazing the way for their communities.

The Latino American community suffers from low educational attainment rates and low-income levels when compared to all Americans. Their immigrant population is very uneducated, with only about half of Latino immigrants holding a high school diploma, compared to roughly 90% of the overall population.²⁹ Latinos score lower on tests than their White peers in almost every state, and their test scores are comparable to White students that took those tests nearly a generation ago.³⁰

²⁹ <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/07/12/key-findings-on-the-rise-in-income-inequality-within-americas-racial-and-ethnic-groups/>

³⁰ "Achievement Gaps: How Hispanic and White Students in Public Schools Perform in Mathematics and Reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress." National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Home Page, a Part of the U.S. Department of Education. June 2011. Accessed February 20, 2019. <https://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/pubs/studies/2011459.aspx>.

What I Learned

I have learned a lot in doing my senior project. In fact, I can say that the purpose of my project was to learn why I was struggling to justify my place at the UW. It felt like a fluke that I got accepted here. I just was not expecting to get in. Why? Does it matter? In the end, what matters is that the reviewers of my application thought that I belonged here.

While doing my senior project, I was able to recognize my love for writing and telling stories. After all, it is what I claim to be the reason that I got accepted into the UW. I was able to tell a powerful story about my journey through academia. My grades were good, but I was in the bottom 25th percentile for transfer students. My whole life, I had just felt like I would not get anything good out of life. I guess this is the turning point of that thought process. No more feeling like I don't deserve to have something. It is all on me now. If I do the work, I will get what I need. If I don't, I simply won't.

Now, as for the stories I was able to get out of other Latino students, I learned a lot. First of all, a lot of the students I interviewed had worked really hard to where they are right now. Many of them took high school very seriously. They didn't mess around when it came to their grades. They had recognized that if they got good grades in

high school, there would be a decent chance for them to be accepted into one of the most prestigious universities in the world. Some of them even worked with their parents in jobs such as fruit picking and janitorial services. At this point I had learned that I have had it easier in some regards to other Latinos students.

I never had to work a day in my life in order to support my family. My mother has never asked for my money. All she has asked for was for me to do chores. In fact, I believe this is the chief reason why I became such a hard worker in any of my jobs. I did have some hardships that many of the Latino students I interviewed did not have. None of the students I interviewed were raised by a single mother. This was an important factor in the development of my life. I did not have a lot of parental supervision growing up, which led for some wild times growing up and maybe some gaps in my educational development. Another important factor was that I dropped out of high school, unlike nine of the ten students I interviewed. This really put a dent into my confidence in getting into a school like the UW and justifying my place here.

I learned that I am not alone in my struggles. A lot of my peers in CEP struggle to get the ball rolling sometimes. This became very evident in our capstone course during winter quarter. When it came time to turn in our literature reviews, less than half of the cohort was

able to turn in the assignment. In fact, I of all people had been one of the first to do so. It became really hard to ignore this and at this point on I knew I was not alone in my struggles for completing a senior project.

Overall, I learned that no matter what academic background you come from you are going to struggle during your time at the UW. I know students who got 3.9 GPAs in high school and don't start their essays for class until it is due in three hours. Justifying your place at the UW takes time. There is not a student who just goes through cruise mode while at the UW. Part of the process entails that you will do things you simply don't want to do, no matter what academic background you have. Things will feel forced for everybody at some point. Part of my senior project wanted to identify any differences among groups of people in the feeling of having to force something like their time in college. I hope I use this as a learning process that I can reflect on for the rest of my life. I am not alone in my struggle, and any decent person would not want me to struggle unnecessarily.

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