An American Dream

"Haci, haci," Dona Carmen told me, as she showed me how to handle the dough for the flour tortillas we were making. I was amazed about how she worked the dough with her veiny, dark hands. She made it look easy.

I noticed some scars. "You're staring at my scars, aren't you?" I responded "Yes (embarrassed to admit it.) How come you have so many?"

"If I'd tell you, we would be here for hours."

Carmen explained that she came from a little town called Tepexi De Rodriguez, Mexico, a town that's filled with poverty and the only means of survival is through agriculture. (This explains the scars.) "Yo trabaje en el campo desde Chiquita." As a kid she always worked in the fields with her family. She learned how to pick out the weeds at a young age and progressed to plant the "maize" and other crops after she reached the age of 9. This is so common in Mexico. Kids have to help their families by going to work. Mexico suffers economically, which makes the country have such high poverty levels.

Carmen talks about how many jobs don't pay enough to be able to provide for their families. In return, every helping hand that they have contributing, the better-suited families are to sustain themselves. This "help" usually means the children. Many young kids hardly make it through school because of the work they have to put in to help their families. Carmen didn't reach a high school education because of her constant work life at a young age.

Regardless of the problems we face here in America, there are laws put in place to keep our children from having to leave school to help their families financially. This leads many people to migrate where there is a better economy. Many cross from Mexico to the United States, just like Carmen. It's so easy to judge, but when placed in someone else's shoes, it is completely different. We tend to associate the big jackpot as a win, but there are people who fight to come to this great country for the American Dream, the biggest jackpot.

"I left it all, all for the American Dream, I wasn't thinking about myself but my little boy on the way." She explains how it wasn't easy for her to leave her family behind while dividing the big tan ball of dough into mini hockey pucks. "I was pregnant with a little boy. The year was 1997." She had heard about this amazing place "America" full of opportunity. When the father of her son had up and left her, the responsibility fell on her to fill both shoes. With her will and support, she decided that the best decision for her son's future would be to take him to America. Alone and scared, she decided to keep the baby no matter her situation.

She seemed a little at ease, knowing she would have help from her brothers once she got there, but she heard the terrible and scary story about the journey. Many involved people getting caught and sent back with absolutely anything. "People would save their life savings to be able to pay the extreme amounts the guides charge to bring people over to America." She had everything to lose, but it was the greatest gamble of her lifetime. It's easy to assume that people immigrate with everything to gain and little too loose, but in many cases, they end up losing absolutely everything, including their life. Carmen mentioned that the extreme climate of the Mexican border brings people to last resorts to survive. Stories like drinking their urine, suffering through life-threatening cuts and injuries from rides like "the

beast (a train that passes through Mexico and the US)" really puts into perspective the life that people like Carmen lived back in Mexico.

However, her major concern was trying to leave Mexico before her pregnancy became too advanced, but as she said, “Life is full of surprises.” So, with time and constant guilt from her mother and father, the unexpected happened. She had waited too long, and her son was born. "He weighed 8 pounds and around 6 ounces.” It was May 11, 1997, when her world finally changed, and she needed to think about how she could make the little boy's dreams come true.

Even though it is difficult to pass the border with a kid, she was determined. No number of cries from her father and mother could stop her from giving her son a better future. As much as it hurt and stung, she had someone else to think about other than herself. She tells the story on how the rumors and stories were true, but with the help of God, she was put with some great people who helped her throughout the journey. She explained the amount of pain she suffered from the miles of desert she had to walk to reach certain checkpoints or "rest spots". Her feet became a pool of red deep blisters from her heal all the way down to her little toes. But she explains how the amount of fear that flowed through her during that long journey kept her from feeling the pain. “Pain is temporary, and I would do anything for my boy. ”

She also explained the thirst she felt. It was like nothing she had ever felt. If it wasn’t for the people around her, she wouldn't have been able to keep up with being able to feed her son Luis. Breastfeeding and the extreme climate pushed her body to extreme measures. Immigrants risk their lives to gain a better future, and a lot of willpower is what keeps these people going when thirst and hunger become a reality.

These people don't have anything else. They either make it or don't, but not making it is not a choice. Immigrants constantly get stereotyped, but we should understand it’s not as easy for them either. The trip really changes how people view things as well. They become more grateful when good times roll by. We, as Americans, take these things for granted.

She paused a long time before continuing. She looked over at a picture that must have been about 11x14 of a wrinkly old man with a dark grey cowboy hat. I saw a tear flow down her cheek. As she saw me, she said, “He was my father, he just passed away a few months ago.” She went on, almost burning her hand from being distracted. She never got to say her last goodbyes. It had been 19 years since she last saw him. It broke her to know that even if she did return to her old Mexico, it wouldn’t be the same Mexico she once left.

People who immigrate to this country don’t do it as a choice but out of necessity. People suffer day in and day out from violence, poverty, and corruption, not just in Mexico but in many places. The voice and journey of people like Carmen show the truer meaning of coming to this country. They suffer extreme physical and emotional pain, leaving everything they have ever known and going somewhere to start over, without the option of going back home. It’s not something they want to do but they have to do. They give up everything to try and get everything they once thought was important, money, jobs, education, safety, and sometimes they end up losing more valuable things in the process.