

A family member that is near and dear to me is my Uncle Carlos who is an immigrant from Mexico. Learning about his story on how he came to the United States has changed my perspective of what I believe is a “typical childhood.” Carlos Clements was born on June 11, 1957 in Veracruz, Mexico to two loving parents that had a hard life with many struggles due to economic reasons. His hometown of Veracruz is located on the east coast along the warm Gulf Coast of Mexico. Even in the 1950s Veracruz was a fairly large city.

Carlos’ childhood was filled with memories that are very different from most people’s experiences that I know about. For example, growing up, rather than celebrating Christmas, many Mexican families celebrate Three Kings Day. Three Kings Day is similar to Christmas in that children receive gifts. Three Kings Day is also known as the Epiphany, a Christian celebration that celebrates the Biblical story of the three kings who followed the star of Bethlehem to bring gifts to the Christ child. Another childhood memory that Carlos shared with me in our interview was a special day in April. A young Carlos and other kids in his friend group would go to the store to buy water balloons. The children would climb the stairs to the roofs and pop the water balloons on people walking by. The casting of water balloons made him laugh at the childish events of his youth. He shared that does not think back to his youth often as it was so long ago.

Carlos’s immigration story is one that is both sad and also joyful. Carlos’ mom had a hard time providing for Carlos and his siblings. The only option she could think of was to put Carlos, his brother and sister up for adoption. At age 8, Carlos was adopted by a family from San Diego, California. This was the beginning of a new life for Carlos. Carlos was driven in a car by his new family to his new home in the United States. The drive took three and a half days to go from Veracruz, Mexico to San Diego, California. Carlos remembers this drive as though it happened yesterday. The car seldom had music playing as radio stations were far and few. Hours would go by in silence. There was also no AC so you had to drive with the windows down on long dusty roads.

As a new immigrant to the United States, Carlos shared that everything felt strange to him. He remembers that most people did not look like him, did not speak Spanish, ate different food, and that everything he was accustomed to was different. In his new life, all of his toys, food, clothing, bedding was provided for him. He did not remember ever feeling a need of wanting anything or not having things like in the past. In fact he shared that when he came to this country he didn't bring any toys, pictures, family mementos, nothing but a bag of clothing. One strong memory he did share was his sadness of missing his friends in his old neighborhood and the fun they had! Another memory of being 8 years of age, is that he could not speak or understand English. The rules at the time stated that in order to go to school one must speak the language. It took Carlos about eight months to a year to learn English. Learning English wasn't the easiest for him either. Since Carlos' new family worked during the day, and Carlos couldn't go to school right away, he was left home alone and watched English TV. That is how Carlos learned to speak English and that is how he was able to finally go to school.

Carlos's life in San Diego opened up many possibilities for him even to this day! Carlos started his education in the fourth grade. He enjoyed attending both middle school and high school in San Diego. His new life in California provided Carlos with chance encounters with both cars and girls! Carlos fell in love with cars and has worked his entire life collecting, rebuilding, sometimes selling but more often collecting old cars! While working at Alto Car Rentals, he met Doreen, my father's aunt, and Carlos's wife. Carlos is now "retired" but works even more than when he was paid to work. Carlos, is an immigrant that came to this county with a new family. They provided him with very different opportunities than what life would have been like in Veracruz. Carlos has continued to be close with his mother who still lives in Veracruz, and his siblings. He visits his family in Mexico often, enjoys watching baseball games, traveling with Doreen, and helping to raise his every growing number of grandchildren and great nieces and nephews, including me!