

From the borders to fighting to live the American dream

Many come to the U.S in search of a better life, but the transition doesn't always go as smoothly, especially for those undocumented immigrants.



Daisy, 19, poses for a photo after attending a panel discussion of youth from Central America at American University.

On a brutally cold December night, a young girl by the name of Daisy arrived in Texas after crossing the US-Mexican border in a van with a coyote arranged by a relative.

“I was very young, only 12 years old - I didn’t understand what was happening,” she said.

She was given a different identity to memorize by the coyote. She had to learn a new name, age, and citizenship status.

“I spent one night to memorize everything in my head. It was hard accepting a name that wasn’t mine,” she said, “he just kept telling me ‘it’s for your well being’.”

Daisy was reunited with her mother and siblings, who were already in Texas. She asked to only be identified by first name for safety reasons.

Daisy is, now, publicly speaking about the trauma and experiences she went through at different conferences and panel discussions. She is one of many undocumented immigrants that grew up facing dire challenges and violence in Central America and went through a mental distress. Daisy has asked for her first name only to be used for safety reasons.

According to experts most Latino immigrants don't get the treatment they need to address those mental health challenges due to immigration status, language or cultural barriers.

At a tender age, Daisy had already experienced the ups and downs of life. At 8, she had been separated from her parents, who had already left to live in the U.S. She and her siblings then started living with her grandmother, who passed away. Daisy was heartbroken and forced to go live with her uncle.

At age 10, Daisy said she was a victim of an assault in the farming town in the Guerrero state of Mexico she grew up in. She received no support following this trauma, and as a result, started cutting herself.

"That night changed everything about my childhood," she said.

Daisy was ready to put her past behind her and look forward to a new life in the U.S. Three weeks after joining her mom and siblings in Texas, the family moved to Washington, D.C. in January of 2010. Like most newcomers, Daisy had a hard time adjusting to the new country she had come to call home.

"Seeing people with lighter skin was new to me," she said.
(laughs)

However, Daisy's main objective was to excel in her education, so she was excited to start school. "My mom warned me that it was going to be different because of the language, but I didn't care - all I wanted was to learn," she said.

Daisy's excitement turned into tears the first day of school. "I remember that was a sad day. I was crying, all the students around me were speaking English and I didn't understand," she said.

To make things worse, Daisy's classmates started bullying her. "They made fun of my accent and pronunciation," she said.

When teachers took attendance and called out her name, her classmates would say that she was not there while she's sitting in the classroom.

"They would say 'she can't talk, she can't say anything' and called me 'the invisible girl'," she said. (tears)

Daisy asked her mother to switch schools without saying the reason, but wasn't successful. She continued cutting herself.

She didn't talk to anybody about what she was going through until a few months later, when her mother found her cutting herself. Daisy, then, told her about what has been happening.

Her parents spoke to the principal at her school and she was later put in touch with the school counselor, but that didn't help much.

"I was very shy to talk about my situation and how I feel because she didn't speak my language. I didn't like it," she said.

Finding a bilingual counseling center wasn't easy for Daisy's parents. They were undocumented with no health insurance and couldn't afford to pay for counseling sessions. They both worked three jobs around the clock to support their family.

Steven Lopez, a grantee at the National Institute of Mental Health, a federal agency for research on mental disorders, studying mental health and the Latino population, said mental health centers should be more accessible to their communities with highly trained professionals that speak languages other than English.

"We need to have a culturally competent staff to break those language barriers," he said.

A few months later, her parents were able to find her a bilingual counselor at [Mary's Center](#), a federally qualified health center that provides health care to individuals whose needs are not met by the public and private systems. Daisy felt more comfortable opening up there and her counselor was a great source of support.

“It’s been four years now since I stopped cutting myself,” she said.

Daisy still meets with her counselor every Monday for an hour. Being able to receive this type of mental health support, however, is not easy to most undocumented immigrants.

Elizabeth Andrade, assistant professor at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, said that undocumented immigrants avoid getting any type of healthcare due to fear of risking getting deported.

“They rather play it safe than being sorry later because these clinics ask for a lot of information,” she said “And, now because of Trump’s win there’s more fear instilled.”

Andrade, who has over 11 years of experience working in health communication within the Latino youth community, suggests that there should be a strategy focusing on creating awareness on the serious implications of mental health and on information about the free community clinics, which are accessible without documents.

“Schools should have screenings about mental health to reach out to more families and inform them of where to get help,” she said.

Armando Trull, senior reporter at WAMU, who has been covering violence in Central and South America for a decade, said that most Latino immigrants from there grow up witnessing violence, ongoing wars, death, and devastation.

“These kids coming from these regions have very specific mental health issues and our community needs to find a way to better address that,” he said.

Similarly, Lopez hopes that immigrants, whether documented or undocumented, will have better access to information and support moving forward. According to Lopez, the lack of support can lead immigrants to a much bigger risk, such as suicide.

“Community centers are overwhelmed, they don’t have much resources to cater to all the needs,” he said, “We, as a nation, need to do a much better job about that.”

Daisy doesn’t want others in a similar situation as her to go through what she had to go through. Therefore, she is actively involved with [Carecen](#), a non-profit organization in Washington, D.C. that seeks to foster the comprehensive development of Latinos. She takes part in organizing youths summits, where youth immigrants can get together and share their stories.

“I try to motivate other people,” she said, “I try to tell them that they have the ability and power to share their stories.”

Now a senior at Cesar Chavez Public Charter School in Washington, D.C., Daisy aspires to be a lawyer, so she can help those who don’t have support. “I want to be a support and fight for them, so they know they are not alone,” she said.

Daisy, 19, has concerns about not being able to go to college or even secure a future here in the U.S. with the new administration taking office in January.

“It’s something I think about everyday. I need to be able to reach my goal and accomplish the promise I made to my grandma and parents, but I might not be able to,” she said.