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Soy de la Tierra del Sol, I long for my Oaxaca

By Yaritza Gonzalez-Ramirez

I am from Rancho Alfaro which is a small town in Oaxaca, Mexico. Rancho Alfaro is part of the Mixteca region in Oaxaca. I am Mixteca, but I don't speak Mixteco, because it disappeared in my town. I know some words in Mixteco like: tí kuu (agua, water), shato (una tortilla de maíz grande en forma de triángulo). On special occasions we eat "Shato" because it takes a long time to make and you can eat this with honey or by itself. I want to learn Mixteco because I feel that it is part of me. I want to carry my language deeply within my soul.

Before I left my town to the United States I was learning a little Mixteco at school. When I was 15 years old, I left my town to live in Silacayoapam which is 30 minutes away from Rancho Alfaro. I moved there because the schools in my town Rancho Alfaro only went up to 8th grade. I know if you read this you might ask yourself "why" if it is only 30 minutes away but the cost of transportation would be too high for my family to afford so it was better to move to Silacayoapam and to live with my parent's friend because they would not charge rent. This is very common in Silacayoapam because people move to be able to attend school. The students in COBAO plantel 10 taught Mixteco and there I was able to learn a few words. I learned how to greet people in Mixteco, how to say hi and bye. I was in that school for one year. They began to teach Mixteco in March or April when they realized that many of us no longer spoke our language, Mixteco. I didn't learn a lot because they began teaching Mixteco towards the end of the year and because I was going to move to the United States. To learn Mixteco is one of my life goals.

Living in Oaxaca for 16 years of my life I had moments of sadness, stress, but also happy moments full of laughter. I had beautiful and wonderful moments in my little town, Rancho Alfaro. I have saved all those beautiful memories in my soul and I carry them with me. But all of this changed when my parents said we were going to travel to the United States. This changed my life, the news was not good for me, they were horrible news because I had my whole life in Mexico. I had friends, family, basically a very happy life. Now, I would have to say goodbye to that life. Maybe my life in Mexico was not a comfortable one nor was it full of luxuries but it was a very happy life.

One day my family planned a trip to a ravine, we had a good time. We left from the ravine in the afternoon, and when we got to Silacayoapam, my dad received a message that said, "El 18 de Mayo tienen su cita en el consulado" (May 18th you have an appointment at the consulate). I saw my father's face and he had an expression of surprise, he got into the car and he said, "Israel me envió un mensaje diciendo que el 18 de mayo tenemos la cita" (Israel sent me a message saying may 18th you have an appointment at the consulate). He sounded surprised and a little worried.

As soon as my dad gave us the news I felt so many emotions and maybe my family felt the same. I felt sad, worried, confused, etc. The farewell was tough, it wasn't easy, saying goodbye it hurt so much. I remember the last day at my school, I could not stop crying. It is not easy leaving when your friends tell you not to go. When I was in the car, I read a letter from my best friend. She wished me luck. Every word in that letter made me cry. On May 10th as we left Rancho Alfaro I could not stop crying. On May 11th we arrived at Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico. We had to arrive days before the appointment because we had to go through several steps before the appointment such as the glaucoma exam, vaccinations, etc. The truth is that the days I spent in Juarez were fun and beautiful, we met wonderful people and we as a family had a good time. The day of the appointment arrived and at the consulate we had to wait some time before they would tell us if we were approved or not, then after answering some questions and showing a few papers that were needed they approved our residency to be in the United States. They told us that we had to wait three to seven business days before they gave us a six-month visa and that we would also have to go to El Paso, TX to sign papers. After three business days they spoke to us telling us to go to El Paso, TX to have our visa signed and that same day we entered the United States.

Once we got to the United States, we went to San Diego to see my father's brother, uncle Jose Luis, who we had not seen for over 20 years. I did not know him nor his family. We were there for a few days and then we went to see another uncle who lives in Bakersfield and we spent a few days there until we finally got to Fortuna. When we got to Fortuna the first thing I noticed was the change of weather. Oaxaca, San Diego, Bakersfield all have warm weather and Fortuna is cold. I was freezing. I had never felt so cold despite it being summer. But Humboldt is very beautiful. I love this place, walking

amongst the pines is very relaxing, the rivers look very clear and clear and above all meeting my family was very important to me. All of my mother's brothers are here and two of my dad's brothers are here. I met my uncles and cousins for the first time, seeing the emotions on their faces to see my mother after more than 18-24 years without seeing each other was something very moving. Moving to the United States was painful but also joyful because I got to meet my family again after so many years.

In August of that year I began school at Fortuna High School. Going to a school without knowing any English was not easy. Being spoken to in a language you do not know nor understand does not feel good. When I entered some of the classrooms the teacher would ask students, "Who speaks Spanish?" because the aide for Spanish speakers was not hired yet so the teacher had to rely on students to interpret for us. When she would ask if anyone spoke Spanish everyone in the classroom was silent, no one answered. Believe me, I have never felt so powerless. I wanted to run away and start crying, I felt many negative emotions. I just repeated in my mind: "relax, relax," but I felt that it did not work. I had never hated school as much as at that time. Students would then tell each other "Jose don't you speak Spanish" and then they would say "No, Teresa knows Spanish" or "Pedro stop lying, you speak Spanish." I remember that one of the girls once said "I only know how to say, 'Hola Como estas?'" Some of the students looked like they knew Spanish but maybe because they did not want to be associated with me; no one was willing to help me. I know that some of them spoke Spanish but I thought they were ashamed to be Mexican and speak Spanish and this is why they did not want to help me. Or maybe they thought that this was not their responsibility and they were not responsible for that burden to translate for someone. This happened in all of my classes and it felt horrible. I do not give that feeling to no one. Months later at different Latino parties like Quinceñeras I would meet some of the students' parents and see those students who did not want to help me. I would tell myself "Wow, no que no hablaban Español!... Wow that was messed up!" But at the same time, I am not sure why they decided not to help me. Maybe they had a good reason to not help me. I have never confronted them. However, there was always at least one student per classroom who did help me during that class period. After the period was over they would go on with their life, their help did not extend to showing me the U.S. social life or introducing me to friends or helping me navigate school.

After a week of this type of emotional torture they finally hired an interpreter that helped us a lot. Thanks to the interpreter we could understand, do things better and everything improved.

But not knowing English hurt me. I still have not mastered English, however, I recognize that it is my fault because I have not put the time and dedication to learning the language. I do not have a lot of friends in the United States because everyone here is not very social. I have cousins that grew up in Fortuna but I feel like they are different. I do not feel close to them, they are not very warm. If we were in Oaxaca and I just got to a new school, my classmates would say "Yaritza, come sit with me," "Yaritza hang out," and "Yaritza, later we will go out, come with us." Inviting a person who just came to a new school or place is important to making someone feel welcomed. My cousins go out with their friends and they have never invited me to go with them. Being here I feel trapped physically, mentally and emotionally, I feel that little by little I am ceasing to be me, but nevertheless I feel that it is part of my life now and I also belong here. I feel that coming here has taught me to value many things that I had and things that I did not have and now have. In Mexico I had friends and I felt welcomed and that I belonged there, here in the United States I have economic wellbeing and I have family who I love. During these years I have learned a lot, this change made me, it taught me courage. I realize that life changes when we least expect it. I know that many of us come here to improve ourselves and get ahead, to be better financially, I appreciate the opportunity and I feel lucky. I know that there are sacrifices in everything one does and I am willing to make those sacrifices. I know that on many occasions I have undervalued my life and I no longer want to do it, sometimes we are happy and we do not even realize it. I know that being here has also given me wonderful moments next to my family and friends, and new people that I have met, this is all thanks to the fact that I have come here. I have been able to meet people and I feel grateful and I should not be depressed.

Changes are not easy but this change has given me a beautiful lesson in life that changing a country, language, culture, people, and many other things are not always easy nor are they good or bad but one will learn something from this experience. As changes enter one's lives we must remember that many times things are not what they seem. Sometimes they paint a very wonderful picture of American life and it is not like this. Of course, there are good things, and vice versa, Mexican life is not all bad nor is everything wonderful. I

always learn something in different ways and I know that it is part of life. I want to continue learning and enjoying this life here in the United States, with the illusion of always visiting “Mi lindo Oaxaca” (My beautiful Oaxaca)- the title of a beautiful song, land where “Dios nunca muere” (God never dies) a second song, and where I listen to “Cancion Mixteca,” a third song which makes my skin gets goosebumps when I think of it because I am Mixtec. I love the following line that last song which says “... oh, tierra del sol!, suspiro por verte ...” (Oh, land of the sun!, I long to see you.)

Citations of my three favorite songs that remind me of Oaxaca:

Lindo Oaxaca: <https://youtu.be/jkcOVPJlye4>

Dios Nunca Muere: https://youtu.be/WOAWSLv_08w

Cancion Mixteca: https://youtu.be/EG9jXZE1_Yk