

Para Mi Abuelo

Alejandra Vargas

Abstract: Alejandra Vargas grew up in a neighborhood in Los Angeles, California that consisted mainly of immigrant families, which meant she was never alone in her journey as a first-generation student. She was made aware early on of the challenges first-gens might face in the U.S. and was given access to an abundance of support resources. Still, it isn't easy to manage all the expectations placed upon first-gen students. Vargas recounts moments from her past to show there are many forms of success stories among the first-generation community, but also to examine the impossible standards first-gen students are expected to meet. **Content Advisory:** This narrative contains content that may be upsetting to readers, including references to sexual assault, depression, and suicidal ideation.

School can be another world from home. This can be especially true when you are a first-generation student. I was lucky enough to have been born and raised in a community where most of my classmates were first-gen, which meant that I was not alone. I was not alone when it came to learning English. I was not alone when my family brought an authentic Mexican dish to the potluck, and I was not alone when it came to the struggle of having one foot in both worlds. I was very fortunate to attend schools where our cultures were not just welcomed but embraced. I was happy with my friends and my teachers.

My home life was full of happiness as well. The title may have hinted at it, but my grandfather raised me since I was a baby. My parents loved me, but they were unable to care for me. Them giving me to my grandfather may sound cruel, but it was the best decision they could have made. I will perpetually thank them for it because my grandfather raised me with so much love and support, that I often cried in disbelief that I could be so lucky. I would feel terrible, but extremely grateful for my life whenever my friends would tell me how their families were too busy working, or too tired from working to spend time with them. My grandpa made it his mission to spend time with me. Every day he would leave our house almost two hours before the last school bell rang to wait for me at school to the point where most of the staff and even my classmates knew him. Even the people that I did not know personally knew me as the girl who was always with her grandpa. My uncle lived with us as well, a fellow lost sheep that could not be with his nuclear family. By the time I was 8, whenever I was asked to describe my nuclear family, my response was always the same: My grandpa and my uncle.

Everything, of course, was not perfect. We were very poor. I could count with one hand the number of times our refrigerator was full. But the bills were paid, we had a roof over our head, and we were not starving. And more importantly, there was love in that household. Things were as good as it could be except deep down, I began to realize something was wrong. I was feeling sad for no apparent reason, and I could not figure out why. Ever since I was around 7, I would start to cry, and I would become frightened because there was no cause. But at 10 years old I began to have a reason.

My father had gone to prison and was released in Tijuana, Mexico where we were sent to pick him up. Although he was not present much in my childhood, I knew he loved me, and I loved him. When we arrived in Tijuana, we had discovered that he had passed away due to blood poisoning. This is when everything truly began to crumble. I could not attend my father's funeral in Mexico because apparently my mother had lost all my documents that I needed to travel, and

there was no time to get replacements. I stayed behind with my aunt who offered to care for me, because she could not go either for her own reasons, and her husband. I will not beat around the bush about it. In the three days that I stayed with them, her husband molested me twice. My aunt never knew, I think. I was confused, but all I knew for certain was that it broke my already hurting soul. I was already a quiet child before these events, but afterward, I became almost mute to everyone except my uncle and my grandpa.

When the two came home from the funeral, they offered me nothing but support and love, not knowing that their support was healing me from much more than my dad's death. As time passed, my sadness became something darker. More sinister. I began to want my death more than anything. It scared me so much. My school began to take notice in my lack of motivation, and often counselors and teachers would remind me that I am a "good student," I just need to "try harder." I never spoke at school of my troubles at home because I did not really have any, did I? When the counselor asked me if I am being abused at home, and I responded with no, she explained that there is no real reason I should be acting this way. So, I listened. I began to work a little harder and before long my grades were at the very least passing. Not amazing, not great, just barely passing.

I was constantly bombarded in high school with posters and recognitions of other first-gen students that had accomplished so much in their life. They were the prime example of what we first-gens should be. They had great grades, were on route to getting a community-driven career, and were constantly talking. Why were they always talking? Could they not just shut up for a few minutes? My resentment towards them was petty, but I do not regret it. The definition of success is different for everyone, and I did not appreciate that they constantly boasted that their accomplishments were superior to those of other first-gen students.

It did not help that in my Hispanic community there exists a standard where if you do not meet it, you are failing in the eyes of many. I had friends who expressed to their families their interest in going to college for creative careers, such as graphic design or music, and were met with nothing but criticism. Their families would respond with things such as, "Why can't you get a good career like nursing? Your cousin is in law school, why can't you follow that path? We did not cross the border for you to get a useless job that cannot even support us." Hearing the hurt in my friend's voice as she vented about this broke my heart, but it also made me extremely grateful. My grandpa raised me with this idea that my career should revolve around my happiness. When I told him in horror what my friend's mother told her about not crossing the border for her kid to get a useless career, he scoffed and responded, "We crossed the border for you to have a chance at a happy life, not to use you as a tool to get rich."

Although things were never the same after my father's death, I was still mainly happy with my grandpa and uncle. When my thoughts became dark, all it took was one hug from my grandpa to remedy them. I used to believe that my grandpa held magical properties because how is it possible for someone to be as great as him? He was helping me heal from unspoken problems as if he knew them personally and was ready to battle them with me. But as fate would have it, he could not join me for the whole duration of the war. He was diagnosed with dementia during my junior year of high school. His memory began to decline rapidly, and he could no longer care for himself. My uncle was supposed to become his caretaker, but he fell to his own demons and began to drink heavily.

Suffice to say, my high school graduation was not a happy one. By that point, my uncle was always on a bender and was barely home, and my grandpa's dementia was at its worst. Some of my extended relatives attended my graduation, but it simply was not the same. My

fellow classmates all seemed so happy and proud that I felt terrible about not feeling the same. I did not feel proud or accomplished. I did not apply to any four-year colleges because I had stopped caring about my education. I stopped caring about everything. I attended community college at the behest of relatives but failed my entire first semester and lost all my financial aid by the end of the second. In the Hispanic community that I lived in, there is an abundance of resources for first-gen students, but very few of them focus on mental health, which was the core of my problems. And when it came to discussing mental health, it was hardly taken seriously. Many of them believe depression to be a side effect of not having God in your heart, or an excuse to be lazy. I personally never felt encouraged to seek help for my mental health. Oddly enough, it was not until I made friends in college who shared this same numb outlook that I was prompted to seek out help.

First-generation students go through many kinds of journeys. You see publicized success stories of first-gens getting into med-school and devoting their honor's speeches to their families, or stories of similar nature. But what about other kinds of first-gen success stories? I do not get straight As, I am not a president of some club, and I do not volunteer every week. Sometimes I cannot even get out of bed in the morning. I did, however, manage to earn an Associate's for Transfer in English in the same community college I had failed many times at before. I did transfer to Cal State Los Angeles with the goal of earning my Bachelor's in English. I was even able to find a great job in a high school. And I am still alive.

If I am being truthful, I did not expect to be alive at this age. My grandfather passed away in March of 2018 in a nursing home, and my uncle passed away almost exactly one year later in 2019 on a bus bench. I lost my family and I carry that pain still, and I imagine I will do so for a very long time. I often cry because it really does feel awful not being able to just go home and vent my frustrations with the same people that raised me and gave me nothing but love and support. But I am still here, because rather than follow them as I so desperately wanted, I realized that my story is not done. The strength that I must have to have gone through all those horrible things and still manage to be somewhere that isn't a complete hole, or dead, was all given to me by my grandfather. My success, whatever it may be, is because of him. And it will be for him. I am grateful. Lonely, but very grateful.