

The Labels We Live By Ben Goldstein, APPI, Aveiro, April 2018

1 Erick Hernández's Story

Crossing the border

I was 14 years old when I crossed the border illegally through a town called Agua Prieta in Sonora, Mexico. The reason I decided to go to the US was because I was just not getting along with my stepfather. We were constantly getting into fights. One day I decided to leave the house and just go to my grandmother's house. The thing is that I did not tell anybody that I was going to my grandmother's and I did not have money to pay for the transportation fare. Since it took me a long time to the house; everybody in my family thought that had ran away. As was arriving to my grandmother's; my cousin was calling from Boise Idaho and he asked to talk with me. He asked me if I wanted to go to the U.S. with him and I told him "yes"

It only took less than a month to find a *coyote*¹ to take me across the border. I remember that before I left I went to my mother's house to give my farewell. I when I told her that I was leaving she did not believe me. She just told me that I was old enough to make my own decisions.

I was really scared once I was in Agua Prieta because I was there by myself. I was just given instructions to go to a specific hotel and wait there till the *coyote* would go there to pick me up. I arrived at the hotel at night and by the early morning the *coyote* was knocking at my door. He rounded up about 10 people that were going to cross the border. One of those people was an old lady. As we were crossing the border the *coyote* would tell us when to hide and when to run so the cameras would not see us. Since most of the people that were crossing were relative young we were moving fast except for the old lady. The *coyote* was going to leave to lady behind so I stayed with her to help her out. She was not able to keep up with everyone so I grabbed her by her arm and followed the group's tracks.

We finally got to a small house kind of in the middle of nowhere and we waited there for a night till my godfather would pick me up and pay the *coyote* for crossing me.

Arrival and integration in Boise, Idaho

Once I arrived to Boise I felt as if I were in a different world. The streets were different to what I was used to see. I was angry that my mom did not believe me that I was leaving. I was also in denial to learn a new language. This was a big cultural shock for me. I did not speak any English when I arrived to the states. I had taken English classes at school but the English that we get in public school in Mexico is not the best. I basically did not know English.

At the beginning I would only speak Spanish to my godparents (my cousin's parents) because they did not speak English and very little Spanish with my cousins. It seemed to me that they were ashamed to be seen speaking Spanish.

There were not many Hispanics in Boise and the few that were at school did not want to speak Spanish. As the time passed I was speaking less and less to it got to the point that there would be months without speaking it. I did not need to speak Spanish at school or at work so it became almost useless for me.

¹ "coyote" is Mexican slang for smuggler. Autonomous migrants pay "coyotes" a fee to guide them across the border. As surveillance has increased on the U.S. / Mexican border, the number of "coyotes" has also risen rapidly.

I was easily identified as a Mexican because of my skin color and my accent when I would speak. When I was labeled the most was during high school. My classmates thought that just because I am brown skin and I spoke with an accent I most have been involved with gang members or that I would sell marijuana. I thought that that was the most stupid thing that people would label me just for my physical appearance. My skin color and my accent did not define me.

Some of my classmates thought that just because I am Mexican I was not able to understand or do well at school. It seemed as if I were expected to learn slower than my American classmates. Even when I knew how to speak English, I was shy to talk to people because I knew that people were going to judge me. I did not talk much to people during junior and high school.

Questions of identity

When I got out of high school, had my first job working at K.F.C as a cook, and even when most of the people working at the kitchen were Mexican the people at front were Americans so was the link between the kitchen and the front. I started noticing that I had a great advantage as a person who can communicate in two languages.

I started hanging out with more people that would not judge my skin or my accent. I stopped being the cook stocked at the kitchen to being the one interacting with the costumers. I got tired working at the fast food field so I started looking for more jobs that did not have to deal with food but because I was an illegal it was really hard for me to find a different job. I ended up working for another restaurant called the Olive Garden, I started as a server but then I worked my way as a bartender.

Working as bartender gave me the opportunity to meet more people and the more I got to meet people, the more I got away from my family. I started to adopt the way most of young Americans live. As I hung around with more Americans than with people that speak Spanish I just stopped using my Spanish and my accent became more like an American. I had to drop my Mexican accent in order to be more accepted.

Return to Mexico

When I came back to Mexico I was labeled as *pochos*² I thought that I came back speaking Spanish just fine but people would look at me funny because I spoke Spanish with an American accent. It took me almost three years to change my accent completely. The reason that I changed my accent was because I was seeing the same faces that Americans would look at me when I spoke with a Mexican accent. It is really uncomfortable to be look at as weird person or almost with a hateful face because I can pronounce things correctly.

Role of languages

I would consider myself as a more active learner. I have learned that even when two languages might sound or look alike sometimes they are still two different things. The role that Spanish has for me is the language that I use most of the time, weather is for family or professional purposes. Now English is the language that has helped me be more competitive in my working live. Just like Spanish did while I was in the States.

² "pochos" pejorative , colloquial expression used to describe Mexican Americans who can't speak Spanish well, speak Spanish with a strong U.S. accent or act as if they were not Mexicans.