

Mayra's Story

My name is Mayra and I am 29 years old. I was born and raised in Ambato, a small city two hours south of Quito, the capital of Ecuador.

My parents always worked very hard to provide for my sisters and me. They managed to own two businesses and provide my sisters and me with a good education. During 1999 our government decided to change our currency, a process called dollarization. Dollarization and the introduction of cheap Chinese goods into the Country was what started the decline of my parents' business. People in Ecuador preferred to buy cheap Chinese products therefore my parents' hardware store went out of business and they got left with a huge debt. My parents decided then that it was better to leave the country and seek for better opportunities for all of us, especially my sisters and me.



We arrived to New York in May of 2005, five days after I got my first job. My godfather, who had been living in USA for over 30 years, offered me a job delivering newspaper to New York University. The job was very upsetting, on one hand I had left my country and my college, I was one year away from graduating when I left, and on the other hand I was working for one of the best universities in the country and all I wanted to do was graduate as well. Thanks to that job I decided, that no matter how long it would take to save enough money, I would go back to school. My younger sister, seventeen at the time, was working for a construction company. I remember when we heard she got a job in a "company", we were very happy for her. Little did we know that the place she was working in was a basement. I came to visit her only once; the place was in a house in Bushwick, completely dark, no light bulbs only two giant lamps, a nasty bathroom, the floor was always wet because of a leak of water coming down from the first floor. If you are wondering what her position was there, she was hiring undocumented workers and paying them \$5 per hour. She was making the same and working 50 hours per week. My dad had it the worst, at least my sister and I knew some words in English, but he did not speak one single word. He was working as a painter making \$200- \$300 per week. He was treated very badly at work, just because he was a Latino. He got into an accident at work; he twisted his ankle so badly that he needed crutches to walk. The company did not pay for anything related to the injury. Instead, they told him to go home and not to come back because he was not useful anymore. Because of his undocumented situation he did not say a word and went back home.

I did babysitting for 7 years and helped cleaning houses. When I started doing babysitting I met so many good people with every kind of stories of why they are here. One of my good friends is from Honduras and is here to make enough money to send back to her mother. But I'm certain that not all the money is for her mother. Seventy percent of what my friend sends goes straight to the La Mara Salvatrucha gang in Honduras and if my friend does not send this money every month for them, they will kill her family. There is nothing my friend can do from here besides work hard to support her two boys and send money back to Honduras. My friend from Chile came to the USA to escape the abuse of her husband. She left her five daughters in Val Paraiso. In nearly ten years she has put three of her five daughters through college in Chile. She tells me that had she stayed in Chile, her kids would never have had the opportunity of a decent education.

I had saved enough for school but again my undocumented status did not help, I was paying \$1,400 for one class and going to school late at night because I needed to work to pay for it. Paying for school was not the only obstacle, the fact that you cannot even exchange products in a store without a valid State

ID, and the judgmental comments of some people that have no clue of the reason that brought you to the country was very frustrating. I did not speak English and did not have friends. So I felt alone. Now I graduated and I feel extremely proud of all the things I have accomplished. Within 5 years my parents and sisters, all of us working 10 hours every day 7 days a week, paid off a huge debt and managed to have a decent way of living in New York. I am very appreciative of the people that helped me, even the people that were rude because all the things they said to me or to my parents gave me the strength to keep going and not give up.

Living in USA as an immigrant is very difficult because every day you have to fight against racism, intolerance, and prejudice, among others. I have seen and heard so many things about and against immigrants. Many people have judged my family and me without knowing our true story. Somehow I have learned to deal with these things. What I cannot understand is the lack of knowledge that some people have. You see, growing up in a third world country you hear all these stories about how great USA is. How smart, intelligent and well-educated people are in this country. Of course now I know that it is not true, some people in USA have no idea of the world outside their own comfort zone. How can they judge people's status, when they have zero knowledge of how hard life is for some people?

The truth is that immigrants are building this country. Immigrants pay taxes, work very hard, and generally add value to the economy. Say what you want about immigrants, we are here because of desperate situations and there are people who want to hire us. I don't think any of us is leaving.