

CORTEZ JOURNAL

Immigrants become part of San Luis Valley decades after arriving

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June 28, 2018

There are few calm moments inside Ortega Middle School's special needs classroom in Alamosa, Colorado, where Lucia Gaspar, a teacher's aide, helps kids learn the basic math and reading skills they will need to navigate the world. It's not an easy job – her students vary widely in their intellectual and physical abilities – but Gaspar, with her patience and grace, can coax small miracles from them.

Take Violeta, a small preteen girl who sits silently at a table, unable or unwilling to communicate much beyond a few words in Spanish. Violeta was born in the U.S. but spent much of her childhood in Mexico. Just recently, her parents sent her to live with an aunt in Alamosa.

“¿Qué clase de animal te gusta?” Gaspar asks Violeta, before repeating the question in English. “What kind of animal do you like?”

“Perro,” she replies softly. Gaspar clasps her hand, helping Violeta trace the letters of the word in English: dog.

She turns to me, smiling. “It's the first time I've gotten anything out of her in days.”

Born into a Mayan family in rural Guatemala, Lucia Gaspar was only a few years younger than Violeta when she came to the U.S. without papers, with her siblings and their single mother, who was desperate to get her family out of poverty. Gaspar and her older sister would become the first women in their family to graduate from high school, thereby avoiding their mother's fate, working long hours in the fields of potatoes and spinach that quilt the floor of the San Luis Valley.

The student population at Ortega Middle School, much like the surrounding region, is roughly 50 percent Hispanic. Some are young Mexican and Guatemalan immigrants, but many were born in the U.S. Often their parents arrived with little education and took the kind of low-wage jobs in the fields that the vast majority of Americans refuse to do. Their hard work has made the San Luis Valley one of Colorado's most productive agricultural areas. In the decades since their arrival, the valley's immigrants have become part of the community, with homes, jobs, and American family members.

Their future success depends on many factors, including comprehensive immigration reform, which will better enable people to get the education, resources and jobs they need to become full members of U.S. society. But that also depends on the nation's willingness to reframe the way it talks about immigrants: not as social problems to be kept out by a border wall, but rather as opportunities to contribute to the communities they live in, while helping to build a more inclusive America.

Gaspar loves working in the special needs classroom; it gives her the sense of purpose that was lacking in the jobs she held before she received legal status. In 2012, after 13 years in Alamosa without documentation, she enrolled in the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals program, or DACA, which protected some young undocumented immigrants, or Dreamers, from deportation while allowing them to work.

But President Donald Trump canceled DACA last September, and since then, Gaspar's emotions have seesawed from hope to disappointment, as attempts to create a permanent version of the program have failed. Her DACA permit expires in February 2019, and all the uncertainty is wearing on her. "It's frustrating, not knowing what's going to happen," she told me.

When one of Gaspar's former colleagues learned about her situation recently, she wanted to know if she could help. "Can I sponsor you in some way?" she asked. Unfortunately, Gaspar explained, there is no way. It didn't matter that she was brought across the border as a child, that she graduated from high school in America, that she now had a job and three kids who were U.S. citizens. The laws offered no way for people like her to belong.

America's immigration laws – dictated largely by labor needs and race discrimination – have alternately shaped and shattered the lives of immigrants across the West for generations. Laws like the Immigration Act of 1924 were deliberately designed to permanently restrict immigrants from "undesirable" areas of the world – particularly Asia, the Middle East, and southern and eastern Europe. When severe labor shortages followed, particularly in agriculture, the Bracero Program was created, bringing millions of temporary Mexican workers to the U.S. That was followed in 1954 by Operation Wetback, which sought to deport many Mexicans who could not prove their citizenship, often without regard for due process.

Still, Mexican immigrants continued to come to the San Luis Valley, followed by Guatemalans fleeing the civil war in the 1980s. Today, immigrants in Alamosa – both those with legal status and those without – work for \$10.20 an hour on nearby farms, as well as in local schools, nursing homes, hospitals, nonprofits, restaurants and other businesses. On Alamosa's main street, a Guatemalan grocery store sits across the way from a microbrewery, alongside numerous Mexican restaurants where I heard Spanish as often as English.

Alamosa's immigrant community is part of a changing West – increasingly younger and less white, even in rural areas. Research shows how this new diversity is helping make local economies more dynamic and robust. Immigrants pay taxes, start new businesses, buy homes, and help bolster the workforce as the white population ages.

For immigrants in Alamosa, education has played a crucial role. Resources like the federally funded San Luis Valley Migrant Education Program help the children of seasonal agricultural workers bridge the gaps in their schooling with tutoring and other services. Immigrant parents are among the most supportive that program director and former teacher, Esmeralda Martinez, has encountered in her 16 years working in the Alamosa School District. “They have such respect for the school system,” she told me. “They want their kids to succeed – people appreciate that.”

Martinez herself is a beneficiary of the program. The child of a migrant farmworker from Aguascalientes, Mexico, she arrived in the San Luis Valley in 1985 with her parents and nine siblings, who became permanent residents when then-President Ronald Reagan passed a 1986 law granting legal status to 3 million undocumented people living in the U.S. All of the Martinez siblings went on to graduate from college or start businesses, and more than 30 years later, she sees herself as a testament to what immigrants in America can achieve if they are given a chance. “I’m a success story for what the (Migrant Education) program provides,” Martinez said.

Data compiled by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, prove that by the second generation, Central American immigrants make significant strides in education: 30 percent obtain a college degree, while only 10 percent drop out of high school.

Their success has come even amid the extra hurdles that many of those immigrants have faced along the way. Recruiting families into the Migrant Education Program has always been a challenge, said Martinez.

“We try to explain the program is educational and doesn’t harm them in any way,” she told me. But in the Trump era, recruitment has become even harder as many immigrants have grown more afraid of the government.

The immigrant community’s greatest fear is of deportation. The loss of a family member can inhibit an entire family’s upward mobility, even for those who are U.S. citizens. Growing up in Alamosa, 21-year-old Marisol Lucas, the daughter of Guatemalan immigrants, believed that education would allow her to repay the community that gave her so many opportunities.

Though her parents barely reached the third grade, Lucas graduated high school with a 4.0 GPA and will complete her Bachelor’s degree in sociology later this year. If her parents had been undocumented, however, as is the case with some of her family and friends, she might not have had that chance. Recently, her uncle was deported, forcing her cousin, a U.S. citizen and a senior in high school, to reconsider his college plans.

“I don’t want to go to college anymore,” he told Martinez. “I need to help my mom with expenses,” he said, though without a college degree or trade skills, he would likely be limited to minimum-wage work.

Gaspar could not go to college herself; in 2009, she was unable to qualify for in-state tuition and financial aid. But she hopes that her kids will attend college someday, and that she, too, will get another chance. In all my visits to Alamosa, she never wavered in her belief that the uncertainty

of her fate will be resolved – that Congress will eventually pass a law giving Dreamers a pathway to citizenship. “I don’t think God could let so many people down,” she told me.

During my last visit in May, I accompanied her to her son Erick’s soccer practice. We drove to a nearby field, where the two girls ran off to the playground. The only parent on the sidelines, Gaspar watched as Erick dribbled the ball around the other players, before kicking it into the net. She cheered. Dark clouds had moved across the sky and a cold wind picked up. Gaspar wrapped her sweater more tightly around her shoulders and watched her son play.