

## Winner of the 2016 Living History Essay Contest

### *A Second Chance*

by Melanie Melesio

Guanajuato, Mexico is a humble city of vibrant, colorful, and small concrete buildings scattered on narrow, winding roads that stretch out like veins into the valley. The narrow streets are enlivened with running children and women selling Conchas. The men of the city have weathered hands from working hard on their farms, raising livestock and selling the fruits of their labor at market. However, for some, growing up in Guanajuato is difficult as the physical demands of ranching and farming take their toll. After the early death of his father in 1980, Ricardo Melesio dropped out of school at the age of twelve. Ricardo now had to support his family by working on the small farm his uncle inherited from his late brother. This sacrifice was expected, and there was no better option as he was the oldest child. Ricardo remembered how his hands felt numb and his body ached at the end of every day. His source of motivation to continue working was his desire to help his four younger siblings and his mother, who suffered from dementia. For years, the death of his father frustrated him. He would think to himself, *why did you die? Mom is still alive and broken. You can't abandon us like this.*

When Ricardo came of age, his mother finally revealed to him that his father died trying to cross the desert in order to cross into the United States. After this revelation, Ricardo felt he needed to fulfill his father's dream. The farm had been struggling recently, which resulted in his inability to feed the animals. Despite the fear of ending up like his father, Ricardo left for the U.S. in the 1990s searching for a better opportunity in the hope of sending money to his family.

Ricardo Melesio's life as an illegal immigrant in America in the 1990s demonstrates the hardships of living as an "alien." Despite being a "country of immigrants," Americans demonstrated they were not fully prepared to socially or culturally deal with foreigners, and negative stereotypes and stigmas surrounded these hopeful immigrants. My uncle Ricardo always likes to mention how English felt strange and foreign on his tongue. Of course, everything seemed either awkward or terrifying. Being alone in an unknown place is a transformative experience. Leaving family behind was difficult; he constantly missed them. He recalled the constant longing of wanting to see his family, however he pushed forward knowing going back was foolish.

Working in construction was difficult as racism was strong in the 1990s. Ricardo recalled how the Hispanic workers were given longer hours and less pay compared to the Caucasian workers. There was not much they could do about these injustices, especially since the prospect of deportation constantly loomed over them. Many Hispanics were also desperate, which led them to take unreliable jobs. For example,

Ricardo remembered one job where he was cutting down trees and clearing up roadways. The manager drilled it into the workers' heads that it did not matter if it was two in the morning, or if they had little ones. Such details ceased to matter if there was work to be done. Suffering from illness was another major obstacle. Some small "free" clinics existed. Unfortunately, the nurses, as well as the doctors, treated Hispanics with disdain. The medical professionals spoke in mocking and belittling tones, occasionally prescribing false medicine.

I recalled a law my mother often mentioned. The law was the Simpson-Mazzoli Act, enacted by Ronald Reagan in 1986. When I brought this to the attention of my uncle his eyes crinkled as he explained, "this law is what turned our life around as illegal immigrants, if you had come here before 1982 you could become legalized." Reagan's law allowed one of Ricardo's friends who met the qualifications to become a citizen. His friend then claimed Ricardo, which allowed him to apply for legal status. In turn, Ricardo was able to do the same for some of his family members.

In conclusion, after years of enduring the hardships of working themselves to the bone, some Hispanics have seen their dreams become reality. However, the crass beliefs people hold concerning foreigners are still alive today. In some ways nothing has changed.

## Bibliography

All quotations from Mr. Melesio were taken from an interview with the author held on March 5, 2016.