

JOURNEYS

Raising Hope for NYC Youth



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JOURNEYS

*Dedicated to those who journey and the
people who tell their stories.*



Published by Fresh Youth Initiatives, 2018
New York, NY

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Preface

Immigration is on my mind this year—in work every day, in the news, and suddenly in the lives of the important people around me. In recent months I came to know a whole group of writers and storytellers who contributed in one way or another to *Journeys*—our collection of stories about immigration and change that reflects the heart and soul of our Fresh Youth community. Thank you to every contributor who brought to life these stories, each one a gem in its own right.

The immigration experience is everywhere in the FYI community. I see it in the strength and spirit of my colleagues, travelers all. Mary who taught herself English by watching PBS but hid it from her teacher, believing she'd broken some unspoken rule of her Spanish-speaking Kindergarten. And Beatriz, all grace and compassion, whose family's heart broke on fleeing Cuba. And Paola who arrived here at the age of fifteen—the age of so many of our high school immigrants, and Sergio at eleven—homesick for his friends, and Susan who grew up in Puerto Rico and swirls Spanish words like delicious fruits to be savored. It is all remarkable, and moving, and powerful.

Five of FYI's board members are immigrants themselves, others the children of immigrant parents. Phuong spent five years in a refugee camp after fleeing Vietnam with her family. Luba left Ukraine with religious persecution at her heels. Sal is a Mexican-American, Rajiv an Indian via Taiwan, Isabelle, the daughter of Haitian and French immigrants, and Billie who introduces her story with the words, "I am a refugee."

And there are our FYI children who are writing their family stories. They are forging an immigrant's path, a story to be told to their children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

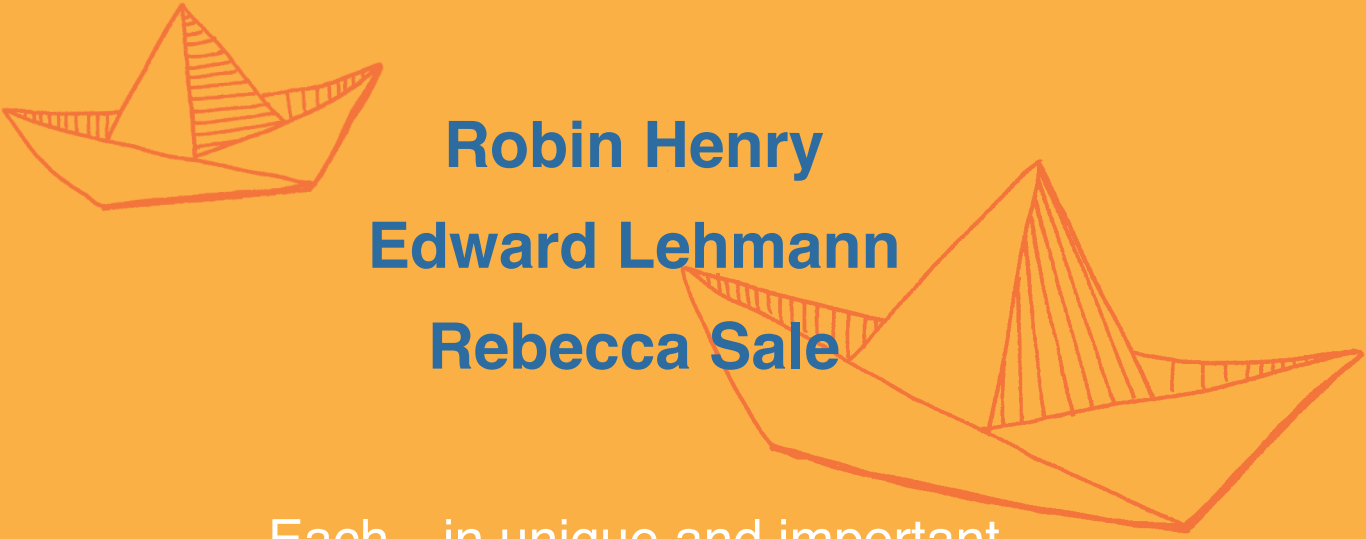
Author Junot Díaz described his own immigration at the age of six as a "profound fracture of my reality". Many of the stories in this book give voice to those breaks, heartaches and hopes. I think *Journeys* brings us together, helps us, in some small way, to heal those fractures that we carry from one generation to the next.

We all have a story to share.



Eileen Lyons
Executive Director

The Board and staff salute
current and past Board Presidents
of Fresh Youth Initiatives



Robin Henry
Edward Lehmann
Rebecca Sale

Each—in unique and important
ways—cherish FYI and the children
and families we serve.

The Diaz-Lopez Journey

It was a fragmented journey. It was 1958.

My little brother Lou was 9.

My older sisters, Awilda and Alba were 12 and 13.

My oldest brother Rick was 15 and I, Raquel was 11.

We left Puerto Rico to come to New York for a
“better life.”

Bad timing.

The first two years were hell.

Racism, bullying, a grey landscape and cold
weather were what we had.

Better lives, we didn’t.

We were separated, each of us sent to a different
relative.

Relatives open their doors at times, but not always
their hearts.

Some in New York City, others in East New York.

Disconnected and cold, the English language
non-existent.

Mom wanting to return to her island of enchantment.

Apartment searching, no luck.

Finally a non-winterized summer bungalow in
Coney Island.

Ice on the inside walls, door frozen shut, space
heater.

No coats, nothing to get through the winter.

Charity from schools.

Deplorable conditions, reunited and happy. Coping.

Separate high schools, middle schools, one ele-
mentary school.

Pop working in a sheet metal factory, mom taking
in sewing.

Little brother making “white” friends, safer.

Oldest brother joined the army, safer.

Sisters defending one another against bigotry.

“Spics go home.” Everyone got beat up, even mom.

Mom was having a baby at 35.

Along comes Ivette, underweight. Doctors. Poor
eater. Alone.

Onto her own journey, English-speaking and born
in Brooklyn, NY.

Lucky, she won’t have to journey.

No one went back to the island of enchantment,
Puerto Rico.

It was the island of Coney that became home.

*Ivette Cirino, mother of FYI staff member Gianna Smorto,
shared this family story.*

Billie's Journey

I am a refugee, and the product of a brutal 2-year Liberian Civil War.

In January of 1990, my mother and a seven-year-old version of me sought refuge in the United States. Tensions swelled in my country as warlord Charles Taylor and his militia overran the Liberian countryside and closed in on Monrovia, the capital where my family resided.

We had tickets on the last flight out of Monrovia but the plane was oversold. The airport was over-run. People were body surfing to the ticket counter out of desperation. After three hours of intensely holding the crowd, airport attendants closed the gate and my family and I watched bewildered as the last flight out of Monrovia left without us. It would be the last flight for years to come.

My parents and I returned home broken, knowing we didn't have time to waste. My parents were intent on rechanneling our energy to devise an alternate escape. A plan was hatched: we would drive to neighboring Sierra Leone and secure a flight to the United States. We'd also take my aunt and three cousins with us.

The path to safety was treacherous, and the trip arduous. We spent two days navigating the deep bush not knowing if rebel forces were around the next bend, or if deep ditches filled with water from rainy season's torrential downpours would leave us stranded without reprieve. Worst of all, we were at the mercy of "soldiers" who, at various checkpoints held my family at gunpoint in attempts to

steal everything they could get their hands on. Each time, my mother stood her ground ensuring we escaped with our lives and our dignity.

We all ultimately made it to the United States; all of us except my father, who decided to go back to Liberia to "protect everything he built." Days and weeks would pass where I wouldn't, and couldn't, hear from him. Every time I got a call stating he was safe, my heart would burst from sheer joy. Although my father navigated the war safely, the same wasn't true of his father and brother who lost their lives in the hands of merciless soldiers, or his mother who passed soon after, haunted by the grief of losing two of the people she loved the most.

This was a defining time in my life, one riddled with fear and hopelessness, but also with a deep sense of awareness that if I navigated this, I could get through anything. It is also the reason why I am empowered to support other young children who like me, may be navigating a complex life event.

This is why it's important for me to be a part of the dynamic organization that is FYI.

Billie Gibson serves on the Board of Directors at FYI.



Kimberlin's Journey

All my life, all my happiness, I lost in one day. That's why I don't like to talk about the hurricane. I didn't expect it. It was like a dream.

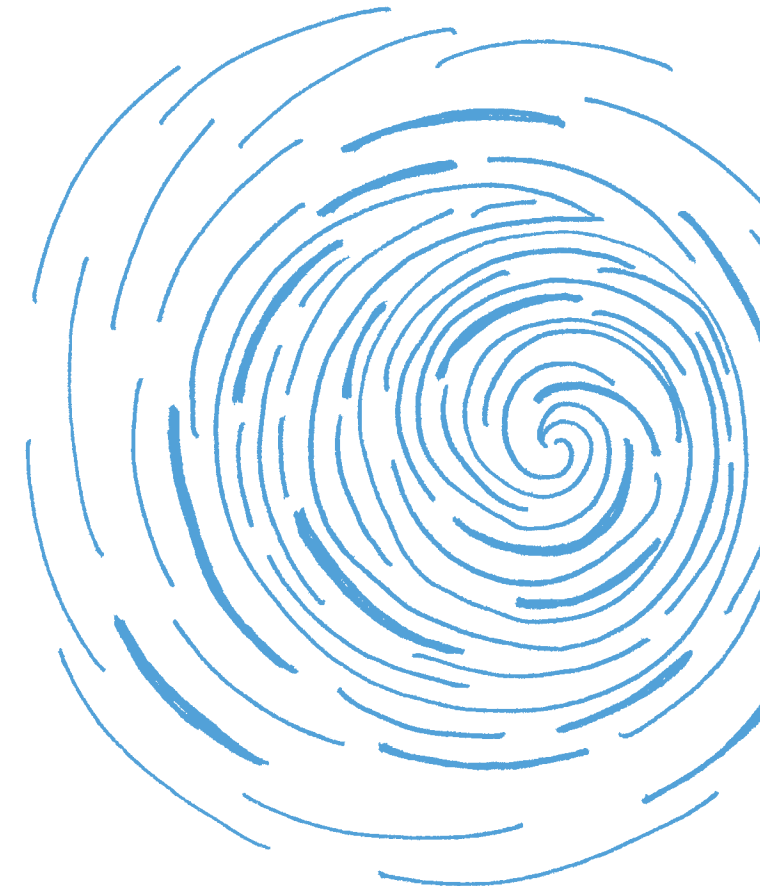
In the week before, there was another storm and it didn't do anything to my house. Then came Maria. No water, no food, nothing. We had to make lines for gas. No electricity. Now they are closing schools and there are houses that FEMA goes to help. But the government has too many problems; the economy is not good. My mom sells insurance but now with this hurricane, what person would buy insurance for a house? Or a car? Who will be buying a car right now?

There are people who have said to me that life is going to be better here. But I think they do not know what I've gone through. If they passed through my story, they would be more understanding. My mom is Dominican. My dad is Jamaican. I was born here but I spent all my life in Puerto Rico, so I love Puerto Rico. In Puerto Rico, I was studying to be a pharmacist and I was taking robotics. I was taking dance and taekwondo classes. I was singing too; I was in a group there. Now I had to leave all that and start a new beginning. It is not going well. I came back to the place where I was born, but I don't feel happy here. I wish that hurricane did not pass through.

Right now I just have to move on. Keep studying. For some reason our country is stronger, more together. That is a positive thing. We had nothing.

No phones. Now everyone is talking and you see kids playing together. Without the hurricane, that would not happen.

Kimberlin is an FYI participant at Gregorio Luperon High School.





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Ivette's Journey



I'm just like you. I'm human. I have struggles. I've been through pain, just like you. I love just like you. We think we're so different. But we are the same in so many ways. Just because I come from a certain place or I'm a certain color and I might not speak the same level of English as you do, doesn't make me any less of a person than you are.

After all the struggles, because there have been a lot, and change and pain and learning, it was all worth it. It's still worth it. Because I'm here. There are a lot of places to go still, I hope.

Ivette is an FYI participant at Gregorio Luperon High School.

I'm always seen as the outsider. There's more to me than just being Dominican. When I came to Luperón, I was told that I was so different by the other Dominican students. Why do you like English so much? You're always speaking English! You like American stuff! Why are you acting white? Why are you acting American? You're not American. Be Dominican. Well, what if I'm a hybrid of the two?

I love my community. Wherever you go, you have that warm feeling. We always try to be warm and welcoming. We're always like that. I love that about our community. Also, the culture, the music, the language and the background story of where we come from and our roots. I think that's really important right now. To maintain that and represent that. Because there is a lot going on and it's important for us to remember our roots. That we never let go.



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Dr. Taylor Sajous' Journey

Dad was born in 1943 and raised in the Haitian city of Gonaïves. After finishing high school in Haiti, Dad went to medical school in Strasbourg, France. His family did not support the dictatorship in Haiti at the time, so he was not welcome at the medical schools in Haiti. Dad said he picked Strasbourg because the weather was not good there, and he thought that way he would have fewer distractions from his studies than in the sunny South of France, where he had also been admitted to medical school.

In Strasbourg, Dad met Mom, who was studying math. He finished medical school and moved to St. Croix in the U.S. Virgin Islands to work as an emergency room physician at a local hospital. Mom soon followed, and they married in St. Croix, where my sister Nathalie was born. After a few years, they moved to New York, where two of my Dad's uncles and other family had already settled.

I was born soon after the move. We lived in an apartment on the Upper West Side, just a block away from my Dad's uncle Felix, who was also my godfather. Felix's family helped watch my sister and me when our parents were at work. While working at a nursing home, Dad sent out countless applications for medical internships and landed one at Kings County Hospital in Brooklyn. He went

on to complete a residency there and eventually earned his board certification in internal medicine and hematology.

Dad was accepted for a fellowship at Mount Sinai in Manhattan, where he demonstrated a talent and passion for research. He was encouraged to pursue a career in research, but he moved to private practice, motivated by the desire to better provide for his family. And after working at other doctors' offices, he opened his own practice in the southeast Bronx, which he grew until his retirement in 2010.

Dad loved caring for his many patients. Already fluent in Creole, French, and English, he perfected his Spanish so he could communicate better with his Spanish-speaking patients. At Christmas, there were always many gifts under the tree for Dad from grateful patients. One of his former patients recently wrote me to say how kind and wise Dad was during the twenty-two years he treated her. She described the many times he helped calm her fears and encouraged her to count her blessings.



For a few years, when my sister Nathalie was studying at Harvard and I was at Yale, Dad worked two jobs to help pay for our college. While continuing to work at his private practice, he took on another full-time job at a South Bronx mental health center. Dad was so proud of us, and he was most

proud when we were helping others. In fact, Dad encouraged me to join the Board of Fresh Youth Initiatives! Dad lives on in our memories, and through us.

Isabelle Sajous serves on the Board of Directors at FYI.



Alondra's Journey

When I came here, I thought I was going to move into a big house with my own room. Instead, we all slept together in one room in an apartment. I slept on the floor and my sister and mother sleep next to me in a bed. It was difficult because we needed to change together. But then one of our roommates moved out and I got my own room. Oh, that was amazing. Every morning I woke up in my own room. It was my own space. The shelves were

covered with books. I was always alone watching movies. My room was always organized and I had all my makeup on a shelf.

I remember that was the best summer of my life. You know when a time or a place has a perfume of home, and you feel like you belong there? That was that summer.

Alondra is an FYI participant at Gregorio Luperon High School.



Jayson's Journey

When I came here, I fell in love with New York. I still like it now, but there's something missing. I don't know if it's the feeling of home. When I was little, I used to sleep with my mother. In order for me to sleep, I needed to hug her and she had to play with my hair. She needed to do that so I could fall asleep. Now I take a pillow and I hug it until I can fall asleep. If I don't have the pillow, I'm not

comfortable. I think it's that. Missing her.

She's not going to be able to come to my graduation because she doesn't have the papers, so she cannot come. It's something that I would love if she was able to be here, but I'm like, it's life. I try not to think about it. It's life.

Jayson is an FYI participant at Gregorio Luperon High School.

Joseph's Journey

Joseph Sánchez considered himself lucky. "So many souls murdered, thrown in the street," he said. "But they did not kill me right away." The family agreed. He was lucky.

Joseph Sánchez did the unthinkable. He stood up to the monster, Rafael Trujillo. A powerful and evil dictator, Trujillo tortured a country and sent fear to settle into every corner, every village, farm, and life. Trujillo ordered Joseph Sánchez, citizen of the Dominican Republic and proud soldier, to kill civilians. Joseph, known widely as a sharpshooter, said "no" flatly and with conviction, standing up for what is right. Life took a turn.

On an ordinary day, after he disobeyed orders, a crumpled paper was thrown at Joseph's feet. The paper detailed a plot against Trujillo. Nobody recognized the handwriting but soldiers surrounded him, insisting the paper dropped from Joseph's pocket. They carted him off to prison. In solitary confinement, Joseph was tortured and left naked. Joseph guards those details from the family. "Lucky," he maintains, "that they did not kill me right away."

Every day, Jesús German, Joseph's brother, visited him in prison. "Jesús saved my life. They did not kill me because of Jesús."

One month later, they released Joseph from prison, without explanation. The brothers fled the Dominican Republic. Joseph, a third year med student left a full and rich life, a promising future.

Jesús, remained by his side. They would later name their sons after the other. Their bond endured. Mary says at the doctor's office, when all attending staff guess him to be much younger, Joseph flexes his muscles. "Here, feel this" he playfully brags, poking his arm.

Only he knows the details, at 82, glad to be alive. Lucky.

Sometime after Trujillo's regime ended, Joseph returned to the Dominican Republic, met and married Maria Cruz and returned to New York. Joseph had six children, two with Maria: Jesús, Mary, Edwin, Joseph, Joeline, and Jonathan.

Mary heard her parents arguing once—debating really, about her. Their own careers upended, they each claimed that Mary's stellar intellect was inherited from the other. Mary, their shining star fulfilled the "blind hope" that had carried them through their immigrant journey.

Mary esteems her father's bravery, risking his life to save others, noting that she and her siblings inherited a gift from Joseph, a family trait: "standing up for what they believe to be right."

Joseph Sánchez is the father of FYI's Director of Administration and Comptroller, Mary Sánchez.



Founded 1993

Twenty-five years ago, Andrew Robinson founded Fresh Youth Initiatives. Believing that teenagers were assets to be developed—not problems to be solved, Andrew galvanized FYI participants to manage a food pantry, feed the poor, brighten the community with gardens and murals, and sew sleeping bags for the homeless—powerful examples of youth leadership that would become known, eventually, throughout the city.

In 1993, Andrew ran Fresh Youth Initiatives out of the living room of the small apartment in which he lived with his wife, Laura. Perhaps that's what inspired him eventually to build a permanent home for Fresh Youth. And so he did. Andrew, organized people, raised funds, designed, swept, prob-

lem-solved, enlisted and inspired. Andrew practiced crowd-funding before it was a name. And then it was done. A beautiful home at 505 West 171st Street had risen on a barren lot.

It takes people like Andrew to make things happen.

Here we are, twenty-five years later, thanking you Andrew for all that you did and continue to do on behalf of the children and families of our community. Your idealism continues to drive FYI's very best achievements.

With great affection and forever grateful,

From the children, families, staff, and Board of Directors of Fresh Youth Initiatives



Tracie's Journey

Sometimes the younger brother takes care of the older.

In Savannah Georgia, Alex, John and Henry—ages 7, 9, and 11, were readied for a trip north, by rail, to live with a steely-willed grandfather who demanded their presence, and avowed that the boys would succeed under his watchful eye. Many saw him as a bullying, abusive disciplinarian. The family obeyed.

Anticipating the whites-only restaurants along the train route through Jim Crow Georgia, South and North Carolina and Virginia, the family armed the boys with a brown bag of home-cooked foods—chicken, sandwiches and fruit and cake, enough for three days. Full stomachs did not disguise the brothers' grinding fear. They clung to each other, a bundle of scared boyhood. John would later explain that he thought they would die. They slept in a tangle. They walked to the bathroom together. They did not budge but as a threesome.

It is perhaps in that moment of a life that character asserts itself, that the seedling of family trust is honed and sealed forever, that unqualified love settles in. The threesome arrived in New York City to face a new family, a new home, and new strictures.

The brothers' stories move in and out of twentieth century history—a world war, the sixties drug plague, Malcom X. Henry aka Mickey, the eldest, described as a gentle giant at 6'5', serves in the army, parachutes from a plane, a terror that marks

his schizophrenic break. Alex the youngest wrestled with the effects of drugs and alcohol on his family. John, always the strongest, will stand by them; he rises to become a captain in the FDNY.

John faced racism from the ranks of firefighters. He fought discrimination, teaching his men that racism will kill you in a mission that requires absolute trust in your brothers. "You can't let the family down." He saw family everywhere. He took care of Mickey for forty-seven years—never placing him in a mental institution. "Family" he would remind his own and his brothers' children—treating them all with unqualified, bounteous, indiscriminate love.

John became one of FDNY's first black captains. At his funeral, firefighters and civilians lined the streets to mourn and honor him. Men from the Vulcan Society—a fraternal organization of Black firefighters—served as an honor guard by Capt. Gilstrap's coffin, their reverence providing a measure of comfort to the family, keeping John safe, and ensuring dignity, on his final journey.

Tracie Gilstrap shared this cherished family history. She is Senior Associate Director of Programs at Youth INC—a nonprofit that empowers youth-serving organizations, including Fresh Youth Initiatives, to achieve their mission.



My Great-Grandma's Journey

One day my great-grandma got on a ship and went to America. She was with her mom and her sister. She was nine and her sister was seven. The year was 1923 and she was leaving Poland to live with her dad in America. There was a war between Poland and Russia. They were afraid of the soldiers who were burning down Jewish homes in the night.

My great-grandma traveled by boat to Ellis Island. Her mom looked sick before she left, so she sent my great-grandma to the drug store and bought makeup to look healthy. Luckily, they didn't have any problem when they went through the medical exam.

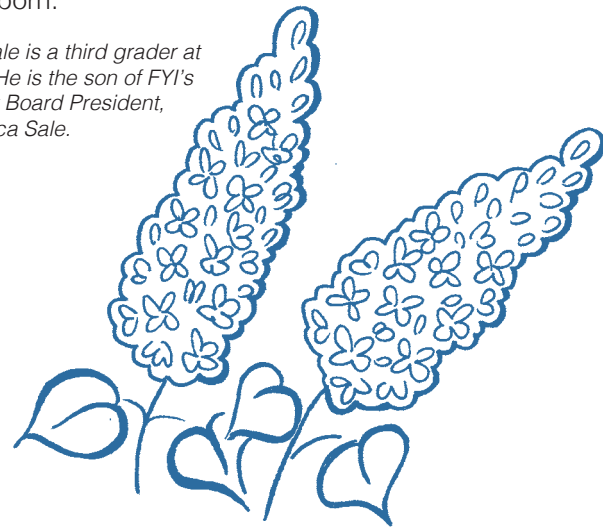
My great-grandma was named Golda. When she registered at Ellis Island in the Great Hall, they changed her name to Gertrude because they thought Golda wasn't a good American name. They changed her sister's name from Udela to Adel. My great-grandma never liked her new name so she changed it all of the time from Gertrude to Gert to Gertie to Goldie to Trudy.

She went with her mom and sister to live with her dad in Brooklyn. He was a butcher. She didn't want to speak with an accent so she didn't speak any Polish after she arrived. She wanted to fit in with the Americans.

One year later, my great-grandma Golda's mom died. Golda had to cook the same thing every night so she always hated to cook later in her life. Her dad remarried a woman that she never liked and Golda never said her name because she didn't want to remember her. Golda always stayed very close to her sister, Adel. She liked living in America even though she hated her step-mom and she missed her little house and garden in Poland. She liked the lilacs there.

Golda met her husband at Brooklyn Beach. She lived a long life in America and died in 2006 when she was ninety three, just before my twin sisters were born.

Max Sale is a third grader at PS87. He is the son of FYI's current Board President, Rebecca Sale.



My Mom's Journey

My mom first came to this country when she was six years old. She went to school in the Bronx but she did not like it because she felt different. Kids made fun of her because she was dark. She did not like the environment because in her building, it was super quiet and she was used to the loud music. My aunt did not like it at all here. She would make up excuses so she wouldn't have to go to school. My mom and my aunt were made fun of because they didn't know English. Then my grandmother saw how they felt and talked to them. She told them they didn't have to learn English that fast because they just got here. She also told them that it didn't matter what anybody else said because they don't know your story. She also told them they should not worry about being judged and to ignore it. Afterwards, my mom and aunt had a little more confidence and started to get to know kids and made some friends. The friends they made

helped them with their English. They slowly started to understand and speak English. They started speaking English fluently so therefore they were changed to a different class. Then they started to enjoy the country more. The encouragement and the help they got really helped them feel supported. My mom began to read and was doing pretty good. She was really happy because people didn't make fun of her because she knew English then. Afterwards, my mom started to get jobs that required English and she was happy because she was able to apply. (Keep in mind this is years later). The job she ended up getting allowed her to speak both languages and this was good because she was able to help other people as well. Now my mom is a happy 32-year-old bilingual citizen of the United States of America.

Jade is a middle school participant at FYI's Youth Center.



Sal's Journey

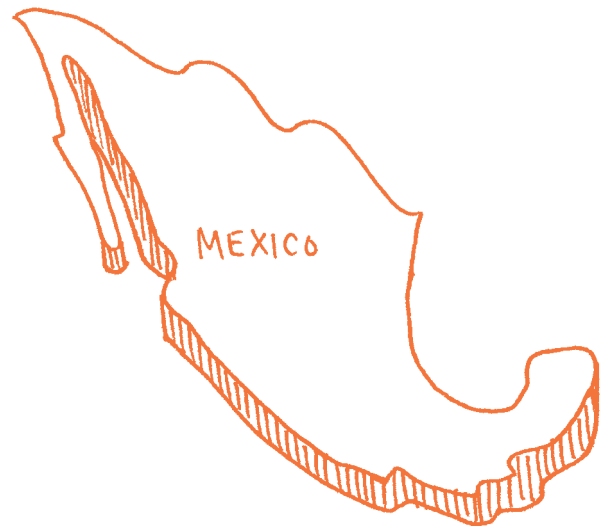
My parents grew-up in a small rural village in central Mexico, the same one in which our ancestors had lived for generations on end. Obtaining an education in this part of Mexico was not the norm for children. My mother received a second grade education, my father left school after the first grade. They could barely read and write in Spanish. The entire town's livelihood depended on its agriculture. My father followed in his father's footsteps and became a farmer. My mother, like most women in the village, was in charge of all things domestic—cleaning the house, cooking the food, and rearing the children. My oldest sisters were both born in Mexico. Although their birth was a great source of joy for our family, they were a liability since they could not assist on the farm. My family's situation, already dire, was compounded

by two terrible planting and harvesting seasons. Unable to provide for a family of four, my parents, seeking a better life for their children, made the ultimate sacrifice and immigrated to the United States in 1977.

Living in a Los Angeles suburb, I grew-up in a tight-knit nuclear family. I did not meet my extended family, including my grandparents who lived in Mexico, until I was in the fourth grade. Every time I asked my parents when I was going to meet my grandparents, they would tell me that we couldn't travel to Mexico because of their immigration status. As a fourth grader, I was oblivious to politics, yet it was politics that would determine the legal status of my family. Little did I know then that Congress had introduced a bill granting amnesty to certain immigrants. Former President Ronald Reagan signed that bill into law, qualifying my parents for amnesty, and to become residents.

With their permanent resident card in place, we went to meet my grandparents. We visited the house my parents lived in before they immigrated. Their hometown stood in stark contrast to our suburban house—instead of bathrooms there were outhouses, dirt roads instead of paved roads, and in lieu of washing machines, women hand washed our clothes. I then understood and appreciated the many sacrifices my parents had made to ensure that we would have a better life in the United States.

Sal Arrona serves on the Board of Directors at FYI.



Susan's Journey

We have a saying in Puerto Rico, "Leave 'em dumb." Let them think whatever they want. Latinos are incredibly generalized. We're flattened. I'm not two-dimensional. There's a lot more to me and a lot more to us as a people. A great deal of my journey has been a fight to prove that I am intelligent.

As a student, art therapist, and professor in the "art in education" world, I have experienced this element of surprise when people come and observe my class, read my curriculum, or hear me speak in public. They are always surprised. That says quite a bit about their initial perception of me. They are surprised by the kind of artwork I make. I've had colleagues question my abilities, "Can she teach that college level class?"

In 1988, I enrolled at The College of Saint Elizabeth, which was an all-women's Catholic institution in New Jersey. I spent my first year taking uncredited, remedial courses. I was thankful that I was getting individualized attention with my remedial courses. It helped me with the process of adapting to academics in the United States. Before I came to the United States, I was part of the honors society at my private Catholic high school in Puerto Rico. I won the Miss Popularity contest my senior year. I was president of the student government for two consecutive years. And when I came to the United States, I went from a ninety percent average in my grades to a seventy. That crushed me. I became doubtful about pursuing a degree in psychology

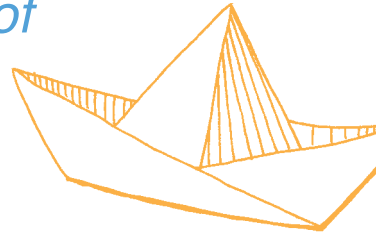
It took a very long time for me to understand that I had a cultural sensitivity that many of my classmates didn't have, and would never have, because I grew up on an island and came to the United States as a bilingual student. How do I convey to the immigrant students at the high school level that they are coming in with wonderful skills—that they are intelligent, solid, and ready to live here. How do I educate colleagues and professionals on the intersections within cultural diversity?

I moved to the United States because I did not want to be in Puerto Rico married to a man with children. I found the heteronormative lifestyle so boring. I felt there was a world out there to be seen. It's 2018 and I still struggle with women being the key players and key hunters in the relationships they have with men. Women are not seen in a favorable light if we exercise a significant degree of agency. It's still seen as negative. This continues to be a struggle for me.

Art making and art therapy really became a home for me. Being around artists and art saved me in many ways. The art world gave me a sense of belonging. I think that helped me a great deal. Now I'm used to being an oddball. It has taken decades to understand something about being a Puerto Rican woman in the United States: that I am intelligent.

Susan is the Director of FYI programs at Gregorio Luperon High School.

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have been proud supporters of
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Stephen & May Cavin Leeman Foundation



Building Value

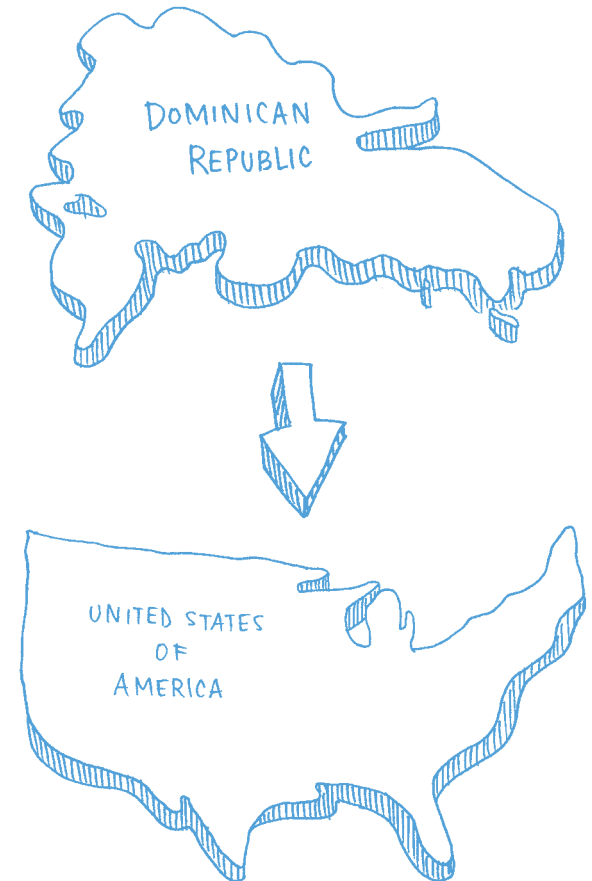
Yodenni's Journey

I came from the Dominican Republic and it was not easy for me to get used to new people. It was also hard for me to learn and get used to the language over here. I found it hard because not everyone in my family came to this country so that made it harder for me to get used to the United States. I was alone with only my mom and sister. But as time passed I got to meet other family members that were here and they showed me a lot of new things and because of this I was able to start getting used to the United States. I just want to tell you that you are going to get used to living a new life and it is going to be like an adventure so enjoy it.

Version en Español

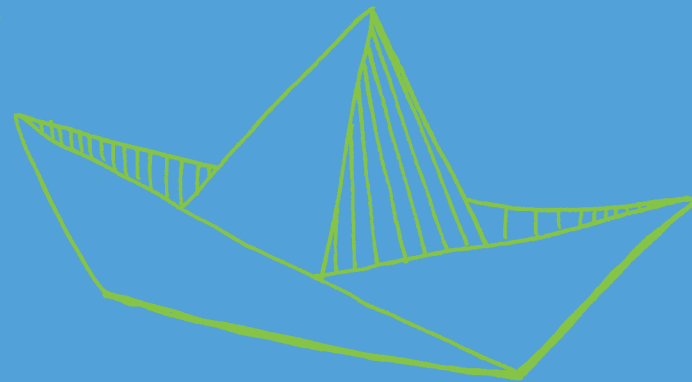
Vine de República Dominicana y no me fue fácil familiarizarme con gente nueva. También me costo aprender y acostumbrarme al idioma de los Estados Unidos. Fue difícil para mi porque no toda mi familia vino conmigo. Nomas vine a este paiz con mi mama y con mi hermana pero con el tiempo pude conocer a nuevos miembros de la familia. Me mostraron muchas cosas nuevas que me ayudaron a utilizar este nuevo país y solo quiero decirte que vas a acostumbrarte a vivir otra vida y va a ser como una aventura, así que disfrútalo.

Yodenni is a middle school participant at FYI's Youth Center.



Celebrating and thanking the staff
of Fresh Youth Initiatives who believe in
the potential of every child,
and who make all good things possible.

Eileen Lyons, Executive Director
and The Board of Directors



Phuong's Journey



"We left Vietnam in 1983 and lived as refugees in Hong Kong from the time I was two, until I was seven years old. In Hong Kong, we moved five or six times, across different camps, living in small utility sheds. My mom, brother and I shared one bed among many rows of beds. My mom found work as a helper in the kitchen. While life in the camps was very sparse, I cannot say it was an unhappy childhood. It was safe, there were other children to play with, and we had regular meals.

There was no formal schooling in the camps, just an hour or so a day of English lessons. In 1988, we had the opportunity to resettle in Australia, near Melbourne, along with my father, who had been living in Hong Kong, but outside of the camps. Melbourne was where I finally entered a traditional, primary school. I was seven years old.

My parents moved us into a Vietnamese neighborhood, but my school in Melbourne was very diverse, ethnically and economically. I remember going for a playdate to a friend's house one day, and seeing that she had about twenty Barbie dolls! That is the first time I remember having the awareness that some people had "more," than others, and certainly more than I had ever had living in the camps.

My mother and father worked hard as tailors in Australia, taking in sewing to support us. I appreciate their hard work so much. While they were never formally educated, my parents made it clear that pursuing an education would be important for

my brother and me. Eventually, I made the connection between having more options and the role education plays in that.

That idea always inspired me, in primary school, and later as I put myself through university and graduate school.

At fifteen, I remember a teacher pulling me aside to tell me that, while I was a good student, my English grammar, especially the use of past and present tense, was terrible. I wondered why none of my previous teachers had ever told me! I appreciated his honesty, however, and I got to work. I will always be grateful to that teacher for giving me the feedback I needed to improve.

I was always very good at math and I love it. Math is logical, sequential, and you can always think through the next steps, which is a good lesson for life. I worked as a math tutor while in college, and it remains a passion of mine, helping young people learn about and master this wonderful subject. I very much support the work that FYI does to help students succeed, especially in math.

Phuong Truong serves on the Board of Directors at FYI.

Lourdes and Edgardo's Journey

Lourdes and Edgardo started their journey to America on September 20th, 1972 when they boarded a plane heading to NYC. During their layover in Hong Kong, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos announced Martial Law and shut down all airports. They knew their decision to immigrate was the right one. They left their three children (ages 5, 9, 10) to the care of family to finish out their school year and give themselves the opportunity to settle in NY seeking employment, a place to live, and a new life for

their young family. In April 1973, the Tolentino family was reunited and settled in Woodside NY. During the following decades, numerous siblings and cousins followed their lead and migrated to New York in search of opportunity. Today, Lourdes and Edgardo have 4 married children, 11 grandchildren and 3 great grandchildren, living in all parts of the United States. Their bravery, resilience, selflessness and determination have led to their proud legacy.

Bernadette Cuevas is the daughter of Lourdes and Edgardo.



Phuong Truong Suckle and the Suckle Family



Rosa's Journey

Long before I came to the United States, I had an image of it in my mind from adult conversations around me; it was a city in which streets glittered with gold. While playing in my abuelito's small plantation, my sisters and cousins would pretend that some of us resided in New York and the others remained in Santo Domingo. The top of the pickup truck was always New York, and the ground, our native home, the Dominican Republic.

In June 1964, my mother, two older sisters, brother and I, boarded a Pan American flight to New York to join my father who had migrated two years earlier. I was very excited and couldn't understand why Mami cried. As I ran ahead inside the plane, I heard English for the very first time; it was an incoherent sound, like the teacher in the Charlie Brown cartoons I would see years later, pronounced by a tall blonde in a blue pleated skirt. I startled and immediately took cover in my mother's own pleated skirt.

During the cab ride from JFK to the Bronx, I was mesmerized by the tall buildings, but could not understand the iron balconies on the facades. I wondered why Americans didn't have a door to their homes, only to learn later that those were fire escapes and not entrances!

My family remained in the Bronx until 1973, residing pretty much on the same street, usually in apartments too small for all of us, beginning with the first two bedroom fourth floor walkup, to the last one with four bedrooms, one creatively created in the hallway, by Papi. However, since our

family continued to grow to 8 children (the 9th was born in Queens), our parents and maternal Abuela, we always had to share rooms, beds, bathrooms. I didn't enjoy the privacy of a bath with a locked door until I left my mother's house years later.

My memory of the Bronx is filled with gangs, shootings, fights, and hiding. In the 1970's gangs owned the streets, at least where we lived. It was not rare to see fights, and hear gunshots. As a timid child, I ended up seeing too much violence, ranging from a man axed in the back of his neck, to a young man falling like a paper doll after being



shot in the chest. I was afraid of everything and everyone around me. We were always indoors and only ventured out to school.

We finally escaped the Bronx in August 1973; it was unplanned. On a hot summer night, a young Dominican man who didn't know how to drive accepted the challenge to drive an Impala which resulted in several crashes and a young man's legs severed; he was the brother of one of the gang leaders. As the two gangs played out their anger and frustrations in the streets, a strong message was sent: Dominican families must leave. Buildings were set on fire and in one day, seven Dominican families moved. Unfortunately, we were unable to find another apartment because we were a family of eleven. By the end of August, we were the only Dominicans remaining.



In less than one week, we packed, storing our measly belongings in basements, and divided ourselves into relatives or friends' apartments. For about three weeks, my two older sisters and I stayed in a friend's already crowded apartment; they had six children! I remember a hot tiny room with two sets of bunk beds on which eight of us slept. After that, my grandmother rented a room in a friend's house that let rooms and seven of us moved in. This lasted an eternity. I started high school living out of that room.

On December 24, 1973, we finally moved into our own home in Corona, Queens. My father's employer took pity and lent him money to purchase a fixer upper. Papi dropped my two older sisters and me off at the new home with buckets, cleaning products, brooms, etc., to clean our new home. My family and I began a new chapter: immigrants owning our own home.

I do not remember precisely when I started school, but know that it was not in September like most students. I was enrolled at PS 50 Clara Barton Elementary School, one block away from our home. I was automatically placed one year behind because I did not speak English. I was in class 109 with Ms. Sternberg, the lowest in the first grade. Only a girl named Wanda, who became my translator, spoke Spanish. The only problem was that Wanda didn't really speak much Spanish and I was extremely shy. In her attempt to teach me English, Ms. Sternberg led me to understand that I should repeat what she said. I parroted everything she said, even repeating when she addressed another adult.

While I don't recall the details of my first year, certain memories remain vivid. I remember the

first time I saw a small carton of cold milk and a pencil pretzel, we used to receive as a snack. I had only seen milk in a glass bottle or straight from a goat. I thought it so special that I saved half to share with Mami. I also remember the day she was late to pick me up. My mother always picked me up first at the front of the school, and we would walk around to the backyard to pick up one of my sisters. When I did not see Mami outside, I cried inconsolably as Ms. Sternberg tried to calm me. I became more hysterical when she escorted me back inside the school to the principal's office! I felt trapped and certain that I would never see my family again. Mami was never late again.

I also am not sure how much I learned that year, except the words "kite" and "bluebird", but recall that despite her inability to communicate with me, Ms. Sternberg made me feel welcomed in her class. Unfortunately, second to fourth grades remain a blur. I cannot remember much about the teachers and/or friends. I just remember crying regularly because I did not understand and/or felt alone, and waiting anxiously for the end of the day so that I could see Mami and my family.

I cannot pinpoint when I learned English. However, from 6th to 9th grades I ended up in the gifted

classes and eventually the Bronx High School of Science. That experience embarked my love for learning. While I did not pursue the traditional route, I put myself through college by attending weekend courses, with my 6 year-old beside me. I worked in business for many years but after feeling unfulfilled, I returned to education taking a \$22,000 pay cut! I worked my way from teaching to being an Instructional Coach, an Assistant Principal, Principal and to my present position as the Deputy Superintendent of District 6. As I look back, it was my family and Bronx Science that saved my life. My parents' own education was limited; Papi finished 6th grade and Mami 8th. They demanded that we speak our native language at home, which enabled me to be able to speak, read and write in two languages. Somehow, they instilled values that shaped us, to cherish people as individuals, and to be our own person. They, and I guess life as well, taught me to persevere regardless of the challenges, and to always try my best. It is their values that guide me, Papi's voice of strength and determination in my head, Abuela's recipes that flavor my style, and Mami's caresses that lead my heart.

Rosa Argelia Arrendondo is the PLF/Deputy Superintendent, Community School District 6, where FYI is located.



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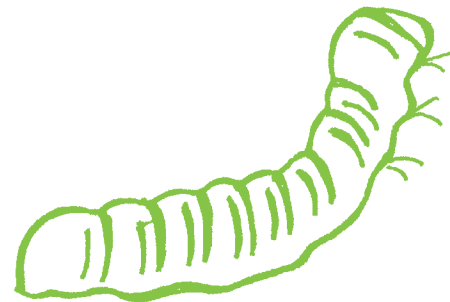
D's Journey

I remember the first days. All I did was cry because I didn't have my mom. I was so attached to her that breaking off from her to come here was the worst. I didn't know this country. I didn't know this language. I went to school and people did not listen to what I was saying.

I found this new world to be so independent. In D.R., if you're sick, your aunt who lives on the next corner will come and take care of you. If you're hungry and your mom is not home, your neighbor will come and give you food. Here? I need to do it all by myself. I would get anxiety. I had cutting problems. But I have learned to control myself. I know that I need to do better for my brother, my mom, and me. It's definitely something I'm working on. This country has been a roller coaster and I have learned a lot of things. I feel thankful that I came here and even though I have been through all this pain and suffering, this country has things my country does not have.

I look forward to stability and independence. And becoming a butterfly. Right now I am a caterpillar. I want to have a house. I want to adopt a kid. I want to be able to support my family in D.R. and support myself. I want a degree, definitely. That's the main thing. I want to help girls become more open-minded. And I'll have a big library in my house. That's how I know I've become a butterfly—a beautiful butterfly that just spreads her wings out.

D is an FYI participant at Gregorio Luperon High School.



Janice's Journey

There are a lot of immigrant stories about being successful. But the story of having to go to a different place, in order to find a place where you are loved, where you feel safe to be who you are, I think that's a story worth telling.

I was born and raised in the Philippines in a family rooted deeply in the Christian religion. My mom is Catholic and my dad is part of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines. Growing up was all about Sunday Masses. For women, it was all about getting married and children.

Growing up, my sisters played with Barbies. But I would say, "I like Ken, I want to be Ken!" Because my mom and dad were athletes, sports were the only thing I could do without them saying, "how come you're not doing girly things?" I'm not comfortable with dresses, but with sports, I can say this is what you wear. Sports helped me through problems with which my family struggled, and increasingly became an outlet for me, a way to forget about problems.

I would feel excited about seeing a particular girl, but because of our Christian values, I felt I shouldn't be feeling this way. There was a point when I was filled with self-loathing and felt I had to deny my feelings. I went deep into wanting to go to church every day because I wanted to be cleansed; I was told this was a sin. I even tried to date a guy. But it did not feel natural to me. But I also did not want to be the sinner. What do I do? I

focused on sports, on things that made me forget about the attraction I felt.

I realized that I had to either accept this truth and forget about my faith, or try to hold on to my family and my faith but be unhappy. Then came the opportunity to come to New York. I came here and found I could be myself. I could love the people I wanted to love, I could select the family who would embrace me. When New York Marriage Equality passed, that gave me hope. I was like, I'm never moving out of New York City! I'm staying here! When it passed, I thought, I'm home. This could be home because this is where a future could be and this is where I feel safe.

When a long-term relationship failed, I started to dig into what faith is and what it should mean for me. Here is a God who is supposed to be all-knowing and all-loving. This God should be about love and not about punishment. Focusing on that allowed me to have peace in my mind and a joy in who I am. I could finally accept myself. That realization gave me the courage to open up to my family and allowed me to love myself more.

From then on, when I'm talking to my students who are coming from families with close-minded family members, I simply say, "believe in something kinder. Believe in hope."

Janice is a teacher at Gregorio Luperón High School.

Margaret and her Daughters' Journeys

My sister is intrepid. Let me explain. She traveled to the far ends of the earth to find her two daughters, to adopt them. Once home, she frets over imagined hurts and pain, a history she does not know. She notices a scar on her daughter's foot. Too close to a fire? Shoes too tight? Who held her at night, she asks herself. All thoughts set aside in the light of day.

My niece, Vishakha, born in India, lived in an orphanage for two and a half years. She and Mumb-

ta, her closest ally, looked out at the world, side by side, a buzz of life beyond their crib. They communicated in their own language, caring for each other's every moment. She will leave her behind.

I watch Vishakha as she calls Mumbta on her play phone. "Pikaki fine," she declares, cradling the phone, reassuring Mumbta that she had managed the 28-hour flight from Pune, the overnight in a German hotel, and the trek north from Boston to Vermont. She had landed safe and sound. She would find her way in a place where, people, words, objects and meals were different, new, confounding, and comforting.

In the early days, she liked to wear her fancy dresses, the ones carried from India. She also enjoyed a spin in the car every so often. My sister would drive her round and round back country roads—she in the back, perched high in her child seat—festooned in the colors of Indian spices and marigolds—all orange and red and gold.

Seven years later, Vishakha's new sister, Mitike, arrives from

Ethiopia. On her first morning, Margaret finds Mitike at dawn, sitting perfectly still in her room, bed made, bag packed, waiting. "No," my sister tells her, "this is your home."

During Thanksgiving dinner that year, Mitike explains that she once tried to make a doll using sticks and bits of stone. The next morning, I watch her playing in the front yard with her new life-size doll. She has slung the doll across her back wrapped and held tightly by a large scarf secured in front.

Worlds knit together.

Vee and Mitike are watching Sponge Bob, Vishakha sprawled across the living room sofa. Mitike sits on the floor, staring intently at the screen. An expansive shawl draped over her head cascades to the floor. One day soon she will employ a Sharpie to scribble boldly across a green velvet ottoman in the living room. Mitike has tested the waters, crossed a bridge. My sister takes it in stride.

Mitike and I discover an abandoned tree house in the woods. I leave to find quilts for a roof. When I return, she is sweeping the floor. There is muscle memory in her sweeping, the broom stick twice her size. We huddle in the tree house into early evening then run home, screaming in the growing dark, the ground black beneath our feet.

At the doctor's office my sister asks me to help comfort and hold steady this sweet little girl as two nurses administer a backlog of immunizations. Six or eight today. She sits still, strength written on her features, even as her eyes well up with tears. Two nurses. Two arms. Round one.

I can barely stand to watch this moment unfold. Round two. I want to snatch her up and find the nearest exit. I don't. This little girl shows strength I can't possibly understand. She will continue to teach me, in years to come, to move on...the pain is over, we are okay, she repeats.

Their journeys, I think, are not for the faint of heart.

Eileen Lyons is the Executive Director of Fresh Youth Initiatives.



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Amy's Journey

When I hear of my grandmother's journey, my heart swells with admiration. Her name is Ana Gloria Toledo Rios and she is the strongest person I know. She was born September 17, 1939 in a small town in Puerto Rico into a household filled with abuse at the hands of her father. She decided, at the age of 17, to leave the only home she knew, and move to New York City with her aunt for a chance at a better life. When she was 22 years old, she met her future husband who was 18 at the time. She had sought an escape only to fall, once again, into the trap of abuse in her marriage to my grandfather.

In their 51 years of marriage, my grandparents experienced a steady stream of devastating losses. From the death of their first child, to the loss of several siblings, parents and good friends, they carried on for the sake of their children. Their marriage gave birth to the crazy, loud but loving Rios family that I know and cherish. They had five children and twelve grandchildren, including me. Every time there was a birthday, holiday, or family celebration, we never had to ask where it would be. We all knew it would be at my grandmother's house, a small but comforting home filled with abundant love and delicious food. If my grand-



mother wasn't the one who answered the door, you would be sure to find her in the kitchen cooking for the entire family.

Last year, all of our lives were changed forever when my grandfather's diabetes began to take a toll on his body. My grandmother never ceased taking care of him, no matter the verbal abuse she endured. When she was admitted into the hospital for exhaustion, a diagnosis of colon cancer was leveled at her. In the middle of her own treatment, her husband, my grandfather, passed away. Still, my grandmother continued to fight for her life. Thankfully, she is now in remission.

In her pursuit of a new life, my grandmother was forced to leave the old one behind. For the 62 years she has lived in New York, she had no contact with her siblings, who believed her to be dead. It was not until this year, that she was able to see them again. Next month, my parents are taking my grandmother on her first vacation ever, where she will be reunited in Puerto Rico with her siblings.

When Ana Gloria Toledo Rios made the courageous choice to leave her home, she never could have predicted what the outcomes would be. From her choice, and her sacrifice, my own journey came to be.

Amy Aviles is a staff member at FYI's Elementary Welcome Program.

Rebecca's Journey

Choosing a name for our daughter became an easy task once we learned about her namesake. The story of her great-great-grandmother, Rebecca Zinman, and her journey to the United States gave us inspiration that our Rebecca would become a strong and loving woman. Rebecca Zinman was adventurous, hard-working, loving and very clever.

Born in Dvinsk, in what is now Latvia, she later lived near Riga, Latvia with her husband, Harry, and their seven children. In 1904 Harry emigrated to New York City on the SS Pennsylvania to find work and save money to send for Rebecca and their children. Meanwhile, the persecution of Jews in Riga made life unbearable. Rebecca, at the age of 38 years, made the journey to Amsterdam with her seven children. There they were able to stay with a relative for almost two years. On March 17, 1906 they made the voyage on the SS Ryndam to New York City. She and the children joined Harry who had been living with Rebecca's sister and husband in an apartment on the Lower East Side at 247 Cherry Street.

Their tale continued in Brooklyn where they resided at 21 Kermit Place, close to other relatives and friends. Harry tried his hand at a variety of jobs. It was Rebecca who had the vision for a family business. She opened a hair salon with a doll hospital in the back. Harry and the children performed a variety of tasks, but she was the driving force behind a business that would provide income for the family.



I never knew my great-grandmother, but her son, my grandfather, my "Poppy", was one of eight of the kindest and most generous children. Rebecca and Harry gave us a legacy which we try to pay forward. Although the family never had much money, whatever they had was shared easily with others. My Poppy was so joyful and loving that he brought sunshine into every room he entered. He was loved by many and I simply adored him. I am thankful that Rebecca was his mother and that she and her family were able to leave what is now Latvia and journey to the United States. They had a better life and contributed towards making the world a better place.

The journey of my maternal grandfather's family is just one story in our family tree. It is with utmost respect, admiration and gratitude for all our ancestors that I share this story. This is the legacy that is passed on to our daughter, Rebecca Sale.

Jane Rosenthal is the mother of FYI's Board Chair, Rebecca Sale.

**BUILDING A DIGITAL ECONOMY
THAT WORKS FOR ALL**

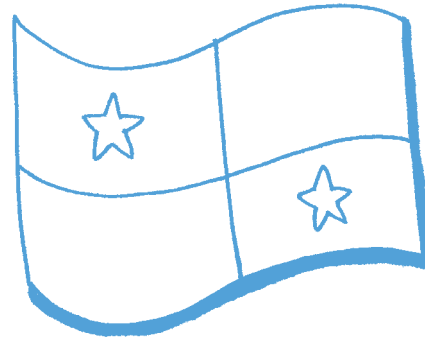


"...he went from coming to the U.S. as a child, eating off the streets, to building a thriving business."

Anonymous, Philanthropist

"Immigrants should not be treated bad because we are all the same and we should not discriminate against anyone."

Yuali, age 11, FYI Participant

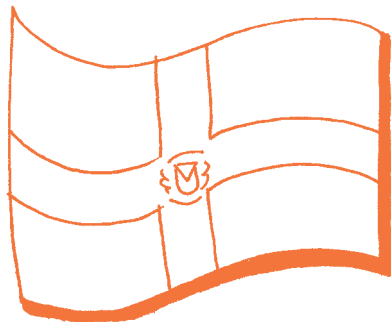
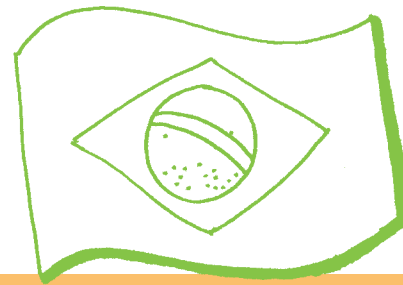


"My father, born in Puerto Rico, was the youngest of 18 children. He married my mother, who was born and raised in Panama. They met in Brooklyn. You can say I am a Panarican. My family tree is a gigantic map of people moving together on a journey in which family is deeply treasured, always."

Jeremiah Roman, FYI Senior Youth Practitioner

"I left everything behind including my family and my language. To this day, I wonder whether I left or was pushed out by Brazil's violence. The bullet holes in my garage door were a reminder that this wasn't how my life was meant to be."

Alessandro Guimaraes, FYI Social Worker



"My mother told me that when she left Bonao at 13, they left behind death and sadness. The car accident that left my grandmother a widow, and the mysterious death of my aunt, my namesake, with the looming shadow of dictatorship uprooted her family. They are still mourning their losses. When they moved into their Brooklyn home, my mom recalls the bittersweetness with specific memories: MLK, JR and Robert Kennedy from their fire escape, the West Indian Parade, working long hours in a Manhattan factory, and snow. For her, being homesick is a lifelong marriage of hope and sadness."

Beatriz Oliva, FYI Clinician at Gregorio Luperon High School

Emilia's Journey

Hello, my name is Emilia, I am eleven years old and I am from Ecuador. I came here when I was 3 years old, I was a little kid so I really did not know what was going on. At first, it was really hard for my parents because we did not fit in that well. We had to live with my mom's cousin for about 8 months and it was awful. After a few months, we got our first apartment, which had two bedrooms. It was six people so that was a disaster but that was all we could afford. My first school ever was P.S. 128 and I went there when I was five years old for two years. After this, I changed schools

because I moved to Castle Bridge and I fit in pretty good because I could talk Spanish there so I was very happy. After a year and a half, I moved to another apartment and that made me very happy. I learned English in my schools because I used to have cards that I read every single day and I would read small books. Now I live in a big apartment and I know English. I just want all of you to know you are not alone and that other people have gone through immigrating to another place.

Emilia is a middle school participant FYI's Youth Center

Francina's Journey



When I first came here, I was so excited but at the same time, I was nervous and scared. I was nervous because I had to start my life all over again. I had to adapt to the people here, and make new friends. I was really excited to meet new people and to try new things but it was hard for me. Then I came to FYI. Being in FYI helped me a lot. FYI helped me to improve my English and make new friends. And I learned how to be friendly. I was really shy when I first got here. FYI is like my second family. Now it has been five years since I

got to this country. I have been through a lot but the people around me helped me get through the struggles I was going through. One last thing, there are going to be friends that you are going to lose throughout the years. At the end of the day just surround yourself with good and positive people. Good luck!

Francina is a high school participant at FYI's Youth Center. This note was included in immigration kits given to participants in our elementary school program

About FYI

You are here to help, and Fresh Youth Initiatives is so very grateful to you.

Fresh Youth Initiatives empowers youth who have the fewest resources to achieve their greatest potential.

Our programs address five challenges in our community:

- The academic achievement gap among Latino youth
- Immigration—adjusting to a new home and language
- School transitions, especially middle to high school to college
- Social-emotional and mental health needs
- Access to resources that prepare youth for college and careers

The kids we serve don't lack talent or ambition, but they will and do benefit from a boost. Tutoring, reading instruction, STEM activities, guidance and counseling make a difference. Opportunities like summer jobs and college visits can be life-changing. Children who face serious trauma receive expert support and kindness. And our out-of-school time programs and summer camps provide a safe enriched place for kids while parents juggle the competing demands of jobs (often several) and raising a family.

FYI thanks you, our supporters, and all the people who work side-by-side with us. Together we are helping 1400 children from 5–19 years of age to reach their very best potential. Together, we are making a difference.



Fresh Youth Initiatives is celebrating its twenty-fifth year
of helping children and teens who have the fewest
resources to reach their greatest potential.

With your help, FYI empowers immigrant and first generation
youth to navigate life's most challenging transitions.



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