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People believe that the two words in a hyphenated identity tell the whole story, but for me, the reality goes beyond two simple descriptors. The term Nicaraguan-American may explain the fact that my heritage is Nicaraguan while my passport is American, but it does not say enough. It does not explain the “inbetweenness” of being the first person in your household to be born in the United States. It does not fully describe the pressure of making your parents’ sacrifice of leaving their former lives worthwhile. It does not totally portray the joy of holidays celebrated a little differently, of not only eating maduros and opening presents on Noche Buena, but also having pancakes and unwrapping gifts from Santa on Christmas morning. A hyphenated identity—especially as a first-generation American—is not a simple combination, but a duality of self.

Growing up in Miami reinforced this sense of double identity. I am as American as our national pastime but as Latin as the salsa played between innings at Marlins Park. Miami is a place that is as in-between as I am; it is undeniable that Miami is an American city, but its connection to Latin America is equally indisputable. At school, my friends and I compared our families’ immigration stories. My Cuban friends would tell me about their abuelos and tíos who had been imprisoned for their political views, echoing the stories of the politicians that would—for better or for worse—go on to shape Miami’s cultural and political landscape. In my own home, I heard about the revolution that shook Nicaragua even harder than the earthquake that had crumbled Managua seven years prior. I learned about how the Revolution resulted in scarcity and danger, about how my parents risked arrest each time they had to buy my older sister’s baby formula on the black market. In a city where over half the population is foreign-born, these stories are as abundant as the rain, and they deeply impacted how I viewed the world. I have always been acutely aware of how life can change in a second and of how resilient people can be when faced with seemingly impossible circumstances. Reminded of life’s fragility but surrounded by so much fortitude, I always knew that I wanted to have a career that would allow me to help people facing unexpected adversity.

Once finally in the United States, my parents worked to support our family while they simultaneously studied in order to restart the careers they had left behind. They started off working low-wage, entry-level jobs while they learned English and prepared to take the medical licensing exams that would allow them to practice medicine in this country. Even as they inched towards that goal, they worked their way up to better jobs: my dad assisted patients in a nursing home, and my mom worked in a university doing research until she was fired for being pregnant with me. Shortly thereafter, my parents passed their exams and never looked back. I grew up grateful for my parents’ courage to start over in a new country and in awe of the challenges they overcame in doing so. I also grew up knowing how quickly life can change for a family and feeling a responsibility to use that knowledge to make life better for others who faced such catastrophic, life-changing moments. I can’t help think about what my family would have done if my parents had not had the opportunity to move on to better things after my mom faced discrimination at work. For many of my clients, this is not a hypothetical; they seek legal help because they are desperate to find options.

Before law school, I was in the wrong profession. I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but I had mistaken the means for the ends. What I really wanted was for everyone to enjoy the privileges I was fortuitously but undeservedly born into. I was
drawn to education because my parents emphasized and exemplified how education can propel you forward in life. Our family was the embodiment of the quintessential American dream. They were able to restart their careers in the United States and finally experience stability because they were highly educated. In turn, they educated me and my sister and provided us with opportunities and experiences that are denied to so many students, students like the ones I taught only twenty-five miles from my own high school.

I quickly discovered that I was not meant to be a classroom teacher. My vocation lay elsewhere. And yet, the passions, interests, and desires that had led me to become a teacher were as present as ever. In fact, working in a low-income school where half of the students did not graduate only fanned the fire that had led me there in the first place. I decided to go to law school and pursue a degree that would give me the power to create equity in a world that so often lacks it. Fighting for workers gives me the opportunity to not only directly work with clients to secure just outcomes for them and their families, but also to create change on a systemic level: by holding employers accountable to hard-fought workers’ rights laws, curbing exploitation of employees, and teaching workers about their rights and empowering them to use the tools available to them (such as administrative agencies) to advocate for themselves. My clients remind me of how lucky I have been and why it is so important to use the law to reduce the role of luck in people’s life outcomes.

In legal settings, I am often one of the few Spanish speakers in the room. That means that at work, at my externship, and in the pro bono work I have done at the Workers’ Rights Clinic and at the Wage Justice Clinic, my clients are usually Latinx because I am one of the few people that can meet the demand for Spanish-speaking legal assistance. But I do not merely speak Spanish with my clients; I speak their language. I understand their backgrounds and the unique anxieties that come from being a Latinx person in this country because I am the daughter of two people who had to start their lives over and learn how to navigate systems in a foreign language in a foreign country. I am the daughter of two people who had their intelligence questioned because of their accents instead of being praised for their bilingual abilities. I am the daughter of two people who know the pain of having to leave their parents, their siblings, their cousins, and their lifelong friends behind while they pursued a better life for their children. I am the daughter of two people who did their best to give those children a sense of identity while they lamented the cultural divide that would always exist between two generations raised in two different homelands. My clients are often so grateful to encounter someone that empathizes with them, and I am grateful that the deep ache I feel for my parents’ suffering can be put towards the service of others.

Pursuing social justice work is part of my fulfillment of a silent promise all children of immigrants make to their parents: I promise to never forget what my life could have been. I promise your struggle was not in vain. I promise to pass on the gifts you have given me. Part of the duality of my identity is carrying my family’s past in my heart while looking towards the future I want to make through my legal work. This identity provides me with a unique worldview that allows me to understand that every person carries with them their family’s struggles and their country’s history. It is a perspective that I hope will allow me to be an empathetic and tireless advocate for countless workers.