

Speaker 1: As part of the University of Michigan's bicentennial celebration, the U of M library brought StoryCorps to campus to capture personal stories of those who make up the University's rich history. Sharon came to the United States from Mexico, at the age of six, with her mom Lydia. **The two are undocumented, so we are not using their real names.** Although she lived in fear of deportation, Sharon chose to focus on her education. With the support and encouragement of her mom, she realized her dream of becoming a Michigan Wolverine. In 2017, Sharon graduated with her B.A. in American Culture. In 2018, she received her Master's of Social Work, her MSW. For our latest installment of StoryCorps, our U of M graduate sat down with her mom to discuss what it's like being an undocumented immigrant living in the U.S. And, what it took to apply, get accepted, and graduate from the University of Michigan.

Sharon: First of all, I wanted to say that I love you and I am really happy to be able to have this conversation with you, and to talk to you. My first question is, why did you decide to come to the United States?

Lydia: Well, I came to the United States because there was no work there. I was looking for a better life. I was 28 years old at the time, and I had you, your dad had already died a year ago, and that's why I came. The goal was to last here just two years and work to build a home back in Mexico.

Sharon: Do you remember when we arrived in California?

Lydia: Yes, I remember when I arrived in California. I had already come without you two years before. That is what affects me a lot. I couldn't look at your picture when I arrived. I remember that I had brought a picture of you, but I always had it flipped over because I couldn't get myself to look at it. That's how I survived the two years. But I came back and you said, "Mom," you said, "I wanna go back with you." I said, "Do you wanna leave?" You said "Yes" so we started the process. You crossed quickly, but I didn't. It took me about a month on the border to cross. So then we got back together in California, and you went to school with zero English, but you got through it. I worried a lot. I thought what if they tell her to stand up, and she doesn't understand. Or sit or eat. But you proved to be a very brave girl and always ready to learn new things.

Sharon: Something that I will always remember is when we practiced saying, before going to class, "I don't know how to speak English." And when I got to school, I remember when they said, "Oh, this is our new classmate," and the first thing that came out of my mouth was, "I don't know how to speak English." But then I was making friends, and, being in California, there were a lot of people and students who also spoke Spanish and English, and that's how I learned English. And also with your help and help from my teachers.

Lydia: Yes, you had your friends and I tried to go to school to learn a little bit of English. And I took some classes to become a healthcare aid, which I still have my certificate for. And then we decided to move to Michigan.

Sharon: Yes, out of all places, Monroe Michigan. Why did we come here again?

Lydia: Well, the first thing was that I knew my husband now, I knew him from my town in Mexico, and he came over here, so he was here before me. He used to tell me, "Oh, come over here, you're gonna like it." The other thing that was very important for me was, that in that time, Michigan used to give the driver's license for undocumented people.

Another thing that I liked was at the time, Michigan used to give drivers licenses to undocumented people. I wanted to drive and go to work, and that's why I decided to move. And I came to Michigan and started a new life with Martin, who's my husband now, and we signed you up in school, and I started working as a CNA taking care of old people.

Sharon: I remember that when we moved here, the demographics of the city were a lot different from San Mateo. There were not many friends in the school who spoke Spanish. The Latin community was smaller, and I think that this is where I realized our situation as being undocumented. Do you remember when there was a raid on the apartments?

Lydia: Yes, that raid was very frightening. There were a lot of Latinos in those apartments, but immigration scared them away. Many went back to Mexico. Others moved to a different state, and a few stayed in the state but moved from those apartments. That was a very, very painful experience.

Sharon: Before that, I really didn't know that fear of "I could actually be separated from my family, from my community, or my parents could go to jail." Before that time, everyone in the apartments went outside, the children played, my friends and I rode bicycles, it was a very happy time in my childhood. But after that night, my thinking was completely different, because I remember having a lot of fear. I remember that we even turned off the lights in the apartment so nobody would see us.

Lydia: It was quite difficult because there was no family, there were no friends.

Sharon: Before that, we had a lot of parties. The Hispanic people gathered to celebrate their own customs and traditions. And after the raid, there was too much fear to do that. There weren't as many celebrations as before.

Lydia: Well no, we did not celebrate because everyone was sad and we were also very afraid. If people saw a policeman they ran, because at that time, the police would stop you for any reason. People still had licenses, but, for whatever reason they stopped you, they would not just process you themselves, but they would call immigration.

Sharon: And then when I went to college, it was another barrier for not having papers. But then I know you always wanted me to go to college, always.

You always pushed me, you always pushed me to go to college.

Lydia: Well, as a parent, you always want your children to be better than you, to not have to suffer like you, to not have time without a job like I did, to have more possibilities, and

be free and have a better life. So we always told you to go to school, even if you couldn't do things at home, but had good grades, go for it, don't stop no matter what. And I think we put that in your head and it followed you.

Sharon: I remember when I started the program MAS, maximizing academic success. In middle school, they started to introduce me to the university, and they started taking us to different campuses around Michigan, and I came here, and I remember that I was certain I wanted to be a student at this University. I started participating in summer camps, where we stayed in the dorms, and you always supported me, always. And I thank you for that because I know that for other students in similar circumstances, their parents, maybe they didn't push as they should, or had other concerns, which is also understandable. But you, even if you were doing a thousand things, you always pushed me to participate, to do things inside the University. And I thank you for that.

Lydia: I remember that we came to see you on July 4th, which was allowed, and we would either take you home for a day, or they would tell us when to come and see you. And I always made tamales de mole because you like it a lot, or black beans that you also like a lot, every time we came to see you. I thank Richard Nunn very much that he pushed you, and helped you, and opened the doors to tell you how to apply, how to get into the University of Michigan, how to get to know the University because I did not know it either. Well, I still don't know it because it's so big. And you also put in a lot of effort and enthusiasm, because from the students from there, there were many Mexicans and Latinos who were in the same situation as us, but just two made it in, and you were one of them.

Sharon: It was difficult applying to the University. I didn't know what to do with the application. I had no idea how to fill it out. I didn't have a social security, I didn't know what to put in that bracket. But we found a way. I think we called the school and, because I was afraid of saying I was undocumented, I didn't know what to ask or how to tell them. And they couldn't help me because they had no way to do it either. But we applied, and they accepted us. And we grabbed the letter at home. I remember that I had been told that if I got a small envelope, it was because I was not accepted. But if I got a big, yellow envelope, it was because, yes, I was accepted.

And we jumped and we cried and we were so so happy. I remember that was like the highlight of my life. I was just so happy, I really wanted to be here.

Lydia: Well, when you were accepted was one of the best moments of our lives.

Sharon: It was a difficult process because I got in and was here for the summer camp, but after that, we couldn't pay the twenty-two thousand dollars that the University requires. We could not apply for financial aid. So I went back to community college, devastated, angry at the world. But you helped me, with the classes, and after the University changed it's rules I was able to return. Once again, I was a Michigan Wolverine. And I was here, and studied, and a year ago I graduated.

Lydia: And now you go for your Master's which makes me so proud.

Sharon: When I walk across the stage, I have always thought, "it's not just me walking, but you are walking too," and the whole undocumented community walks, because I'm not the first, and I know I will not be the last to graduate in this situation, and I will always thank you for everything you've done for me, for our family, even for my daughter, your granddaughter. Because you've always been there, and I know that my achievements are not only because of my effort, but also because of your effort.

Lydia: And now I see that even others call and they say, "My son received a letter, but how do I get him to go to school and enroll?"

Sharon: For me, it's such a great privilege because now that the doors have been opened for me, I know that there are many people, many friends who are undocumented who also want to move forward, but no one tells them it's possible, there is money, you don't have to worry about that, there are possibilities, you can continue at school. Unfortunately, their counselors don't know how to guide them. And when they call, I do what I can to find the answers they need, to make sure they can do it too. If it's not here at the University, it's where they choose. But they know it's possible.

Lydia: Well, I really thank you for helping others and always thinking of others.

Sharon: Well thank you so much for having this conversation with me.

I know that sometimes it's not possible or it's difficult to talk about these things, but for me it's important that your story is heard.

It's one of my favorite stories.

Lydia: Whenever I talk about this, I always cry because it's been very difficult for me. I've been here for 20 years, but I can't get over being here without family. It's just us alone. But everything is for the best, and thank God you graduated, and that makes me very happy. I know it was not in vain, everything we did.

Sharon: Well you made the best choice I think. I love you.

Lydia: I love you too.

Speaker 1: That was a U of M graduate speaking with her mother about the struggles of being undocumented in the U.S. These interviews were recorded by StoryCorps, www.storycorps.org. For more from the series, visit arts.umich.edu/storycorps.