

TESTIMONY



Kyle Christy

My Immigration Status: Beloved

In Christ I am more than the 'crime' I committed at age 5.

Adriana Mondragon/ OCTOBER 21, 2014

As proud as I am of my Mexican heritage, there is only one place I can call home: the United States. I belong to the wave of immigrants who arrived in the country as children. All that remains from my early years in Mexico are a few blurry memories, drawn together from what my mother has told me.

My mother lost her first husband in a car accident in 1978. After his death, she traveled for the first time to the States to identify his body and take care of the funeral. She was left to fend for my two older siblings, mourning and under-resourced. About seven years later, she met my father, and I was born. When I was 3, he left our family to marry another woman.

Later, my mother's love for her oldest son compelled her to travel to the States a second time. She hadn't seen him since he moved to Orange County at age 14. When my brother learned she was going to leave me with my uncle, he insisted she bring me to keep the family together. Twenty-five years later, here I remain.

We moved into an apartment with my two uncles on Minnie Street in Santa Ana, California, once named the toughest city in the country in which to make ends meet. We faced challenging times. My mom hadn't been allowed to attend school past the second grade, so she worked mostly babysitting jobs. She wanted to give her children what she had missed: an education. Many times I wished my father had been there to help us financially. The child support was scarcely enough to meet our needs. But more than that, I was hungry for the warmth of a loving father who would protect us and ensure my mother didn't have to play the role of both parents.

A Profound Wound

As I entered junior high school, I excelled in math and dove into volleyball and basketball. I also joined the Early Academic Outreach Program (EAOP), the largest college-prep track sponsored by the University of California–Irvine, as well as the Puente Program, which helps students enroll in public university. The same year I started EAOP, I began visiting the Minnie Street Learning Center, an afterschool community started and hosted by Mariners Church, a large, historic nondenominational church in Orange County. There we cleaned up the streets, tutored younger kids, and taught a computer class. I became the first student to be elected president of Puente. I learned how satisfying it was to make myself useful and serve my neighbors.

My junior year of high school, the other Puente leaders and I had a chance to travel to San Francisco to visit colleges. Reality struck me with a profound wound: I was undocumented. I learned that my status could bar me from traveling and attending college. I could no longer accept the evasive answers my mother gave when I asked if I could work to help pay our bills. As my graduation drew closer, we could no longer avoid the fact that my dreams of going to college could come to a dead end.

I tried to dodge every insult fired at undocumented immigrants, but I felt the effects. Guilt, shame, and depression all knocked on my door, and I welcomed them.

I also faced profound confusion about who I was and where I belonged. I felt I didn't belong anywhere—too American to return to Mexico, too foreign to belong in the States. Even though I tried to stay optimistic and dodge every insult fired at undocumented immigrants, I felt the effects. Guilt, shame, and depression all knocked on my door, and I welcomed them. I carried

them around, believing I was somehow responsible for the “crime” I had committed at age 5. The accusations led me to fear my situation and future.

In this season of desperation, I learned how much a heavenly Father would provide.

True Identity

Much good came from the learning center: tutoring, role models (including the first positive male role model of my life), and leaders who spoke out on the complex issue of immigration because of people like me. But nothing more beautiful and powerful came from the center than the introduction to my Savior, Jesus Christ. I was 13 when I first heard in detail about the living God. At youth camps hosted by the center, I started asking questions and getting answers that filled my heart as I heard the Good News for the first time.

In 1999, I attended the Racing a Zealous Army one-week summer camp. As my peers shared their stories of faith, I poured out my heart and realized my need for the almighty God. I gave my heart to him and hungered to know more about him. One of the most significant verses I learned is Proverbs 3:5–6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take” (NLT). I knew I could trust God with my future because he loves me and takes care of me.

By God’s grace, I became the first person in my family to graduate from high school. After learning of my undocumented status, my high-school teacher, counselor, and other school staff did all they could to help me visit colleges. I received \$10,560 in scholarships to help cover my freshman year at Biola University, in nearby La Mirada. Even knowing my status, sponsors at Mariners Church covered most of my tuition. They are daily reminders of God’s love and hand in my life. I earned my bachelor’s in psychology at Biola, then a master’s degree in marriage-family therapy. Today, I work at Wilshire Street (part of the Lighthouse Community Centers) to create a support program for struggling families in Santa Ana.

I was also the first woman in my family to earn a college degree. Most have had no choice but to struggle as single parents or endure cyclical abusive relationships. Everything seemed to point toward that fate for me. At times I felt weak for being a woman. At an early age I watched my

mother fight to be heard, as she was often ignored for being an uneducated single mother. God's grace allowed me to break out of these cycles.

At Biola I first learned about God's heart for the sojourner. I learned that Jesus himself was a child immigrant, and that he calls his people to aid the widow, the orphan, the oppressed, and the poor. I came to realize that not every manmade law accords with God's law. Most important, God drew me close to his heart for justice.

In the midst of these experiences, I had to define the core of my identity. I am a person of color. I am a woman. I am poor. I am fatherless. I am an undocumented immigrant. Indeed, it has been excruciating to see myself in the eyes of the world. But I have learned about my true identity. Above all other labels, I am a child of God. Like other immigrants, I want to use my education to help our country thrive economically, but my desire to serve God is central.

I can't help thinking about the recent surge of unaccompanied immigrant children to the States. Their stories sound too familiar, biblically and personally. My prayer is that some of God's servants would respond to their arrival in ways that make him known through word and deed—just as other servants made him known to me at age 13.

There is nothing I have left to fear. God has brought me this far, providing all along the way. I am struck with sincere gratitude for my mentors, but above all, I am in awe at the work my Father has done in my life. I give him all the glory.

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