



Photo courtesy of Jon Andelson

“Rosa Jimenez” is a pseudonym, but the facts of her life as recounted in the accompanying interview have not been changed, except for the names of her family members and of the small Iowa community in which she lives and works.

Living on Quicksand

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY JON ANDELSON,
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The Center for Migration Studies estimates that over 535,000 “unauthorized” persons from Mexico were living in nine Midwestern states in 2014. Of this number, 22,144 were living in Iowa. This is the story of one these immigrants, as told by herself to editors of Rootstalk in late 2015. Rosa’s story is neither typical nor atypical; rather, like everyone’s story, it is unique. In some ways she has been more fortunate than other undocumented immigrants and in other ways less. She manages a Mexican restaurant in Anytown, Iowa, and has raised three sons in the community. A few years ago, her husband was deported back to Mexico. Given her current status with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, if she visits him she will not be allowed to return.

Two editors of Rootstalk and a bilingual friend of Rosa’s conducted the interview in English, Rosa’s second language. We have chosen not to “correct” her English, except when necessary for clarity, as a reminder to readers of her bicultural and bilingual identity and to legitimize Chicano culture and experience. Readers should also note the special challenges that anyone trying to make their way in a foreign culture faces when they do not speak the language, and especially when they are not authorized to be in that culture and have few resources on which to draw. The editors have chosen to use pseudonyms for Rosa and her family: her husband Jorge and her three sons: Roberto, Arturo, and Mario. We appreciate Rosa’s willingness to share her story and her honesty in talking about her experiences. Through peaks and valleys in her life, she has remained remarkably positive.

ROOTSTALK: Where were you born?

ROSA: In Mexico. In Francisco Villa, in municipio De La Huerta, Jalisco.

ROOTSTALK: What made you decide to come to the United States?

ROSA: The first time, follow Jorge, my husband. Better life. I working in a hotel [in Mexico] and always had communication with American people. I like how the culture is for American people, like... friendly, I guess. And, I don't know, I'm just impressed when they speak in English in Mexico [laughs]. In my dreams I wanna learn it, from when I was little. I really like how they talk. But not everyone is able to come, and it's not easy. When you come you have to have somebody else here first. And it's expensive. It doesn't matter if it's friends, family or whatever—you have to pay them rent. If it's your sister, doesn't matter, you have to pay.

ROOTSTALK: Where did you go when you first came to the States?

ROSA: I came first Oregon, maybe 1991, and then after that I moved to California, my sister live in Fresno... but not moved, just spent time there with my sister. When you come from Mexico, you don't know where you want to be. I feel so sad to be in Oregon, in Williamsburg. It's a place, just American people, you just feel like they don't really like you, and Roberto go to school and there's nothing for me to do right there, so I feel worse. Then after that I moved to California, my sister live in Fresno . . . but not moved, just spent time there with my sister. She was working, and I could take care of the kids. My middle boy, Arturo, born in Fresno.

ROOTSTALK: Why did your husband come to Oregon? Were there jobs there?

ROSA: In Oregon, living many people from his town in Mexico. And he start working in strawberries, pick up fruit. And then I did that but I really don't like to be out because it's raining all the time. The first time [in the States] when I came I was a year, I guess, or two years. At first I really didn't like it and I wanted to go back. One day my sister called to tell me my dad is dying. My husband said, "Don't leave," and I said "No, I feel weird, and I have to go back." I decided to go back, and Roberto stayed with his dad.

ROOTSTALK: So he stayed in Oregon, and you were in Mexico?

ROSA: Yes, I was... months, or a year, I guess. Then my dad passed away. The second time when I decided to come back [to Oregon], it was because I was missing Jorge. [Laughs]. And [it was in Oregon] that I had Mario. So when my kids was one and two years, I used to work in the canneries processing onions. I cry all day. You go home and you still cry. [Laughs]. But when you missing something or you're mad, you cry fine when you're working [with onions], nobody cares. [Laughs].

ROOTSTALK: They think you're crying because of the onions. [Laughs].

ROSA: People have no idea what is that job. That is the most hard job, onions. It's not just because you cry. It's really cold. It had to be cold. But when it's summer, made the onions even more strong. Some people bleed—*sangre de la nariz*—bleed?

ROOTSTALK: Their noses start bleeding?

ROSA: Yeah, and some people go just one hour, and then you have 15 minutes break, and then they go home – more American people because they really don't like that. I guess, 1 percent is Amer-

ican, the other 99 percent was Latin people to work in that job. And I working there like two or three years. When you don't have option, you have to do it.

ROOTSTALK: How many of you working at the cannery at that time had documents to work in the States and how many of you didn't?

ROSA: How many people is legal? I guess 90 percent isn't legal.

ROOTSTALK: Ten percent have papers?

ROSA: Ten percent have a high position.

ROOTSTALK: So the hard labor with the onions is done by people who don't have papers, and they don't have any way to...

ROSA: And the bosses know that. They know that. Nobody who have paper want to work like that hard and that kind of money. The minimum [wage]. They don't pay more than that. If the people have two or three years, they get a quarter an hour more than the other ones, which is not a big difference. But when you come into United States your mind is you're coming to for work. You have to focus on that. My first year, when I working there, I'm standing up, I take a break 15 minutes, half hour, and then work, then lunch 15 minutes. But the rest of the day you have to work. It's not how many hours you want to work. You have to work until you finish. My first year, when I was there, standing more than 13 hours, in my mind, thinking, "how much money is [this] in Mexico? What can I buy in Mexico with those money?" But we save.

One day in 1999, after working all day in the onion cannery, Rosa went to pick up her children at a friend's apartment. Jorge stopped at another apartment in the same building for an

after-work drink with friends. While he was there, by chance, the police staged a drug raid on the apartment and arrested everyone present. Although a lawyer got the charges against Jorge dismissed, he became a material witness in the case and was scheduled to testify in court. About this time, Rosa decided to return to Mexico with their three sons. Before the last hearing in connection with the case, though, Jorge was seriously injured in a car accident, almost losing his hand. The same lawyer who had represented him in the drug raid case represented him in the injury case, and Jorge was awarded compensation. Since he could not work due to his injured hand, and was having trouble functioning, the lawyer suggested he take the money and go back to Mexico to be with his family, even though he had not yet had his final court appearance, and he followed the lawyer's advice.

In 2001, Jorge decided to return to the United States (illegally) to work in Des Moines, Iowa, where he had friends. Rosa and the boys followed by plane on regular tourist visas shortly afterwards. In 2002, Rosa and Jorge became the managers of Amigos restaurant in Anytown, commuting daily from Des Moines, fifty miles away. In 2004, after their oldest son received a serious head injury at the hands of a local gang in Des Moines, Rosa and Jorge decided that the entire family should move to Anytown. They lived a relatively stable life in Anytown until one day in 2011 Anytown police, acting on a lead from Oregon authorities, arrested Jorge at the restaurant. He was sent back to Oregon, where he faced felony charges for never showing up for his last hearing in relation to the drug case over ten years earlier. Due to the felony charges, the US Citizenship and Immigration Services decided to deport Jorge. For the last five years, Rosa has only been able to communicate with him through Facetime and Skype.

ROOTSTALK: Can we talk about your husband? He was here in Anytown with you for many years,

and the two of you worked together in the restaurant, but a few years ago he was deported back to Mexico.

ROSA: Yeah, my husband is a really good worker, a very good dad, and really good friends with people. He don't speak that much English, but in the Spanish you can see he's friendly. He have a lot of friends. If you're in my home, he's doing whatever he can to make you happy. And he respect a lot, a lot the kids. For him, kids—he say, when you're doing something bad to one kid, that's in their memory forever. And that's why he want to be really good with kids. When my son's friends come to our house, he don't speak English [to them], but they love him.

ROOTSTALK: I imagine it's really hard for him, loving kids so much, to not be here now.

ROSA: It is also hard for us, but I guess it's more hard for him than us. He's busy there [in Mexico], he working there, but he have more free time than I, and it's hard for him. Most of Mexican, or Latin, dads don't involve that much with their kids like my husband is. When he was here he help me in laundry, he help me bathe the boys, he help me 100 percent, we do all of it together. He's like that. That's why it's really hard for kids who don't have a dad. I don't care how old they are, I think they need a mom and dad, you know, forever.

ROOTSTALK: When did you move to Iowa? How long have you lived in Anytown?

ROSA: In Iowa...2002? In Anytown, I have at least 10 years and a half. I have 11 years in the restaurant. I used to have my family in Des Moines, and we would come to this business [in Anytown] before we moved.

The reason we move 100 percent in Anytown is

because in the six months of the drive [between Des Moines and the restaurant in Anytown], like 14 people, a group that was there, beat Roberto, black people. They fighting first with Mexicans, but Roberto walking close to them. When they done, they say "You wanna fight too?" and Roberto don't say "yes" or "no," and they punch him. So then he fall, and broke the head. But Roberto was with couple Mexican kids, and they think he die, because he don't respond. They leave him on the floor, and everybody run. So some people walking and see him, call the ambulance, and that's how he was in the hospital. So when they call me, I was in the restaurant, you know 25 minutes from Anytown to the hospital. That was the last – he needed one more year to finish high school. So they arrested two, one was taken two years in the jail, and the other one I don't know. In the court, when they asking [Roberto] what he think about the kids, he tell the judge, "I don't want you doing nothing to the kids. My opinion is they do community service. That's all I want." But they decided to give them more years for other stuff.

ROOTSTALK: Is there still a lot of tension between African American kids and Latino kids in Des Moines?

ROSA: Yes. And when we live in the place we [were] living in, it's a lot. And what happened with Roberto made me hard.

Roberto sustained head injuries in the attack which caused permanent cognitive impairment.

ROOTSTALK: What has it been like for your sons to grow up in Anytown? What do you think their life in Anytown has been like? Have there been problems?

ROSA: For me, mom, Anytown is like... it's their home. It's where they grow up. I say to my

husband: look around at their life—Mexico, Fresno, Oregon—what friends do they really have, what real friends? It's in Anytown. They visit Mexico, fine, they have friends there, they go to see people, they're talking to people. But they grow up here in Anytown, and in that time, they made real friends, who they really love. Here in Anytown, it's like my town. I gonna feel sad if I go back to Mexico. I tell my husband how many people I know from living here, many people. Anytown College, too, they used to help me a lot when we came, the first year. They'd send students who wanted to learn Spanish, so they're taking my kids outside, for have communication with them. So they helped me, they go into the restaurant [that Rosa manages] to help they in English, to learn it more. So people was nice. For me, I feel welcome in the first day we be here. Everybody's so nice. Any problems that I have, any problems, I feel all the town is back to me, I mean, everybody's supporting me. Different ways, but yes. That's why Anytown for me is awesome.

ROOTSTALK: Do you think the boys feel the same way?

ROSA: It's hard for Arturo to stay in Anytown.

ROOTSTALK: So after a certain age, maybe Anytown is not so good?

ROSA: Well, Mario is...Anytown is like heaven for Mario. Kids, little kids, really like him, they feel like Mario is Mario, because he put a lot of attention to the kids. He's friendly with every family. Mario, he's in college now, and in the restaurant all people asking for Mario a lot every day. "How is Mario in school? How he like it? How he feeling?" Everybody asking how Mario is. He really popular in Anytown, I guess. But he wanna graduation right there

and then come into work Anytown. He want to living in Anytown. Forever. [Laughs] Yeah, if you talk to Mario, he's from Anytown 100 percent.

ROOTSTALK: Do you think the fact that the boys were in sports in school helped them become integrated more than if they had not been?

ROSA: Yes, absolutely.

ROOTSTALK: How about Roberto?

ROSA: Roberto's half Mexican, half United States. He don't care, he like Anytown a lot, though; he's really friendly with everybody.

ROOTSTALK: And your husband . . .

ROSA: He missing a lot of good stuff when we don't have papers. He missed graduation for the two boys. He missed when Mario was in state wrestling tournament. I tell Mario, "Mario, please do it for me. I want Anytown remember us forever. You have to go to state [tournament] and get a 6, 5, 4, 3, or 1, whatever you can, but more than that I want to see your name in the sports wall at the high school." And he is. He did it! So that's made me really proud to my kids. I'm not saying we have everything. No. But we are happy, even though problems. We have love, we have health, we have kids—I have many thing what other people don't have.

ROOTSTALK: But not your husband.

ROSA: Yes, but maybe opportunity to [bring] my husband. I hope they can do it, change my life a lot. And his life and my kids. If their dad is here, he be available to run grandsons. Sons and grandsons, that is the dream for everybody. I hope we can do that. I don't know. You never know. God is good. Can help us, I guess.

Rosa herself was arrested in 2012 for using a false Social Security card and spent several days in jail. She was released on bond, and in January, 2016, the government dropped charges against her, and she can now apply for a U-visa. The U-visa is a non-immigrant visa set aside for victims of crimes, and their immediate family members, who have suffered substantial mental or physical abuse and are willing to assist law enforcement and government officials in the investigation or prosecution of the criminal activity. Rosa qualifies for a U-visa because of the attack on her oldest son, and she hopes to get her U-visa later this year. However, even with it she will not be permitted to travel freely to Mexico and return for three years, because the government wants to monitor her actions within the U.S. Jorge does not qualify for a U-visa because of his felony.

ROOTSTALK: Can you talk about how managing the restaurant has helped you in the community, how you find community through the restaurant?

ROSA: People saw how we working. A lot of people ask me, "You have day off?" No! You can't. You have to be 100 percent working. The first year is hard, a lot of people asking, who are you, why you coming here? But a lot of people, as soon they know we are family, we have kids, boys enroll in every sport ... I mean, restaurant I guess is the place everyone can go, so they can get to know you. Some people feel like discriminated, because you are Latin. The thing is, when you be honest and work hard, that's help a lot. That's help a lot. I mean, people trust you. For me, the restaurant it's my job. I'm not made much money, but my kids have house, my kids have clothes, I pay my bills. That's enough for me. It's like that, and I teaching my kids the same. You don't have idea how many friends Mario bring a day, and maybe they don't have money. I don't care, they eat anyway. [Laughs] A big table to eat a lot of free food ... my sons, they like to share

what they have.

ROOTSTALK: Has managing a restaurant changed your connection to the town?

ROSA: Oh, yes. The people in Anytown, they're nice, but I can see—I mean, they're more nice with me because they know more about me. I have a home, and working regular job, full time, and go home. And kids go to school. I mean, probably some people saw me two or three times a week. You know? Sometimes they say, "I just come in because I want to see you!" Or they asking their little kids, "Where you want to go for birthday party?" The kids don't say, "the restaurant," they say "with Rosa." Because I love kids, I'm mom, and I understand what the kids are like. Sometimes I can see the parents embarrassed with they little kids, 'cause they make mess everywhere and I say, "Nuh-uh, I'm mom. [Laughs] Don't worry, I clean."

ROOTSTALK: What has your family given to this town?

ROSA: First when we came, Anytown College students they working in the restaurant because it was the first Latin restaurant. A lot of people make with us, like, project. They come in to see how is Latin people [laughs].

Also, I have kids [from town] working for me, like the same age that my kids, they start to work for me. I flexible [boss], it's nice for them, because they are like my sons. That's how I feel because I'm friends with everybody. I can be mean when they don't do nothing; I say "Hey, don't be lazy. Do it." You know? But I'm flexible, and I guess that's giving kids opportunity. I have hear some kids say to me, "Rosa—in my mind, my best time that I remember is when I working in Amigos. I was in high school and I had my own money."

I have people come into the restaurant to learn Spanish, too. People like it. And I teach people to eat spicy food. Ten years ago they don't know how. [Laughs]. They say table salsa is too spicy, now they asking for spicy, real spicy, salsa. [Laughs]. I teach you something.

And then I guess I teach the people, "Life is not easy." I'm past for police, for the jail, for immigration, for separate my husband. People they don't know how I had to working in the kitchen when there's short people [when we are short-staffed], when I had to come in early, when I had to stay late. They just saw me, I'm here. Sometimes I go to the back room and cry, but I come out and give you a smile face. I'm still here with my kids, and I'm not broke.

ROOTSTALK: Do you think your family has been able to teach people -- I mean your customers -- to treat immigrants better, because they understand you, they know your family?

ROSA: I guess. Anytown is Anytown, so people know how we are. Mario tell me sometimes, "Mom, people think you're a good worker. You're a good person, and we are a good family." The only difference is they American, we Mexican. But it's hard. I understand every people when they're deported -- it's really hard. And it's real -- you think that only happens in the TV. No. [Laughs]

If immigration tell me, give me option, you husband can come back [to the U.S.], or you can go back to Mexico. For me, I will living here forever. I love this country, I love how the people is, I love it here. And right here [in Anytown], this is my family.

ROOTSTALK: Just missing one person.

ROSA: Yeah, but for one person, make hard. Yes.

For the time being, Rosa's lawyers have suspended their efforts concerning Jorge, not wanting his more complicated immigration case to jeopardize hers. The process of attempting to legalize her status and defend herself against the felony charge has cost her more than \$20,000 in legal fees. She works seven days a week at the restaurant, 14 hours a day to cover those fees, pay for family expenses, and help her sons with their education and sports activities. She has not been able to save any money. Roberto has a green card. Arturo and Mario, both born in the United States, are U.S. citizens. Once Rosa's status is resolved, she and her lawyers will renew their efforts on Jorge's behalf. If that effort is unsuccessful, and when the boys are more settled in life, Rosa says she will probably move back to Mexico, so long as her status in the U.S. allows her to visit her sons and any grandchildren she might have by then. 🍃