

I grew up in the small town of McAllen, Texas, located right on the border of Mexico. I was a lucky little girl. I had parents who constantly told me they loved me and two adorable little siblings. I lived in a beautiful home in a town that was safe: a town where most doors remained unlocked at night. But everything changed during my middle school years. The Mexican Drug War spiraled out of control, and the town that I used to call home transformed into a monstrous symbol of danger and violence.

My house was located two miles from the border. We frequently travelled to Mexico to bring supplies and play with the kids at orphanages. We visited one particular orphanage on a weekly basis for over a year, and fell in love with a 2-year-old little girl named Crystal. Her mother had been 10 years old, and the baby had severe health problems. We became the familiar faces that she knew would always return, and we loved seeing her eyes light up every time we walked in. But after talking to the orphanage director, we discovered that that particular orphanage did not allow foreign adoptions. We decided that we would try anyways, and after hours of phone calls, we managed to set up an appointment with the mayor of the town. After talking to him for an hour, we were thrilled when they told us that they would allow the orphanage to make an exception, and we could proceed with the adoption.

Two weeks later, I was walking to my middle school tennis courts when I got a phone call from my mom. I could hear in her voice that she had been crying. She told me that the mayor that was going to let us adopt Crystal had been shot by a member of one of Mexico's drug cartels, and the person who replaced him refused to allow us to adopt. I was absolutely devastated. When I got home that afternoon, my parents told me that we couldn't cross the border anymore: it had gotten too dangerous. That's when it hit me: Crystal, the two-year-old little girl that I had grown so close to over the past year, the baby whom I already viewed as my sister, would never be a part of our family. But even worse than this, I would never see her again. And I haven't. But we had no choice but to let it go as best we could, and before I knew it I was a sophomore in high school.

The Mexican drug war continuously affected the rest of my high school years. These effects ranged from little things, like my classmates and I having to remove our class name, "Theta," from our cars because it could be mistaken for a drug cartel, to bigger issues. At the end of my senior year, I got a phone call from my best friend asking me to get to her house as soon as I could. Her parents both immigrated to the US at a young age, but they had a house in Mexico that they regularly spent weekends at to see family. I quickly drove over and found her on her bed, crying, "They've got him, they've got him."

The drug cartel had kidnapped her father. I stayed with her and her mom for hours, waiting for news. Finally, a cartel member contacted her mom. If she wanted her husband back, she had to pay them \$20,000 and agree to never return to their house in Mexico ever again. They could not return to collect belongings, or take the cars parked in the driveway. They had to completely relinquish all property. I was at her house a few weeks later on the day that he was released. The man I saw was not the man I had grown to love like a second father. He had been brutally beaten up. But the most powerful change that

had taken place was in his eyes. The eyes that used to convey happiness and fulfillment were now overcome with fear and distrust.

I know I've relayed several personal stories in this speech. But what I'm trying to get at here is this *isn't* just personal, and this *doesn't* just affect people in Mexico. It's easy for us, as a country, to just wash our hands of the issue, and treat it as if it's not our problem. But the issue with this way of thinking is it *is* our problem because it affects *our* citizens. It's difficult to see the intensity of an issue if it doesn't directly affect you. But I know that I speak for the American citizens living in border towns that it *does* directly affect us. As George Washington stated hundreds of years ago, "Government is not reason; it is not eloquent; it is force. Like fire, it is a dangerous servant and a fearful master." Government is a *force* that brings about change to protect its citizens in times when its citizens need protection. *This* is one of those times.