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Hey, Look Around You – Smile

Today I am 20 years old, the same age that many of you are as well. I was born in the heart of Mexico to a woman, who at the time was also 20 years old. She was young, she was beautiful, and she was and is the bravest person I have ever known. My mom was raised in a big Mexican family of 8 children. By the age of 15, she was forced to drop out of high school to work full time in 2 jobs to financially provide for her family. She was not able to finish high school, college was never an option, and by the time I was 2 years old she was divorced with nothing to her name, but two little Mexican boys – my older brother and me. She put up an amazing fight for a couple of years in Mexico as a single parent. She soon realized, however, that the opportunities that would be available in Mexico for my older brother and me, would be limited due to her salary, her lack of education, and her own professional limitations. When I was 7 she was 27, and in that year she made a bold decision, a decision that would change my life, her life, and the life of my older brother – A decision, which I personally don't know I could have ever made myself.

The three of us would be moving to the United States. What was my mom thinking? My mom didn't know English. She didn't know anyone in the U.S. She didn't have an education. She didn't have anyone that believed in her, but none of that matter because Mom had the drive, the focus, the strength, and the tenacity that is and was unparalleled by any force.

At the age of 8, I moved to the United States. Mom worked 2.5 jobs – as a cook, a waitress, and a cashier. There were days when I would see her at 5:30 AM as she got ready for work, and did not see her again until midnight. Meantime, my brother and I attended school. I enrolled in the second grade and my older brother in third. Our real education had begun. Mom was happy, we were happy and it was all coming along well – until we hit a small roadblock. My brother and I were not U.S. Citizens.

The issues that came along with not being a U.S. citizen were small at first. However, by the time I was in high school, I was not able to legally work, I could not drive, I could not have internships, and I could not travel outside of South Texas. The biggest challenge, however, was yet to come. I could not apply for financial aid, and I could not apply for scholarships because a social security number was and still is required. I was not sure if college in the United States would be an option. I thought of all the work that my Mom had done. I thought of her goals for her two children, and how they would not be realized. It had come to the point where I had started to download applications for colleges in back in Mexico, a country that I love dearly but a country that I had not lived in since I was 8.

During my senior year, I would turn to some fellow classmates in my high school, who complained about filling out their financial aid forms, complained about having to finish their scholarship essays, and who complained about college applications, and I would often find myself thinking, “Wow! That’s incredible. You have the ability, the privilege, the opportunity, and the support to do something amazing with your life.” The tasks that some saw as burdens, the responsibilities that some saw as overwhelming and time-consuming, and the opportunities that some saw as rights instead of privileges were concepts I could not conceive. By my senior year, it had been ten years. Ten years since we had moved to the United States. Ten years, thousands of hours of work, and hundreds of obstacles confronted, for this moment – for college. And I was not allowed to seize it.

Two years later, you will find me here, a sophomore in the House of Lowell, the best house on campus, and a U.S. Resident. How I ended up at Harvard, is another five-minute speech: and it includes the extraordinary help of an amazing lawyer who stepped up to the plate and many wonderful individuals along the way. But, now that I am here I look at my life. Today I am twenty. The same age my mom was that day in 1991: 20 years old. And I compare our lives to hers. Our opportunities are vast. Our resources are unmatched. The people willing to help us in this house, in this community, and in this institution are incomparable. We can do literally, anything our imaginations and hearts desire – and I assure you that whatever that may be, there will be people ready to support us.

I thank my mom, who is now remarried to my stepdad, an incredible man who I am proud to call my father. I thank my mom, because even though she never knew what would come out of her decisions, she left everything behind. Everything. So that one-day her children could have what she never had the opportunity to experience. An education.

So next time you are stressed, next time you have 5 summer internship applications due on the same day as 3 midterms, 2 papers, 18 interviews, your MCATS and your LSATS Hey, Look Around You – Smile. Because sometimes the small tasks that we see as burdens, the small things that we see as annoying responsibilities, are nothing but blessings, and privileges. And these blessings and privileges are life-changing opportunities that I assure you, not everyone has.