

Gloria Sosa: [00:00:04](#) So we're gonna get started now. So thank you so much, Joanna, for, um, giving me this time to talk to you and, um, just sharing your stories with me. So, um, can you please share with me your age, your preferred pronouns, and during and what years you were at Cal State LA.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:00:22](#) Yeah. So I am 33 years old. My preferred pronouns are she and her, and I was at Cal State LA from fall 2007 till spring 2013.

Gloria Sosa: [00:00:41](#) Great. And were you a student or what was your role?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:00:45](#) I was a student, yes. Undergrad student.

Gloria Sosa: [00:00:50](#) Undergrad. Perfect. Uh, can you describe uh, describe to me, uh, your current occupation.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:00:58](#) Yes. So I'm currently a grad student at California Baptist University, um, doing a dual program for marriage, family therapy and, um, professional clinical counseling.

Gloria Sosa: [00:01:10](#) Okay. What was your major at Cal State LA?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:01:13](#) Social work. Social work, and a minor in Chicano studies.

Gloria Sosa: [00:01:19](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. That's very good. So it aligns with what you're doing now, right?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:01:22](#) Yeah. <laugh>.

Gloria Sosa: [00:01:24](#) It's like the combo. Um, could you please describe your family background?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:01:31](#) Yes. So I am a first generation, uh, immigrant. Uh, my parents and I, um, came to the US when I was eight months old, I believe. Um, and ever since I grew up in South Central Los Angeles, that's where my roots are. Um, come from a family of four. Um, my mom has always been a, that immigrant stay at home, but provided childcare for all the other moms that work in factories, um, in the area. My dad had different jobs and factories, um, um, and, and landscaping and so forth. So they've had different odd jobs just to pay off the rent. Um, and I just got a younger sister. Um, I'm still the first in my family to have a degree, and so I'm also gonna be the first in my family to get a master's degree.

Gloria Sosa: [00:02:28](#) Yay. you go! So, um, you're from Mexico. Do you mind sharing from where? What state?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:02:38](#) Oh, yeah. I'm from Guadalajara, Jalisco.

Gloria Sosa: [00:02:42](#) And are you the oldest sibling?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:02:44](#) Yes, I'm the oldest.

Gloria Sosa: [00:02:46](#) So then all of your um, siblings were born here?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:02:50](#) Yeah, I only have one, and she was only born here.

Gloria Sosa: [00:02:53](#) Oh, okay. Okay.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:02:53](#) <laugh>. Yeah.

Gloria Sosa: [00:02:54](#) So your family of four. Okay. I under- misunderstood <laugh>. Nice, nice. It's the only one. Okay. Um. When you moved from Guadalajara to here, did you stay in the LA area?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:03:11](#) Yes, yes. We never moved anywhere. We've always lived in South Central.

Gloria Sosa: [00:03:19](#) Did you live in the same house or was it moving around? Just the area?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:03:25](#) Mm, moving around the area, just, but within the same like little community, like maybe like when we moved from one house and then two blocks down, we ended up renting another house, but within the same small community.

Gloria Sosa: [00:03:39](#) And what was that community like?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:03:45](#) Uh, growing up in the nineties, it was hard. It was a lot of gangs around that time, a lot of shootouts. Um, but it was different. Like you still had such a diverse community. I had such a diverse group of friends, you know, learning English. My mom said I was able to, you know, catch school really quick. The language, the culture. Um, mostly all my friends were always African American. My best friends still this day they are African American, like my best friends. So I've always had that connection, the black and brown unity connection with, you know, those in my community. Um, it was hard, but I think it made me very alert of my surroundings. It made me be the different hustler in, in that sector of it hustling for an education and opportunities. So, so yeah, it was different. <Laugh>

- Gloria Sosa: [00:04:53](#) So it was a diverse community. And how did you deal with the violence? You were, um, alert your surroundings and can you perhaps give an example how that looked like?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:05:07](#) Um, just looking over your shoulder at the time, making sure, you know, um, we knew the gang members in the streets, um, and I never felt threatened by them. Um, I think because my mom also took care of the kids, so it was more like they protected us or they protected me. Um, I was, I was known in the community because I was so involved in my community. I was a youth activist. I was always doing workshops with, you know, immigrant rights workshops and everything. Everybody in my community knew me. They all knew my parents. And so, you know, going to Cal State LA on the bus, <laugh>, um, carrying a laptop or, you know, just my books, everything. Um, I remember that there, there would be nights that, you know, we live in the hood, so sometimes the street lights didn't work. Um, and my mom would send a few of the gang members to wait for me at the bus stop so that they can walk me home, <laugh>. So it's that community sense, like, they always protected me. They knew that I was gonna make it out and I was gonna be somebody in the future. So it kind of felt like, I know it felt good to know that, you know, that they also believed in me, you know?
- Gloria Sosa: [00:06:28](#) Yes. So since an early age, you were aware that through education, and I quote what you said, you were going to make it out of that community?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:06:40](#) I, I never saw myself making it out, like living out. I just saw myself as my mom would aw. Like, we came here for a reason, you know, the American dream, all of that, yada, yada. But I didn't know I was undocumented. That all changed when I was in middle school. So how I found out was I was selected or nominated for a scholarship, \$5,000, and I got it. I didn't it. Yeah. But they required a social, and I remember going to the dinner and the awards ceremony and everything, and then they put all the awardees and their parents in a room so they can fill out all the paperwork with the taxes on their social so that those scholarships can be dispersed to, um, to them. Um, and it was gonna be done through like an account, like a bank account, and we would have access to it when we turned 17 or 18 like that or something like that. And so I remember my mom pulling in, my counselor out and talking to her, and my counselor kind of looking at me and started crying. And I was just like, well, what's going on? You know? And they pulled me to the side and told me like, you're gonna still be part of the ceremony, but you cannot get the money. And I was just like,

what do you mean I can't get the money? Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. But yeah, you can't because you don't have a social. And then like Monday, it was a Saturday night type of award ceremony. So my construction was like, on Monday we're gonna explain it to you a little bit more just in your, enjoy the dinner, enjoy the award, you still, you know, you still won that and you still deserve that. Monday came and my mom went to school and sat down with my counselor and they explained to me that I don't have papers that I was born in Mexico, and because of that I don't have a social security number. And I was just, well, just, I'm, what is it, 12, 11 years old? I, I don't know what immigration is. I don't know what immigration status is. I don't know what a social security card is or number. That's never defined me or that's never really been a part of my lab or sense or anything like that. Um, and my mom was, the only way my mom was able to explain it to me because I was just like, well, just put any number there. You know, like, just put something until you get, I can get the money, I can get the scholarship. Like, fix it. You're an adult. And the only way my mom could explain it was this. She was just like, your sister, she was born in the US so she has US papers. You were born in Mexico, which I already knew mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And she's like, you were born in Mexico. And I was like, yeah. She's like, well, because you were born in Mexico, like in Spanish. Um, she was telling me, you have Mexican papers. So then I told her, well, then put my Mexican number in there, <laugh>. And I still didn't get it. Uh, but they had to explain it that they wanted the American number, the American papers, and I don't have that. And so that to me really sunk in. And in that moment, I really realized that, okay, if these few digits, if this little number had such a drastic change in me receiving this form of scholarship or money for me to go to college, because for me, college was everything for me. College was everything. Then how else and what else is gonna be taken away because of this? So in that moment, I realized the impact of my undocumented status.

Gloria Sosa: [00:10:29](#)

Right. At a really young age.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:10:32](#)

Yeah. So I made it my mission, my, I don't know what to call it, but it was like the fire in me that like lit up. And in high school I was like, I'm not gonna be quiet about this. I know there's other people I know that we can do other stuff. So I became kind of like a voice of the young immigrant movement. And I was joining MEChA and I was joining other stuff, and I was being a part of, you know, community organizations and I was going to classes and telling my story that I'm undocumented, and that kind of like a way of other students letting the teachers know,

"Hey, I'm undocumented too. Like, what can we do? What are resources out there for us?" You know?

- Gloria Sosa: [00:11:23](#) So, um, so this happened in the scholarship happened in middle school mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And then this is when it hit you right. That you were undocumented. Okay. So moving a little forward, I guess, to high school first. Where did you go to high school?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:11:43](#) So, I went to two high schools. I went to Jefferson High School, which is in South Central, very historical high school. <laugh> We had, riots when I went to high school, it was they gang related. Um, I went there for two years and then I finished my 11th and 10th and 12th grade at Santi Education Complex, which is also South Central.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:12:09](#) Okay. So what was it like at Jefferson?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:12:17](#) Um, I mean, at Jeff to me it was just like, you get the kids that don't want to study, then you get the kids that want to study (inaudible) I mean, no matter what my circumstance were, I put education first. Can you hear me?
- Gloria Sosa: [00:12:46](#) Yes, it was, cut it up a little, bit okay. Yohana so you were sharing with me how was, uh, how was it like at your Jefferson high school? Your first high school where you did the 10th and the 9th grade?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:13:01](#) Yes. Um, yeah, so I mean, I think any normal high school, I didn't experience anything different aside from just the riots that happened in 2000 and, um, 2005 or something like that? Um, you know, um, which were gang related. It put a hold in my education in the sense that it interrupted the education during time with the teachers. Um, but I mean, I did what I had to do with projects, with homework. I, I just continued. Um, and then Santi education opened, so that was a brand new high school.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:13:52](#) Okay.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:13:53](#) So we went from an old high school, very historic, where, um, my cousins, my aunts, many of my family members have gone there. Um, and the community, um, to a brand new, like you took the plastic off type of high school <laugh> that had a pool, had tennis courts, had everything you can think of. Um, and at Jeff, I was, I played, I played tennis. So at Jeff you had to walk to the park to play tennis, to practice for tennis, um, for our high school. So that's kind of like the little difference that we had.

Um, but yeah, I just, I mean, it's, my education was normal to the extent, but, um, just about just me being more aware of my situation. Um, and I think the only club I had joined there was Big Brother, Big Sister. That was the only thing available there. Um, Santi, Santi was a whole different story. <laugh> Santi, um, we had MEChA, we had, uh, we created Somos Raza We had really strong young teachers who were coming in ready to talk and provide ethnic studies. So we were learning about Che Guevara, we were learning about, um, the different, uh, you know, revolutionary, just, not just Pancho Villa but Las Adelitas. You know, we were learning so much there. And I remember, um, just going after school to just learn and grab books that were not part of the American educational system, like we were reading Malcolm X, you name it. Um, and even though that sounds crazy, right? Like, that was revolutionary at that time. That was right. That was different in those moments because that was not part of the curriculum. You know, we had people, um, who were, for example, really good community, um, activists, uh, Ron Coches, Jose Lara. We had, um, those type of key elements in our high school. Um, so yeah, we were, we were in there creating curriculum for us, learning about our history, um, and, and creating programs and organizations that were for us. And for me, Santi was more of that awakening for my story. That's where I started sharing more. Um, we had social workers, um, therapists in there, and I remember just starting my healing process there about my journey. Um, because if you were to talk to me back in 2017, I mean, 2007 <laugh>, I would not be able to say everything I'm saying without crying. You know, the trauma would hit harder. Um, but because I healed in therapy, because I, I healed that part of my life and my identity, um, I'm able to talk to it now in a way that's more of a healing than a trigger. And the passive was for triggering. So we had that kind of support there. Um, you know, and I believe that the teachers there really believed in me. I, I still have them down as friends, they become mentors. Um, and I was kind of the, I don't wanna say Guinea pig, but I was kind of, uh, <laugh>, how do I say it? I was a lot of, so a lot of them were first time teachers or educators in this com- in this community. And I was their first undocumented senior <laugh>, I guess openly, I guess, you know, maybe other folks were, but openly I was their first, even my college counselor there. And I remember like, I was valedictorian, so I had a really high GPA. And they're trying to get me into Berkeley. They're trying to get me into UCLA, you know, these are prof, these are all educational UC's. Um, UCLA, I'm applying to USC. So I remember sitting down and doing the UC applications. And remember, this is before the Dream Act, right? Before any of that, the only thing that was in, in, in our world during that time

was AB 540. That's the only thing we had. Um, but nothing else. Everything else that was in the news or in the political, um, I guess air, was the Federal Dream Act. Um, that was it. There was nothing else educational wise, financial aid wise, that would support aside in California, aside from AB 540 Um, so I remember some submit. I remember being ready to submit my four UC's, and of course I don't have papers. So they were like, well, let's figure out, let's see what's gonna happen. And of course, it didn't take the waiver because I don't have a social, so it asked for a credit card. And I believe each application was, let me see, Cal States were \$50, each UC's were \$66 or \$65 each. So, if you, if you were to times, let's say 65 times four universities, that's \$260, right? That's \$260 that I did not have. <laugh>. I was working already under the table. I worked in the fashion district, I sold prom dresses. Um, at the age of 16, I started working around in that area. So that was my way of earning income. Um, but I didn't have that money with me in that moment. So I remember looking at my counselor, I remember having a counselor, my college counselor in the back, assistant principal on the other side, and three other senior, uh, teachers in the room helping other students too. And when my college counselor gasp, she's like, oh, no, they'll turn, because I get, I was like, Guinea pig. So I was the one kind of separated from everybody else and seeing how they're gonna help me, what's gonna happen. And I was just like, what happened? And she's like, you have to pay. And I'm like, oh, how much is it? And she's like, um, if this is the amount, it was like two something. And I was just like, look, I will have the money on Monday. Like, I'm gonna work Friday, Saturday, Saturday and Sunday, and I will get you the money on Monday. I can, you know, I don't even have a, I didn't even have a debit card, <laugh>. So I was like, can I borrow the debit card? Can I borrow money? And, or I can have my mom come and pick and, you know, give you the money. Like, I'm over here figuring out. Right. And I remember my, my college counselor picking out her debit card and she up, she said, I'll pay for it. Then one of my other teachers took out his debit card and she's like, I have the Cal States. Then my other two pay for my private, um, applications, which was UC, USC and Mount. No, what is the amount? The All Girls college? I forgot that Private School. Um, but yeah, they all took other cards and they paid. And I remember just crying. I was like, whoa. Like, she's like, no, like we believe in you mija and we're not gonna let any, uh, you know, nothing stop you from achieving your dreams.

Yohana Barajas ...:

[00:21:42](#)

You know, you just have to get to just one. And, you know, and that was a goal. Just get to one. And I remember them putting the fire under me, like, okay, so I can't get financial aid. I am

working, but it's not a lot of money. What's my next option? They're like, scholarships. Okay. pos ponte. And I was applying to, I wanna say two scholarships every week. And I was able to graduate with a total of \$10,000 in scholarships. Yeah. <laugh> outta the \$10,000, I wanna say two of those scholarships were renewable until I graduated. Those scholarships were \$2,000 each. So, every year, as long I kept and maintained a certain gpa, I was able to renew until I graduated from Cal State LA. uh, from college, right. So, I ended up getting into UC Riverside, I got into UC Berkeley, I got into Santa Cruz, I got into Cal State LA. I got into Cal State Dominguez Hills, and I was waitlisted at USC.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:22:58](#) Um, because they needed me to complete one more class. I was missing one more class they wanted me to complete. Um, but I mean, financially that wasn't gonna be the best choice either way. Um, so, but I was just happy over there. Alright. I got at least, I got a wait listed <laugh>. Um, I remember sitting down my parents and just spreading out the packages, all my acceptances and going over all the financial aid, like looking at the numbers, realistically, right? And yeah, I could've gone to Berkeley, I could've gone to any UC, but realistically I wasn't going to be able to afford it. Not even, not even the scholarships that I have were gonna be enough to afford it. So I then looked at the Cal State's and I said, okay, what can I afford? Which one is best? We went, I took my parents, we took the bus and we went to Dominguez Hills, we took the tour, we visited, and ah, I liked it, but it wasn't giving me the energy, the vibe I wanted.

Gloria Sosa: [00:24:00](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:24:00](#) I went to Cal State LA. And, um, I remember the high school was like, I need you to go to Epic Center. And he's no longer there. He retired, but she's like, um, I need you to go and speak to Jorge Uranga. He was the director of Epic. And I'm not sure if you ever met him, but, um, he was a director of Epic. And I went in, I took the bus, I went, I met him, and he was like the Godfather I never knew <laugh> <laugh>. He welcomed, "Hola. mija como estas?" And just, I spoke to him about my story. He's like, you know, oh, I know Fermin. I know there's an organization here. It's called SURGE. You need to go meet them. And this is in the summer. So this is before, before I would start school or anything. This is still like, I was still a senior in high school.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:24:57](#) I was about to graduate. Um, so he's the one that connected me to SURGE, um, and to Fermin. And I remember reaching out to Fermin. I said, Hey, I, I'm about to graduate from high school,

like, I have like one more month and I'm going into Cal State LA in the fall. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, you know, I, I heard about SURGE I, you know, I wanna join an organization, I wanna join something. Um, can you let me know? And he said, join us. They're having a two day or weekend retreat that I believe in that, in that moment, I think SALEF or MALDEF had provided the funding for. Um, and so I went, hotel was included. Everything, I think we say like around Boyle Heights or something like that. <laugh>, I met everybody. I met the original members. Um, you know, Fermin was also a freshman. Um, so when I went in, he was a second year.

Yohana Barajas ...:

[00:25:53](#)

Um, I met Jose, I met Jorge, I met Martha. I met kind of like the OG originals <laugh>. Um, and I kind of became that OG original too, in a, in a sense. But I was like the baby original <laugh>. Everybody was there before me. Um, but I remember that feeling of like, just, I was able to breathe and say, I'm not alone. You know, I'm not, I'm not alone in my thoughts. I'm not alone in my struggle. I'm not alone in the sense that I'm first gen and I don't know what to do. They SURGE was that family, that support group that, that system, I really needed to not just succeed at Cal State LA but create that story at Cal State LA. If, I don't think, if SURGE was not there, I don't think we would've done, we would've done, and we would've been a part of that historical movement.

Gloria Sosa:

[00:27:04](#)

Right. So yes, SURGE does have this story of bringing people together. Right. And that's beautiful. Um, so that was beautiful. There's a lot to cover there. So let me come back a little to, um, your high school. So, at Jefferson it was pretty much, um, just doing classes, right? And, um, once you got to Santi, that's where everything unraveled. Yeah. Um, so it sounds like everything started because you were able to find the people who was willing to help you, right? Yeah. So how did that, how did you find the people willing to help you? How did you disclose your status?

Yohana Barajas ...:

[00:27:52](#)

I was never afraid of my immigration status because that fear in a way was never instilled me. And, and the only way I could describe it was, you know, my dad was, um, my dad was deported a few times, so I was able to experience that. Um, he was deported because he was doing stuff he wasn't supposed to be doing <laugh>. So, and I remember once he got out of jail and (inaudible) and just kind of started doing the right thing, I remember him sitting to me down and, and telling me. Um, so he came outta jail when I was in, in the eighth grade. Um, and he was in jail for like 10 years. So he was outta my life for a long part of just my childhood. But I remember him just saying like,

you know, no matter what, no matter what happens because of our status, because you know, nobody can take away your education. Nobody. Es lo unico que no te pueden quitar. Te pueden quitar la casa, el carro, las tarjetas, todo, Una educacion nadie te la puede quitar ni el gobierno.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:29:04](#)

So that's stuck with me. You know, if I were to ever get deported, if I were to able go back to Mexico or, you know, my Rancho in Santo Domingo, I know that I can go back with a sense of education, resources and start from there, you know? Um, and that really helped me. And so I was able to just really just, if the teachers were like, you know, "Hey, I need help with this." Or, I remember doing my project, um, for my AP government class on AB 540, um, where, um, I was able to fly. So I represented SoCal, Southern California Girls Coalition, something like that, where one girl from each city was, um, nominated and represented, and the house assembly members paid for our trip. So we got our flight book hotel booked for the whole week, and we spent the week in Sacramento. Um, so I represented South Central <laugh>. I represented South Central <laugh>.

Gloria Sosa: [00:30:12](#)

Was that the first time you were, um, going away from home?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:30:18](#)

No, I, um, before that there was, there was another event in Sacramento before that. There was a, there was another event in Sacramento that, um, I was nominated for as well. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, and again, flight, everything paid for. Um, so that was my second time. But I remember just being in the plane scared. I remember, you know, my mom letting them know that because I'm underage, I'm able to travel, you know, on the plane with my school ID and the school field trip. So it protected us. Um, so I remember just like going over that with my mom and, you know, making sure that I didn't do anything dumb in the airport or anything, like <laugh>. I was just so, I was such a stickler for like the rules because I didn't wanna break any rules, <laugh>. But yeah, like I, I was just, I've always been very open about my situation.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:31:16](#)

I've never, even to this day, I've always been, because I've always said, if I can say it, maybe I can give power to somebody mm-hmm. <affirmative> who might not be able to say it in that moment, who still, you know, we, we call it 'coming out of the shadows', right? Who's still part of those shadows. So, um, I've always been able to say it. And to me that's always been a really great powerful, I don't wanna say tool, but just a way of me to connect with people. Um, because I was able to humanize being undocumented. Nobody knew unless I said it. Um, you know, I

spoke at different conventions. I spoke at different educational conferences. Um, I, I was getting paid to go to, uh, grad, um, to different graduate classes at, you know, Northridge, Fullerton, different universities, UCLA, um, and the professors, because they knew my story, um, by networking that, you know, they would figure out, you know, a grant or a scholarship, 200, I did speak in engagement and they figured out how to pay me. And it was like a scholarship rate. And I went to speak. And for that one hour I would get paid \$200. Um, but it was sharing my story, it was me and just being part of the movement. But yeah, I was able to connect with people and that really helped me build a really strong network of educators, professors, lawyers. I can count how many lawyers I have in my phone because of that <laugh> free services as well. Um, you know, I was able to have a really great support system. And I think that, like I said, it takes a village. I was able to create and build a really strong village to help not just myself, but my parents in a way they were able to benefit from that village. You know, they, at moments we didn't have a car, so they're the ones that were able to pick me up and take me to different speaking engagements and so forth.

Gloria Sosa: [00:33:37](#) That's very, um, a touching story. Thank you for sharing that. Um, I'm sorry my connection is not stable. Um, but thank you for sharing that. But so again, um, and you we're doing a lot of things during your high school years then. Yeah.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:33:57](#) <laugh>. Yes.

Gloria Sosa: [00:33:58](#) Yes. You were doing a little of everything. You were a local celebrity, you were flying, and, um, that is a beautiful experiences. So did you remember, when was the first time you disclosed your status to someone at school? Uh, during, um, your time in high school?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:34:24](#) I think, I think I first talked my friends about it. Um, I think I was just like in, I, I don't know what we were talking about. I remember, you know, I was born in Mexico and you know, I don't have papers, so I have to kind of, we were talking, we were talking about college, but I don't remember how I came out and they all just looked at me, but like, but you don't look undocumented. What do you mean? And I was just like, what <laugh> What does that mean? I'm just getting that from my friends. And my other friend was like, well, I was born in Mexico too, but I have papers. I know. So I don't, I don't know what you did, but <laugh>, I don't have papers. I was just like, I'm, I was born in Mexico, but I, I grew up basically here, you know?

- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:35:14](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, and, and you know, they, but they kept, they kept saying that you, you don't look undocumented. And I think when I told my peers, that was mostly what I got, you don't look undocumented. And it came to a point when I started saying, what does undocumented mean? Like, what do you mean with that? And like, oh, like your English is good. You don't look like you just from Mexico, or you just crossed the border. Or like, what does that mean? Like, I'm really trying to comprehend, you know? And I was like, well, you don't have a really strong accent or, you know, you're into the, the fashion. You, you're, you're dressing. You don't dress like somebody who just came. I don't know what that means. I was like, that's still, but I think that's from my peers. That's really what I got. You don't look undocumented.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:36:02](#) I think that was like their first, you don't look like an immigrant <laugh>. I don't know what that means. I still, to this day, I'm like, what not look undocumented mean? Um, but yeah, that's what I got. Um, I remember disclosing to a teacher, um, because she was talking about college. And I think that in that moment I was just like, oh, I have to apply to college. Like I'm in high school and this was at Santi. And I was just like, I have two more years. How am I gonna do this? And I really just said like, "Hey, this is my situation." Um, it was like after the class ended and we, we were gonna go to lunch and I said, um, and she's still a really good support system to this day. And I just told, I know, I was just crying. Cuz I remember I couldn't even say without just crying.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:36:52](#) Like it was just a trigger for me. And she's like, don't worry. Like I have your back and we're gonna figure it out together. And that's what we did. And they were very good at making me be very self-sufficient. They were really good at not doing things for me, but allowing me to kind of like treating me like a grad student. Because now that I think of it, it was like that, it was like, I need you to research what's, what's going on, what laws you qualify for now. And that's how my paper on AB 540 started because I was able to research that. I didn't know it unless I was able to, I was doing research work in the 11th grade and I had to provide articles to her. I remember it being APA style <laugh>.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:37:45](#) I had to do that. And that was my way of also educating myself, understanding the language. And if you go back to 2006, the language AB 540 law had was way different than what it looks now. Now the language, a lot of the language changed because of our movements. And I remember reading like "illegal alien", you know, that word alien and, and a lot of those, uh, immigration laws. And I would just like I'm no alien, like, what,

what does that mean? Like, why, why are they using these terms? And it was just so dehumanizing, not just to myself, but just to anybody. And you know, which illegal alien are you? Are you the top one that's been in high school for three years? Or you're the bottom one that has to visa? Like Right. That's crazy. <laugh>

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:38:42](#)

And I, I guys didn't sit well with me. Like, I didn't like it. Like no me gusto. I'm like, I'm gonna fight this. Like this is not, and that was kinda like the circulator. So I'm not just an undocumented person, but now I'm also an alien and I'm in a, in a world or in a, in a government that really tries to stigmatize and dehumanize the undocumented population. How do we change that? Well, we create the narrative. That's how we change it. We, we choose a language we wanna use. That's how we change it. So we ended up starting moving, oh, what are you, I'm an AB 540 student. You didn't wanna say you're undocumented. You said I'm an AB 540 student or dreamer student. That's our code for being undocumented. And that was a way for those teachers who were educating themselves knew, oh, I have a, I have an AB 540 student, or I have a dreamer student.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:39:38](#)

Right. And without saying I have an undocumented student, that's how we started moving on those terms. We started making them see like, this is who I am. The law does not, it is not an alien. This is a student. Right. There was a little damage to that. And I can say this because I wasn't, in a way I benefited from it, but I, we didn't know the damage it was causing the long-term damage it was causing. So the dreamer student was a dreamer that student that was defined was that Valedictorian. Right. Got to the UC's, got to the Cal States, um, top of the top undocumented students. You, uh, leader in the involving the community, Valedictorian, 4.0 and above to the top colleges universities. Right. And the damage was, there was undocumented students who were unfortunately, and it's okay, they weren't going to go to college.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:40:45](#)

They had other aspirations, they had other dreams, they had other goals. But even if they wanted to use that word Dreamer, they couldn't because "Oh, you're not a Dreamer student." You know? And even in our group, in in our group of other undocumented students from other campuses, you saw the narrative change from a UC to a community college. The, the students who were in community college really weren't seen as much as they really wanted to be seen. Um, and I was fully aware of that. Like, I was just saying, "What's going on and why is this going on?" You know? But it's new, it's a new movement. We didn't know how much damage it was gonna cost to the

extent Right. But at the same time, we knew that it had to be used kind of like a weapon in a political system because governors, politicians, anybody in the, in the stance, if they wanna put something upfront along the Dream Act, anything, the news had to show the Dreamer student. We were the ad, right?

- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:41:58](#) We had to show the dreamer student if you were this revolutionary student doing, because we also had to walkouts. So we were doing walkouts, everything, but you had to have a balance. So I learned how to do that balance. I learned to be that revolutionary student, but also that dreamer student, you know, because I knew that I needed to do one thing or have an image in order for these politicians to listen to us in order for us to be heard. And in order for, for the movement to be taken serious because we were not just students. We were gonna be the future of America, basically.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:42:42](#) Right. The next generation. Right?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:42:45](#) Yes.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:42:47](#) Very true. Yes. Thank you for sharing that. So, I mean, again, I, I wanna get a feeling of you during this time. I know that you have, um, the, the drive in you and the force that it's, it, it was given to you and fostered by the teachers who help you. But when, when you were telling this teacher about your undocumented status, were you ashamed of it? Or why do you think you had the, uh, reaction of crying?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:43:21](#) I had the reaction of crying, mostly because it was a trigger of trauma. And I'm gonna use some mental health words, <laugh>. It was a trigger of trauma. You know, being undocumented is not something easy. It's not something that people want. It was, it wasn't something. And most important, it wasn't something I really asked for. Right? I was kind of brought here by my parents and well, this is, we want you to have the American dream. But not realizing I had to really work really, really hard for that American dream because I'm undocumented, you know? So.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:43:57](#) Okay.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:43:57](#) You know, in a life where you can choose battles, that was a battle I couldn't choose. And I had to learn how to fight. So even saying that I was undocumented, I think it, it wasn't. No me daba verguenza. I was not ashamed of it. It was more of that hurt that came with it. The pain that came with it. That's what,

that's where the connection of my trauma was. That that pain and that anger that, and the teachers would cry because they're like, whoa, you're a valedictorian. You can go to any university you want, but because of your status, that's, just really gonna limit us. Right? And, and they will cry with me because it's just like, I don't know how to help you <laugh>. And I was like, I'm asking for help. And they didn't know how to help me, you know? And it's, it was really like, I was like, that guinea pig, like we had to figure it out together.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:44:54](#)

We really had to figure it out. And, and yeah, me, me saying it when, when I was in high school, it was that pain that, that of fear, the pain of the unknown, most important. I didn't know what I wanted, but I remember the school social worker, she's a therapist there also continues to be my mentor to this day. So I still have connections with everybody, <laugh> in high school mentors. They continue to be my mentors. But, um, I remember her saying, don't let your immigration status break you, always bend. Bend to the forces, but don't let it break you. And, you know, and she's like, you're gonna be somebody who's gonna follow her heart blindly. And in therapy, I was able to know that, again, I was, I was doing therapy sessions with her in high school and I was like, how can I follow my heart blindly being undocumented?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:45:57](#)

Because I think the number one thing, the number one fear to this day for any undocumented person is fear of the unknown. What awaits us in the future because of our status. Right. Um, and that was my biggest connection. That was my biggest thing. I didn't know what the future would help. I know I wanted to go to college. I know I wanted to be somebody in life. I know I really wanted all of that. And I remember doing a vision board and putting down everything I was gonna do before the age of 25. And that helped me. And this was a therapeutic technique that we used because I helped me envision what I wanted to do or be by the time I was 25.

Gloria Sosa: [00:46:47](#)

So one, one thing that I would love to know, it's who refer you to the social worker at school. Was it mandatory that you, um, visit the therapist at school?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:46:58](#)

No. So because of the community we grew up in, and because of a lot of the riots in the moment at the other high school, um, they basically did like a little boundary and anybody within that boundary had to go to this new high school. Anybody outside the boundary had to stay in that old high school. Um, and so they were putting in, um, gangs in the new high school that weren't supposed to be together. So I, I think for like the first

week of school or the second week of school, we still had riots in the new school because they were gang related. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Um, so we had to have, you know, more police officer on campus. It looked like a prison, you know, <laugh>. Um, we had to walk in, you know, uh, metal detectors, all of that good stuff, <laugh>. And, um, they brought in social workers.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:47:52](#)

They brought in and, and the, the, the perfect terminology or the perfect title for them were, um, psychiatric social workers. So these are school therapists, not counselors, school therapists, they're licensed school social workers. Um, so they brought 'em in and it was, I believe three of them. Um, and they told us, these are free services. And I just went in and, um, her name was (inaudible) Salazar. And I remember just connecting with her, just her office embracing the Mexican culture, um, just having decorations, her being a Latina, just that. And I remember her just sitting down and telling me like, how are you doing? You know, how are you feeling? And I just remember crying. And even now that I'm a therapist, it's like, why, why did you cry? Is that because nobody ever asked me how I was going in that sense. Um, you know, I have that older sister syndrome where I took care of everybody and I bent care of everybody.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:49:01](#)

Um, and I was the one that's always there for everybody. Mm-hmm. <affirmative>, you know, and for somebody to sit down and really look me in the eye and kind of connect with me and say, how are you doing? You know, I don't wanna hear about your mom, dad, nobody, how are you doing that broke me. And that I made a connection in that moment that says, I need, I need to come. So I would see her, I believe like once a week. Um, I had a session with her and I was able to learn about mental health, about the importance of it. And I was able to use it to strengthen my story to, you know, um, look at my trauma and not normalize it, but heal it. So that when I went to Cal State LA I remember like, I remember getting, um, at Cal State LA offers, mental health services too.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:49:55](#)

And right. You get even, um, health benefits as students. So I remember like taking advantage of everything. I got contacts, I got glasses, I went to a chiropractor, <laugh>, and I saw a therapist every semester I went in and I was able to do different forms of therapy to be able to heal different parts of me; of my traumas. Um, even with, um, um, there's a form, there's a storytelling therapeutic technique. And I remember using that in a way to help me continue to write my story, rewrite my story, um, and use it to write paper, use it to be a public

speaker, use it to write scholarships, but use it to strengthen my story.

- Gloria Sosa: [00:50:49](#) Thank you for sharing that. It's very powerful. Um, so let me, make sure I understood it right. So you went to the, to see this, uh, school, um, therapist just at a maybe curiosity. Yeah. Okay. And this led to, um, cover notice, um, in your words on your trauma, right? That you were carrying?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:51:15](#) Yes.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:51:17](#) Okay. And you continue and, and um, it might have something to do with what you're doing now as a career right?
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:51:24](#) Yes. Like I think she's the reason I went into Cal State LA cuz she was also a Cal State LA alumni. Um, and her mentor was her, her, she was a Cal State LA alumni and her mentor was Jorge Uranga. So she's the one that connected me Jorge Uranaga. So she's the one that, she's always had that strong Chicana just everything. Like I, till this day, she's already, she's also the reason, um, you know, I'm at a grad program because I had her do a reference letter <laugh>, you know, so she's, she continues to be a part of my life to this day. Um, you know, um, she, you know, and, and I'm in the field because I've always admired her and her work and her professionalism. But I I always admired what she represented. She represented what I wanted to see as a kid and I saw her, but I wanted to be another Mexicana in the mental health field. I wanted other girls to know that we have them, you know, that, that we understand that we spoke their language, you know, for her to switch from English to bilingual, you know, me decia tienes que entender you know, like you have to understand. No te pongas terca. And I was just like, okay. You know, she was able to connect with me in a way that, you know, not other counselors might.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:52:52](#) Right. Right. So yes, when you see, seek a therapist, you need to connect at some level.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:53:00](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah.
- Gloria Sosa: [00:53:00](#) Yes, definitely. So, um, I mean, I'm so amazed by that story of just finding the courage because a lot of the times we don't find the courage right. To seek, um, to see a, therapist. It might be because it's stigmatized in our community or, you know, for other reasons.
- Yohana Barajas ...: [00:53:21](#) Mm-hmm. <affirmative>.

Gloria Sosa: [00:53:23](#) But I was very brave of you and, um, you know, it got your here. So I'm glad that you make that choice. Um, so I wanna touch up on when you were in high school, you were doing a lot of stuff. So you were giving this talks for grad students, is that right?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:53:45](#) Yes. So, so my mentor, I don't know if you know him, Miguel Savala he's a professor at Cal State LA. Um, so I have a few, I had a few organization I was a part of, uh, some organizations where there were different professors from different campuses there. ELAC, Fullerton, Cal State LA, UCLA was a big one too. Um.

Gloria Sosa: [00:54:10](#) What was the organization name?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:54:13](#) Um, this was called Somos Raza. So this, Somos Raza was a group of, um, educators who were high school teachers and college professors who wanted to provide ethnic studies. And they're still on until this day and resources and scholarships for students. And it's also open to undocumented students. Mm-hmm.

Gloria Sosa: [00:54:38](#) So you got, um, to meet professors through this organization?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:54:44](#) Yes, I got to meet them. We got to be comrades in a way, um, because Somos Raza there was also, um, lawyers who were part of the organization, um, and they were teaching graduate level classes for individuals in the programs who were gonna be teachers. Um, and they, um, what, what is that word called? Oh my god, I'm looking up. Um, oh, teachers in urban areas and you know, I went to Fullerton and if you know Fullerton, Fullerton's, like Orange County, right? <laugh>. And so they wanna be teachers in urban areas. So I would go and I would present do talking and growing up in, you know, in my community, kinda how I did now, just my story, um, what we kind of expected and what we want in teachers going into those neighborhoods. Um, you know, what kind of language, what kind of support, what kind of resources, but also what are the obstacles, you know, that we face as students of minority, uh, just coming from minority communities, um, and even students who are undocumented.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:55:55](#) And so I would always end with sharing my story, um, and how they can, they can be impactful in those students' lives. And I would always tell, and I remember getting questions like, well, how do you get undocumented students to come out? And I was like, well, you're not gonna put cookies out and tell them they're free for undocumented students. Right. <laugh>. And I would just like make them laugh. Yeah. I would say, I would say

host like this, the way this professor's doing it host, it's very important for other undocumented students to see another undocumented student coming from a college, whether it's a Cal State, a community college or a UC, and sharing their story. Because then that humanizes them. It humanizes the process is not somebody who's third, fourth generation con papales coming here telling you about college. Like, how are we connecting? What can you provide to me?

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:56:48](#)

Right. Or coming from a goody good neighborhood, and I'm from the hood, like, okay, your parents are gonna pay for college good. My parents can't even pay for a bike. Like, it, there's no connection. And to me, community connection was always important. And, and if you don't have that, you lose your audience. You lose everything, you know? And that was important for me. So for me to go into those spaces to be able to teach, to be able to be a speaker, I was able to carry that into Cal State LA too. But in high school, my main role was how do I help my teachers help other kids <laugh>? How do I get them to, you know, make it so that they know that they're being supported? How do I get them to, what kind of resources can we look for? You know? So I would have them in, you know, our rising board, you know, and hey, we need snacks or we need this.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:57:48](#)

Or, I remember working with a few teachers and we were able to move a whole dash, like a bus, a city bus because we didn't have a lot of transportation within our new school system. So we were able to talk to city council, the mayor, everything, um, and be able to move a dash in front of our high school so that we are not crossing the different gang territories. Um, so my, my movement in high school was social justice. It wasn't just immigration, it was social justice. Um, it was educational justice. Um, I remember we were about to graduate, we had a principal who was just very militant, very coming from a very established family and always wanting to have Navy Army recruiters in our campus. And I was so against that because again, I was part of Somos Raza where we educated ourselves about, you know, Latinos and Mexicanos and, you know, individuals, people of color, even black, black, um, even our black brothers and sisters being part of the army.

Yohana Barajas ...: [00:58:59](#)

And how that made more of a damage than provided any help. And I remember organizing to get the recruiters out, we made sure that we had the schedule for the recruiters so we can go in and talk to them as we were interested. And that way they could just talk to us through the whole break, the lunch break with the nutrition break, and then talk to nobody else, um, to

the point that we protested them and we ended up getting them banned. So since 2006 or seven, we've never had army recruiters in our high school. We completely had it banned. Yeah. And that's powerful because that was another way of individuals who didn't see themselves going to college, seeing that path as, as a reason. And for us was no, you have more options than that.

Gloria Sosa: [00:59:49](#) It's a very powerful story. Um, that's very, very powerful and brave. Can you elaborate on that story a little bit? How, how did you, um, organize like a group of students and do you have support from the teachers who were already supporting you to, um, to do this to kick out the recruiters?

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:00:13](#) Yeah, so we were part, well, so this was a, this is the, um, Somos Raza and MEChA club at Santi. And, um, we were, we were just look at what's going on in our campus. So one thing was the transportation, right? We got that done. Um, I was also the president, no vice president of the senior class. Um, so a lot of that was able to, I was able to get the agenda for a lot of the school to see what's going on, but it was being part of the clubs and seeing what's happening, what we were not okay with, and how we wanted to organize. And our teachers are MEChistas from UC San Diego, <laugh> from UCLA and they have a background in organizing. Um, and they have a background in politicizing and, and being, creating a movement. And they taught us how to organize just the concepts, the foundation, the, the formula of organizing one-on-one as Raza period.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:01:20](#) That's, really how it does. They, taught us, um, one of the key features was Ron Gochez. If you google him from South Central, you will know who he is. <laugh>. But he was Ron Gochez. The other one is Jose Lara. He's one of the biggest, um, components of ethnic studies and why ethnic studies is part of the curriculum in LAUSD now. Um, so I had really strong players my side, um, and knowing who to make friends with, knowing who to have on your side, and knowing that the fights that we were fighting were for good, right? That we're actually making good movements in our community for other students for the next generation. That's what the, the, the key role. A lot of, uh, not backlash, but there was a few hiccups that happened. Um, the principal and then, so we got our, our principal fired.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:02:19](#) So that was the other, the next step. Um, because he, he was very against us. He was very against the teachers that were organizing with us. Um, but he was not doing stuff, um, the way he was supposed to do. He was very a shady principal. So, um, se llamaba Carmino and we got him fired because, um, he

threatened, well, he threatened me that he would deport me if I, in that moment the news was going on about us moving the dash and that I had to go. And he pulled me outta class, um, and I, that I wa he wanted me to talk to the news about how impactful it was. Basically he would take credit for all the good things he were doing right. And he would always have the news there pa enseñar la cara and he loved that. But he wanted to used me to be that student face that, you know, that we're up in the hood, but you know, he's doing such an amazing job here, giving him credit.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:03:20](#)

And I said, no, I'm not doing it. Um, and he threatened me. He's like, well, if you don't do it, I'm gonna make sure you don't get into the UCLA. I'm gonna make sure that I can use your immigration status. We can deport you. I have your address. And I went to tell my teachers about him. I went to tell him about what he did. Um, and so from there we ended up starting a report of all the things he started doing, um, to us, not just to me, but to the other, um, students. Um, to the point that on one day on a Friday, he had police in the school go look for us because he called our names in the intercom and said that we needed to be in the principal's office immediately. Like whoever did the announcement for him was really mad.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:04:06](#)

And I looked at my teacher, I was in ballet class <laugh>. So I was in my ballet outfit, <laugh>. And I looked at my teacher and I was scared, like, I don't wanna go. Like I know he's mad. And I was just like, I don't wanna go. And he said, what happened? I told her what happened? And she's like, well, you don't have to go. So our class was behind the auditorium and they said that we didn't go, that we were gonna have campus security, um, look for us, escort us. Well it was in campus security, it's LAPD on campus. So we had LAPD go to the classes that we were in on our schedules and go look for us. I had an actual LAPD officer looking for a student for I don't know why. And my teacher had to hide me in the restroom, in the auditorium, so they didn't look for me.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:04:55](#)

Then we all, I remember when the class finished and the teacher was like, well, I don't know if she went to go to the principal's office, but I don't know if she's not there. She's not there. She tried to cover for me and she's like, Mija, get ready. We're gonna call your parents. So I remember getting ready, calling our parents, and our parents were furious because it wasn't just me, it was all our student club. And those are the ones that who were, they got, like they found, um, they wanted to speak to their parents, but that's not the way you speak to our parents. So from there we started doing community forums.

Our parents came, yelled at the, principal came in with six police officers, like bien wanna be, I don't know, <laugh>. And it was just chaos. It was so chaotic. And that was the moment that we turned against them. And we started gathering information. We started gathering the community, our parents, we made our parents organizers so that we can make sure we got the principal out. And yeah we got him out. So the next class I graduated 2007, 2008, the new class year. Um, didn't have that principal. Yeah. <Laugh>

Gloria Sosa: [01:06:06](#) Oh my God. It's like you did it all. You did it all. You, you really, um, the revolution you were right when you used that word. Yes. Oh my god. That's like.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:06:21](#) I was a disrupter. <laugh>.

Gloria Sosa: [01:06:23](#) Indeed. Indeed. Yes. Oh my God. So I have so many questions. So one was, so your, with your group and your coalition of, Somos Raza um, you were just looking for things that you could change around campus, right? Sounds like it.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:06:42](#) Yeah.

Gloria Sosa: [01:06:43](#) And then, um, trying to, from your advisors and your, um, teacher mentors who were, um, part of their own revolutions during their time, um, found the structured to actually make the, the change that you wanted mm-hmm. <affirmative>, um, was it a, like a structure that you would follow to do perhaps to move the dash?

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:07:11](#) Um, not necessarily like, oh, here's how you do it. They would really just sit back. We would meet after school and say for example, like, "Hey, like this is going on. We keep, you know, every time we cross a gang boundary, we always get, you know, stopped. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Hit at, it's always even scary to walk there with certain friends because, uh, those friends belong to another gang." And so it was just hard just to get from home to school or from school to home. And so we talked about like, "What if we were able to, you know, move transportation or, or something like that." And we will bring it up to the assistant principals. And, and that moment, um, the Peace Committee opened, oh, that was another organization I was part of. <laugh>, I forgot about the Peace Committee. Okay. So think about, think about Somos Raza as Malcolm X and think about the Peace Committee as MLK.

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:08:24](#) So you get the dynamic. So the Peace Committee was really different students from different grades. So we had 9, 10, 11, and 12. And that was the year I was in 12th grade. Um, each one of us represented, um, our classes, um, and our grades cause there was a track B track and C track. So I represented C track and we, the Peace Committee, our facilitators were the counselors, the social workers, and the city council member, uh, Jan Perry in that moment. And then two LAPD officers who wanted to establish and build, um, support and report with our, the students and the community. So, a lot of those ideas were like, how do we do that? So what I would do was Somos Raza we need to help the kids who are in the hood. We're trying to walk from home. We need to build the system, get that information, how do we do it? Bring it to the Peace Committee, introduce it as the Peace Committee. Jan Perry is right there. We had city council right there in front of us. How can we get this done? Everybody else is on board because we had other Somos Raza members on that, that organization. And that's how we basically moved up. We went from one organization, get the agenda and give it to the other one.

Gloria Sosa: [01:09:56](#) So really to create collaboration, right?

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:09:59](#) Yep. Coalition.

Gloria Sosa: [01:10:01](#) Coalition, collaboration, and make a really good use of the resources available to each organization. Mm-hmm. <affirmative> Very clever. I love that <laugh>. I love, love that. Um, yes. So do you wanna continue for today or would you like to, um, stop now?

Yohana Barajas ...: [01:10:25](#) We could stop there. I think that's a good, that's a good stop. Um, and then, yeah, that's a good stop.