

By Any Means

April 10th, 2020 marked less than one week for my 21st birthday. I was excited to hit a milestone in my life despite the unfortunate circumstances. I had accepted that I would not be able to celebrate it the way I always wanted to: with a lot of friends. That afternoon, my grandmother was making coffee in the sunlit kitchen. Its bright orange light made the walls look like they were made from honey. Coincidentally, she got a call from her old friend. You know, nothing unusual.

Her enthusiasm vanished with the call's progression. I was concentrating on my chemistry homework and paid no mind to the substance of the call. As soon as she hung up the phone, she headed in my direction to what almost felt like light speed. I can vividly remember how the smell of coffee accompanied her presence as she entered my room.

"What happened?" I said obliviously.

"He passed away." she said, as she sobbed and burst into tears.

I looked down for a split second and felt my heart drop by the gravity of the news. At the same time, I was bombarded with feelings of shock, confusion, sadness, and a multitude of questions. I immediately knew who she was referring to.

"How could it have been possible?! I trusted that he would get better." I thought to myself.

Our suspicion of coronavirus was true. In April, tests weren't widely available in New York City, so we had to assume that he was sick from COVID-19 based on his persistent symptoms of fever and cough. He was also undocumented, which made it a challenge to seek medical help.

"Would his fate have been different if he had received medical help in time?" I asked myself as my eyes filled with tears. I could not believe what I was hearing.

"Maria told me that he was getting better," My grandma said, "but he started coughing up blood and died shortly after, alone in his room. His roommate, who also contracted COVID-19, found him after it had happened."

We cried as we shared so many memories we had with him. My upcoming birthday did not matter anymore. The next few weeks passed by, and I was still in disbelief. I just couldn't believe that he was gone. Forever.

I constantly thought about his tragic death. We all hope to die in the distant future peacefully and surrounded by our loved ones, but COVID-19 robbed him of the opportunity to have some humanity as he died alone in his room. Not being able to see any physical embodiments of his death almost made it easier to be in denial. I hoped that it was all a lie, I wanted to believe that he was somehow somewhere out there alive and well, but I could not convince myself. I knew I had to face the truth.

Life before the World Turned Upside Down

I migrated from the Dominican Republic to the United States in 2009 at 10 years old. My grandmother was the first person to migrate here, followed by my father, who requested my U.S. residence first, followed by my mom and my little sister. He needed some time to get settled before he was able to bring the rest of the family, so he rented an apartment in The Bronx and we lived together for a little while: my dad, my grandma, and me.

To fulfill my mom's role, my grandmother took her place as my caregiver. She made a living as a street vendor in Washington Heights, selling Dominican flour patties called *pastelitos*, and cassava-based patties called *empanadas* in 178th and Saint Nicholas. Her cart was conveniently placed a few blocks away from my middle school in 173rd, making it easier for her to pick me up every day. My dad also worked in the street vendor business as a side job making the *empanadas* from scratch to sell to the vendors, while being a delivery driver full time. My grandma's occupation meant that after school hours ended, I had to stay in the street while she finished working for the day. During her shifts, I would help her in any way I could; I would run errands for her and push her cart into storage for the next day. When there wasn't much to do after school, I would go to the Fort Washington Library and hang out with my friends.

Gentrification has transformed Washington Heights to be a watered-down version of what it used to be. I knew that some of its essences had vanished when I noticed that a lot of my friends that lived in the area had to move elsewhere due to increasing rent. I also noticed the shift from individual-owned stores to big franchises like 7-Eleven, IHOP, and Little Caesars. The Washington Heights that I remember growing up was very rich in Dominican culture. The neighborhood felt so vibrant and alive. There were beauty-supply stores, pharmacies, clothing stores, bodegas that all had one thing in common; almost everyone spoke Spanish. It was spoken so much that it felt like D.R. itself, and you almost forgot that you were in New York. They were assets to the community.

My grandmother had been a vendor in the same location since the early 1990s, so she became familiar with the people who ran the nearby businesses. In the same block, there was a Jewish-owned but immigrant-run clothing store made up of Dominican and Mexican workers, and it was one of the owner's two locations in Washington Heights. Throughout the years the workers grew very fond of her and treated her like family. They even nicknamed her mom or *Mamita*. Maria, Leonardo, and Ana used to run the store: Ana was the cashier because she could speak English, while Maria and Leonardo worked doing everything else. I have taken the liberty to change their names for the protection of their identities.

Washington Heights was a very tight-knit community; we often helped each other any way we could. Ana, Leonardo, and Maria helped my grandma during the times when she struggled to feed me. They would also shelter us when it was too cold out while she was street vending by waiting in the store for customers to come by.

Leonardo was very selfless, loyal, and he liked making jokes to lift other people's moods. At the same time, he became a father figure to me because he was very protective of us. Ana and Maria were also very welcoming and supportive; they always made sure that we were okay. I remember the Christmas of 2010 I wanted to get a video game, but my family could not afford it. That prompted Maria, Ana, and Leonardo to save up some money to buy me that gift. I was so happy and grateful that they had gone above and beyond to make me feel like I was part of their family. I will always be grateful to them for everything they did for us.

Leonardo's life story exudes resistance, as it's often the case for a lot of undocumented immigrants. He was raised in Mexico by his grandparents because his parents had abandoned him. He restrained himself from sharing a lot of details about his past because it caused him a lot of pain; in fact, I did not know this until recently. Despite his hardships growing up, he decided to come to the United States to find himself a better life. He crossed the U.S. and Mexico border in the late 1980s and ended up in New York, where he started working as a tailor in downtown Manhattan. Later he found a job at the store in 178th and that's where he stayed all this time, never having a spouse or children.

I graduated middle school in 2012. Subsequently, my mother and sister came to the U.S. shortly after. My grandma stopped being my caregiver, so she went back to DR for a few years. She occasionally came to the U.S. to stay with other family members months at a time and we lost communication for a while. I started going to high school in Harlem; I lost touch with the life I had in Washington Heights and the workers at the store.

During my high school years, several changes happened. Ana decided to quit her job as a cashier at the store, so Maria and Leonardo were left with all the work. The rent was so high that the store owner decided not to hire anyone to take her place, making the work too much to handle between the two of them. Not long after, the owner was obligated to close the 178th store location. Leonardo and Maria were transferred to work at his other location. Fun Fact: the location where the store was located opened as a Taco Bell a few years later.

Chaos

After I started attending Brooklyn College, my grandma re-established her communication with our family and decided to stay with us for one of her occasional U.S. trips. After she came, we had agreed that we were going to visit Leonardo and Maria so we could finally see each other. Unfortunately, that never happened because the opportunity never came. During that period, I was struggling a lot with balancing school and work; I had little very little time for myself. I was very sleep-deprived, and the stress at times was too much to handle. My everyday one-and-a-half-hour commute from the Bronx to Brooklyn did not make it any better. We were patiently waiting for my next break to meet up, but shortly after the pandemic started.

During the shutdown, everything was so chaotic. People didn't know what to make of that situation, or how long it would last. Brooklyn College and most CUNY's had announced that they would switch to online learning on the same day; professors had two weeks to make the sharp transition. By late March, the stay-at-home orders had shut down non-essential institutions and businesses. All I knew was that school and work were going to be remote indefinitely and that I was finally going to be able to catch up on much-needed sleep. I was very happy about that.

Unfortunately, on April 10th my grandma received that call announcing Leonardo's death. From Maria's recount of the story, the process following his death was very somber and dark. People in hazmat suits picked up his body in an ambulance. Since he had no next of kin and his grandparents were deceased, it was labeled as unclaimed. The city took responsibility for his burial at no cost. Little did anyone know that his body was likely buried in the isolated land where the city buries the unhoused, the sick, the unclaimed, and the poor: Hart Island. After his body was taken away, his room was in quarantine for 3 days to get ready for a police investigation before his distant cousin and Maria were allowed to pick up his belongings. Reflecting upon his passing makes me wonder if at any moment he needed medical assistance but stayed silent because of his status as an undocumented immigrant.

The pandemic has highlighted the systemic injustices carried out towards marginalized people, placing them in a position where they have been disproportionately affected by the new norms. Undocumented people are not the exception. They have been systematically denied a basic service that is necessary for the survival of the pandemic: access to health care. A Harvard Medical School article emphasized that undocumented people have the lowest access to health insurance in the country and receive subpar care compared to their counterparts (Collins, 2021). For the containment of the covid-19 virus to be achievable, health care must be readily available

for everyone, especially undocumented people. With it, they will be more likely to come forward and get treated. Without it, they may stay at home hoping to get better, possibly spreading it to those they live with. This denial of a basic service strips people from their humanity by depriving them of the opportunity to get treatment, denying them their survival.

Leonardo was working at the clothing store before the governor's executive order on March 20th to shut down non-essential businesses. Looking back, that's most likely how he contracted COVID-19. Although he was not an essential worker, an overwhelming majority of undocumented workers are. FWD.us estimates that more than two-thirds of essential workers are undocumented (69%), which is higher than immigrants (55%) and U.S.-born workers (48%) ("Undocumented Immigrant Essential Workers: 5 Things to Know", 2021). This proves that the economy relies heavily on the participation of undocumented workers more than any other group. As essential workers, they are not being compensated in any form for their increased risk because there is no hazard pay. At the same time, undocumented essential workers have less of an option to stay at home and work remotely and the more that they are at risk. Leonardo's situation is an example of how much more dangerous it is to work under the risk of exposure to COVID-19.

Additionally, the New School published a report where they estimated that New York City has lost 1.2 million workers due to the pandemic, and within that figure 192,000 are estimated to be undocumented immigrant workers (Parrott & Moe, 2020). It is also highlighted that "Nearly one in six New York City jobs lost due to the pandemic was held by an undocumented worker. The 54 percent displacement rate among undocumented workers is twice that of the 27 percent overall private sector displacement rate" (Parrott & Moe, 2020). It proves that being undocumented makes people more vulnerable to losing their jobs. They are already in a position where they have little options to ask for assistance, and the loss of employment can be devastating.

The New school report also emphasized the reason why undocumented people are more vulnerable to losing their jobs. They stress that non-essential industries that also happen to rely on face-to-face interaction (such as restaurants, hotels, construction, & private transport) also rely on low wages and low levels of education, making them more eager to hire immigrants, including those that are undocumented (Parrott & Moe, 2020). Because industries above require low levels of education, they are categorized as "low-skilled". That is how they try to justify their workers' low wages. By design, these industries prey on immigrants and undocumented workers. The fall of said industries directly translates to the demise of its workers, disproportionately affecting immigrants and undocumented workers.

Undocumented workers also have fewer options to provide any financial safety. They do not qualify for the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security Act (CARES). According to the attorney Taylor Jameson, undocumented people use an Individual Taxpayer Identification Number (ITIN) instead of using a social security number to file their taxes, which automatically disqualifies them from receiving the benefits (Jameson, n.d.). During the COVID-19 pandemic, access to unemployment can be the difference between life and death. It's the difference between staying at home safely and being at risk by going out to work. In the context of a pandemic, it stops being a financial tool and it starts being a means of survival.

Lastly, a New York Times article pointed out that CARES benefits are denied to families that have filed taxes jointly with a person who had an ITIN, even if only a single person in the family is undocumented (Dickerson, 2020). The government is using the tactic of guilt by association to deny people their benefits. It is inconceivable and sickening to know that you can

be a tax-paying undocumented worker and it would not guarantee you or your family any protection, even if they are entitled to that compensation. The government chooses not to provide any relief for families with undocumented people, emphasizing that their well-being is not their concern. Like I mentioned before, access to financial safety nets makes the difference between life and death.

Resistance

Almost overnight, I noticed an explosion of street vendors in my neighborhood. Some I had never seen in previous summers. They were selling an assortment of items from masks and makeup, to house plants. When I went to visit Washington Heights, I had also noticed the same thing. It made me think about the relationship between street vending and undocumented workers during these difficult times. A New York Times article highlighted that “With little recourse, many immigrants from Latin America — who already were among the hardest hit by the virus — have resorted to what they did back home: working as ambulantes — street vendors” (Arreondo & Gonzalez, 2020). Street vending is one option available to undocumented workers. At this time, it is used to provide some relief for families that have been left without economic means of survival. Its nature of self-employment allows people to have complete control over their business and guarantees that they will not lose their jobs. But it also comes with its disadvantages.

That same New York Times article also pointed out that “[Street vending] is a fluid ecosystem, evidenced by the flood of newcomers ... and those who support them” (Arreondo & Gonzalez, 2020). It is undeniable that the pandemic has created a surge of first-time undocumented vendors looking for economic relief. However, their presence is not benign. One vendor stated that “Before the pandemic business was so much better ... Now there are more sellers than customers.” (Arreondo & Gonzalez, 2020). The increasing number of vendors has created more competition with existing vendors, making it more difficult to make a profit. An article by the Wall Street Journal highlights that street vendors estimate that the loss in pedestrian activity has contributed to the loss of 30% - 40% in sales (Kadet, 2020). The surplus of vendors and shortage of customers due to the pandemic critically diminished vendors’ collective earnings. This can be devastating for undocumented vendors because they have to put themselves and their families at risk during the pandemic for 60% - 70% of their average earnings without guarantee of access to medical care.

Another disadvantage of street vending is the shortage of mobile food vending permits in New York City. According to Sharon Otterman from the New York Times, in 1983, the city set a permit cap at 2,900, forcing new street vendors to either sell illegally and risk getting tickets, or rent out licenses in the black market; cardholders gouge the price by charging up to \$25,000 every two years, which only costs them \$200 to renew (Otterman, 2019). It is absurd to force vendors to resort to selling without permits, while the city gets to penalize those without them when they were not made available in the first place. It can be intimidating for undocumented people to sell without a permit because it makes them an easy target for the police. Their only option to have some security is to get a license in the black market, forcing them to pay an exorbitant amount of money every two years.

But there’s good news. As of January 28th, 2021, Intro 1116 passed legislation, guaranteeing to gradually add 4,000 new licenses by 2022 (Crowley, 2021). This bill provides immense relief for undocumented street vendors because it would legitimize their business, as

well as protect them from police harassment. Also, a viral video of a woman's arrest for selling churros at a subway train station has prompted the city not to task police officers with enforcing street vendor regulations as of December 2020 (Vick, 2021). For now, vendors will not be policed or punished by amounting fines if they do not have a license, allowing undocumented people to make a living.

Growing up in Washington Heights has allowed me to meet working people and learn about their struggles. The pandemic has made me realize that Leonardo's tragic passing reflects the larger societal issues surrounding undocumented people. They are more likely to be essential workers, increasing their exposure to COVID-19. They have also been systematically deprived of the services that are essential to survive the pandemic, including access to quality healthcare and unemployment benefits. They have used street vending as means of resistance because the government has turned its back on them. It has been a viable choice for undocumented families, but it comes with struggles of its own. Their livelihood has been compromised by an increasing number of vendors and fewer customers, diminishing their collective earnings. Furthermore, the already established systemic barriers to prevent street vendors from legitimizing their business have encouraged the police to target and penalize vendors. But the injustices done to them have sparked action to allow them to feed their families through the passing of intro 1116, promising a bright future. I hope that the ongoing struggle of undocumented workers serves as an example to our and future generations of the impact of neglecting an entire population, and I hope that society doesn't make the same mistakes again.

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