

LIVING IN FEAR

Immigrants'
Mental Health
Tested

Ten years ago, Christmas was loud, organized chaos for Nohemy (whose name has been changed to protect her identity). The aroma of pozoles, quesados and homemade tortillas filled her grandma's two-bedroom duplex. She remembers being a 10-year-old surrounded by the people she loved and the delicious food, laughter and Christmas presents.

"Those years that I had with everyone were the best years of my life," Nohemy said.

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FEATURE

Her family in the United States is much smaller now. When Nohemy was in fourth grade, many family members were deported back to Mexico. The next Christmas marked the start of missing her family members who were no longer in the U.S.

“That first Christmas sucked so much,” Nohemy said. “I don’t want to have winter break or Christmas break or any of that, because, what’s the point?”

Nohemy, a 20-year-old Mount Mary junior, has always been plagued by fears of deportation, and it’s made her anxious about the safety of her family members every day. Who will she lose next?

She’s not the only one. According to the Center for American Progress 115,747 people in Wisconsin have at least one undocumented family member. Vanessa Rosas, a bilingual psychotherapist who works with immigrants at Sixteenth Street Clinic, a community health center in Milwaukee, has seen immigrants suffer with the same fears as Nohemy.

“There is a paranoia that happens and a suspicion that someone ringing the doorbell will be someone who is there to take your loved one away,” Rosas said. “This is the reality of many people who live in this city.”

She said that this constant fear could lead to an anxiety disorder or a mood disorder.

“The fear can stop individuals from experiencing new things,” Rosas said. “There are many things that these individuals restrict due to the fear of being caught.”

Journey to the United States

Both of Nohemy’s parents are from Ciudad, Mexico, a city near the border. Before Nohemy was born, they lived near each other in the same neighborhood, with dirt roads, small houses and a close community. Everyone worked hard to excel, but it was simply impossible to earn a living wage.

Her grandmother would make 150 burritos to sell to children during their school recess in order to support her own three children.

“She would sell food outside of their home, and they had a neighborhood where a lot of the people around there knew that she sold food, so they would go to her if they didn’t feel like cooking that night,” Nohemy said. “My grandma only had education up to the second grade. She really only knew how to read and write.”

When Nohemy’s mother became pregnant at 15, she knew she had to get to Texas to give her future child a better life.

“My mom basically dropped everything and moved her whole life to Texas,” Nohemy said. “And I was born in Texas.”

Since Nohemy was born in the U.S., she is a citizen. However, her parents came to Texas on student visas. Their student visas only lasted for six months, but they weren’t planning on returning to Mexico.

When Nohemy was 2 years old, she and her mother went to Milwaukee because of the work opportunities after Nohemy’s mother and father split up.

When Nohemy was 3 years old, her father attempted to start a new relationship. However, when he did not want to marry her after she became pregnant with his child, his girlfriend had him deported.

“He’s (her father) like, ‘okay, I will help you with this kid, but I am not going to marry you and be with you, it’s just not going to happen,’” Nohemy said. “And that really pissed her (his girlfriend) off. And so she called immigration officers on him and they deported him.”

Nohemy’s father desperately wanted to come back to the U.S., so through connections he formed in Mexico, he came back, but not legally.

“They got a coyote that sneaks people from Mexico to the U.S.,” Nohemy said. “So that’s what he did.”

Without papers, Nohemy’s father risks deportation again, something that plagues Nohemy’s sense of wellbeing daily.

“He’s just a cute, little dorky dad who makes fun of his kids and disciplines them when he needs to and has such a good (sense of) humor,” Nohemy said. “It wouldn’t be fair for him to be deported now because he’s just so different. He’s grown up so much, you



Last year, Nohemy’s aunt threw a family gathering in Mexico. Since Nohemy and her brother are both U.S. citizens, they can visit Mexico and see their family without fear. The family party consisted of her cousins, great aunt and grandmother. **Photo provided by Nohemy.**

Nohemy's one-year-old baby sister loves attention and grabbing on Nohemy's hands and hair. Nohemy has already thought about what may happen if her little sister has to go to Mexico with her mother. "A school is a school and as long as she learns her colors and her ABCs she'll be fine, and then she can come back to the U.S.," Nohemy said.

Photo provided by Nohemy.



know, he has his business in order. He loves his wife so much and he loves his kids so much and he pays the bills and the rent and he loves to cook with them and spoil them."

Losing Her Family

Nohemy's mother remained in Milwaukee, failing to return to Mexico to renew her student visa. Nohemy's grandma joined the pair on a vacation visa in Milwaukee to help her daughter raise Nohemy. Although she was there on a vacation visa, she was not planning on going back to Mexico either.

"My mom was my mom, but I was mainly raised by my grandma," Nohemy said. "I want to say for the first 10 years of my life, I saw my grandma more than I saw my mom because, at that time, we were living with like eight people in one house and my mom was the only one with a full-time job."

Nohemy looked up to her grandmother and saw her as a motherly figure.

"My grandma is literally the wisest person I know," Nohemy said.

When Nohemy was 10 years old, her grandmother and aunt were deported.

"(Her mother) made a pretty bad mistake," Nohemy said. "Basically, she looked at her student visa and she's like, 'Oh, it's going to expire this year.' So, her and other family members were like, 'We should just take a vacation out of Mexico. We haven't seen them (family) in like 10-ish years. We should go.'"

Entering Mexico wasn't difficult – Nohemy, her younger brother, aunt, grandmother and mother were all let in with ease. Coming back proved to be more difficult than anticipated.

Nohemy's mother was let back in, even though officers at the border realized that she hadn't used her student visa in 10 years, which was illegal. Nohemy's aunt wasn't as fortunate.

"When she swiped her visa, they stopped her and they said, 'There's something wrong here,'" Nohemy said. "Why is there this 10-year gap? What's going on here?' They caught her, interrogated her and gave her a 10 year castigo, which means a 10-year penalty time-out where there is absolutely no way that the legal system will let her take out a visa, papers, green card, anything. It's just 10 years punishment."

That was 10 years of having to stay in Mexico, separated from her sister and mother. While the rest of the family who had made it back was in Texas, Nohemy's grandmother wanted to go back to Milwaukee, because her son was still there. She decided to take a bus, but this wasn't a safe decision.

"She got on this bus, and the bus got pulled over, and they checked everyone's papers and she didn't have any," Nohemy said. "So, they took her and she got deported for 10 years too."

Nohemy was very young, but she knew from then on that nothing would be the same. Her younger cousins also went back to Mexico to be with their mother, and the size of her family was halved.

"It was just very weird because we went from a family of, like, eight people to a family of four," Nohemy said. "I mean, that year I knew that things are just always gonna be different."

Rosas says that she's had clients that have felt that they are different from others, and this has impacted their mental health.

"Many clients have come to see me with symptoms of depression and anxiety because they are in a country that sees them as the 'other,'" Rosas said.

Nohemy and her mother also experience what Nohemy refers to as "seasonal depression" around holidays because of the loneliness that they experience, missing their family in Mexico.

"It feels very lonely," Nohemy said. "You just want your family there. You want to talk, you want to laugh, you want to dance with the little kids and make fun of people. But all of that is just taken away."

Nohemy lost her mother-figure and her aunt, and her mother knew she couldn't go back. Now, it was just her uncle, mother, step-dad and little brother in Milwaukee. Nohemy knows that she could lose her mother from one wrong move, and that's what scares her the most.

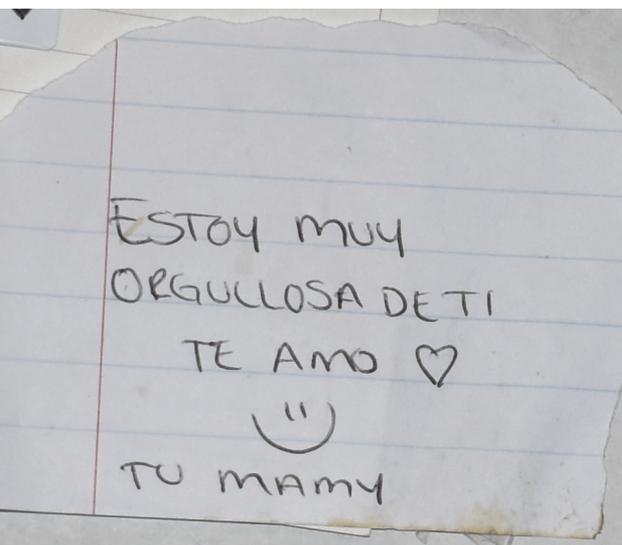
Living in Fear

Today, Nohemy lives in a house about 20 minutes away from where her stepfather, mother, brother, 13, and baby sister, 1, live. She visits often, and thinks about them every day.

Tearfully, Nohemy describes her biggest fear – that she could lose her mother.



Nohemy explained her painting of her house coated with honey. “When I was younger, my grandma explained prayer to me like it was honey,” Nohemy said. “When you’re praying for someone, it’s like you’re covering them with goodness and protection with a thick coat. I painted this to say, ‘Bless our house and everything in it.’”



During Nohemy’s sophomore year of college, her mother put a note into her lunch box that said, “I am very proud of you. I love you. Your mom.”

“I wouldn’t know what to do without her,” Nohemy said. “Yeah, that’s my biggest fear. It’s not me dying or getting in a car crash or fear of heights. It’s, what am I going to do without her? She was 15 when she had me, and she’s given me everything. She’s like the best mom ever. She’s the definition of mom all in one person.”

Her mother considered applying for U.S. citizenship, but immigration lawyers have warned her of the risks.

“The only way that she can apply for citizenship is to do something that we call *pide perdón*, which is like asking for forgiveness,” Nohemy said. “And in that process, you have to go to Mexico and schedule a meeting and present your case to a judge and that judge is going to say either yes you can apply for citizenship, or, no, you are deported.”

For her family, the risks are just too high. Nohemy’s mother has a son and a new baby to care for.

“It’s kind of hard for her to pick up everything and leave her three kids here to take a chance down in Mexico that could go either way, and then maybe come back home,” Nohemy said. “If she doesn’t come back home, then, I would probably be left up here. My brother, my sister and her husband could go live in Mexico with her but that’s not their home.”

Recently, all of Nohemy’s greatest fears about losing her mother almost became a reality.

Nohemy received a call from her mother that said she had been pulled over after dropping her son off at school. She needed Nohemy and a close family friend to come and show their driver’s licenses.

“I picked up my friend,” Nohemy said. “We went to the spot where she got pulled over. We parked behind the cop and the cop was like, ‘Is this is your mom? I need you to take your sister and take her car and you guys can pick (your mother) up at the police station.’”

Nohemy couldn’t stop shaking on the whole drive to the police station. She had no idea what was going to happen to her mother. Her mind raced with what she was going to have to do.

“Oh my God, I’m going to have to take care of my sister,” Nohemy said. “I’m going to have to take

care of my brother. Can I even go to school? I need to pick up more shifts.”

Luckily, the police officer just told her mother not to speed anymore. Then, he let her go. Nohemy is thankful for that situation, but that doesn’t mean her mind doesn’t race with those same thoughts every day.

It is not just Nohemy who fears what could happen to her mother while driving. Rosas said that 40 percent of her clients are undocumented immigrants who express their fears to her. Rosas’ clients typically describe a similar situation to what happened to Nohemy’s mother.

“I have had people who have described panic attacks when driving their kids to school because they saw a police officer,” Rosas said.

With recent Immigration and Customs Enforcement raids in the South Milwaukee area, Nohemy’s anxiety about her mother has gotten even worse. On social media, friends from the area will post about ICE, warning others. Nohemy will nonchalantly text her mother and ask her how she is doing, but the fear that she feels waiting for her mother to answer is intense.

“Oh God, it makes me so nervous,” Nohemy said. “It’s like, ‘Answer, please.’”

Rosas has also spoken to clients who have experienced damage to their mental health because of recent ICE raids.

“President Trump, early in his presidency, signed executive orders that would increase border security and increase deportations of unauthorized immigrants,” Rosas said. “In addition to signing the executive order, the 287 (g) program was reignited, which authorized ‘local and state law enforcement agencies to perform immigration enforcement activities, including investigating, arrest, deportation, transport and searches of unauthorized immigrants.’”

Stricter immigration laws have been accompanied by normalizing hateful rhetoric in the United States.

“The rhetoric that is shared about immigrants profoundly impacts the wellbeing of those who are being targeted,” Rosas said. “The discrimination that individuals faced

is shown in social attitudes, ethnic group barriers and microaggressions, which can result in lower self-esteem, loss of identity, internalized symptoms and behavioral problems.”

Rosas describes a client who began to isolate herself and her children from society after the start of Trump’s presidency.

“I had a woman who I saw that had two children,” Rosas said. “Her fear of the police and fear of being caught was so severe that she had to withdraw her children from their school and home-school them for one year to avoid leaving her house. Her children began to separate themselves from their parents, could not concentrate, were not able to sleep or eat well. There was a stress that was placed on their family because of the mother’s fear that she would be taken back to a country that she no longer considered her home.”

Nohemy has also experienced hopefulness and strength. She is currently active in Hispanic Professionals of Greater Milwaukee, a nonprofit organization helping Hispanic individuals advance in their careers. She is also a part of Students Achieving Leadership Through Spanish Activities, a support group for Latina and non-Latina students to promote understanding of the Latino culture.

“It makes me feel a little bit stronger,” Nohemy said. “Yeah, I’m super sad about it and it sucks but it also makes me feel like I have these privileges and I need to make the most use out of them. I need to work harder. I need to save more money.”

Nohemy admits that she wishes she could just take a deep breath more often.

“My whole life, I’ve been preparing to just take care of my family since forever,” Nohemy said. “It’s like, with other kids, you’re going to do great things because we believe you can do it. It’s like, you’re going to do great things because we need you to.”

Nohemy’s fears of having to take care of her family are founded. There are many families who struggle after family members are deported. according to the Migration Policy Institute, 32 percent of children living in low-income families in the United States are children of immigrants.

“Poverty is high among undocumented families and

individuals,” Rosas said. “Being undocumented in Milwaukee further limits work opportunities to decent-paying jobs. Individuals report that due to being undocumented, they allow exploitative working conditions. Some families have lost additional income by a parent due to deportation.”

Nohemy wants people to understand that the solution to her fear isn’t as simple as asking her undocumented family members to apply for citizenship.

“I don’t need the advice,” Nohemy said. “I don’t need the whole, like, ‘Oh, you should go see a lawyer.’ Trust me, we’ve done all of it. We’ve seen all the lawyers and we’ve saved all the money and it’s still too much.”

Don’t Suffer in Silence

There’s help for undocumented immigrants or immigrants who live in fear of losing their family members. Nohemy said that her counselor, Victoria Rydell, in the Promise Program, a program at Mount Mary that provides academic and financial support to first-generation students, has been a great person to talk to.

“You just feel hopeless, and just being able to release the pressure and just talk about it and saying, ‘It’s unfair,’ but just knowing that you’re not alone and there’s a thousand other stories of a million other people that are going through the same thing, it’s like, okay, I’m not alone,” Nohemy said.

Rosas also recommends several organizations in Milwaukee dedicated to helping immigrants and their mental health.

“You are not alone and there are people who care about these issues,” Rosas said. “There are great organizations like Walker’s Point, Sixteenth Street Clinic, Outreach Clinic or Sebastian Family Psychology Clinic that provide excellent care. I would encourage individuals to seek help.”

This article is the second in a series of stories about the challenges that students face with immigration. If you have any ideas pertaining to the subject or would like to share your story, contact Quinn Clark at clarkq@mtmary.edu.



Nohemy often wears her mother’s necklace, that her mother eventually let her keep. Her mother also gave her an infinity ring on Nohemy’s twentieth birthday. “In our Mexican culture, gold jewelry is only worn on fancy occasions or a popular gift to give to kids as they grow older,” Nohemy said.