

## ImmStoriesCapStoryLiveOct2022.mp3

**Lisa Cantrell** You're listening to "Capital Storytelling Live." My name is Lisa Cantrell and I will be your host. The following recording came from an event that featured storytellers who all identified as immigrants or children of immigrants. The event was, rightfully so, called "Immigrant Stories," and it was held on October 28th, 2022, on the campus of Sacramento State University in celebration of National Immigrants Day. Capital Storytelling partnered with the Dreamer Resource Center at Sacramento State to host the event and we were sponsored by Capital Public Radio and Student Affairs of Sacramento State.

**Lisa Cantrell** On this recording, you will hear from five storytellers who each got on stage that night and shared. Our first storyteller of the evening was Ximena Ospina. Ximena says that her heart is rooted in Colombia and it stretches out its fruitful branches in the United States. As an immigrant, she says, she sometimes has felt that she was neither from here nor there. But, with the power of storytelling and the human connection and cultural preservation it brings, she's been able to find a little bit of home. Ximena's story is entitled "Siempre Waiting."

**Ximena Ospina** [Applause] Before I share my story with you, I wanted to begin with a fact: 90 million people are internally displaced worldwide, and I anchor my story around this fact to really emphasize a couple of things. One is that my story is not so unique, and also that I'm just part of a global phenomenon.

**Ximena Ospina** In the mid-nineties, I was seven years old, so I'll let you do the math [Laughter], and my family and I packed our whole lives into four suitcases, and we left Colombia to the United States. This was after a few attempted kidnappings of my father and the last threat was on me, and no longer Colombia could offer us safety. So we left. We used to say I became a very anxious kid, especially with everything that was happening with my family and myself, so much so that I slept with my parents for a very long time and I would sleep right in the middle of both of them and I would make sure that they were okay by placing my hand over their mouth and nose to make sure that they were still breathing at nighttime. I also would interlace my leg with my dad's leg and my mom's arm with my arm so they wouldn't go anywhere. So, granted, they didn't get very good sleep for many, many years [Laughter].

**Ximena Ospina** And so we left and we came to California. As a new immigrant kid, there was this question that I was always asking: why are we always waiting? We waited a lot. The first waiting that I remember was at the immigration office trying to meet with our attorney. It was this really dark place, the wait room, and they always had AC blasting. We would wait. There was this corner of the wait room where there was a communal area for kids to play, and there were these crusty toys. My favorite one was one that had a wooden base, and it had these barbed wires that would come from one end to another with twists and turns-- I don't know if you all know what I'm talking about [Laughter]. There is this wooden ball that you had to come across to get it to the other side. All these intricacies, which is a really great metaphor for the immigration system in the United States [Laughter].

**Ximena Ospina** So there I was waiting. But it didn't stop there. The waiting continued. Another place that I spent a lot of time at was the DMV, the Department of Motor Vehicles. America's favorite place to bond. Just kidding [Laughter]. Typically, when I would go with my parents, I would sit with them. We had moved to Monterey, California, so there was the Monterey DMV. There were two wait areas with a kiosk and there was this giant statue

right in the middle inside. Again, typically, I would wait with my mom, my dad, but this time I was feeling super antsy. So I asked them, can I just sit by the statue and just wait there? And they said, "okay." We could still keep an eye on each other.

**Ximena Ospina** So I walk over to the statue and I sit down and I will say that I was with my handy dandy Barbie. Her name was Esmeralda. She had black hair and green eyes. She was part of the four suitcases that we came with-- one of them was filled with my Barbies. Esmeralda was my favorite. So as I sat there and the more bored that I got, the more that my imagination started getting very creative. So this giant statue actually became this mountain and so then I got up and I would grab my Barbie and I would start climbing. Not me, but the Barbie would start climbing the statue and I would get really high up on my tippy toes trying to reach all of these high levels of this mountain range that I had created in my head with the statue. I lost track of time and I realized, okay, Ximena you are alone in this new country. You don't speak English, you should probably check in on your people to see where they're at. So I look around and I no longer see my parents, and this sense of panic just came over me. Again, I was a very anxious kid and I always thought something was going to happen to my parents. So I started freaking out and panicking. My heart starts beating, my hands get really sweaty, my eyes start getting really foggy and I really can't see cause I'm trying to hold back tears. All I could see was these automatic doors that opened and closed at the DMV. I thought to myself, well, if they've left, I probably should just run out to catch them. They can't be that far. So that's exactly what I did. So I grabbed Esmeralda in one hand and we just booked it out of the DMV. As soon as my foot was about to hit the parking lot, a woman stops me and she starts speaking in English. I couldn't understand her. She's switching to Spanish because she realizes that I don't speak English. As I'm trying to tell her what's going on, my mom just comes flying out. I turned around and I see her and I am so relieved. Her reaction was a little bit different. She was so frustrated. She's like, ¿Qué estás haciendo? What are you doing? Because this whole time she had seen the whole freakout mode happen and apparently it was a very short span. So she saw me sitting down, getting up, walking around and then looking around and then just running. But to me, this felt like eternity. But it was apparently only like a minute or two of all of this happening. I blame this incident on the waiting.

**Ximena Ospina** Fast forward 20 years later, I had just moved to Sacramento and I was at a job interview at a refugee resettlement agency. I'm waiting in the wait room and I'm sitting down and I see a family of four walk in. It's a mom and a dad and a daughter who's about seven, the same age that I was when I came to the United States, and a little boy, which was the brother, was about two years old, the same age that my sister was when she had come to the United States. They sat right in front of me. The little girl is talking and talking and talking and she's speaking Pashto. She's from Afghanistan. They're also with an interpreter and a caseworker. I'm just super curious about what this little girl is saying, and so is the caseworker. So the caseworker looks at the interpreter and asks, "hey, what is the little girl saying"? And the interpreter looks at the caseworker and says, she's asking, "why are we always waiting"? At that moment, I went back 20 years ago. I went back to the time where I was the attorney's office. I went back in time when I was at the DMV, and I started to cry. I'm about to go to a job interview, so not necessarily a good thing. I'm crying and I always think about perhaps what they might be thinking, right? This woman who's sitting staring at them, she's smiling at them, just like looking at them. Then all of a sudden she starts crying. Clearly, she's not doing well.

**Ximena Ospina** I got myself together and I get called up to the interview. I walk upstairs and it's a panel of three. It's the leadership team, and I'm sitting right in front of them. The first question that they asked me was, What brought you here today? All I could think

about and all I could blurt out was, I'm here because of the little girl. I am the little girl. I started again to cry, not recommended. It's a job interview [Laughter]. To my surprise, I made it through the interview and to a bigger surprise, I got the job [Applause].

**Ximena Ospina** All of this is to say that from Colombia to Afghanistan, it's the narrative, this notion of this collective wait as immigrants, so much so that it took 15 years for me to get my U.S. citizenship. I remember the day that I went to go do my naturalization ceremony. It was in San Francisco, California. That's when you go and take your oath and they celebrate you. How it was structured, it was this big ballroom and it's about 200 plus people representing all sorts of different countries from around the globe. At first, there's this very fancy official that comes up and tells you your rights and responsibilities as a U.S. citizen. Then they start calling individuals up by country in alphabetical order. So first is Afghanistan. Everyone from Afghanistan stands up and they do this all the way until the letter Z. As I'm observing all these individuals, I'm seeing so many different expressions and emotions happening in this room. Some individuals are super proud, others are a little anxious. Others are also a little bit relieved. Then there I was. I was feeling really angry. I was angry that when my family and I had to leave, that Colombia could not give me the opportunities, the sanity, the safety for me to be a person in my own country and to flourish. Then I was really sad that also taking this oath meant that I was going to be less Colombian. For 15 years I wasn't able to go back to my home country. That was for me, the biggest struggle of being an immigrant in the United States. It was trying to nurture that identity of my Colombianidad. It also doesn't help that in the oath you're actually stating that you're going to give up all allegiance to your home country. Now you are in full allegiance to the United States. So, in a way, it did feel like I was losing part of who I was. I sat with those emotions. Throughout this whole journey, I've really learned a lot from my own immigration process, and I continue to learn. Sometimes, the immigration process does have some trauma. For me, that trauma really ignited a lot of anger. A lot of anger. But what's beautiful about this anger is that as I've been able to harness it, it's also been a way for me to find my own purpose. Thank you [Applause].

**Lisa Cantrell** That was Ximena Ospina. Up next, we have Meghna Bhat. Meghna is a proud first generation South Asian immigrant and a capital storytelling ambassador. Her superpower, she says, is using storytelling to create culture and narrative change about topics that are taboo and stigmatized, such as gender violence, mental health, sex education and more. Meghna says she is a true cancerian. She loves chaat--a street food in India, brisk walks, acrylic painting, hummingbirds, visiting her patio and sending Schitt's Creek gifts to her loved ones. Meghna says she is truly grateful to her biological and chosen communities for making her a better, more compassionate human being. You'll be hearing her story entitled Everyone Knows Someone. As a quick content warning, there is nothing graphic in Meghna's story, but it does deal with topics of domestic violence and abuse.

**Meghna Bhat** [Applause] So my story goes back to the time when I was in middle school growing up in Mumbai, India. That's where I was born and raised. I grew up in a middle class, working family with my mom, a maths schoolteacher of 20 plus years, my dad, a self-employed businessman, my younger sister and my paternal grandparents who lived with us. My parents did their best to support a family of five.

**Meghna Bhat** Once in a while they would take us out for these budgeted weekend getaways with other family members from the community who had kids. We would all spend time together. As kids, we would get so excited for school to get over and go on these road trips because we would chill out, play outdoor games and dance to music.

Among these families who we accompanied during these road trips, there was this one family. The parents were much older than my parents, and they had two daughters. One was as young as me, and the other one was about 7 to 8 years older than us. Her name was Aparna and I called her Aparna akka. Akka means older sister in my native language in Konkani. So Aparna akka was this beautiful, graceful, smart woman that I was in awe of. Her smile just lit up the room. She was so reassuring and she made us kids who are younger than her feel so comfortable, so seen and validated. I'll tell you why that's important is because I was an introvert. I did not have a lot of friends. I was a really quiet child. A fact that my partner and my family cannot believe right now [Laughter]. So that's what mattered to me and even though I loved spending time with my adorable younger sister, she was still small for my age. But spending time with Aparna akka and her younger sister was one of the best moments during these childhood getaways. Even though she was my friend's aka, I felt like she was my aka too. She was my older sister.

**Meghna Bhat** There was something about Aparna . She was very kind, she could hold conversations of all topics with people across all ages. That made her popular and well-liked in our community. I remember we had a beauty pageant in our community club that was like a huge deal. Oh, my God, the excitement. I remember that year Aparna aka was awarded Miss Wadala. We felt like we knew a celebrity. I remember the way she walked on the stage with such confidence and humility and grace, the way she answered the questions posed by the beauty pageant judges. She answered them with wit and sassiness. I wanted to be just like her, just like Aparna aka.

**Meghna Bhat** As time flew by, as life goes by, as we all know, we kind of lost in touch. Because I started high school, she started college, all the other kids got busy. So rarely we would go for these weekend getaways, but we would meet once or twice at our cultural festivals at the community club. It was still not the same. Later that year, my mom gave me this exciting news that Aparna aka was going to get married. Oh my god. I was so excited for her. I was a hopeless romantic. But I was genuinely happy for her. I remember going to her engagement ceremony. I remember going to the wedding ceremony. There she was, looking gorgeous, happy and radiant. A few months later, someone told me that she had left for the US with her husband, who was this young, dashing, successful Indian doctor. Imagine living the Bollywood romantic dream and the American dream together [Laughter]. I just wanted to be like her. At that time, there was no social media, no emails. Again, as life got busy, we all lost touch. We didn't even know what was going on.

**Meghna Bhat** Many years later. I was in my first year of college in Mumbai, 10 minutes away from home. I remember coming back one day from my classes. I walked into my living room. My parents were talking grimly with each other. I asked them, "What's wrong"? I got worried. They glanced at each other and they made me sit down. My mom told me, you remember Aparna? we just got the news that Aparna had got divorced from her husband and had returned back to India. I did not know what divorce was, what it meant, like what it looked like, what it was like to experience that. I had no idea. I just knew it was a hush hush topic among our community members. It was taboo, especially for women. I felt a sense of sadness for her. At that time, my dad added, Meghna there is something you should know, in a very serious tone, he told me a Aparna was being abused and battered by her husband in the U.S. for many years. She finally left the U.S. and came back home to her family. The words abused, battered, her husband and Aparna all started jumbling in my mind. I did not know how to react. I felt like my legs and my hands could not move. I could feel a knot in my stomach. I could feel a lump in my throat and a lot of thoughts were racing in my mind. What happened? Why did the abuse happen? How come she didn't get to leave earlier? How is she doing now? And while processing that, in

my mind, I also thought, is this the same Aparna akka we're talking about? The same one I saw who was so radiant and happy on that wedding stage. Is she the same one who answered those questions so confidently to those beauty pageant judges? It still didn't make sense.

**Meghna Bhat** My mom and my dad told me that poor girl, nobody should have to go through this. It is horrifying. My mom calling Aparna a poor girl did not come from a sense of pity or pathologizing her or the need to save her. My mom was just feeling a deep sense of empathy and anger for what had happened to her. My dad responded "I'm just glad that Aparna is back home safely with her family in India and that's what matters. There was something so caring, so compassionate about the way my parents responded to Aparna that left a deep, lasting impression on my mind and heart. There was something very profound at that moment that helped me process what had happened to Aparna.

**Meghna Bhat** What I didn't know and what you should also know is that a year later I too was going to experience sexual harassment at my workplace and I too was going to be in a relationship which was abusive. I was going to experience intimate partner abuse and stalking by a person who I had just started dating. I was feeling scared, ashamed, guilty of being in that abusive relationship. I didn't know again how to make sense of it. I was scared because I knew where he knew where I lived. He knew my family. I knew that if I had to share it with my parents, I honestly don't know how they would have reacted to that situation. But I felt in my gut that they would have probably been supportive. But I did not share it at that time.

**Meghna Bhat** While going through all of these feelings of guilt and shame and blaming myself, I was wondering why I didn't see the warning signs, what could I have done? Could I have better communicated that this person was causing harm and hurting me? Should I leave? While processing that, it hit me like a load of bricks. I was like, Oh my goodness on a very different level, this is what Aparna akka may have gone through in a country far, far away, away from her family and community by herself. Maybe at that time there was no support system and there's no conversation around it happening.

**Meghna Bhat** As a college student in psychology, I had started just grappling with the harsh realities of gender violence prevalence in our communities. I had also realized that street harassment and stalking and sexual harassment is not romantic. It's not a sign of love. It's not a sign of respect. In hindsight, my parents reaction to Aparna could have been traumatizing, could have been hurtful, it could have been judgmental. But at that moment, in that conversation, a year before, they did not judge her at all. So when I thought about Aparna, when she was ready to leave her abusive relationship and thinking of my parents words filled with empathy and kindness, I decided to take a step back from this abusive partner and cut off ties with him in a safe way. That's what gave me the strength.

**Meghna Bhat** In 2004, later that year, I came to the U.S. to start my graduate studies as a young international student. Every course I took in victimology, every course I took in gender studies. Every interaction I had with a stranger who disclosed their experience with me. Every advocate. Every. Every survivor. I realized I had so much to learn and unlearn, like many of the ignorant responses coming from the community, including from myself. Instead of asking questions about why they didn't leave and other things, I think it's time to create that space with kindness and empathy.

**Meghna Bhat** I'll tell you, among the many things that I learned and unlearned what impacted me the most, There were three things. One is that domestic violence can happen to anyone. It can happen across all sectors, irrespective of gender identity, education, employment, how rich they may be, what house they may be living in, sexual orientation and across all demographics. But also, domestic violence is not just an immigrant community issue, it's not a third world or a developing country problem. It happens here as well, unfortunately. Second, as I mentioned, a lot of my responses would come from a sense of protecting them. I realized that I could ask a different question instead of asking them, why didn't you leave? Or what happened? I started asking them, how can I support you in your healing process? And I believe you and I see you. Because that would have helped me, that would have helped Aparna. Last but not the least is cultural change is possible and prevention is possible. If we have these difficult, messy conversations with our community members, with our youth about what consent is, what healthy relationships are, healthy masculinity, about gender equity. I believe prevention is possible. And the reason why I'm sharing this story today and why I'm wearing a shade of purple is October is Domestic Violence Awareness Month. The theme for this year is "Everyone Knows Someone." So I dedicate this story to Aparna. I dedicate the story to myself and to all those who have experienced some form of abuse and harm, those who are still struggling through difficult situations, and those who we have lost to domestic violence. I see you and I believe you. A big shout out to all the advocates, the educators, parents, teachers who are working to make that change possible. I know it is possible. As my mom said, nobody should go through this. Thank you [Applause].

**Lisa Cantrell** That was Meghna Bhat sharing her story live on stage at our event called "Immigrant Stories," held in October of 2022 on the campus of Sacramento State. Our next story comes from Kimberly Gomez. Kimberly is a first generation Latina raised in El Monte, California. As the oldest daughter in an immigrant household, Kimberly was the first in her family to earn a high school diploma and go to college. She says she has worked to create space for safety and belonging for marginalized students to grow academically and personally. At the time of this recording, she was the coordinator of the Dreamer Resource Center at Sacramento State. The title of her story is "A Day at the Mango Loco."

**Kimberly Gomez** My name is Kim Gomes and I am going to tell you a story about a day at El Mango Loco. And before I begin, I just want to dedicate this to my abuelita, to my grandma, Mama Rufina. My uncle Tony is the owner of a small business called Sugar Source. Sugar Source is a business where he would get small bags of sugar and put them in big costales, in big bags of sugar, and then we would send those to bakeries and bigger businesses. So that was kind of what he was doing for his small business. Something else to note, my entire family is undocumented. So that was something that he was trying to do. He was trying to be an entrepreneur.

**Kimberly Gomez** One day, a woman comes up to his business and she knocks on the door and she asks if my uncle could possibly make her some dried mango chamoy and chili. My uncle was like, 'Sure, why not'? He's an entrepreneur [Laughter]. So he will do anything, you know, to make a little bit more money. He did it along with my mom, Maria's, help. They started creating their own recipe of chamoy, and they started creating their own recipe of chili spice. Now, some people might not know what chamoy is, It is very hard to explain [Laughter], but it is like a thick, spicy, savory type of sauce. We use it a lot in our Latinx culture. I personally put it on my hot Cheetos and about everything else. So that idea actually sparked El Mango Loco and it started booming. So these dried mangoes with chamoy and chili, it was selling. It was selling much more than the sugar. So what did he do? Of course, he hired all of his undocumented sisters and their kids, myself included

[Laughter]. So we were all hired. My first summer job was making Chamoy. So I was making it this one summer, and it was really great because I got to work alongside like ten of my cousins and my four aunts and my one uncle. I remember a specific day because this is the last memory that I have of working with my abuelita, my Mama Rufina, because she moved to Mexico the following summer.

**Kimberly Gomez** That summer we woke up at 6 a.m., got to work, we clocked in. My abuelita was about 75. She she was around that age but she would come to work with us every single day because she wanted to get paid. She lived with my mom and she would wake up early and she'd go with us. We all clocked in. We just put our little punch cards and clocked in. I started making the chamoy. My mom was the manager, so she was very prestigious. My grandma, we would say to her, throw the trash away or maybe just sweep a little. We tried to make her feel included, but not not to do anything too strenuous. After about 3 hours of just churning and churning chamoy and then getting spice and putting it in and churning, it was very repetitive job. I was getting tired and I was looking around at all my tías who immigrated here. They migrated here at the ages of 18, 17, 20. So of course we started our mornings by listening to reggaeton: Shakira, Bad Bunny, Daddy Yankee. Those were our tunes. So we're listening to Shakira and I'm churning for three hours straight and I was looking around and I can see my cousin, my prima, she was singing at the top of her lungs, you know, like "Dame más gasolina." [Laughter]. Then my tía Lucero, she was one of the youngest, she was just shaking her butt and dancing around and, you know, making the mango. After those 3 hours, I finally was like, Mom, we need a break. We need a 15 minute break. So we took our 15 minute break and my abuelita was making peanut butter sandwiches for everyone, and my tías were all drinking coffee. I don't drink coffee, I was drinking some orange juice. We were all eating peanut butter sandwiches and my grandma urged me to eat more because I was too skinny. So there I was trying to, you know, eat a little bit more before the shifty was about to start, because this was just the 15 minute break, she pushed some Oreos to me so I can eat more. So there I was, happily eating some Oreos and I remember it was such a hot, hot summer day and we were all drenched in sweat because there was no AC and we were in a warehouse and it was 90 to 100 degrees that day. And I can picture my abuelita and the reason why I'm wearing pink today is because it makes me confident, but also because it's my abuelita's favorite color. That specific day, she had a pink cardigan and she was sweating I could see her dripping and she just has cute little curls all over her head. There she is right there. She took off her pink cardigan and she put it on the chair next to her and back she went to sweeping and throwing away the trash. Now, finally, after a few more hours of churning and churning chamoy. I was pretty frustrated. One, because my mom was telling me what to do all day and I was a 16 year old and then two, I was hot and sweaty and we were just splashing our face with water at random times. I was thinking to myself, yes, I am blessed to be working here with my family and my cousins and I'm getting paid, that was awesome. But I also never want to do this again. I do not want to work in a warehouse. I do not want to work where there is no AC, where I'm standing up for 8 hours straight and just repetitively churning. So I told myself that summer, no matter what, I am going to college, I'm going to college and I'm going to work in an office and I'm going to have AC. That that was my thought. That was my thought.

**Kimberly Gomez** As you heard I'm the Dreamer Resource Center Coordinator [Applause]. So it happened [Laughter]. I remember I was so tired and my mom came out to me. She's like, What's wrong? And I was like, I'm hot, I'm sweaty, I'm tired and she was like, you know, your aunts and your uncle and I used to work in Mexico in the fields all day. Okay. I'm not tired anymore. I'm good. I'm good. So I was looking around and of course, my aunts are not tired. They're still shaking around dancing. But all my cousins were very tired

as well, all of us kids of the immigrants. So it was lunch break that day and we did potluck style. So my cousins brought ceviche, they brought shrimp and a bunch of seafood and my uncle stopped the street vendor and got everyone ice cream, some paletas. We had tortillas, rice and beans, of course. So we had an amazing potluck style lunch that Friday and my grandma sat right next to me. Something she loves to do is she loves to hold my hand. The entire lunch break she was holding my hand and I was eating with one hand so she can hold my hand. I just looked around and I can hear my tías all chismeando, all gossiping, as always, and my cousin, Jenny, and I we were, of course, talking about boys we were 16. Our little brothers were all watching YouTube. They're those iPad kids, you know, that generation. So we were all kind of in our little world having lunch and just enjoying our time together. There was my abuelita holding my hand for the entire 30 minutes.

**Kimberly Gomez** We finally finished our lunch and we went back to work. I continued churning and making chamoy. That day was a Friday. So as we were winding down, finishing up the shift, we were all very excited to go home. Because this was a small business, we would all get paid cash, which was amazing because as I mentioned, most of them were undocumented and we got paid weekly. So that was also really cool. The shift was ending. We were cleaning up, still sweating, but very happy. We're all walking towards the office and I can hear everyone super excited. They were all talking about whose house we're going to after, who's making the barbecue, what are the plans for Friday and for the weekend. My grandma was right behind me, like lightly touching my back as we were waiting for our check. And, of course, my abuelita was waiting for her check as well. So once we all got paid, I feel my grandma pushing a \$20 bill to my hand. She's like, your Domingo, so your Sunday. I don't know if this is just Latinx culture, but I always was supposed to get an allowance on Sundays and we called it the Domingo, the Sunday. So my grandma just pushed that \$20 bill into my hand, and I always took it. So this wonderful memory is something that I hold near and dear to my heart, because that was the last summer, and the last shift, because school was going to start that I had with my abuelita, with my grandma, because she returned to Mexico the following year and she passed away February 2020. Because my entire family is undocumented, we weren't able to go see her. Because we are all children of immigrants, I still to this day do not have a passport because of fear, because of being low income, because of feeling guilty that my mom cannot travel. So we saw my grandma's funeral through Facebook Live. Hopefully one day, things will change.

**Kimberly Gomez** I want to turn this story around by saying something great, something wonderful that happened. So El Mango Local, the small business that we were talking about, listening about earlier that came from a woman just knocking on the door. Today, El Mango Loco is in Riverside in Southern California. My uncle has more than 20 employees and the mango is being distributed at Costcos and 7-Elevens [Applause]. So I want to leave you all with the positive note, I also graduated in May from USC with my master's degree and I am working in an air conditioned space and in an office [Applause].

**Lisa Cantrell** The story you just heard was from Kimberly Gomez. You are listening to a recording from a live event held on the campus of Sacramento State in October of 2022 and that event was called "Immigrant Stories." Up next, you will hear from Vahideh Allahyari. Vahideh is originally from Iran and she has worked more than seven years in nonprofit organizations in her home country. Once she moved to Sacramento, she completed her associate's degree in library information science at Sacramento City College, a local community college and then she transferred to Sacramento State to continue her studies in child and adolescent development. Her story is entitled "Library."

**Vahideh Allahyari** [Applause] After coming here, I realized a lack of English knowledge is taking my rights away as a woman. I needed to have my independence, especially with having a conditional green card. I went to a placement exam for English courses. After we got our results, my daughter said, Mum, yours is exactly at the basic level [laughter]. I didn't want to live as an uneducated person in the United States.

**Vahideh Allahyari** Classes started. Some of my classes were fun and easy. Some of them were stressful and confusing for me. I was tired of sitting in classrooms. English always made me sleepy [laughter]. One day I was sitting outside of the English department. Between the building and the library, there is a chair. I was thinking and missing my children, my family, my friends, my job, and even my students at the nonprofit organization I worked at. I was thinking about giving up and going back home. On the other side, I was thinking about my daughter's education here, our future and our freedom. Suddenly I noticed I had just one friend. She was from Iran, my country. She came out of the English department as she was going to a library. She was working at the bookstore. I called her over because the idea of working at the college crossed my mind. After having some conversation, I said, could you please help me to get any job at the college? She said, Sure. Come to the library. The library is hiring. I can talk to my supervisor. Then she helped me get a job at the library as a student helper. She was responsible to train me how to shelve the books. When I went to start my work at the library my supervisor pulled my timesheet and this little badge on a shelf. Seeing my name on this little small badge made me feel better, like I belonged in this community.

**Vahideh Allahyari** They showed me three or four carts full of books to start working. I pulled them upstairs and started. Day after day passed and I was working everywhere at the library reading, shelving and illustrating their books. Anything my bosses and my supervisors asked for I did. Sometimes I thought, okay, Vahideh you could be good at customer service here. Because, you know, shelving the books is the hardest job physically because we need to push the books. Some of the books are very big and heavy and shelving them is hard. I thought, okay, I need to use this job as a good opportunity for learning English. I already started reading the name of the books before shelving, but that wasn't enough for me to expand my vocabulary. I started making flashcards everyday day with five names of books: writing, spelling and translating them. After a while I could hit shelves of their books faster than before because I could recognize their sections before reading their call numbers.

**Vahideh Allahyari** I was working on the third floor and I was very busy. My friend came upstairs and she said, Vahideh, Do you count used books? I said, No. Then I thought, okay, I need to ask my supervisor. I went downstairs and I said, do I need to count the used books? She said, yes, you need to start. I'm going to send someone to show you. Because I said I don't know how to open the computer upstairs and count the used books? She said, okay, I'm going to send someone to help you. Then she called me again. Vahideh? Vahideh? She said you need to help the students upstairs when they come to take a book. You need to help them. I started counting the books, and working on the computers because I didn't have a laptop. I didn't have computer at home. I was an immigrant. I didn't have opportunity. Then I started answering student's questions. When you sit at the desk, it's different. They come and ask questions. That caused me to improve my speaking, especially my listening. Sometimes I don't understand very well, but I keep listening and smiling with them [Laughter].

**Vahideh Allahyari** I started working in the evenings. My boss said, Vahideh, you need to work at the evening and help Charlene with periodicals. I said, okay. The evening shift is always more quiet than the day shift. Charlene was so nice and helpful. While I was working with the periodicals, I started reading magazines and newspapers. I saw some news about my country. Iran: Trump puts executive order. So I was very curious to read about the news then. Charlene was very helpful. Any questions I have? She answered patiently. She helped me everyday learn. Everything about the circulation desk, how to put the books on the shelf, how to check-in or check-out the books, everything. Then one day, my supervisor said Vahideh, I know you are doing everything. You can work at the busy time here too. I got very excited and happy. Okay. I am going to do customer service now. I am going to work at the busy time and improve my listening and find out about my weaknesses, my strengths. Working at the busy time helped to me to increase my self-esteem. On the other hand, my classes changed and were enjoyable for me because reading magazines articles helped me to write my essays in the classroom. Sometimes our professors needed to announce in the classroom how students can get to the library and get their textbooks or articles. Then my professors, when they announced it in the classroom, some of them said, Vahideh is working at the library. If you have any more questions, you can ask Vahideh. That was an honor for me and I found many friends between my classmates. I helped them come to the library, I explained to them that librarians are very helpful, you can get your sources, you can get a better grade on your article [Laughter]. Because I left my home everyday early in the morning until the evening or until maybe the close the library. If I worked at the evening shift, I went between my classes and the librarian. So I had plenty of time, for example, for reading the articles or magazine, especially my favorite ones Fashion, Arts, Sports. Sometimes Charlene gave me fashion magazines.

**Vahideh Allahyari** So then one semester, I saw a sign about the International Games. I asked my daughter, would you like to go and play some games? I was expecting to go and play chess because I played chess for a long time back home from middle school. So my daughter said, yes, yes, I am going to come. So we went, we played, we had the fun. But I noticed there was no chess there. One day I was talking to Antonio Lopez at the library. He is very nice and a respectful person. So I showed my interest for volunteering to start a chess club at our college because I noticed we didn't have it just in our game club. After a while he called me and said, Vahideh, we have a chess set. I got so excited. I used to take that and sit outside of the library at the quad. He created the opportunity for me to play with people and my community started growing every day I played with the students. I taught them how to play chess. They taught me how to speak English. I was very happy to have people around me.

**Vahideh Allahyari** We had English Graduation day in the English department for students. I asked my supervisor Anna, she was always kind to me, for a 50 minute break. I went and after I came back my friends at the circulation desk, they surprised me by showing their kindness to me. I was so happy for having them around me. After I got my English certificate, I was curious about library courses because while I was working, upstairs the library was offering courses for the students. I thought I need to learn about library science. I was so curious. One day I shared that with one of the librarians. I didn't expect that she was the coordinator of the library courses. Pam, she came and explained to me that I needed to finish my English courses before. So after I got my certificate, I went to her office and said, I'm going to take the library courses. After I finished my English certificate, I got a library information science certificate. Then I decided to study general education. Then I got my associate degree in library information science. I thought about transferring to Sac State it because I was while I was working at the copy machine, our

children section is at the right side of the copier and I always checked out two or three children's books and I read in my free time or working at the copier when people are not there. So I was so excited to transfer to Sac State and study in the Child and Adolescents Major.

**Vahideh Allahyari** I am sharing this story because before working at the library I always thought the library is just a place for checking out the books or some other sources. But now the word library has a different meaning for me. The community of the library helped me to get my English certificate and to find my community, my friends, and to get my library associate degree, to begin to find my real interest in studying by reading children's books. So right now, I am going to get my bachelor's degree next year [Applause] I am looking to study as much as possible to help immigrant, bilingual students at these schools to see their happy face every day. Thank you [Applause].

**Lisa Cantrell** Our last storyteller of the evening was Diana Medina. Diana is a poet, educator and storyteller, born and raised in Los Angeles, California. She uses poetry, storytelling and creative expression to communicate her identity as a first generation Mexican-American daughter of immigrants. She's worked in the nonprofit sector, empowering communities of color for the last 16 years. Her mission in life, she says, is to use her gift of words to bring more clarity, compassion and connection to communities in need of healing. In 2021, Diana released her debut poetry collection, "Healing Out Loud," and her writing has also been featured in modern Latina Magazine and StoryCenter. Diana believes all people speak in poems and stories, and it is her calling to hear them, write them, speak them and share them with the world. I should also say that she is a beloved storyteller at Capital Storytelling, and she's taught classes and workshops for us. The title of her story is "The Ferris Wheel."

**Diana Medina** Shout out to all the storytellers that already spoke, round of applause for them. So it's 1996 and I'm in seventh grade and I'm sitting in my math class and our math teacher announces that we are going to have the first ever math fair at Mulholland Middle School. Everybody in our honors math class is required to submit a project to the fair. This presented two challenges for me. Challenge number one is: I didn't feel very smart because I had been added to this honors math class after having been in the regular math class. The teacher noticed that I was doing well so she moved me into the honors math class and when you are the smartest kid in the regular class, it's one thing. But then when they move you into the honors class, you move way down on the totem pole of smartness because you're in a room with a bunch of other people who are way smarter than you. The second challenge was, I didn't know anybody in this class and we needed to work in partners. I was like, well, I don't know who I'm going to work with, but I ended partnering with this girl named Lillian, and we didn't have a lot of parameters for the project other than three things: we needed to make a poster, we needed to build something, and we needed to use math in a meaningful way. Lillian and I met a couple of times during lunches to try to figure out what we're going to do. We have a few weeks, and I quickly found out that Lillian and I both loved ideas and we're very big procrastinators because every time we met, every time we met, we'd be like, this is all great. We'll figure it out next time. Eventually we get down to a week before the math fair and we still don't have a project. So we meet urgently in the library and we go on AOL and we start looking up what are we going to do right? We download and print this picture of a Ferris wheel from Texas. As you know, the 1996 Internet, the picture was really grainy. We look at the picture and we decide, okay, we're going to make a Ferris wheel out of popsicle sticks, and that's going to be our project. She was like, tes, I love it. It's going to be great. I was like, It's going to be great. We decide we're going to meet on Friday after school to build the Ferris wheel, and Lillian

says, All right, I'm going to get popsicle sticks. I say, okay, cool, I'm going to get the glue and we're going to meet at her house and we're going to make this Ferris wheel happen. So Friday comes and I go to Lillian's house after school and we start trying to glue the Ferris wheel together or the popsicle sticks to make like the two circles on the sides of the Ferris wheel and realize that it's really tedious. So then Lillian's like, Oh, I have an idea. Why don't you glue your circle and I glue my circle that way we just make two circles and it's faster because we both have the same measurements. We had already done some of the math and conversions to figure out what the, you know, how big it needed to be. So I said, okay, and I'm following Lillian's lead because I'm like, well, I'm not very smart, and maybe Lillian is smarter than me because she's been in this class longer. So we glue our two circles together, and when we're done, we hold them up and we're like, oh, okay and they're crooked. They don't really match. Lillian is like, okay, great. So you're going to figure out how to glue these together, right, and make this into a Ferris wheel? I wanted Lillian to think I was smart, but I looked at these two crooked popsicle stick circles and was like, I don't know how I'm going to do this, but I said, yeah, I'll figure it out. I take the two crooked circles home.

**Diana Medina** Now it's Saturday. I'm in the back porch of my house, and I'm spread out on a table with my math book, with a bunch of scratch paper, with the two big crooked circles. I'm trying to figure out how I'm going to attach these two circles together. My dad passes by and he looks at me and I'm really stressed out and he's like, what are you doing? And I said, I'm making a Ferris wheel. He looks at the table and he's like, ¿con que?. Which means with what? I hold up a popsicle stick and I'm like, con esto, with this. He's like, wait, wait, wait, waot. What do you mean? He's like tell me again and explain it to me slowly. A side note about my dad, my dad is a carpenter [Laughter]. He has, you know, all sorts of tools and things like strategically scattered all over our backyard. He immigrated to America in the 1970s to help support my mom and siblings who were living back in Mexico until eventually he made enough money to bring them all over. Then my sister Melia and I are the only two that were born here in the States. When he was a child, he stopped going to school after second grade to go work with my grandfather, cutting down trees and turning them into lumber that they would use to build houses in the local town. So my dad cannot help butt in when he sees somebody trying to make something. That's exactly what he was doing but I was really astonished because him stopping to take interest in what I was doing in that moment was a rarity. My dad worked two jobs. He worked as a carpenter during the week and he worked as a handyman on the weekends. The only time I ever saw him was when he was either coming or going from work and him taking an interest in what I was doing because I was doing something with sticks and trying to build something was a rarity. My dad had never been able to help me with my homework before. So he says, okay, explain it to me again. What are you making? What are you doing? So I say, okay, there's this math fair coming up and me and Lillian made these two circles, and now I have to figure out how to glue them together. At this point, I'm really frustrated because he's taking up a lot of time, making me answer all these questions and my project is due soon and it's Saturday. He's like, When is this due? I said, Monday. He's like, ahh come on, mija, you don't have enough time, you need more time than this. I said, I know, but you know I have to do it. At this point in my head, I'm like, Oh my God, please stop talking to me because I really have to finish my project. And he says, tell me again, dime otra vez que estas haciendo? What are you making? I start trying to talk about the math there, and he's like, no, no, no. What are you making? Like he wanted me to explain to him the Ferris wheel, and he's like, ¿Cómo quieres?, how do you want this thing? So I said, I want it to be a Ferris wheel. I need it to turn. I need it to be to scale of this grainy picture from a Ferris wheel in Texas. I need it to be a working Ferris wheel and I have to somehow use math to do it. Then I pick up my papers that have all my weird calculations on them

because I was like trying to make a scale model and I hand it to him and I say, this is for a math fair. So it's really important and he looks at the pictures and he looks at all the stuff and he throws the stuff on the table and he's like, No, tú no necesitas todo este papelejo which means you don't need all this paper. He's like that's bullshit, "Ven aca"...he tells me to follow him, so I follow him into the kitchen. He goes to this cabinet where my mom keeps all her pots and pans and he takes out this one giant pan that my mom uses every year to roast tamales. It is a giant pan. It's about three feet tall. A small child fits inside of the pan [Laughter]. He grabs the top from the pan and he takes it back to the table. He pushes all of my stuff out of the way, including my two crooked wheels that me and Lillian had painstakingly worked to make. He starts laying popsicle sticks inside of the perimeter of the pan top and says, This is how you're going to glue your sticks together to make the two sides of your wheel even. He goes and brings me wood glue. He brings me Q-tips from the bathroom. He brings me a paper plate, and he tells me to start gluing. So I'm gluing and as I'm gluing, he's standing there watching me and he goes, What are you going to use to make the base? I said, more popsicle sticks because that's all I have. And he's like, no, no, no, that's not going to work "veras! Te voy hacer un invento agrigola!". He walks away into like the depths of the backyard to go grab things. Now the phrase invento agrícola translates to agricultural invention. This is the phrase my dad loves to say and use when he is going to use his talents and resourcefulness to like make something happen out of nothing. It has nothing to do with agriculture. He just likes the way it sounds. So that's why he says it. He comes back with scrap wood. He pulls out his table saw, and he starts just tinkering. An hour later, I have a base for my Ferris wheel. Then he shows me how to attach the two sides of the wheel that I made with more pieces of little scrap wood, with bits and pieces of popsicle stick and then, you know, a little while later he makes somehow this, like, weird dial looking thing and finds a dowel out of an old broom stick and sticks it in the middle. And an hour later, there's a working Ferris wheel on the table, and I'm just like, okay. Then he goes, Que más necesita mija? What else do you need? Because I know he's busy and at this point, I'm like, I had already taken a lot of time, and I'm like, and I still need to do the math calculations and call Lillian and tell her that somehow we made a Ferris wheel happen. I said, No nada, asi esta bien, that's it. I'm fine. He's like, No, no and he's like, looking at the grainy picture of the Ferris wheel from Texas. He's like, you need little seats for people. Like, where are they going to sit? So he grabs the handful of popsicle sticks and walks over to his saw and he like saws, a whole bunch of them in half and he starts gluing them together to make these little baskets. He's like, okay "me vas hacer muchas de estas" and he tells me how many baskets to make. You're going to make a bunch of these. So I make these little baskets as he's telling me to make them and then he finds a little drill and drills holes in the sides of the baskets, and he runs a wire through them, and then he puts old paperclips on them. Maybe another hour and a half later, there's a Ferris wheel with little baskets and it's spinning and the baskets are swinging on the Ferris wheel.

**Diana Medina** We leave it like that until the next morning. So now it's Sunday, and I wake up and go out into the kitchen and my dad is drinking his coffee and he's like, what else do you need for our project here? "Que mas necesitas para nuetro invento Agricola?" And he's like, looking at the picture and he's like, Do you want me to put grass on it? He's like, Maybe we can make it look like a carnival. He's like, oh, maybe we should paint it and he just has all these ideas. And I said, No, no, asi esta bien it's fine. It's fine. By that point, you know, it's Sunday. We have to go to church, we have to run errands, we have to do all these things. And I still have to call Lillian, but I let him convince me to put some of my nephews' action figures in the baskets because he wants to test the structural integrity of the swinging baskets and it works. So we go to church, we come back, I call Lillian, I tell her what happened. The next day, Monday, is the Mafia. So now it's Monday and her and I

decide frantically in true procrastinator fashion that we also have to make our poster because we haven't had a chance to do that. So we meet up at nutrition and frantically glue together the three part board of our Math Fair Project. It's like Popsicle stick, Ferris wheel, amazing and we put the Ferris wheel in front and take it to the auditorium, you know, put it on the table and all that stuff. People are passing by and the teachers are judges in the math fair and everybody's really impressed with the Ferris wheel and how it's spinning. My dad said, Bring the action figure so they can see that people can sit in the little baskets. So the people are spinning it and liking it and my teacher is so impressed and she's like, How did you do this? I said, my dad helped us. I didn't tell her that we didn't use any math until after the fact. I didn't tell her that, my dad butted it in and made me use a pan top and all these random things. I didn't tell her that my dad had never helped me with my homework before and that this was a really special moment for me. We ended up winning first place in the math fair [Applause] and the teacher was so impressed with our Ferris wheel that she took it to the staff meeting and said, look at what my honors math students made. She had that Ferris wheel displayed in her classroom for the rest of the year and two years after.

**Diana Medina** That Ferris wheel was the first of many things that my dad has made for me. My dad has made me bookshelves, he has made me coffee tables, he has made me coat racks, cutting boards, rolling pins. He has made my siblings patio furniture. He has made them decks, porches, playhouses for their kids. He's even made my niece a baby doll bed that is like exactly to the specifications that she asked for. Any time he ever sees any of us needing something, wanting to buy something, he's like, no, no can make that. Como lo quieres? How do you want it? I can make that and seemingly like magic, a few days later, the thing we want appears exactly how we asked for it. [deep breath] I'm sorry, it's my dad. Most recently, the thing my dad built for me is a portable wooden stage for us to use at the nonprofit that I work at called The Practice Space, where we teach public speaking skills to kids. When I asked him about it, all I remember was the way he was asking me the questions about it. Como lo quieres? How do you want it? Who's going to be using it? Will old people be stepping on the stage? Will young people be stepping on the stage. Who's moving it? Are you moving it? Are you moving it in your car? Are there going to be people helping you? All these questions and questions and questions until eventually he made me this four part stage that fits in the back of my Honda Fit. It's on wheels so that I don't hurt my back moving it. Last month, when our organization had an event, my dad drove 6 hours from Los Angeles to Richmond, California, to see our students use that stage. He saw me perform poetry on that stage, and I'll never forget the look on his face the whole day. He was sitting there and he would be walking around talking to people. He's like, I built the stage [Laughter]. I'm really proud and it's beautiful to me because my dad has used his talents and his hands in many ways to make my life better, to make my work more meaningful. I didn't know that wood could be a love language until my dad and all the things I've noticed he makes for us. He's not a man of many words, but every time we need something, he's like, Como lo quieres? How do you want it? And then he makes it. These days I'm very sad that I don't live there by him anymore, but I stay in touch with him by calling him whenever I need help with a DIY project and I facetime him and ask him questions about it and when I'm feeling really, really anxious about things, I go to his favorite place, Home Depot, and I go to the wood and lumber section of that place to smell the wood because it reminds me of him and every time I take a breath in the section of that store, it reminds me to approach seemingly insurmountable things like that Ferris wheel project calmly, with curiosity and with patience and that's the way I remind myself to be more like him. Thank you.

**Lisa Cantrell** Well, that is all for our episode. You have been listening to a live recording from the Capital Storytelling stage, from an event we hosted in partnership with the Dreamer Resource Center of Sacramento State in October of 2022. The event, called "Immigrant Stories," was sponsored by Capital Public Radio and funded by a very generous grant from Student Affairs of Sacramento State. You can hear recordings of all of our previous events on our website at [CapitalStorytelling.com](http://CapitalStorytelling.com). You can also find out about all of our classes and workshops and see our resources, including workbooks and storytelling games on that website. We hope that we will see you soon. Don't be a stranger.