

I remember during my childhood I thought I had the world at the palm of my hands. Everything felt just right. As a child, I'd move house to house only knowing that materialistic things were of unimportance to me. As long as I had my brothers by my side playing day by day, I was happy. I was raised by my single mother and older siblings. Moving was a repetitive cycle that we fell into. Sometimes we'd live with a friend of my moms for a couple of months, other times it was in a place where there were many people bundled up in bunk beds. There were these nice ladies who'd take care of me and my brothers as we played in a little structure they had inside. Often throughout the weekdays I would dread going to school but on the weekend my family and I would go out. Whether it was to the park, the beach, a museum, someplace fun and exciting for hours until we went back to that one place with the bunk beds. Our meals were typically pizza or something from McDonald's, but "only the dollar menu" my mom would say. By age 13 I had a good understanding of what welfare, W.I.C., child support, shelter home, and EBT meant. These programs were good indicators that my family and I fell into the lower class.

Going into high school I started to feel as if my life had many challenges and obstacles but it felt normal considering everyone in my neighborhood was doing either similar or better. At this point, I had a home, small but a home nonetheless. During my time in high school I noticed many changes going on at home, it felt almost unstable. Sometimes we wouldn't have hot water, other times we didn't have food. My escape from home was school, I was fed there, I was able to shower with warm water in the locker rooms, I painted during art classes, I felt at ease. Socializing wasn't even a question, I had one friend who understood my situation but even at times, she'd question why I couldn't go out much or why I never invited her over, or why I couldn't go on field trips. They were situations that she didn't have to worry much about. I never blamed her for that but it made her think I didn't want to be friends.

When I turned 15 I didn't have the traditional Quinceñera like most girls in my high school, the following year I didn't have the sweet 16 or even a birthday party. I was asked rather to start picking up more responsibility at home; I had to get a job to help my mom. For two years, I was working at McDonald's and going to high school. My modes of transportation, like my mom's, were either by feet or by bus. Somedays I'd walk to avoid the bus because I had fallen asleep multiple times and missed my stop to either work or school. During one of my history classes, I fell asleep during a lesson and I was awoken by my teacher at the time, Mr. [REDACTED]. He asked me to leave his class and to report to the Dean's office. Getting there I was asked to call my mom to pick me up; I didn't get any chance to explain that I had opening shifts all week and my sleep schedule was just off. They called my mom and she told them that I couldn't be picked up because it takes her 2 hours to get to my school from her job; that it'd be best to send me home walking. That day I cried on my way home. Once my mom got home I was expecting relief and understanding, instead, I was scolded and told to do better, be better.

My senior year came around, an exciting and often stressful period for students. I experienced mostly stress, this year was one for the books. This was the year where I became an independent student because I was at risk of being homeless; my mom had lost the house because we weren't making enough money for rent. At this point my main goal was applying to colleges, that's the only way I knew how to get out of this turmoil. I wanted to create a better life for my family and for myself. I just didn't know where to start. The majority of my time in high school was spent in the college center, where a college advisor helped me apply to college. She helped me the best she could, but there was always the assumption that I knew a thing about college, her first question to me was, "Where do you want to apply?" my response to her was, "Harvard". I didn't

know what I was saying, I'm a first-generation college student who never even thought college would be an option.

Applying to college as a low-income first-generation student has its own challenges. My application contained no extracurriculars, just my job, my GPA, my test scores and that I took care of three younger children (my siblings). I titled this "caretaker". It's not the shiny application where I played sports or was a part of any clubs or organizations, I was just trying to survive during high school. I decided to apply to only UC's and CSU's considering they were more affordable than a private university. My college advisor highly stigmatized community college because it was easy and common for students with my background to fall for the money rather than the education. I couldn't visit any campuses besides UCLA, primarily because there was a bus that took me there in under an hour. Another campus I visited was Cal Poly SLO, accessible through a free program I greatly appreciate here called Poly Cultural Weekend. I fell in love with Cal Poly because of the program that helped me so quickly build a community that's still there for me till this day. I decided to accept my admission to Cal Poly the day after, I felt relief not having to worry about which decision I was going to make.

There was a burden I felt of the unknown, another challenge I encountered with being first-generation. Coming from a low-income background not only is there the lack of stability and reoccurring problems that made it hard to focus on school work; but there was also the problems that came with being a low-income first-generation student. There was no background or experience to go off from and I didn't have the support of my family who always told me college was just a waste of money. I was just a walking statistic, I've been told numerous times that I don't belong on a college campus because first-generation students are four times as likely to drop out of college their first year. I went through imposter syndrome my first year and it played

with my emotions to the point where I did nothing for an entire week during finals week one quarter. My grades suffered.

Back to my first day of college, I was nervous, I didn't know what to expect and I constantly worried about financial aid because I was placed on hold for not having all the documents that the courts were sending me through the mail. I visited the financial office about ten times my first week of college, I couldn't even enjoy my Week of Welcome, an orientation program the school puts on to help students feel more "welcome". Yet they lacked the diversity and inclusion aspect. My parents could only help me by sending me documents I needed but they'd often get upset that I kept asking for these important documents, worried that I'd lose them somehow. Luckily a financial aid advisor helped me through so much of what I was struggling with, many of my EOP counselors recommended her and she's helped me find resources on campus to help relieve the financial burden and I'm always thankful for the help she gave me.

Once I felt like the storm had passed, I had my first couple of classes. I didn't know we had to read the syllabus beforehand, everyone else submitted a printed and signed syllabus on the first day that docked 10 pts. from my grade. I would think to myself, "how can you be so ignorant to not read the syllabus?" I kept believing that everyone was just smarter than me. I started encountering more problems where I didn't even know textbooks were required for some classes, I didn't even have enough money for textbooks, I used my scholarships and grants for my tuition and housing. I kept thinking to myself "why is it so much harder for me to just be a college student?" Almost as if they had a head start or something had been holding me back. The truth is, low-income students are less prepared to enter the rigor of college courses. I had a lack of resources and exposure to a quality education, also known as LAUSD. Without the access to books, Advanced Placement courses, afterschool programs or academic help like tutoring, I've

just been learning at a slower rate which leaves me to either catch up or fall behind once I get to college.

The typical phrase I hear, “you’re just not trying hard enough” or “college isn’t for everyone”. Discouraging words, I’ve heard from some of my closest friends in college. But I catch up, I start studying more often, going to work fifteen hours a week with sixteen units. I’m doing great! Picture this, it’s eleven at night on a Thursday night, it’s my second year and its winter quarter, I’m at the library continuing the progress I’ve been making and I start feeling nauseous. I run to the restroom and throw up only to see blood. If you didn’t guess it, it was an ulcer. I had to go to the hospital, imagine the medical expenses, imagine my mom crying over the phone. I missed work the next morning, there goes my job I thought. My grades fall behind because I’ve been told to manage my health better. I would eat McDonalds and pizza every day when I was younger and since coming to college I’ve been eating like a rabbit; only greens I kid you not. How can things like this continue to happen, what am I doing wrong? Once again believing I didn’t belong, feeling as if I wasn’t enough. No matter how hard I tried.

I thought coming to college was a way to escape my problems, a way to start over and reinvent myself. I believed that I could have a better life if I study hard and work. Even to this day, I can’t say things are better, it’s Spring quarter and these issues circulate my life impacting my views and my studies. I am grateful for all the love and support that surrounds me. Being in the lower class has not defined my worth but it’s definitely shaped who I’ve become. So, to every person who has ever told me I don’t belong on this campus, this institution wasn’t made for me but I’m here surviving and healing. Making a way for those like me to feel as if they do belong.