Veronica Mendez-Johnson is a Latin American migrant from Coahuila, Mexico. Coahuila is located on the southwestern border of Texas in between Chihuahua and Nuevo Leon, Mexico. The economic break down of the region is low to lower-middle class. The majority of the jobs available were labor jobs in the steel and iron plants throughout the province. (Mendez, 2010) Veronica never knew that she was poor at the time - there was always food on the table, so she and her family never went hungry. She migrated to the United States when she was only 10 years old back in 1992. Currently Veronica is a graduating graduate student in Latin American & Caribbean Studies at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She will be returning to the U of I in the fall to pursue a PhD degree in History.

Veronica is an only child who lived with her mother and father. Veronica’s father is a college graduate from Mexico in computer engineering while her mother never finished college. Jobs were very scarce in the region so Veronica’s father became a steel mill worker. Veronica’s mother was to become a nurse but had to leave school to give birth to and raise Veronica. What Veronica’s mother learned, she passed down to her daughter. These ideals opened the door for Veronica to aspire to become a doctor or
teacher because she loved helping others as her mother did for her and everyone else.

She was always told that school was very important and that she will go to college regardless of what her family’s financial status. School in Mexico was very enjoyable for Veronica; in fact she loved it. Her mother would bring her lunch every day, she could play whenever she wanted to, and life seemed great and easy for her. One day, Veronica’s father was laid off from his job at the steel mill - and so began Veronica’s migration to the United States.

The main reason Veronica had to move at the time was former President of Mexico Carlos Salinas’ privatization movement. In the early 1990’s, Ivy League graduate Salinas proposed for the privatization of many different federally owned companies to foreign companies. In most cases, the new private owners cut the unionized workforce drastically, sometimes by as much as 50% (LaBotz & Alexander, 2005). As a result, the percentage of workers in unions fell during the years 1984 to 2000 from 30% to 20% (LaBotz & Alexander, 2005). Moreover, the economic crisis that followed implementation of NAFTA in 1994 together with peso devaluations and recurrent recessions have meant that Mexican workers’ wages fell by 50% between 1980 and 2000 (LaBotz & Alexander, 2005). By selling over these companies while using pro-government unions to keep wage settlements low, and short-term foreign borrowing to keep the peso high, Salinas reduced inflation. For the first time ever in Mexico’s history, the world’s confidence in the Mexican economy soared and living standards, at least for the upper and middle classes, rose. (Editorial Desk 1996)

President Salinas’ administration’s main goal was to bring Mexico out of its third
world status (Editorial Desk 1996). His administration was considered one of the best in the world at the time. They had “advanced divestment through superior power, political adroitness, uncommon foresight, and near-error-free control of events” (Williams 2001). Salinas did align Mexico’s economy far more closely with that of the United States, capping that achievement with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The administration’s moves attracted the interest of the United States and various other countries. The United States showed their interest by pushing the ratification of NAFTA so that they would have easier access to Mexican goods (LaBotz and Alexander 2005). However, as soon as Salinas left office, all of his hidden tricks and excessive borrowing backfired on the country.

All his short-term borrowing from foreign lenders was a little too much for Mexico to handle, so the peso took a plunge to make up for loans. The foreign lenders took note and began to back off lending money to Mexico. The living standards in Mexico began sharply declining as the amount of the peso began to plummet. It took Salinas’ successor, Ernesto Zedillo, more than a year to stop the economic downturn. The United States overlooked the political problems that Mexico was currently going through and made empty promises that it would have a “fast-acting cure-all that would instantly add jobs, lower trade deficits and prevent cross-border migration” (LaBotz and Alexander 2005). The current administration then blamed NAFTA for America’s increasing interest in Mexican democracy after Salinas fled Mexico and his brother was assassinated. Either way, Mexico has learned a serious lesson from the Salinas administration, as has the United States.
The interview that I conducted with Veronica Mendez was an inspiring and eye opening experience. We went through her life in Mexico to her life in Texas and how it got her to the University of Illinois. Veronica was incredibly passionate about what people should know about her life and why it motivates her. Being Mexican myself, I was very much excited to hear her story and how life is vastly different from the United States. Both Veronica and I thoroughly enjoyed speaking about her life and desire to contribute to this project for the benefit of the University of Illinois.

I started with interviewing Veronica about her life in Mexico. I wanted to show the difference between living in Mexico than to the United States. We covered how much she values her family and how they are a huge influence in her life. We then moved into the reason she moved to the United States. She explained how much she despises Carlos Salinas and his movement of privatization since it was the one of the main reasons her father was out of work. I wanted to show listeners of this interview that people from Mexican or any Latin American country can better their lives and find better opportunities in life; opportunities that their home countries could never offer them.

I then focused on education and its differences between the Mexican education system and that of the United States. She talked of how teachers are accredited in Mexico and how it is more of a bidding war or inherited position than having actual qualifications to teach. She wanted it known that it is more of a system of who you know and not what you know. Parents are more involved in their child’s school unlike the United States where parents are less involved compared to Mexico. I wanted to show that learning is not universal around the world. One cannot choose whom they are
taught from in most foreign countries, whereas in the United States; there are numerous
different schools one can attend.

I then asked Veronica about how she handled being in the United States. She
brought up the language barrier, as most people from different countries find difficult,
especially because of the language barrier. She spoke of how she had no friends when
she was in middle school because she was different. Her parents still made her feel like
she was in Mexico, so she felt like it didn’t help her to get accustomed to the United
States and how kids her age should act in a different culture. She said her mom used to
dress her in the same outfits that she wore in Mexico and all the kids at her school teased
her for it. I thought this was important because it shows what immigrant children go
through coming to the United States; it isn’t easy, to say the least.

We then spoke of how she arrived at the University of Illinois and the choices she
had to make while here. Veronica talked about how she wanted to go to college in
Mexico since it is a lot cheaper than going to college in the states. It was not until her
Spanish teacher pushed her in the direction of scholarships and grants that she applied
she was accepted around the San Antonio area where she migrated to and attended the
University of San Antonio. This is where she began studying Latin American studies. She
graduated from the University of San Antonio and applied to graduate school all around
the country. She and her boyfriend were both accepted to the U of I and into great
departments, her in LAST and him in physics. She said it was important to know all she
can about Latin American Studies so she can educate people about what she and her
people have gone through. This is particularly important because it shows her ties to U
of I and the important role it has played. She wants to be the best in her field and she loves her people. She wants to help her people, educate others about her people and the U of I has helped do that for her.

I learned so much from her and what she has gone through. I never knew how schools in Mexico operated and how they “hire” teachers. In fact, I have never been told about how schools even function in Mexico. It is fascinating how teachers either have to pay to teach or inherit it. It shows how the world is so different from the United States and all the things teachers have to do to become qualified to teach in the here.

She showed me all the acclimating that immigrant children have to do to fit-in in school, communities, and life in the United States. I personally never had to go through any of that because I was born and raised in the United States, whereas some of my family members had to because they were not. To be able to hear what she went through and how it affected her is especially eye opening. On account of this I have heard all the stories of what happens when one gets to the states and what one has to do. However, no one ever told me how it affects him or her. I just imagined all the things my family had to go through and change. The United States is a whole different world from Mexico, and to be here is both a blessing and a curse for immigrants.

Veronica spoke of how much her family meant to her and her education. Which made me relate to how much my family has meant to my education and me. Both of us were always told that college is not an option, it is a requirement. Our families both said they would do anything and everything to see us as college graduates. It showed me that our families came here to better our lives and give us everything they could not get in
Mexico. If it were not for our families, we would not be where we are now nor the person we are.

Veronica spoke of how she does not now regret moving to the United States, and said it was much more beneficial than she thought it would be. When I think about all the people in my family who I have spoken to about regrets moving here, none of them ever said they regret it. All of them stated that they love the United States regardless of all the things they had to do to either get into or live in this country. It makes me grateful for all I have due to the things my parents had to give up to be here in the United States. Veronica opened my eyes to these facts; facts of which have never really meant impacted me much.

Veronica opened my eyes to many different things I had never noticed even happened in the world. She wanted people to know what she had to go through to be at where she is now. I was challenged to think of the little things people have to go through to get into this country and I counted my blessings. I was blessed with being born in this country of endless opportunities and freedoms that not all people around this planet enjoy.

History can be acquired in various different forms, but oral history is by far the oldest form. Before there was even paper or writing, there was storytelling. People would just sit around, listening to their elders, friends, or family members recanting stories that they either lived through or heard about themselves, passed down from generation to generation. One learns about things that have happened in the past being either too young or not even born to live through. Being able to have a firsthand story
about events of the past can be awe-inspiring, shocking, and particularly thought provoking.

One can learn about history through books, videos, and articles but it doesn’t have the rawness that an oral history can offer. It doesn’t beat the firsthand story of a person who lived it or lived through it. These stories can inspire and motivate people to retell their story and share with more people, who could also share with additional people. This way, the story never dies out, and this person becomes inspiration to more people than they originally wanted to motivate. Oral history can offer more than a book, a video, an article, or a picture can ever offer, and above all, it can change the world.
Works Cited


