

Francisco's Story: From El Salvador to Massachusetts

By Christian Lopez

Success does not have a universal unit of measurement. Bill Gates may be considered successful because of his accomplishments, his money, and the many people who admire him; however, like beauty, success is in the eye of the beholder. It is important that each of us measure success for ourselves and not by someone else's standards. A good success story may take a man from rags to riches, but perhaps an even better story is one that stretches through generations and involves sacrifice.

Francisco Lopez is 42 years old and lives in the suburban town of Taunton, Massachusetts with his wife Marina. They have three children. Francisco now works as the head production manager at the Tribe Origins hummus plant near his home, having been a faithful employee of the company for almost 20 years. Like millions of others in the United States, Francisco immigrated to the United States in hopes of making a "better" living. He says, "A man without goals, is not good." Through his goals and determination to carry out his goals, he immigrated from the small Central American country of El Salvador and made a living. He has a respectable job, a family, a house, a few cars, and takes a vacation to El Salvador every year in November to attend El Carnival De San Miguel, a carnival that as a child was a favorite event. Everything he has in life today didn't come easily. He had to make sacrifices and risked his life by leaving his homeland to come to the United States.

"No, it was war," said Francisco when I asked him if he had motivations for leaving the country. He paused, and the pain Salvadoran people suffered for years could be seen in his middle-aged face. He went on to explain the war to me, "Yeah, you know we had a Civil War

from 1978 to, what, they signed the treaty in, 1996, I believe, they signed peace. The Civil War, you know, made me fled.” These facts are incorrect, but I don’t expect him to cite everything correctly. After 20 years of 40 plus hour weeks, I can’t imagine he found time to finish his education and learn about the war he left behind.

El Salvador is a poor developing country, and is both the smallest and the most densely populated country in the continental Americas. Its main export crop is coffee, and when the price dropped in the middle of the 20th century, so did the number of jobs, plunging the Salvadoran economy into crisis. Public spending decreased and military budgets increased, causing deteriorating conditions for the urban working and middle classes (Menjivar 50). The people stood up to the iron hand of the government and demanded change, causing the birth of guerilla forces such as FMLN that tried to overthrow the government..

During this time the United States government was opposing communist groups, and because it saw the FMLN as a communist party, and it sent aid to the Salvadoran government to extinguish the uprising. The tactics employed by both sides directly affected civilians-- twelve years old were being kidnapped and trained to join the fight, villages suspected of helping the other side were burned to the ground, and gunfights exploded frequently, killing many every day. In 1981, the military massacred over 1000 unarmed civilians at El Mozote, Morazán as part of an anti-guerilla campaign. When news of the massacre reached President Reagan, he tried to dismiss it as FMLN propaganda because it had the potential to embarrass the United States government that had supported the Salvadoran government with large amounts of military aid.

A total of 80,000 Salvadorans died, and more than half of them were civilians murdered by the army. Another 70,000 were seriously incapacitated by war-related injuries(Murray 14). The El Salvador Civil War lasted approximately 12 years and ended on January 16, 1992, with

the Peace Accord signed in Chapultepec, Mexico (Murray 18-19), but physical and mental scars are left in the heads and the hearts of the immigrants who fled, as Francisco says,

Back in '89 they had, what they called, the Final Attack. And um, I was working, I was helping my parents, you know, we lived on farm, so we used to, I had my cows. Back in November 11, 1989 they attacked, the Contras attacked, and there was a fight and they killed my cows and I got upset. And you know, and this is when I decide, everyone started fledding the country, you know, it was all sad, so you know, I did the same thing back in January 20. I left. (Lopez)

Every year, close to one million individuals from foreign nations migrate to the United States, legally, but many of them are turned away. Hundreds of thousands then try to smuggle themselves in, occasionally dying in the attempt (Huemer). Why would someone risk his or her life to enter a country? In this case, the motivation came from the economic situation, the political turmoil and the armed conflicts in El Salvador. It was a matter of weighing out the options: stay amidst poverty and danger, or leave and face the risks of moving into the unknown. For those who made the decision to leave, anything seemed better than staying.

The Civil War forced at least a million Salvadorans out of the country (Murray 14). Due to the high immigration rates, someone in El Salvador usually knew someone in the United States, whether it was a relative, a friend or even an acquaintance. The financial part of the trip was usually paid for by these contacts already in the United States. This social network emerged as the most significant organizing factor behind the massive immigration of Salvadorans in the 1990's (Menjivar 23).

But immigrating to the United States is not easy, despite what is seen in the news. The journey is dangerous and involves many risks. According to one source, the ideal age for an

immigrant is 17, because he has had enough experience to survive by himself and is old enough to work in any field of labor, but is still young enough to be considered a minor if he is caught by immigration (Gill). There is also much anti-immigrant sentiment from Republicans who want to close off the border.

“How old were you when you left the country?” I asked my uncle Francisco.

“I left the country in 1990,” he responds, “figure it out.” Francisco was 22 years old when he left El Salvador. The journey from El Salvador to the United States begins at the Mexico-Guatemala border. The Mexican government is strict on immigration and requires a VISA to enter the country because they are aware of the smuggling that occurs over the Mexico-United States border. After Mexico, it might take multiple attempts to cross into the United States.

It took me like a month to get here. [I] came through Guatemala, through Belize, through Mexico, through Barnsville, Texas. Then, passed all the checkpoints all the borders but, we were going in corpus cristi, and the guy was speeding, in a truck, pickup truck, and the driver was speeding so the police stopped us. And that’s how they caught us. They sent us back to immigration. I was locked up for 3 weeks in Fresno, Texas. Place in Barnsville, they call it “el corralon.” I was locked up for three weeks there. And after than, my friend paid the bill... And I got out. And then after that, I get out, I took a bus from Houston, when I got a friend, and from Houston, I took a plane to Boston. And when I came here, my friend used to live on Huntington Avenue. I think it’s close to where you are. Huntington Avenue, yeah. I think, oh my god, 121 Huntington Avenue. Right on the corner we used to live in a very small place it was like a studio. (Lopez)

Once an immigrant arrived in the United States, they had to rely on a support system. Francisco was lucky enough to have a childhood friend who already lived in the United States to bail him out of jail and fly him to Massachusetts, and even provide him with a place to stay; however, there were others who came to the states knowing nobody and with no place to stay. Immigrants usually lacked basic skills such as cooking, shopping, and speaking English, but their hope was that once they found a job, a new chapter of their life would begin. Immigrants hoped to raise a family in the United States and to take advantage of all the opportunities presented to them: a great constitution to protect their rights, a stable government, safety, a relatively good economy, and a great country. Immigrants wanted to become a United States citizen for all the benefits that came with it and also simply because there is a better way of living here (Coutin).

But in order to do this, immigrants had to acquire legal papers. Some worked with fake papers, but as part of the Immigration Act of 1990, the government provided TPS, temporary protected status, which gave Salvadorans protection from being deported. If they could not get TPS, they could apply for a green card or a residency with a visa or through an employer (Menjivar 85). Once you were a resident for five years, you could apply for naturalization. Many people applied, with an average of 350,000 immigrants becoming citizens of the United States each year.

The generation of immigrants who arrived in the United States in the early 1990s through the early 2000s has now matured. In the beginning, they had to work long hours and it was hard to raise a family. Poor immigrants were overburdened with trying to make ends meet, leaving them with little time to spend with their parents or to supervise children at home (Menjivar 195). But now, these immigrants have families and their children have begun to assimilate into the American culture. But it takes time for a child from this new generation, such as myself, to

realize the sacrifices that were made. This new generation, compared to the previous generation, is privileged. They do not have to worry about starvation, war, political turmoil, or the simple things in life that they take for granted. The previous generation's success is the foundation for this new generation. "What do you expect from a kid who saw his parent being assassinated?" my uncle asks me in a stern voice, "it took a generation to [suffer] and die for there to be peace in El Salvador." Again, that painful look appears in his face.

The heart of the United States is its government, the brain is its constitution, and the blood is its people. The new wave of Latino immigrants has added fresh blood to the United States, but does not forget the many sacrifices of the previous generations while celebrating their success stories. "My old man dreams to see a Lopez graduate from [college]," my uncle tells me. I respond, "He is going to have to hold on for a few more years. *Abuelo* will be 98 in January, when he reaches 102 he will have a dream come true."

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