

# Who tells your story?

My name is Laura. I'm from Bogotá, Colombia. When my mom had me they had to go to register my name. My mom had thought of a different name but my dad decided that I was supposed to be named Laura Aniella, which my mom was not expecting, and the doctors put down a name without my mom even agreeing to it. She didn't like it, but she was really tired after having a baby so she didn't say anything.



Bogotá was a big city, buildings everywhere and everything was stacked on top of each other. I liked that because it was a big city and there were a lot of things to do. I liked to go out with friends to the malls because Bogota has a lot of malls and it was fun to go see the different ones and have coffee or ice cream. My favorite store in the mall is called Crepes on Waffles and they sell the best ice cream ever. I liked to get the Ferro ice cream or the pistachio ice cream. They were really good. I used to go out a lot with two friends. One was a girl and the other was a boy; her name was Luz and his name was Luis Miguel. They were about my age, they were a little younger than me. We went to school together.

Growing up we lived with my grandpa for a while. He built the house himself for me and my mom. My mom and I used to live on the second floor of the house. We had four rooms; one kitchen, one bathroom, one of the rooms was mine and one of them was my mom's. The other room was the living room and the other was an office. It was a pretty big apartment because we had the whole floor. The floors were waxed so they were very shiny and they were a dark red color. The walls were a mix of cream and white. My mom didn't like having any other colors on the walls and a wooden door. At the house, I never felt alone because my grandpa was always downstairs, my aunt lived with him and she was always there taking care of him, so she was always home. Whenever I was bored or my mom wasn't there, my aunt was always there; so I never felt alone. It always smelt like food at my house because my aunt was cooking all the time. There's this thing that she used to make that at first I hated but in the end, I really ended up liking it. It was called *Cubios*, which are like these roots that grow in Colombia. You can season them and put them with some chicken and they're really good. She would make it a lot. I think my grandpa really liked it too so she would make it more often.

My mom was always at work, other than the weekends. At one point in my life, my mom struggled with money. We lived in a very tiny apartment and it was rough; yet she would pay for the things that I needed. When I was very little my dad used to work for a company that made books, and he used to sell them door to door, but after that I don't know because I really didn't see my dad anymore. But my mom was an English teacher in Colombia. When I was growing up I wanted that relationship with my dad but I never got it, but when I think back I really appreciate having that relationship with my mom. I don't think not having that relationship with my dad affected me really. It was more that I saw other people that had dads who would have really good experiences with their dads, but I never missed out on anything.

I got all of those experiences with my mom. My mom and I really liked to just watch *telenovelas* and so we would sometimes watch a *telenovela* and there was an episode a day, so we would watch them together, and she would make snacks or something and we would eat together and watch it together. I spent little time with my mom. Like during the weekend. During the week I was just at school. Like I said I was there all day, so I just interacted with the kids at school. For the most part I was just with my mom or with my aunts at home, or sometimes we would go out to eat. My mom used to like to go to movies so we would go together. She hated all the movies that I liked, but she still went with me.

In the neighborhood where I lived there were a lot of restaurants. Mostly small restaurants around. There were also a lot of bakeries around, which was really good. For my neighborhood it was mostly houses. There weren't big apartment buildings; instead it was maybe 3-4 story houses where big families lived or different floors were rented out. The neighborhood was relatively crowded, especially because I lived in my grandfather's house. Everyone knew my grandpa, so everyone was really nice to me. I went to school near the house and I was also able to go to my friends' houses really often because they lived nearby. It was really nice because there was a lot to do and the mall was like a 30 minute walk, so it wasn't too far away. But the things I remember especially are the restaurants. It smelled like bread because there were bakeries at every corner. I think that's what made it feel like home, and it feels very nostalgic and a little sad sometimes. It looks the same as I remember, but when I go back, it feels like I am not the same person, so things aren't as I want them to be. The community was good. Most people knew each other. The majority of the people that lived in my community went to school with me, so I was friends with a lot of kids that were in the neighborhood and their parents knew my parents. It was really nice.



I have good memories from school. They would do different tournaments, like silly things, and that was really fun. I was very competitive, so I used to really like playing the games they would do at school. Also I learned how to play guitar growing up, but I also used to play guitar with my grandfather and I really liked that. He used to play guitar as well and liked teaching me stuff, so I really liked it. Also when I was growing up, my uncle would teach me how to paint and draw. He would give me classes every now and then. I would get to do really cool stuff that I didn't get access to when I was in school, and that was really nice as well. My granddad taught me that I should always do my best and if I did what I knew was the best I could do, it didn't matter if I didn't get the things that I initially wanted because what counted was that I tried. That has impacted me now because I am working really hard at school. And what I'm doing right now requires me to be very consistent and try really hard and not to give up, and I think what he taught me has gotten me through the struggles I face now.

I used to love school because I got to see all my friends when I went to school. I would be at school from like 8 am to 5 p.m., so I was there all day and I really enjoyed learning new things and just being with the people that were there. I think I liked the most that my friends were with me from the time I joined the school, which was in 2nd grade, until I graduated, so we were really really close and I knew them like my whole life. They had really dumb rules about the uniform, and it was really annoying because they would just get really upset at us if our skirts were too short or if we had nail polish on or if we wore dangling earrings. They hated all that. I was good, but sometimes if I hit a growth spurt my skirt would be too short and my mom wouldn't have time to fix it. I really liked science, but I also really liked math, and when I was in school I was really good at math. I didn't like English though. I liked math because I was really good at it. I liked science because it was interesting.

For the most part, I grew up in Colombia. I did move to the US for a year and a half when I was in 8th grade, and I actually went to school here freshman year, but I wasn't here for very long and it was a very weird experience because I didn't speak English, so I had to learn and the school I was at didn't have any knowledge of hispanic stuff.



They were all American and did not speak Spanish, so I had to figure out how to speak English so I could pass my classes and meet people and talk to people when I was in school, so I didn't really like

it, and that's why after a year and a half my mom sent me back. I was 14 when I first came to America. My mom got a job as a Spanish teacher here and she would teach Latin American students math and other stuff in English. I liked the idea of moving here because it was different and there were so many new things, but I really missed my friends because I grew up with them, and I didn't speak the language, so it was really hard to get used to a new place where I couldn't talk to anybody. So that was harder. Although I was doing a lot of things that were exciting and new to me, I was more sad that I didn't have people to share it with. I wasn't very happy here and it was really hard, but in the end I had some friends, but I never felt like it was home. The class helped, but the class was trying to teach me general vocabulary, so it wasn't necessarily helpful when I was going to biology class. I was 18. I had just graduated high school and I left behind all of my family. The only people that were here with me were my mom and my step dad.

It was just my mom and my step dad when I came to America. I miss my family a lot, especially because I've lived in America for most, if not all of my adult life. But I haven't actually interacted with them a lot as an adult as like, my equals. So that's really weird. But I still miss the way they treated me. I miss my aunt giving me food and treating me a certain way. And just all the things I used to do with them. They were very sad because they wouldn't see us for a while. They were also really happy for my mom that she was able to go to a different country, give me a better life, and, you know, be successful. When we told my family that we were moving it was mostly just, you know, letting them know what was gonna happen. But my mom was always very independent, so they didn't really have a say on whatever she did. She just informed them that we were moving and they had to accept it. But they were very understanding and happy for us. It made it a lot easier because she didn't have to really worry about them, and she was just able to think about the future for us.

We flew from Colombia, which is like a seven or eight hour flight. When we got here we met up

with my mom's friend, who actually was the one that got her the job here, and she drove us to the town we were gonna live in. We stayed at her house that night because we actually didn't have a place to live yet, and we stayed with her until we found an apartment.

We came to Colorado first. Also we came to Colorado the second time too. When I moved to America after high school the second time, I took six months off because I just wanted a break. And then I started college in 2013. I was really excited. This time around, I knew that this was good for me, that being here was better for me than staying back home, and I had a different purpose. I was no longer worried about my friends that I left behind. It was more like, oh, I want to live here, so I have to work for it. It wasn't as hard because before, I didn't know English at all, so I knew more than the first time I came. When I was immigrating I learned that I am a little bit more independent than my mom would like. I kind of just take decisions and run with them. I don't necessarily think about a lot of the people that are around me before I make a decision, which I've had to learn to fix because now it's not just me, but I didn't know I was that impulsive and independent when I was back home.

The US is very different from Colombia. When I first came to the US, and even the second time I came to the US, I was always very astounded by how big everything is. There's a lot of square footage in the US. Buildings are so much bigger and spaces are much bigger. There's so much spacing between houses and even apartment buildings, and like color. And people are so tall, it's crazy. And there's a lot of cars. Having a car is more of a luxury in Colombia, because you need a space to keep your car. And you have to have money for that. And in Colombia it is very crowded. There's a lot of people everywhere, so it's easier to just go on public transportation or walking rather than having a car. I think when I first came it was very shiny and pretty. I only saw the good things. Now stuff is no longer as beautiful as it was at the beginning, and I can see the bad things in it and I couldn't

before. Colombia is different in the sense that there's a lot of small businesses everywhere you go. So that also makes a community because people are like entrepreneurs, they do their own thing and having small businesses everywhere also means that you don't need to go too far from your home to, you know, have a place to eat, like a restaurant or a grocery store. Or have a place where to buy shoes or where to buy clothes. You can do all those things within your neighborhood, walking distance. You don't have to go anywhere. But here, there's just big corporations and stuff. So if you want to buy any of these things here, you actually have to get in a car or a bus and travel somewhere to actually buy these things. In terms of the accessibility to things I prefer Colombia. But this is the life that I have here. So I guess if I could have the same life over there, close to my family, I would not be upset about that. But I wish things were as close as they were to my home when I was growing up.

The hardest part about moving to the US was that I felt like moving to a different country where I didn't speak the language was gonna be very isolating, very lonely. At first it was. But after some time I learned the language better, and I kind of was less reluctant to talk to strangers and stuff, so things got better. It was very sad, because even when I met people like that, they're willing to talk to me. I just couldn't express myself. I couldn't be me. I felt really dumb. It wasn't really embarrassing. It was like an obstacle that I just couldn't get over quickly. It was very frustrating. I always learned quickly and I was able to overcome stuff. But the language was a lot harder, more like an emotional aspect, because there's a lot of emotion that cannot be translated in English. English is a very limiting language. So there's a lot of things that I had to adapt to.

I don't feel as emotional as I did when I was growing up back home. So it's strange, like when I met Feeps the language never let me express my feelings for him, though I wanted to because English is very limited and he doesn't know Spanish. That was something that I had to get accustomed to. There's like multiple instances

where that happens, but it's just really hard to be expressive in this language. So the biggest struggle is not being able to express myself.

After about a year of adjusting to everything new. I went to the Community College of Denver for two years, and then I went to the Metropolitan State University for another two.



My partner and I met in college. We took an art and history class together. His name is Felipe. The first time we met he was copying off my exam. He didn't study. It wasn't that bad because it was a group exam, but I was like "This guy is so lazy." Other times we'd just talk to each other and everything, and then we officially started dating. He was cute. At first we were just getting to know each other, so he was just asking me questions about what I like, what I didn't like and all that stuff. He did talk a lot about shoes, and that was the beginning of our conversations, just kind of getting to know each other. He talked to me first,

or at least he said he did. I don't know though. He asked me out first. I was really nervous because I didn't know if we were going to click or not. We knew each other for a couple weeks, maybe a month, but not more than that. We went to the movies for the first date. I don't remember what we watched, we were making out the whole time. It was a little awkward especially because I didn't know how it was gonna go down. I had asked my mom to give me money so that I could pay for my stuff, and then I forgot my wallet in my car and I didn't have any money. And he was making fun of me because he was gonna pay anyway. Then his mom picked us up after the date, which was a little soon for me to meet his mom. It was really awkward. But she drove me home. So that was nice. As we grew we went on many dates and we hadn't broken up once, we always talked it out. I think that's what led to us being married now.

When I was 26 we moved away from Colorado. I decided to get a PhD in molecular cellular biology and go to grad school in Seattle. I was happy about it and my partner was happy for me. When I told my mom she was really excited, because I could stay and she really liked Feeps, which is my husband. She didn't have a problem with it or anything. She was also sad because she wouldn't get to see me as often. But that was it. But his family wasn't happy. At first, it was a little hard, because I didn't want him to feel like I was forcing him to come with me, or straining his relationship with his family. But Feeps has always been very supportive, and he never made me feel like I was doing something wrong. He made it always be like "This is for the both of us," because I will be getting a degree and it will eventually benefit us both and whatever. His support made everything so much easier. I still live in Seattle, and our plans are to be here for another two or three years, so like a total of five or six.

My mom told me, if you don't get married, you might have to go back home. I had to talk to Feeps about it, and I was telling him why I needed to go home. Because, at that age, my mom couldn't sponsor me to be here. Also I needed a new visa,

and getting the new visa was gonna make my schooling too expensive, and it wasn't worth it. So I talked to Feeps, and I was telling him that everything's gonna be really complicated now, and I need to just go home, that we need to break up. And he asked if he could do something for me to help me out. I told him that he could marry me, but I said it as a joke, because I didn't think he was gonna say yes. And Feeps said, "Okay, let's get married." When I told my mom she was really excited, because I could stay and she really liked Feeps, so she actually didn't have a problem with it or anything.

We got married in Denver at his grandmother's house. Before I met him I didn't really want to get married. He said, "Do you really want to get married?" so I didn't have any expectations for what a wedding should be like. When we got married at his grandma's house it was really nice. We had to ask them for permission to let us get married. His grandmother was fine with it. She was really happy, actually. But his grandfather gave us a speech about how we should not take this like a silly step, it should be a serious matter, and we could not get divorced because that was not right. I felt very mixed emotions. We were very young, especially he was very young at the time, and his priorities were not the right ones. When we got married, he was there for the ceremony with the judge marrying us. But after we were done, he put his basketball shoes and outfit on, and played basketball with his brother and cousins in front of the house and left me behind with all of the people we invited, and I was trying to figure out food and getting people to congratulate me because he was not there. So we actually had a little fight. Mostly just family and a few friends came to the wedding though. We didn't have a ring. We decided that we didn't want to get a cheap ring because we wanted something special, something that we could afford later on, and a gift to each other. For example we decided very early that I was gonna buy his wedding ring, and he was gonna buy mine. But at the time, we were very young, we really didn't have money, so we just decided to wait. It's gonna be ten years in November that we've been married. We

don't have any kids together, we have too many little cousins. Well, mostly his but they're mine now too. I love my in-laws, though.

Before I saw America as a very welcoming place where there is opportunity, but it is given equally. America is not welcoming. I miss the food. I miss my family. Most of all I just miss my home. I miss the culture of the people, they're very warm. But the only thing that made America like my home was Feepers.

One of the biggest struggles for me being an immigrant is that a lot of people whenever they know that I was born in Colombia, the very first thing they say to me is, "oh does your family sell drugs" or do you know a cartel, or things like that, which is really annoying. It doesn't make me feel good, especially because the idea that some people have about Colombia is the wrong idea. And just because there is bad news that comes from Colombia doesn't mean that everything is bad, or that everyone sells drugs and has guns and all these other things that don't make Colombia like a beautiful place or a good place to go. It's a very small percentage of people that actually do those things. When people say those things, I try to correct them and teach them that is not true. There is so much more about my country that they could probably focus on instead of those things. But I still love America because of the opportunities that it provides.

My American dream was to just be successful here while doing something that I liked, and I still have that same dream. I think moving to the US just benefited my life because it gave me an opportunity to go to school here, to do what I'm doing right now, to learn a new language, and also to meet my husband. The hardest thing was just leaving my family behind. I was really close with a lot of people in my family. They sort of raised me. My mom was really busy sometimes when I was growing up, so my aunts would essentially take turns to take care of me and help with whatever I needed. So starting a life where they were not involved was really hard, was new and a little

difficult because I didn't have their support by them being there with me. I miss the two of my aunts, the one who took care of my grandfather and lived with me, essentially for a long time when I was growing up. But also when I went back home after that one year I was in America, I lived with another aunt who just took care of me. So I finished high school in Colombia, and I really miss her. We have a very good relationship. But I wouldn't say I regret coming here though. I like the life that I have now and the people that I've met while being here. I don't think I would have accomplished what I have accomplished if I wasn't in America. And I think I became the person that I am because I came here and I would like to think that I am pretty cool.

I'm the most proud of where I am now, the fact that I was able to overcome all those language obstacles and stuff, and now I'm doing a PhD and that makes me believe I made my family proud because a lot of people in my family don't have schooling. They don't have degrees. A lot of them have just jobs where they're really concerned about their stability or they're unemployed and things like that. They don't really have financial security or an education. And I'm one of the few people who works on something that requires a lot of skill and requires a lot of education, and that will help me in the future get good jobs or jobs that pay really well to eventually have a comfortable future. But they can't say the same, and they struggle a lot. They're proud of me because I was able to sort of not suffer the same and struggle like they do, but be able to do more. I think it makes me very appreciative of the opportunities that my mom was able to get for me by coming to the US. And I try really hard to show her that all the hard work that she put in was worth it, and I am actually taking advantage of it, and I'm doing what I can with it.

I think a way for immigrants to accomplish what I have is just to take every opportunity that is given to them and work really hard to achieve whatever dream they have. They can take every opportunity as it comes and work really hard. I feel like at least for Hispanic families, or at least when I was

growing up, very few of my friends' parents supported their dreams. Their parents only wanted them to have a comfortable life and just have a job. My mom was never like that. So I think having an example of something that can be accomplished, that you don't necessarily have to quit school and get a job, but then you can continue by working really hard towards a degree, and then, you know, be able to do things like what I do right now. But my mom always supported me. It makes me feel good that my mom has faith in me. It also makes me feel a lot of pressure. Because I want to make sure to show her that all her efforts were worth it. But it's always really nice to know that she has my back, and even if I don't accomplish all the things that she wants for me, she will still be there and not judge me. It definitely makes me work harder though. And it kind of keeps me from letting failure bring me down. It keeps me from letting all the failure in my career, whenever it comes, to be the one thing that I focus on. It just keeps me focused on my goal.

We as immigrants just want to have a happy, comfortable life. In the US a lot of the time people think that immigrants are coming for their jobs or whatever. But we don't have an agenda. We're just trying to have a good life, and it so happens that the US gives a better opportunity than our countries do, and that's why we're here. We don't have plans to take people's jobs or take over the US.

story told by: Dawn