

JIM HINCH

# Illegally Brilliant

A California dreamer at Berkeley

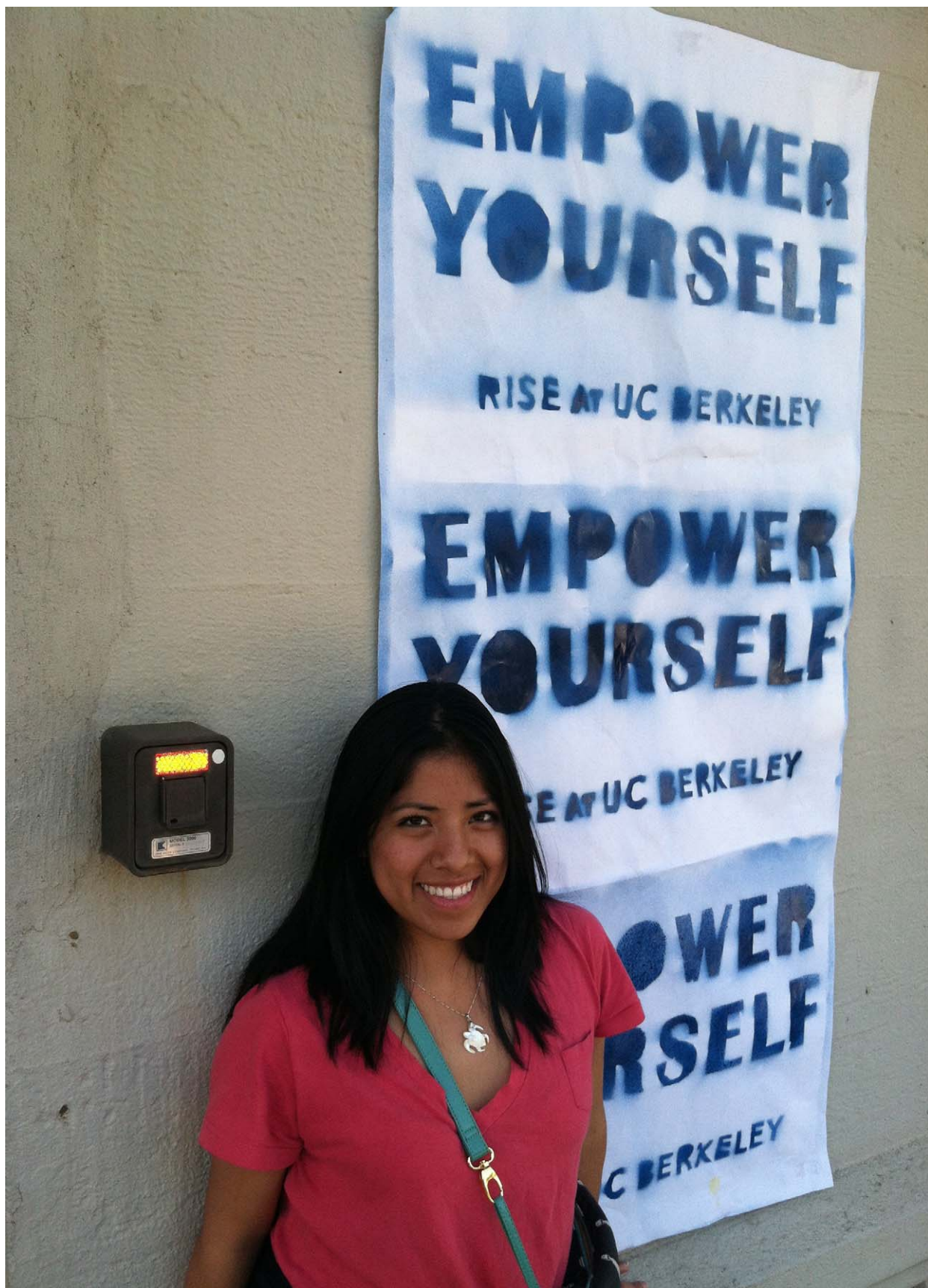
Linda Sanchez, an undocumented immigrant from Oaxaca, Mexico, does not like to be late. But on this spring morning she was late. She bounded downstairs, her hair still wet from the shower, and paced around her kitchen making breakfast. She sliced an apple into a container of Greek yogurt, filled a water bottle, and pried a banana from a blackening bunch on the counter. Beside her, a housemate, moving more slowly, fried a quesadilla on a restaurant-sized stove. It was 9:00 A.M. Linda should have left the house 15 minutes ago.

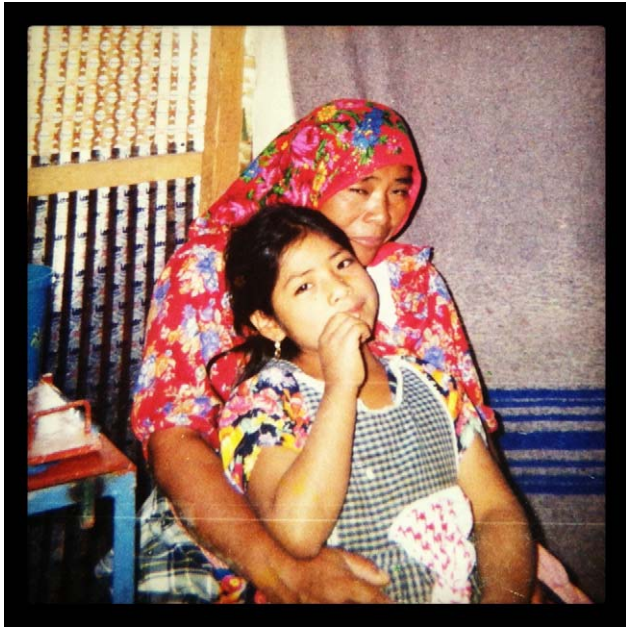
Outside, students at the University of California, Berkeley, where Linda is a senior majoring in political science, hurried along a sidewalk toward morning classes. Linda had stayed up until 3:00 A.M. the night before studying for an upcoming midterm exam and she'd overslept. "Today is one of my busiest days," she muttered, stuffing her breakfast into a backpack. "But I always keep it together. I stay focused on everything I do." She strode through a wood paneled dining hall and opened the front door of her house, a onetime mansion designed in 1914 by Berkeley architect Julia Morgan, now nonprofit housing for thirty-five multiethnic students. She skipped down the front porch steps and hurried toward campus.

Linda Sanchez is twenty-two years old, a Zapotec Indian raised in a remote hillside village and brought by her family illegally to the United States at age nine. She arrived in America speaking neither English nor Spanish, only Zapotec. She was dazzled by city lights her first night in Orange County, where her parents and four siblings moved into a two-bedroom apartment with another family from Oaxaca in a gang-dominated neighborhood in Anaheim. Her first American meal, a McDonald's hamburger, she pronounced "disgusting." She was shunned at school by Mexican children who looked down on her, and she spent afternoons at home shielding her younger brothers and sister from her father's alcoholic rages. But she caught the eye of teachers, was placed

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in a college preparatory program at her inner-city high school, and, in accordance with her own self-willed belief that she would one day defy her roots and become a college-educated professional, she was accepted to University of California, Berkeley, and awarded a private scholarship earmarked for immigrant students.

Her parents discouraged her from attending, objecting that Berkeley was too far away and that it might be dangerous for Linda to live on her own. Linda went anyway—and immediately found herself thrust into the center of America’s intensifying debate over illegal immigration. Berkeley, home to what is possibly the largest population of undocumented immigrant students at any major American research university, became a lightning rod in that debate in late 2012, when the university announced it was establishing a \$1 million privately endowed scholarship fund for undocumented students like Linda, who are barred by law from receiving any form of federal financial aid. At least 220 undocumented students currently attend Berkeley, nearly half the total number of undocumented students in the entire ten-campus University of California system. Berkeley officials boasted that their university is the first in the nation not only to fund undocumented students but also to furnish them with a full-time academic counselor and legal support from students and faculty in the law school. “We can’t afford to waste our talent,” Robert Birgeneau, at the time Berkeley’s chancellor, said in explanation of the university’s support.

Birgeneau said he received hate mail and angry phone calls from Republican lawmakers in response to his stance. For Linda Sanchez and students like her, living on the frontlines of America’s immigration battle has exacted a more ongoing, prosaic toll. Since arriving at Berkeley in 2009, Linda has paid for her education by cleaning apartments, doing maintenance for a landlord near campus, babysitting, applying for more than a hundred private scholarships, starting her own franchise in a direct-marketing company, wearing used clothes, photocopying textbooks instead of buying them, and hawking candy bars outside Cal football games. (“When you have to hustle, you can’t be embarrassed,” she said.) She also has been helped by two controversial state laws. The first, passed in 2001, enables immigrant students raised in California to pay in-state tuition even if they are not citizens. The second, signed in 2011 by Governor Jerry Brown after being vetoed three times by former Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger, makes undocumented students eligible for state, but not federal, financial aid. Prior to the 2011 law, life for undocumented students at Berkeley could be harrowing. Barred from receiving federal Pell Grants, work-study jobs or any government-backed loan, many undocumented students faced periods of homelessness, dropped out of school to work, and scrounged for free food at university events. They also lived—and continue to live—in fear that they or their families would be identified and deported.

Linda professes not to fear deportation. “My community here would not allow that to happen,” she said, naming professors and directors of campus programs for disadvantaged students whose mentorship she’s cultivated. Instead, Linda expects to graduate this year and eventually apply to graduate programs in law and public policy, with an emphasis on international environmental issues such as access to clean water. She wants to become an advocate for indigenous people at the United Nations. Her talent, clearly, has not been wasted. And yet, as a single day in Linda’s life shows, her aspirations, like those of America’s eleven million other undocumented immigrants, are fragile, too. On that spring morning she overslept; Linda was late to the first of two jobs she would work that day, one of three she worked that semester. She worked so much, and therefore had to stay up late studying, because her parents are poor and can’t afford the cost of a college education, and because Linda’s legal status blocked her from major sources of funding. One minor



detail—breakfast made in a hurry and eaten on the go—stood for everything else in her life as an undocumented educational pioneer. It would be like that for the rest of the day. Maybe it would be like that for the rest of her life.

The job to which Linda arrived uncharacteristically late that Wednesday morning was a paid internship at Berkeley's Multicultural Community Center, a student-run meeting space adjacent to the women's gymnasium. Linda slipped inside a nondescript office building and sat down at a desk with a computer. She wore blue jeans, a green T-shirt, a North Face parka, and a pair of flat shoes decorated with Indian beads. Her black hair was pulled into a ponytail. "I feel like my brain is not functioning right now," she said, taking out her breakfast and checking email. Then she got to work coordinating the community center's calendar of upcoming events. On the phone she spoke in a clipped, lightly accented voice. Face-to-face she wore a faint fixed smile, like she'd decided, as a matter of policy, to appear cheerful and optimistic.

She remained at the community center until 11:00 A.M., occasionally glancing in despair at a study sheet for the upcoming midterm in a class on ethics and justice. ("All the reading!" she groaned.) Then she packed up her things and hurried across campus to the university's Chicano/Latino student center, where, in an hour, she'd begin job number two, babysitting fifteen-month-old Robert, Jr., the son of Robert Reyes, a graduate student in the English Department specializing in Chicano and African American literature. One of Linda's campus mentors had recommended her for the job, which paid \$18 per hour for four hours twice a week. Linda sat in the cramped office of Lupe Gallegos, coordinator of the university's outreach to Latino students. The office, which functions as an informal student hangout and study space, overlooked a small redwood grove and was decorated with Tibetan prayer flags, an enlarged copy of a Cesar Chavez commemorative postage stamp, and a poster that read, "Education, Not Deportation."

Linda pulled out a course reader and turned to an article on the Nuremberg Trials. She read for a few minutes and then looked up. The boisterous presence of several younger students in the office seemed to remind her of the autumn day in 2009 when her parents dropped her off at Berkeley. "My dad and my mom and my grandma and my then-boyfriend and my little brother drove me here in an Astro van," she recalled. "I had just my clothes in a big green

container with shampoo and printing paper and pencils. This was all new to them. They didn't know college. My mom was like, 'Okay, I guess this is it.' She started crying. And I cried after they left, but not in front of them." Her faint smile appeared. "People ask, 'Were you homesick?' I was homesick for like a day."

Linda was born in the hillside village of San Bartolomé Quialana in central Oaxaca. "Quialana" is a Zapotec term referring to a black rock common in the area, and the region is famed for its indigenous black stone pottery. Linda recalled a childhood spent mostly in the care of her grandmother, Rufina, a village healer who lived in a one-room adobe house with a dirt floor. Linda's father, Cutberto, was an alcoholic who did not work much. When Linda was four, her parents suddenly left for the United States without her. Linda was not told why they went, and she assumed they had abandoned her. (Later, Linda learned that "my dad was being very violent" and the family decided it would be better for Linda to remain in Oaxaca.) "I remember being raised like a wild little thing," she said. "My grandmother was always on the move curing people with herbs and ancient indigenous medicine. I was allowed to do whatever I wanted. The memories that stayed with me were of me running around the village with the dogs." Occasionally, her mother, Isabel, would telephone. "But I was very stubborn," Linda said. "I never wanted to talk to her. I was really resentful."

Like other rural Zapotec girls, Linda attended school only sporadically. And yet, "I always knew I wanted to go to school," she said. "I felt like school was a privilege." She formed an inchoate desire to go to college and become a lawyer. "I wanted to defend people," she said. "I think it was growing up around violence against women."

Five years after her parents left, something happened to Linda that she was reluctant to disclose. "My mom was scared for my safety," was all she would volunteer. "It was sort of along abusive lines. She didn't want me to be there anymore. She needed me to get out." An uncle, who had become an American citizen, traveled from Southern California to Oaxaca and fetched Linda. "We crossed the border, which was super easy," she said. Her uncle told

"It's not my dream in life  
to become a US citizen."

customs officials, “‘She’s my niece, and we just are going to visit and going back to LA.’ They didn’t talk to me. I remember walking and crossing the border, and I was on the other side and there was a taxi waiting for us and that took us to Orange County.”

Linda found herself in a two-bedroom apartment three miles from Disneyland in a densely populated, mostly immigrant neighborhood of Anaheim. Linda, her mother and father, and her four siblings occupied one bedroom in the apartment. Another couple and their daughter from Linda’s village in Oaxaca occupied the other bedroom. Linda’s father, who had a second-grade education, worked sporadically as a gardener when he wasn’t drinking. Linda’s mother catered parties and *quinceañeras*, preparing Oaxacan delicacies she never made at home. There were shootings in the neighborhood and periodic raids by immigration authorities. “I didn’t go out a lot,” Linda said. “When I saw police I would get scared. I knew I was undocumented.”

Linda’s parents kept her out of school for several months after her arrival in Anaheim so she could babysit her three younger American-born siblings, Rosa, José, and Luis. (Rosa, now 20, lives with Linda in Berkeley and attends Berkeley City College; José, 17, and Luis, 14, are in high school and have talked about enlisting in the military; Maria, 24, has three children and has moved back in with Linda’s mother in Anaheim; Linda’s mother and father have separated and no longer live together.) Linda recalled “crazy fights” between her parents that were so violent the father of the other family who lived in the apartment would try to break them up. After Maria ran away at age 13, it fell to Linda to shield her brothers and sister. “That was my main goal,” she said, “to have my siblings see as little of it as possible.”

At last, the following fall, Linda was enrolled at Robert M. Pyles Elementary School in the neighboring city of Stanton, where three-quarters of the students are English-language learners and 90 percent qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Linda’s parents spoke Zapotec at home. Linda had picked up a little Spanish from her siblings, but mostly she arrived at Pyles illiterate and unable to communicate with other students. Some Mexicans harbor racist attitudes toward indigenous people, and Linda was shunned in her English learners’ program. “Kids didn’t want to talk to me,” she said. “Kids are cruel; they’re horrible.” And yet, “School was the only place where I felt safe. I knew at school there

was no threat to us.” Instead, there were books (“I didn’t really have access to books in Oaxaca”) and space for imagination. “When we had story time, what I remember was painting a different picture of what my family was like,” Linda said. “I would write about my dad as if he was the most loving dad ever.”

By the following summer Linda was bringing textbooks home and “trying to memorize the US Constitution and all the amendments and all this cool stuff. My mom felt like I was weird, and she was questioning why I was doing that.” In eighth grade, at Dale Junior High School in Anaheim, Linda transferred out of the English learners’ program. An English literature teacher, Daniel Laningham, noticed Linda’s work and told her she was college material. “He really praised me a lot,” Linda said. “He put my papers on a wall and said, ‘This is an example of how to do essays.’ This man has been the one who was my guardian angel.”

At Anaheim’s Magnolia High School, where two students were stabbed the year Linda left for Berkeley, Linda was placed in Puente, a UC-affiliated college preparatory program available at thirty-one low-income high schools throughout California. She had a designated counselor, was encouraged to take Advanced Placement courses, and went on tours of California colleges. During a sophomore-year visit to Berkeley, Linda said she knew right away: “This was the place for me. I thought, ‘Berkeley is the most challenging to get into, so that’s the one I’ll try for.’”

All that remained to figure out after she was accepted was how to pay. The annual in-state cost to attend Berkeley is roughly \$30,000. Linda’s parents were unable to help. “My mom said, ‘Berkeley? Where’s that?’” Linda recalled. “She wanted me to go to Cypress Community College. She didn’t understand the prestige.” Linda won several scholarships (including a \$24,000 privately funded merit scholarship awarded to high-achieving students) and bargained for rent reduction at Casa Joaquin, the multiethnic student house where she still lives. She dropped her high school boyfriend (“he had no aspirations”), took classes on Shakespeare and Chicano culture, and explored sushi and Thai restaurants near campus. She met a recent Berkeley biology graduate named Jesus Miguel Diaz and, after ascertaining that he was conversant enough with “world events so he can discuss them with me,” Linda asked him out. “I don’t have too much time to spend with him,” she said. Mostly they go to lectures together or out to eat. Diaz recently took Linda

camping in Yosemite. “I don’t think about my family too much at all,” she said. “I felt like I could come here and build my own community. I’m still very reserved in my personal life. I’m still cold and dismissive with people who aren’t on top of it.”

Linda’s story was cut short by the arrival of fifteen-month-old Robert Jr., wheeled into the Chicano student center in a stroller by his father. Linda’s face brightened. “Are you ready for your day to start?” she cooed into the stroller. “We have lots to do.” She turned to Robert, Sr. “Did you change his diaper already?” Robert shook his head. Linda whisked Robert, Jr. to the bathroom. “Thanks Linda,” Robert, Sr. called as he headed toward a café where he planned to grade papers and meet with students. Linda returned from the bathroom and gave Robert, Jr. a banana. Other students smiled and cooed hellos. “He’s very well beloved here,” Linda said, smiling at little Robert. “*Verdad?*” Robert clambered out of his stroller and began toddling around the student center. Linda followed, leaving behind her Nuremberg Trials article still open on a table. She and Robert eventually headed outside, onto Sproul Plaza. Linda put a sweatshirt on the boy and applied sunscreen to his face. For the next hour they wandered the plaza, listening to a free concert by a university men’s octet, exploring a creek beneath a nearby bridge, and walking into a student grocery store where Linda bought lunch (Asian noodle salad and a raspberry energy drink). They returned to the student center to fetch the stroller and Linda’s things. “Don’t have children!” she called to some students passing in the hall.

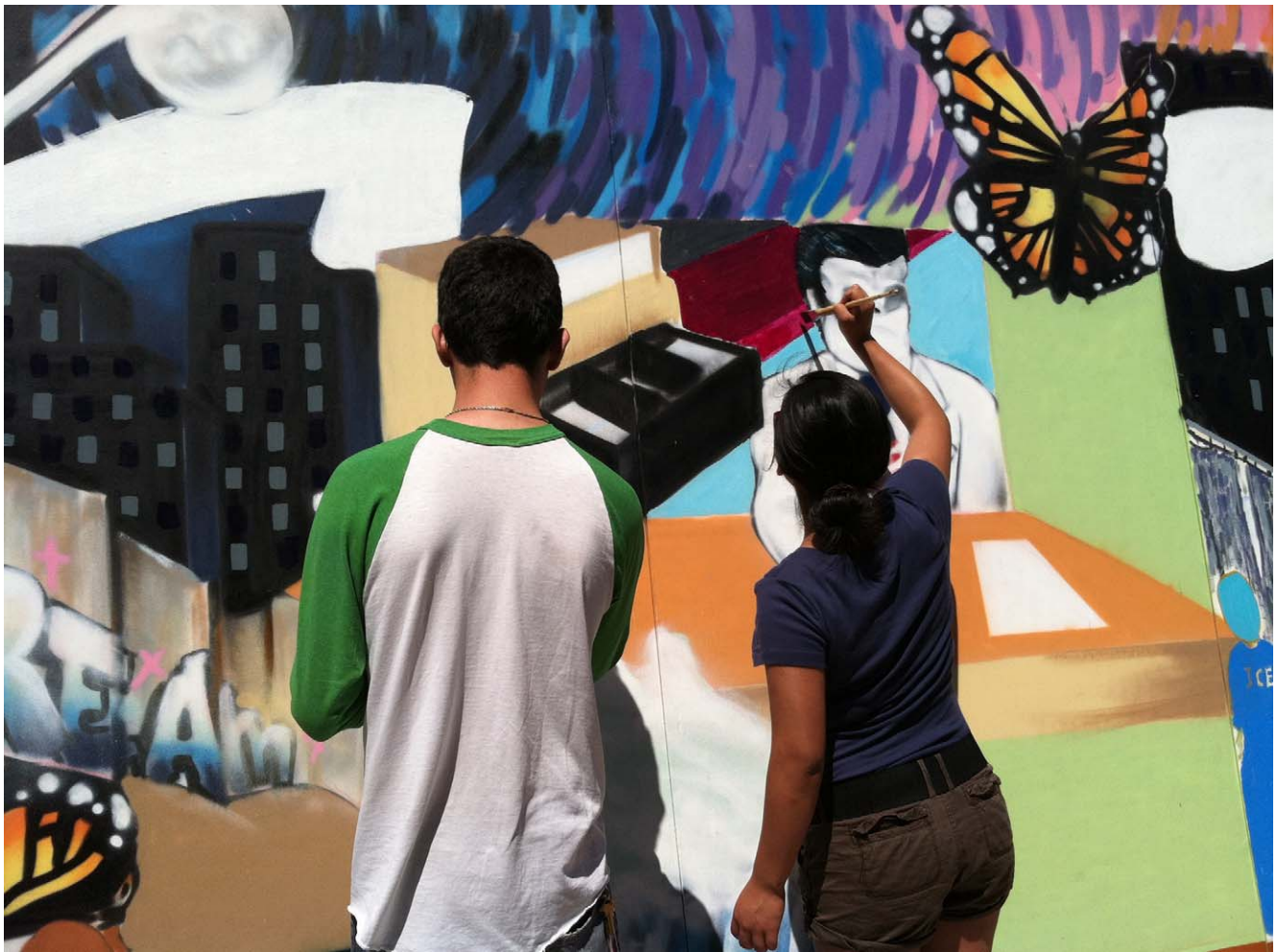
Linda strapped Robert into the stroller and pushed him outside, hoping he might fall asleep. “I work every day,” she said, now beginning to worry seriously about her midterm. “Some days are more school than work. Today is mainly work.” She glanced into the stroller. Robert’s eyes were heavy. She headed across campus toward a spacious lawn in front of the Life Sciences Building. She parked the stroller under a shady tree, covered Robert with a blanket, and spread another blanket for herself on the ground. She ate the rest of her lunch and read about the Nuremberg Trials. Nearby, two students threw a Frisbee. A creek that runs through campus poured over a small waterfall. A soft breeze blew, carrying hints of the afternoon fog beginning to advance across the San Francisco Bay to the west. It was the first quiet moment Linda had enjoyed all day.

She looked up from her reading. The midterm would cover twelve scholarly articles on post-World War II political ethics. Linda had read eight so far. “So it looks like I’ll be drinking coffee tonight,” she said. “Sometimes I don’t sleep at all. If I’m up past 4:30, I can’t sleep. So I just take a shower and start studying again.” She watched the Frisbee throwers, a boyfriend and girlfriend laughing and finding various excuses to stop and touch one another. “I try to have a social life, but it’s difficult,” Linda said. “I’d hoped to catch up on spring break. But I did too much work.”

After the Yosemite trip with Diaz, Linda had spent several days in Anaheim. Instead of studying she’d given talks at three inner-city high schools, including Magnolia, about getting into college as an immigrant. She’d worked on her “business connections,” new clients for her fledgling cell phone services franchise. A few months earlier, always in search of new income, Linda had signed on with ACN, a direct marketer of telecommunications services that has been accused by some state authorities of operating a pyramid scheme and involuntarily switching customers to new service providers.







Linda spent time in Anaheim recruiting new sales representatives and persuading people to use ACN for cell phone service. “My team is expanding in Orange County,” she said. “I receive a residual percentage from customers’ bills and I train new people. This month’s bonus is \$1,000.” ACN sellers are independent contractors, not employees of the company, enabling Linda to work around her undocumented status.

Though it had been nearly a year since President Barack Obama announced a change in government policy, granting quasi-legal status to students like Linda, she still hadn’t applied for what is commonly referred to by its initials as DACA—Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals. A successful application would grant her a two-year renewable work permit and shield her from deportation. “I have to apply ASAP,” she said. But so far she hadn’t had—or made—the time. “I haven’t sat down to look for documents,” she said. “I need proof of enrollment and other verification I was

here.” (Linda subsequently applied for DACA status the following summer.)

Part of her procrastination stemmed from ambivalence about the country that had simultaneously educated and discriminated against her. “It’s not my dream in life to become a US citizen,” she confessed. “I understand the importance of it. But if it’s not doable, I’ll find a way to achieve my goals without it. Right now it’s looking not very possible.” Her expression grew bitter. “If anything I resent here, it’s how people view immigrants. They say, ‘These immigrants are here and trying to steal our tax money,’ and all that stuff. They don’t see how so much of it is their own doing. They want cheap stuff whenever they want it. So big corporations go to third-world countries and employ people for no money. So they have no choice but to come here. And the way the US has funded wars in Latin America that drove people out.”

She paused, noticing that the blanket covering Robert, Jr. was stirring. She stood up. “I see myself going back to Mexico temporarily to do work,” she said, pulling back the blanket and smiling at young Robert. “To be governor or sit in politics and make decisions about the direction of the country. Eventually, I want to be at the UN.” She unbuckled Robert and plopped him on her blanket. For a few minutes, she watched him play with her pencil case, a small red, orange, and pink striped bag. Then she gazed around at the quiet afternoon campus. “I feel safe here,” she said, gently prying one particularly sharp pencil from Robert, Jr.’s hand. “Once, in Anaheim, in the morning, I was still in bed and [immigration authorities] came in and said, ‘Don’t get out of bed. Stay in bed.’ I was twelve. They were looking for a guy who lived there before. It was weird. It was scary. It was like, ‘What’s going on?’ I know my dad was scared. When they can’t find who they’re looking for, sometimes they take whoever is there.”

She gave Robert a snack and let him play for a few more minutes before buckling him back into the stroller. She packed up her things and walked across campus to the lecture hall where Robert, Sr. was finishing a class. At 4:00 P.M., the Campanile, Berkeley’s iconic bell tower, began to toll and students streamed out of the hall, many of them smiling and waving at little Robert as he toddled up and down a nearby staircase. Robert, Sr. appeared and gathered his son into his arms. “Thank you so much, Linda,” he said. “Did he nap?” “Two hours,” replied Linda. “I changed his diaper.” “You rock,” said Robert. He buckled Robert, Jr. into the stroller and headed toward home. “See you Monday!” Linda called.

She began walking back toward Casa Joaquin, where she was due at a house managers’ meeting at 6:00 P.M. Along the way she stopped at a campus office to drop off an application for yet another scholarship, this one part of a controversial \$1 million fund established by the Haas family, longtime Berkeley benefactors. The scholarship was worth up to \$5,000 for the 2013–2014 school year, Linda’s last. She had already been accepted to spend the fall at Berkeley’s satellite campus in Washington, D.C., where she would take classes, intern in a political office, and write a thirty-page research paper—“all the cool stuff, which I really enjoy,” she said. She had three more classes to complete in spring, and then she would be done. She passed the Campanile and gazed toward its bronze clock face. “I think

I’m right where I’m supposed to be,” she said. “I feel like I’m in place.”

Back home, Linda climbed two flights of stairs to an attic bedroom. Though the afternoon had turned foggy, the room was hot and stuffy. Linda opened a west-facing window and dropped her backpack on an unmade bed piled with clothes and a white duvet. The other side of the room, occupied by a second-year biology student named Michelle Chang, was noticeably neater. On a bulletin board above her desk, Linda had tacked some photographs. One showed Linda a few years younger, surrounded by three teenagers and a man and woman, both slightly heavysset, in jeans and T-shirts. The man, unsmiling, wore a blue baseball cap. “That’s my dad,” said Linda, looking noncommittal. “And my mom. And Maria, me, Rosa, José, and Luis.” Another, older photograph showed an elderly woman in a flower-print shawl standing beside a young girl, maybe seven years old, in a dress and checkered apron. “Me and my grandma,” said Linda, smiling. There was also a photo of Linda in a white dress and corsage at her *quinceañera*. Scattered around her paper-strewn desk were several figurines of turtles made of wood and ceramic. A large poster of a turtle hung over Linda’s bed.

“I love turtles,” she explained. “Friends always give me turtles.” She held up one made of blue-stained wood. “This one is from Oaxaca.” Another, made of iridescent, hardened mud, was a gift from her boyfriend, who had bought it in Hawaii. “Turtles are very persistent,” Linda said. “They’re strong and patient. That’s similar to my attitude. They always have their house on their back.”

She cradled the two turtle figurines, one from Oaxaca, the other from her Berkeley boyfriend. She looked at the photographs above her desk, the pile of academic papers she would read later that night. “Wherever I go, I take my experiences and learning and wisdom,” she said. “I create a new family wherever I go.” **B**

## Note

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF LINDA SANCHEZ. Page 63: Linda Sanchez at the annual RISE—Rising Immigrant Scholars through Education—conference in 2013. Page 64: Linda with her grandmother. Page 67: With Oski, the UC Berkeley mascot, at a scholarship brunch in 2011. Page 68: Doing community service in Oakland with the organization 67 Sueños, which works with and for immigrant youth.