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Editor's Note

Vanessa Saldana, in her essay "Success of a Gardener," contributes her perspective on illegal immigration through an intimate portrait of an illegal immigrant: her father. Although she knows her father well, she seems to take this opportunity to explore an aspect of him she perhaps hasn't considered in all its complexity. As you can see, Saldana remains fairly objective through the essay, but her in-depth analysis reveals that she learned something about her father—and herself—that she hadn't realized before taking on the assignment. What is your opinion about immigration? How does Saldana's essay contribute to the current immigration debate?

Success of a Gardener

Vanessa Saldana

Almost everyone has heard the term "illegal alien" because immigration has vastly increased over the years. Those unfortunate souls who are caught by la Migra (border patrol) are returned to their home country; but others like my dad manage to elude them. He not only avoided them once but four times. "I hopped the fence (border) twice, was stuffed into a trunk, and waded across the current of El Rio Grande," my father told me. What happens to the immigrants who go undiscovered by border patrol and make it into the U.S.? My father, Francisco Saldana, was once an illegal immigrant who, with his courage and determination, managed to defeat the odds against him to succeed in California.

When one pictures a man "fresh out of Mexico," what comes to mind? My father does not fit the stereotypical description very well. He's not short but an inch or two shy of six feet. His skin is not dark. His eyes, which have been passed down from generation to generation in the Saldana family, are green. His accent and his features belie his ethnicity. Although he does not fit the stereotypical image, he still struggled throughout his journey because he knew nothing of the American culture.

"There's so much money on the other side," is the common belief Mexicans hold before crossing the border. Who would want to come to California to simply pick vegetables and fruits under the hot sun for a measly twenty dollars a day? My father was left no other choice than that. Many may wonder why he didn't just get an education in Mexico, as we are taught from an early age "knowledge is power," but he didn't have that luxury. Education past the third grade was for the rich; so instead of going to school every morning, my father would go out and help with the family's ranch. At twenty-three, he finally made the life altering decision to come to the States. As he told me, "I would be making twenty dollars over there (California), and it would be worth two

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hundred pesos over here (Mexico).” That was all the motivation he needed in order to seek what everyone wants in life: success and money.

Every aspect of immigration is risky: the trip to the destination, arriving at the destination, and surviving there. Like most immigrants, my father hired a coyote (guide) who helped him cross the border along with other young men. He tried to play off crossing the Tijuana border as if it were no big deal by saying, “I just jumped a fence along with another man and ran into the trunk of a car, while they drove us to Los Angeles.” The two hour trip is hard enough to endure in a comfortable, air conditioned car. Now imagine being locked in a truck with minimal air circulation; my father must have really wanted to be in California. Not many people have ever been in a situation similar to this, but immigrants travel in the most shockingly uncomfortable ways to have a chance at a better life.

The real struggle of an immigrant only begins when they are over the border. Once he paid off the coyote, my dad was left to fend for himself in Los Angeles. In 1979, things weren’t as restricted in the U.S.: “I just went to the airport, gave them my name and money, and they handed me a ticket to Philadelphia.” Why Philadelphia? His older sister resided there, so he already had a place to live. I can only imagine how helpless one would be if they went to a country where they not only had never seen the likes of a city so different from home but had no one to contact for help. My father lucked out since that was not his case. The only job my dad was able to obtain was field work picking fruits and vegetables. Immigrants are left with little choices when it comes to working; all the jobs are menial and take a toll on one’s body. Since that was all my father knew how to do, he took the jobs as they became available. “I would gladly take any money that came my way, as long as I could send some back home to my mother. Plus, it’s what I grew up doing but, here, I actually get paid.” Despite the rigorous work conditions, his wages were unexpectedly low, making a living difficult.

Life is about trial and error; getting it right on the first time rarely happens. Everything seemed to be going well for my father, but then he ran out of money. He returned to Mexico disappointed. Mexico did not have much to offer him: “All I could do back home was help on my father’s land where I would make no money,” so he decided to give the states a chance once again. He failed four times before settling down in San Francisco, where he found work as a gardener’s assistant. Instead of giving up his dream to become successful, he kept persevering to achieve the dream he undertook. After many years of struggles he was finally able to get his Permanent Resident Card, or green card, when President Reagan decided to give illegal immigrants amnesty and citizenships to those already in the U.S. Now my dad was less restricted and was able to get better jobs. As I’ve mentioned, he’s only known physical labor so he took a risk and became an entrepreneur. It may be stereotypical for some-

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one of Mexican decent to become a gardener, but that is exactly what my father chose to do.

At the age of 51 my father is still going strong; working from the early morning until sun set, managing gardens. He does not need a fancy office with a desk and computer to have clientele. Francisco is a business man who sticks with the basics; working on his dining room table with a pen and paper. As far back as I can remember he has kept client records in a notebook that gets replaced with a larger one, as his one-man business expands. That notebook is a symbol to his life's accomplishments, holding numerous pages of patrons. He succeeded even though he was an immigrant, had a third grade education, and did not know how to speak English. What got him through is his work ethic and willingness to take risks without worrying about failure. My dad has been in California for many years now, yet he still does not speak English well. Part of it is due to refusing to let go of his roots and he just doesn't like the sound of the language. He may have attained the success he aimed for, but in his heart, he will always miss his home country: "There's nothing left for me to do here anymore except to wait for you to settle down." The comforts of America are unexpectedly not enough to keep my father here and soon I will be the one crossing the border to visit him.

As Martin Luther King, Jr. once stated, "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy." My father's immigration has shaped him, not just through the sacrifices he had made, but from the fact that he prevailed against odds. Unlike my smooth hands, his rough work callused hands are proof of the effort he made to accomplish his dream. "I came from having nothing and living in a house built of corn stalks, to owning two houses, driving good cars, owning land in Mexico, and even having money left over to gamble." He shows that even without education one can achieve their goals with hard work. I'm not insinuating that education is not necessary; it just makes life a lot more pleasant. Many of us are handed a lot of opportunities that we take for granted, while people, like my dad, in less affluent countries work harder and receive very little. We can't change the fact that we are born in a country far richer than others, but what we can do is take risks and opportunities that are presented to us.

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