

Into the Night

Category: Uncertainty

written by Emma Zavala-Suarez | August 31, 2020

"What makes the desert beautiful . . . is that somewhere it hides a well." –
Antoine de Saint Exupéry

That summer night in the desert a few weeks before my seventh birthday is etched in my memory forever. We met our smuggler around sunset, when he came to our motel room to pick up my mom and all six of her kids, each of us with some degree of ailment—a broken arm, a bacterial eye infection, a cough. We followed the smuggler into the Tijuana-San Diego desert through a hole in a metal fence. By nightfall, we were hiding from helicopter lights above looking for people like us.

The enormity of what was happening was palpable: my mom was risking our lives for “the American Dream.” This was a single night in our long story of resilience in the face of uncertainty. Life adversities can build character but can also tear it down. Growing up in minority communities that met trauma with resiliency also meant I witnessed the deadly impact of living with a lifetime of cumulative stressors.

This is how my lived experience—facing racism, food, and housing insecurity—informed for me the value of a multifaceted approach to building strong and healthy communities. I spent countless hours learning by collaborating with women-led nonprofits, organizations promoting farmworker rights and immigrant rights, working to afford vulnerable communities their basic needs. Complementing this grassroots activism, my legal training added further breadth to my understanding of institutional inequity and injustice. A top-down approach highlighted the value of working within institutions, so I sat at the tables where changes in state-level policies, rules, and regulations were discussed—ultimately affecting individuals’ daily lives.

Now, I have the privilege of gaining a medical school education, which brings new, even more tangible possibilities of ways I can help people in underserved communities.

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