

The Undocumented Experience

Izah Tahir

Artist Statement

As the child of Pakistani immigrants, there was one thing I knew well. My parents had left the culture they knew, a language they understood, and family they loved, and all of it was so I could now reap the benefits of living in America. To convey this idea in my drawing, I split the page into two halves, each representing a different country. The left side depicts an immigrant father, exhausted from working into the night. The right side depicts his son, still in their home country. In the middle, there is a barrier representing the distance between the father and his family. Through a small gap in the barrier, the father is able to send things his family needs at home, such as shoes for his son. Both father and son are alone in starkly different environments, showing how confusing a new country can be and how isolating the undocumented immigration experience can be for both the immigrant and their loved ones.

Epilogue

When I was 16, I wrote about the immigrant experience as my mother's experience. I thought of her sleeping on the floor after buying matching twin beds for my brother and me, and this translated into the father in my drawing sending shoes to his son. However, in the years since, I realized I had a unique experience as well. I may not have moved to another country, but I attended school with a different skin color, different clothes, and different food from everyone else. In fact, I was so shocked, I did not speak a word for the first month of kindergarten. My teacher (falsely) concluded I could not speak English, and she told my mother I was going to fail.

Years later, I was a model student. I had good grades, I participated in clubs, I volunteered at a nursing home. Yet, somehow, I was always two steps behind. I did not have anyone to help me with college applications, and my parents did not have any connections when I needed a job. In fact, I was the one editing their résumés. Like many students in this situation, I worked until I burnt myself out, and then I worked some more.

Now, at age 24, I am finally learning to give myself a break. However, the first-generation experience was not all bad. I love wearing Pakistani dresses, and I could not imagine eating anything but Pakistani food for dinner each night. When I could not buy something as a child, I learned how to make it, and this shaped me into the artist I am today. When I wanted to learn Spanish, I had an easier time than many of my classmates because I already knew Urdu and Punjabi. I continued using those language skills working as a teacher in the Dominican Republic and, later, at a majority-Latino high school in Providence. I could relate to a lot of the students' experiences as immigrants or children of immigrants, and I plan to become an educator to work with such students again in the future. I hope I can help them overcome the setbacks they have endured and discover the advantages they have, just as I did.

Biography

Izah Tahir is a Pakistani-American who grew up in Kennesaw, Georgia. In 2016, she was awarded first place in the Latin American Association's inaugural high school art competition "Portraying the Undocumented Experience," and she continued on to participate in Georgia's Governor's Honors Program as a visual arts major in 2017. Izah later graduated from Georgia Tech in 2022 with a degree in mathematics. She is passionate about human rights and education, and she spent much of her time in college volunteering with Circle K, the collegiate branch of Kiwanis International. She currently resides in Providence, Rhode Island, where she is an editor at a non-profit for publications in mathematics research.