



A Nurse First | Season 4, Episode 1

10 years

[Higinio Fernández-Sánchez]: When I was in high school, I shadowed a few other professionals, including a lawyer, which I thought at that time that I would become a lawyer. But then I shadowed a nurse practitioner. The whole day I spent with her, I was really drawn into the work that she was doing. And it wasn't just nursing. I think it was also her personality and the way that she showed what nursing was about, that I immediately knew that I wanted to go into nursing.

[Welcome to A Nurse First. This is Higinio Fernández-Sánchez telling his own A Nurse First story.]

[Higinio Fernández-Sánchez]: So growing up undocumented as a child is different because personally, I've never even knew, right? I never even knew what that meant until later when things started to affect my life. Initially, it was my dad who migrated to the US, and he chose the town where I grew up, which is Tyler, Texas, because we had other family members that were already there.

My dad migrated for work purposes, which I think it's very similar to other people's reasons, looking for better opportunities. I think initially he wanted to be here for some time and then return to Mexico, but after some time and discussing it with my mother, they both decided to bring the family over. My mother, my siblings, and I migrated years later. I can't remember how old I was, but I started first grade here in the US.

Back at that time, the border wasn't as secured as it is now. Before crossing the border, you didn't even need like a passport or anything. When we first got to the US, I remember we went, the typical, you go out for a burger. And I don't think I've ever had a burger before then. So that was pretty different and exciting too. Everything was like really big to me. I think part of it was because I was a child. And then the other part was because in Mexico we lived like in a really, really tiny place, right? These are things that you basically only see on TV, like the bus picking you up to go to school and then going into your classroom and saying the pledge of allegiance and going to the cafeteria and grabbing your tray.

But of course, there were a lot of things that if I think about them now, were definitely challenges and barriers and I don't ever remember going to like a physical exam because of the lack of health insurance and all these things.

The first kind of barrier that I remember facing is trying to drive. So I did go to driving school and I did all of that. But of course, then I wasn't able to get a license or a permit because I didn't have a social. But before then, I didn't even know what the word undocumented meant because you just grew up like a normal kid. I do remember having some kind of conversation with my parents when I wasn't able to get my driver's license. And it's like mixed emotions and mixed feelings in terms of anger and being upset and being sad and even blaming them at that time. Of course, I don't blame them now. But at that time, you're a teenager, you don't know that and you don't know better. But now I feel like they were so brave, like immigrants are so brave. And I can't imagine because as a child, I wasn't noticing all these

challenges that were around me, but my parents were, right? They had it at the top of their heads all the time. And they had to work around these challenges so that I could live a normal childhood and adolescent life as much as possible.

When I finished high school back in 2006, I went into a community college in Tyler, Texas. It was a two-year program. During that time, I wanted to apply for nursing school for the BSN program. But then, because I was an undocumented immigrant, I wasn't able to apply for the program. One of the counselors at this college said, "Well, you have a pretty good record, and I've seen some people that go back to their home countries and request a study permit and we're able to extend all of the proper documentation and we'll get you back over here and get you into the nursing program." I was a little bit scared, but I finally decided to leave the US for Mexico. I wanted to become a nurse, and I'll do what I need to do, right?

When I arrived there and I went to the US Embassy, I was denied that study permit for obvious reasons, because I had spent all of my childhood and adolescence here. They placed a 10-year ban before they could grant me any other type of entry into the US. I think the first thing when I got the bad news was probably, "Oh, no, I'm not going to be able to see my parents, my siblings, my friends!" What am I going to do? I don't even know anything about this place I'm at right now. I was 21 in a place I've never been, in a language I was able to manage, it was so overwhelming. Like, what do I do? Nobody knows what I need to do. I don't even know anything about this place I'm at right now. I had a birth certificate, but I didn't have an ID, and I needed that in order to do basically everything else.

Nowadays, there's a lot of resources for DACA recipients that go back to Mexico or returnees in general. But when I went back, there weren't a lot of resources in place. So that exacerbated the whole experience of me arriving to Mexico.

[In a literal instant, Higinio was left with little other option than to reconfigure what the next 10 years of his life would look like. Luckily, through hurried and anxious phone calls from Mexico back to the United States, Higinio's parents were able to connect him with his one living grandmother, who without hesitation provided him with a semblance of home. And having that safe space to land gave Higinio the mental capacity to consider what his next move would be.]

[Higinio Fernández-Sánchez]: But during this time, I entered the BSN program in Mexico. I would say that initially my motivation came from if I do this and I'll be able to go back. If I get my BSN, I'll be able to get my credential success, which I did later on, to be able to work and live in the US without an issue. And nursing school was really what I wanted to do. If I'm already here, might as well make the best of it, right?

And things were really rough because I needed to do a lot of things in terms of getting my identification. For instance, when I needed to go apply for nursing school, I needed my transcripts from high school and the community college in the US. That was a nightmare. I mean, trying to get my parents going here to Austin, which is the capital of Texas, and getting those. They needed to get some paperwork in order to mail it to me and then get translations. And then Mexico at that time, they didn't know what was happening. So it was just a lot of going back and forth. And I was still 21.

When I entered nursing school, the term bullying wasn't as popular as it is now. But I did receive in some way some bullying from my peers. Because, of course, I had like broken Spanish, and I used Spanglish. The way I expressed myself and my thought process was different. And it was evident, right? I was used to having my car, going to school, to the community college or high school, coming back, going to work. And life in Mexico wasn't like that. Things were a little bit slower. Of course, you don't earn as much. And it was just a very complex situation for me.

I would say the worst was the first year, trying to do all these things at the same time, trying to settle in, trying to get used to things, trying to get into school, trying to learn the language better. I know students in nursing school cry often. I cry more than that. I can tell you that. Not just because of the content that I needed to learn and the skills that I needed to demonstrate, but trying not to miss my family, trying to deal with some of the bullying, trying to learn Spanish and make sure I say things correctly so that more bullying wouldn't happen. And I was trying to keep myself that busy in order to keep distracted. I didn't want to be thinking about, 'Oh, if I had never left Tyler, I wouldn't be in this situation.' Because I also thought about that, right? If I hadn't left, I wouldn't be in this situation now. But I was able to say that that was my own decision.

[Being forced to spend a decade living away from your home, family, and everything you knew undoubtedly shaped who you are today. How did those 10 years in Mexico impact you in your career?]

Now I can say that going back to Mexico for those 10 years was not the worst thing. It was like the best thing. Living in Mexico for 10 years was, I could say now, that one of the best things that could have happened to me. I learned so many things, and I learned to appreciate so many other things that I potentially wouldn't have learned here. I learned about my culture. I learned how to read and write and speak Spanish well. Like I am like completely fluent. And I write I publish papers in Spanish, and they're published in journals. Those things I wouldn't have been able to do. I wouldn't be able to do now if I hadn't gone back to Mexico.

Before graduation, I was able to go to my first ever research conference. And I met incredible people that I still keep in touch. It was an amazing experience. And so at that time, I was still pretty, I was really young still, and I still loved the ER and the ICU and my bedside nursing. But there was that now, that new interest that came to me that wasn't there before. I really love the adrenaline and all the things that happen in a hospital setting, right? But that changed at that one conference. Now I want to do research. And that's when my research interest became real.

So, then I started to look for a mentor that would say, "Okay, so if I want to be a researcher, what do I have to do, right?" What path do I need to take? So the next step would be to get a master's degree, which I did. And after grad school, one of the nursing schools offered me a position. It was part-time, and I was teaching clinicals because I was still working in the hospital. So I was able to do that. So I was doing like multitasking, teaching at the nursing school, working at the hospital and teaching English as a second language. I learned to appreciate so many things that I had taken for granted.

During my master's program, I was able to do a research placement in Canada. That was the first time I went to Canada. And so she is an amazing researcher. When we met, she automatically said, "You need to do a PhD." But of course, after finishing my master's, I was tired. So I kind of waited out two years

before I went back to school for my PhD. But she sent me suggested schools that would be good for me to go to. And she sent me a list of like five nursing schools in Canada. I chose the University of Alberta. And I mean, now University of Alberta is like number one in Canada. It's top five in the world. Getting to the PhD program at University of Alberta in Canada was one of the best moments in my life, right? Because it's so challenging to get into the program.

So in 2019, the 10-year ban was up. But at that time, I was already in my PhD program in Canada. And I traveled from Canada on a Friday and went back on a Sunday. And I was just able to be here for my mother's 60th birthday. So I remember one of my siblings and my dad picked me up at the Dallas airport. And then we drove to Tyler and my mother and all these other family members were there and they all ran to hug me. But of course, I was going directly to mom.

Oh, it's the best feeling. I mean, it's, I mean, it wasn't, it was so timely it wasn't just, Not the first time after 10 years, but it was also her 60th birthday. Words can't even explain how the whole moment. It was amazing.

Currently, I am an assistant professor slash postdoctoral fellow at the University of Texas here in Houston. It is amazing being home. Even though my parents live like three hours drive from here, it's still if anything, I'm just three hours away.

My life would have played out completely different, I think, if I would have stayed in the US. I think I would have become a nurse. It would have taken me longer to get there. And perhaps I wouldn't be at the place I am now, right?

[Thank you for listening to *A Nurse First* from Sigma. If you loved this episode, do us a favor and subscribe, rate, and leave us a review. It is very much appreciated. For more information about *A Nurse First* and Sigma, visit sigmanursing.org. Until next time.]