

## **“La Migra” – A Mexican-American Perspective**

By Sherri Leigh

*I first connected with Jennifer (a pseudonym) when she responded to my editorial on the ‘La Migra Games,’ which I posted on Nextdoor as well as local newspapers. When I met with her, I felt very much at ease with this highly educated and soft-spoken 65-year-old Mexican-American woman. She shared her experiences as a woman of Color in this community and the pain elicited by the title and intent of the ‘La Migra’ games. Tears came to my eyes as she talked about never feeling accepted by the people in this community and the trauma of growing up as a child of undocumented parents. We are both new grandmothers, each of a child with Mexican heritage, and we both fervently hope they do not have the same fearful experiences.*

Jennifer and her husband first moved to Benicia when their daughter was very young. They moved here for the quiet, connected community and the quality of the schools. She lived in Benicia for 15 years, while her daughter attended Benicia public schools. When her daughter graduated, Jennifer moved closer to her job in East Bay, returning to Benicia upon her retirement.

During her first 15 years in Benicia, Jennifer was an involved parent of a Benicia student. She was frequently in the company of other local mothers, usually as the only woman of Color in the group. She often felt isolated at meetings. The other women mostly ignored her when chatting or attempted awkward engagement by making disingenuous comments about her ‘exotic clothing’ and colorful styles. Jennifer felt out of place, but continued to participate for the sake of her daughter.

Jennifer’s conversations with her daughter revealed that her child felt much the same way. Jennifer’s daughter was a good student and became involved in many activities. Most of her daughter’s ‘friends’ were white, but she admitted to her mother that she felt uncomfortable at social activities. She thought she was invited not because she was considered part of the group, but because she was a novelty, a child of mixed race who didn’t feel like she fit in. The girl didn’t see other children who looked like her or who had a Mexican mother. The daughter was so uncomfortable growing up in Benicia that when she went on to college, she vowed never to live here again.

When Jennifer moved back to Benicia a few years ago, she was hoping for more diversity and progress towards equity. Instead, she became even more aware of the lack of inclusion for people of non-white heritage in this community. She was especially disheartened by the blatant disregard for Mexican culture or history. Even though there is a significant Mexican-American/Latino population living and working in the area, Jennifer could not help noticing that there is little to no discussion or celebration of Mexican Independence Day, Day of the Dead, or Cinco de Mayo in Benicia schools. There has been no representation of Mexican culture at our Diversity Festival in the last two years.

It is in this cultural vacuum that students feel it is fun to play a chase 'game' they call 'La Migra.'

When Jennifer saw the alert from the Benicia Police Department on Nextdoor about the 'La Migra' games, she was horrified. She saw the title as a tribute to the terror undocumented individuals have experienced over the last 75 years – and continue to experience – when pursued by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents (ICE), who are commonly referred to as La Migra.

Years of cruelty and corruptive collaboration between ICE officers and agriculture operators like growers have added to their fears. It was not uncommon (and still isn't) for farmers to hire a crew of undocumented workers during harvest season only to call 'La Migra' and have their workers rounded up for deportation during the final days of the job, to avoid paying them the agreed upon, below-market rate for the hard work they had done. The lack of humanity in this unethical practice is comparable to antebellum slavery practices.

Jennifer's father and grandparents were among those industrious, yet undocumented Mexican migrants who escaped from the extreme poverty, disease and unsafe conditions of their homeland to make a better life for themselves and their family in the US. They spoke in hushed tones about their plans should 'La Migra' find them. She heard stories about the abuse suffered by captured immigrants at the hands of 'La Migra,' and feared for her family's lives and her own, if something should happen to them. The title of the 'game' triggers trauma she and millions of other undocumented Latinos have experienced over generations of pursuit. Sadly, their experience is NOT a game.

Her strong reaction prompted Jennifer to respond to my Nextdoor post, where she likened the game to a 'hate crime' and immediately faced a torrent of angry and spiteful backlash from many insensitive readers. Withstanding the abuse, she then made calls to the police department, the Mayor's office and Benicia's Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion Manager, Dr. Maliika Chambers, about the games – but her attempts to elicit some reassurance and response were met with varying degrees of professional dismissiveness. Jennifer felt and still feels demoralized by the lack of concern from both the Nextdoor readers and the public officials. Rather than being valued, she senses hostility from other members of our community and complacency within the leadership of the government and schools.

I feel honored that Jennifer shared her story with me. Hers is the experience of a daughter of immigrants who has done everything she can to be a hard-working, law-abiding, caring and productive American – yet she is continually treated as a second-class citizen.

Aren't we all human beings with experiences and feelings that deserve to be recognized, honored and respected? Didn't many of our ancestors and family members,

who came here willingly, come to this country to escape hardship and work towards a better life? Jennifer cares about this community and the people in it.

If the 'La Migra Games' brings this pain to Jennifer, I will share her burden, as should we all.