

The Participatory Power of Giving: An Immigrant Student's Path to Community and Change

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Among the many influences in my life in the United States, the volunteer community stands out as the most profound. It has transformed my values, opening my eyes to the true meaning of connection, empathy, and shared responsibility. Through the selfless acts of volunteers, I learned about the Doctor of Liberal Studies program at SMU, navigated my first semester, and contributed to the education of children in Cameroon and Kenya. I had the privilege of welcoming thousands of students to the permanent exhibit of the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, where I deepened my understanding of history and humanity. I also supported my son in organizing his first park cleaning initiative, a testament to the power of giving back. Certainly, one of the most life-altering experiences was the Holocaust studies trip to Poland, which left an indelible mark on my perspective. The generosity and unwavering support of the volunteer community enabled me to present my work in Tokyo, Japan, and later make the life-changing move to Cambridge with my sons. This journey has shown me that the impact of volunteering transcends individual lives—it creates ripples of change, compassion, and collective growth.

My journey to the U.S. began on August 15, 2015, when I traveled 800 miles from San Luis Potosi, Mexico, to Dallas, Texas, with my two sons, who were 12 and 10 at the time. Twenty-nine years earlier, in 1996, my father had started my immigration petition. As the priority date approached, I decided to bring my sons to the U.S. on a journey that would forever change our lives. As I was preparing for the trip, one of my greatest concerns was finding a community for us to belong to. Having lived in Europe and the U.S. before, I considered myself flexible and open to different cultures and heritages. Additionally, there was one constant in my

life that always moved my soul: supporting those who needed help, with no remuneration or tangible reward.

My commitment to community and the beauty of sharing with others began long before moving to the United States. In Mexico, I taught in a continuing education program for at-risk populations, where I encouraged my students to engage with their communities in meaningful ways. As a final assignment, they were asked to volunteer for a cause of their choosing—not as an obligation, but as a way to recognize the dignity and struggles of others.

At first, there was hesitation. Many students were unsure of how to begin or questioned whether their efforts would make a difference. But when the time came to share their experiences, their stories reflected a profound shift. One student played with homeless children, offering them joy and companionship; another organized a quinceañera for an elderly woman who had never been celebrated in her entire life. Some prepared meals for the families of hospital patients, while others organized a food drive to support an independent animal shelter.

What started as a simple assignment quickly became a transformative experience. The students were not just helping others; they were building connections, challenging their own biases, and discovering the power of solidarity and collective care. They left the course with a stronger sense of responsibility toward their communities, inspiring their families, coworkers, and friends to take action as well. These initiatives weren't part of a structured program; they were acts of service, born out of empathy and the belief that everyone deserves to be seen, valued, and supported. Also, their actions were not dictated by obligation but by a deep sense of shared humanity—a value that remains at the core of my work.

These early experiences taught me that volunteering is not just about offering help—it's about building a sense of belonging, learning from others, and recognizing the strength that comes from solidarity. Being part of the volunteer community in the U.S. has deepened these values, pushing me to rethink how I approach challenges and reaffirming the power of human connection. It has shown me that true engagement means showing up for others, offering support where it's needed, and remaining open to the transformative impact of collective action. Through my involvement, I have come to understand that my principles are not static—they evolve with every interaction, every contribution, and every moment of reflection. This community, shaped by diverse voices and experiences, has profoundly influenced who I am today, not only as an individual but as someone committed to a more just and interconnected world.

The first few months in Texas were filled with uncertainty. My immigration status was still pending, and I was navigating an unfamiliar system while striving to provide my sons with a sense of stability and normalcy. Every decision I made was driven by the desire to create a secure and fulfilling life for them, despite the challenges we faced.

Amid this adjustment, one of our first experiences in our new home was visiting a local animal shelter to adopt a cat. The SPCA was filled with loving animals housed in vibrant, welcoming spaces. Volunteers eagerly guided us through the adoption process, taking the time to introduce us to each cat and share their individual stories. Their warmth and kindness made us feel instantly at home. In that moment, I realized that even in times of uncertainty, the generosity of others could provide a sense of belonging. Their support reinforced my belief that giving back is a powerful force—one that not only strengthens individuals but also fosters resilience in those seeking to build a new life.

Not long after, while driving from the airport, I noticed an advertisement for the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum. Curious, I visited their website to learn more. I was inspired by their commitment to preserving the memory of the Holocaust while addressing contemporary issues of prejudice, intolerance, and injustice. Their mission resonated deeply with me and made me reflect on how I could give back to this country that had given my family new opportunities. Eager to contribute, I applied for a volunteer position. After completing the screening process, I was honored to officially become a volunteer.

On my first day at the museum, I observed a gentleman explaining an exhibit to a group of students. The way they listened intently to his words intrigued me, and I couldn't help but ask someone nearby, "How can I do that?" A volunteer responded, "Oh, those are Docents. You need to go through a very intensive training and learn the historical content." Determined, I set my sights on becoming a Docent. One of the first welcoming faces I encountered was Carol. Not only did she embrace my Spanish-speaking background, but she also celebrated the importance of providing resources to the Hispanic community, which made me feel seen and valued in a way that was both inspiring and empowering.

This experience deepened my belief that community is not just about physical proximity, but about shared experiences, mutual support, and the commitment to lifting each other up. It reinforced my understanding that social justice begins with education, with creating spaces where every individual—regardless of background—feels seen, heard, and valued.

Shortly after, the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum moved to a new, expanded location. On opening day, thousands of visitors walked through the permanent exhibit, tracing the history of the Holocaust, the Human Rights wing, the Ten Stages of Genocide gallery, and the Pivot to America wing. One of the museum's most remarkable features was Dimensions

in Testimony—an interactive experience that allowed visitors to ask real-time questions and receive pre-recorded responses from Holocaust survivors. It was there that I first felt the deep responsibility and value of sharing these stories, and I knew I wanted to train for that role.

On the initial training day, I sat next to a tall woman named Gina. As we chatted about the program and our reasons for volunteering, she mentioned that she was from Mexico. Instantly, we connected over our shared immigrant experiences, our culture, and what had brought us to the museum. Then, she told me something that would change my life: she was a student at SMU and part of a unique program—the Doctor of Liberal Studies. She shared how this program stood out because of its interpretation of the human experience, focusing on understanding complex societal issues and their historical roots. Gina also mentioned that she was taking a Holocaust Studies class with Dr. Rick Halperin. She emphasized that change happens through purposeful effort, inspiring me to think about the importance of taking action to make a meaningful impact in both my own life and in the lives of others.

Gina became more than just a fellow volunteer—she became a mentor who profoundly impacted my journey. Early on, she challenged me to write about something meaningful and close to my heart. That’s when I decided to focus on Original Populations and their cultural identity. Gina’s support helped me refine my approach, encouraging me to explore the topic with more depth and purpose. Her guidance, especially during my first semester in the Doctor of Liberal Studies program, was instrumental in shaping my work and giving me the confidence to present it in important forums. She, along with others, showed me the value of resilience, perseverance, and the power of sharing our stories.

Kathy, another volunteer Docent Educator, was a key figure in motivating me to take the next step in my academic journey. From the very beginning, she recognized my passion for

education and human rights and continuously encouraged me to pursue it further. Her belief in the importance of education, combined with her confidence in my abilities, gave me the encouragement I needed to submit my application. Kathy's support made me feel empowered, knowing that I had someone who not only believed in me but also understood the significance of education in making a meaningful impact.

During this time, volunteering became more than just an activity—it was a powerful way to challenge my understanding of the world. As a docent, I had the opportunity to engage with hundreds of students from underrepresented communities, many of whom had never seen their histories reflected in educational spaces. Guiding them through exhibits and discussions, I witnessed firsthand how access to knowledge and representation can ignite a sense of inclusion and enablement.

When I later took a Holocaust Studies class with Dr. Halperin, he taught us the necessity of learning about genocide—not just as a historical event, but as an urgent moral imperative; he assigned us a project to express our learning through art. Beyond studying the staggering numbers of mass murder, I felt a deep responsibility to honor the individual lives lost and the courage of those who chose to resist hate. Inspired by the stories of bravery I had encountered; I illustrated the lives of five individuals who risked everything to save Jewish lives during the Holocaust. That project became *Mensch*, a book designed for middle school students, offering an entry point to Holocaust history not just through statistics but through human stories of resilience, moral courage, and the profound impact of individual choices. My volunteer friend, Lee, was an incredible support throughout the process, assisting me with editing the book and ensuring that the stories were presented clearly and respectfully.

When I first started my experience in the Doctor of Liberal Studies (DLS) Program, I faced significant challenges in understanding and speaking English. It was a constant struggle, and I often found myself reading the texts for assignments multiple times to fully comprehend them. This frustration was compounded by my desire to do well in my studies, but I wasn't alone in facing these difficulties. Recognizing my struggles, one of the volunteers, Carol, graciously offered her support. She went above and beyond by reading my assignments and providing constructive feedback. Her patience and encouragement were instrumental in helping me navigate these challenges. Another person who helped me immensely was Vanessa Hopper. She patiently read and corrected my assignments, offering a wealth of suggestions that allowed me to improve my work. Additionally, she gave me a book on grammar, which became an invaluable resource in my studies. Vanessa's support went beyond just feedback; she also made time for extra sessions where we could review my assignments together. Her approach was always kind, never imposing or rude, making the process less stressful and more productive.

At the museum, I faced similar challenges with my verbal English skills, particularly in understanding idioms and expressions. Joel, a volunteer Docent Educator, recognized my struggle and generously took the time to offer virtual lessons. Beyond language instruction, he emphasized the importance of communicating in clear, accessible terms to ensure that students and visitors could fully engage with the exhibits. He also encouraged me to analyze the concept of respect in humanity, helping me understand how to frame discussions in ways that resonated with diverse audiences. Thanks to his guidance and unwavering support, I gained not only stronger language skills but also a deeper awareness of how communication shapes understanding, empathy, and meaningful dialogue.

Another key member of my community was Anne Marie, a fellow DLS student and volunteer Docent Educator, who became both a mentor and an inspiration. She not only offered invaluable guidance on improving my academic writing and citations but also shared her expertise in the permanent exhibit, where she spoke to students about the importance of being an upstander. Through her discussions on those who risked their lives to help others during the Holocaust, she helped students see the power of individual action in the face of injustice.

Her mentorship extended beyond academics; she supported me as I navigated the challenges of balancing school, a full-time job, and motherhood. Learning from her reinforced my belief that education is not just about acquiring knowledge, but about using it to create meaningful shifts in our communities.

Later, I became part of the staff as a member of the education team, where I had the privilege of working alongside incredible colleagues like Casey and Kathy, whose support had already profoundly shaped my journey. One Saturday, Kathy went above and beyond, driving all the way to my apartment in Grand Prairie to deliver books for a paper I was writing on the role of religion in the human experience for my religious studies course, East Meets West. I had hit a mental block, and she arrived with a stack of textbooks, offering insightful guidance and patiently helping me navigate the complexities of the subject. Meanwhile, Casey took the time to review my assignments, offering insights from a newer generation on values and ethics. Her approach emphasized contemporary understandings and challenges, which provided a unique and relevant viewpoint for navigating modern dilemmas. Their generosity and belief in my success were transformative, reinforcing the power of guidance and community in both academic and personal growth.

In addition to these academic and professional supports, my dear friend Helen, an accomplished artist, played a crucial role during some of the more stressful semesters. Helen had volunteered with me and my son at a local park cleaning up. Recognizing the pressure I was under, she thoughtfully provided me with art supplies to help me de-stress and stay grounded. Her thoughtful gesture allowed me to keep creating and stay connected to the therapeutic power of art during a time when I felt overwhelmed. Having Helen's support during these trying moments was a reminder that sometimes the simplest acts of kindness—like providing supplies to help someone express themselves—can have a kind effect on someone's well-being.

Later, I had the opportunity to welcome students from SMU who chose the museum as their community service site for the semester. These volunteers brought not only their time and effort but also a deep commitment to fostering understanding and justice. On the busiest days, they played a crucial role in supporting students by engaging in meaningful conversations about respect, tolerance, and the dangers of prejudice. As students asked difficult yet essential questions about stereotypes, antisemitism, and discrimination, the volunteers created a space for honest dialogue, encouraging critical thinking and reflection. Their presence reinforced that education is a tool for social change, and that combating hate begins with conversations that challenge bias and inspire empathy.

In turn, many of the students who visited the museum were deeply moved by the commitment and passion of the SMU volunteers. Their actions sparked thoughtful reflection among the visitors, with many asking themselves how they could contribute to making a positive difference in their own communities. It was clear that the influence of the SMU volunteers extended far beyond the museum walls, encouraging others to take action and become agents of change.

On my 50th birthday, I was surrounded by love and warmth, thanks to my wonderful friends Natalia and Adi, who organized a beautiful surprise party for me. The celebration was filled with laughter, joy, and meaningful connections, as I was fortunate enough to have friends and colleagues from different parts of my life come together to celebrate this special milestone. Among my guests were the volunteer docents from my time at the Dallas Holocaust and Human Rights Museum, individuals with whom I had shared transformative experiences and thoughtful conversations. Their presence served as a powerful reminder of the mutual impact we had on one another's lives, rooted in our collective commitment to education and human rights. I was also honored to welcome my classmates from Southern Methodist University, whose research on impactful topics such as food justice, social awareness, health, and mental health has inspired me deeply. Sharing this moment with them was truly special, as we continued to learn from each other and work toward making a difference in the world. Their presence at my birthday party was a testament to the lasting friendships that had blossomed through our shared educational journey.

Amid a significant life change, when I was struggling with a major transition, I received an unexpected gesture of kindness that helped me through a difficult period. When my first son left for college, it was hard for me to concentrate on my assignments. The emotional adjustment was overwhelming, and it felt like I couldn't focus on anything but the changes in our lives. During this difficult time, Kathi, a volunteer with a thoughtful and caring nature, gave me a poem titled "A Smile." It was simple yet powerful, and it truly made my day. The words of the poem reminded me to take a moment to appreciate the small, beautiful things in life, and that smile and compassionate act from Kathi was just what I needed to lift my spirits and regain some perspective.

Building on the lessons of empathy and compassion, I joined a Holocaust studies trip to Poland with the SMU Human Rights Program, where I had the unique opportunity to deepen my understanding of history and human rights. Recognizing the urgency of reaffirming the consequences of antisemitism, many volunteers like Les—who had previously taken the trip—felt a deep responsibility to support others in bearing witness to this history. Their generosity was immediate and heartfelt; they shared invaluable advice and even lent us boots and warm clothing, knowing the harsh winter conditions would be an additional challenge. Their support allowed my two sons and me to fully engage with the emotional and educational impact of the journey. Through this experience, my sons understood the immense weight of history and the responsibility we all share in confronting hatred and injustice. This trip was not just about remembering the past—it was a call to action, reinforcing the necessity of standing against antisemitism and discrimination and ensuring that remembrance is transformed into meaningful advocacy for a more just world.

Finally, I found an incredible bond with Jessica, a fellow DLS student. From the moment I met her at the DLS Program reception, I knew that she was more than just a fellow student—I had found a partner in purpose. Jessica, a passionate advocate from El Paso, TX, and I quickly formed a deep bond, supporting each other through the challenges of academia while recognizing that our work had to extend beyond the classroom. Our shared commitment to social justice led us to take action, becoming volunteer members of the Ngwabou Institute, a nonprofit dedicated to advancing education for children in Cameroon and Kenya. Through this work, we reinforced our belief that education is not just a privilege, but a fundamental right and that meaningful change happens when we step beyond theory and into action. Our journey through the DLS

program was not just about personal achievement—it was about using our knowledge and determination to break barriers, uplift marginalized voices, and fight for a more equitable world.

Jessica is one of the most passionate and driven individuals I've ever met. Her research, focused on empowering Latina communities, is both sharp and inspiring. We often met for tacos and coffee, our conversations flowing effortlessly as we shared our unique perspectives as immigrants and women of color. These moments were filled with honesty, vulnerability, and a shared understanding of the challenges we faced. Jessica's work and insights continuously amazed me, and her unwavering commitment to her cause has always motivated me to dig deeper into my own. The connection we forged during this time has been one of the most rewarding and uplifting experiences of my journey, reminding me of the power of community and mutual support.

As I prepared to leave for Cambridge, Massachusetts, Veronique, a dedicated volunteer Docent Educator, organized a farewell gathering with my fellow volunteers—Marcia, Danny, Lee, Nelson, Gina, Stephanie, Mark, Perry, Doug, Kathy, Carol, and Eli. Surrounded by this remarkable group, I was struck by the profound impact of their kindness and solidarity. I thought back to my first days in Dallas, feeling uncertain and far from home, and realized how, through their generosity and unwavering support, I had found not just friendships but a true community. Their actions were a testament to the power of human connection in overcoming exclusion and apathy. It was because of their encouragement and the sense of belonging they fostered that I was inspired to continue this cycle of support. Their example led me to accept a job as a volunteer coordinator at a nonprofit that supports survivors of domestic violence—ensuring that others, too, would experience the transformative power of care, advocacy, and community.

In conclusion, navigating the demands of academia, full-time work, and family life was not just a personal challenge—it was a legacy of the power of community in the face of disinterest. The help I received from mentors, colleagues, and fellow volunteers was more than just encouragement; it was a powerful reminder that inaction and isolation allow injustice to persist, while collective care and engagement create pathways for change. Through acts of mentorship—whether in academic guidance, emotional support, or simply showing up for one another—I learned that knowledge is not meant to be hoarded but shared, and that true empowerment comes from uplifting others. The individuals who stood by me reinforced the necessity of refusing to be bystanders, proving that the strength of a community is measured not by its size but by its willingness to act, listen, and stand in solidarity against indifference.

The unconditional love and encouragement of my sons were pivotal in this journey, motivating me to excel not only in my academic pursuits but also in my volunteer work. Their faith in me fueled my determination to continue assisting others, sparking a wave of compassion and change. I am incredibly grateful for the volunteering opportunities that have shaped both my personal and academic growth, reminding me that the power of education and service can ignite transformative change in individuals and communities alike.