



STORIES OF STRENGTH

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES
NAVIGATING THE HEALTHCARE SYSTEM





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GLUTEN WAS AFFECTING MY HEALTH

I have always been a healthy person. The home cooked meals that my mother makes are my favorite. Gradually, I started missing school and work because it was hard for me to find the energy to participate and I just didn't feel well. I was feeling very tired all the time. I didn't realize it, but my family and friends started noticing that I was rapidly losing weight. My mother was very worried and did everything she could to help me feel better.

Unfortunately, nothing seemed to be working, I continued to lose weight. A cousin took me to a community clinic located in South Minneapolis. This was a "free clinic" that was available for people that didn't have insurance and for people who are undocumented.

At the "free" clinic, it took a long time because there were a lot of people waiting—people like me, who didn't have health insurance, and who didn't know exactly how clinics worked for people without health insurance. They did some blood tests. The next day they called to tell me to go immediately to Hennepin County Medical Center Cancer Department, for more tests. My cousin took me because my mother didn't have permission to leave work.

When we arrived at the hospital, we didn't know why I was referred the Cancer Center. I was scared, thinking I had cancer. At the "free clinic" no one told me much information.

I had more tests done and then we had to wait for the results. Eventually I was admitted to the hospital, where I stayed for three days. A doctor finally diagnosed me with a gluten allergy that had made me lose all of the weight, leaving me too skinny and malnourished. It was so strange that these symptoms were really an allergic reaction to gluten.

I don't know what would have happened if I had not gone to the hospital. No one in my family had experience this kind of illness. I left the hospital very tired. Little by little, I gained back my strength and started to regain weight. I took great care that I followed every recommendation the doctor had given, including a special diet. I am feeling great, have started a family, and work full-time. The hospital bill was extremely high, but a social worker found me financial assistance. My bill was reduced and I make monthly installments. I am so grateful for the family and friends who helped me find the medical attention that I needed to get well.

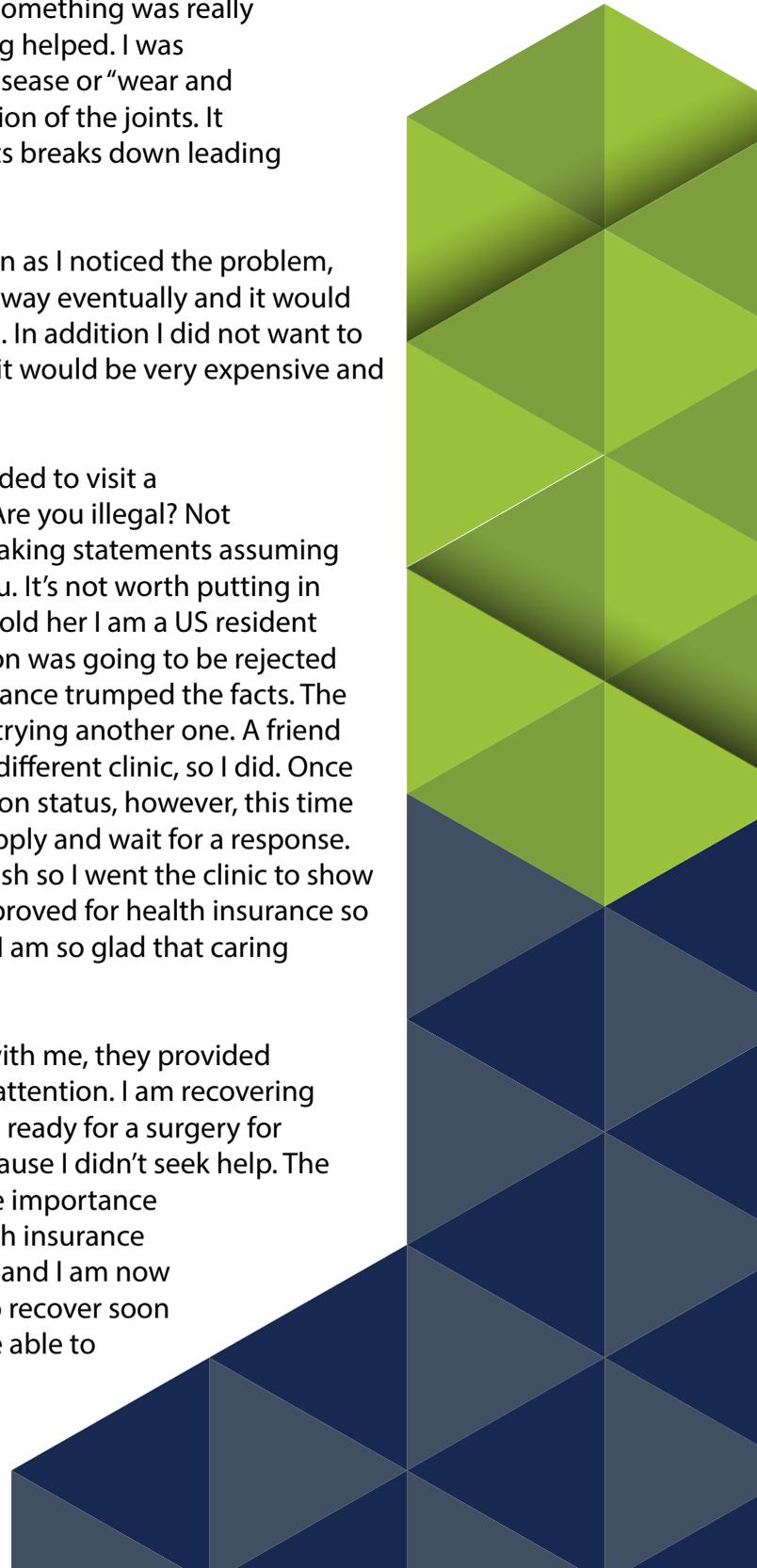
BONE DETERIORATION (OSTEOARTHRITIS)

I have always been a healthy person. First I realized I was dragging my leg a bit but didn't pay much attention. Later, my other leg developed similar symptoms. It was then when I realized that something was really wrong. I looked for alternative medicine but nothing helped. I was diagnosed with osteoarthritis, degenerative joint disease or "wear and tear" arthritis, osteoarthritis (OA), a common condition of the joints. It occurs when the cartilage or cushion between joints breaks down leading to pain, stiffness and swelling.

I know that I should have gone to the doctor as soon as I noticed the problem, but I didn't go because I believed that it would go away eventually and it would be fine if I just was careful and did not drink alcohol. In addition I did not want to stop working and I knew that if I go to the hospital it would be very expensive and I don't have health insurance.

Eventually my legs started to bother more, so I decided to visit a hospital. At the hospital, an intake clerk asked me "Are you illegal? Not paying enough attention to my answer, she kept making statements assuming I didn't have documents. "I don't think I can help you. It's not worth putting in the request to help you if it will just get rejected". I told her I am a US resident but she was fixated with the idea that my application was going to be rejected because I was undocumented. I am sure my appearance trumped the facts. The first experience in the hospital discouraged me for trying another one. A friend neighbor who knew my situation told me to visit a different clinic, so I did. Once again at the reception I was asked for my immigration status, however, this time the in-taker was friendlier and encouraged me to apply and wait for a response. The expected letter finally arrived. I don't read English so I went the clinic to show them the letter. I was told the great news--I was approved for health insurance so I was going to get medical attention. I was excited! I am so glad that caring professionals like those in the second clinic exist.

They submitted my application, they followed up with me, they provided interpretation, and afterwards I was given medical attention. I am recovering from the first surgery and in January of 2017 will be ready for a surgery for other leg. I endured severe pain for a long time because I didn't seek help. The experience in the second clinic made me realize the importance of having access to resources and options. My health insurance now provides therapy, routine visits, and medicine; and I am now waiting to have a surgery on a second leg. I hope to recover soon and being able to work. I want to contribute and be able to pay for my own insurance.



“I did not receive any help while delivering, nor did they offer a Spanish interpreter to facilitate communication. I was frustrated for not receiving any attention until the baby was born and that they took the baby without explaining anything.”

DELIVERING MY CHILD WITHOUT MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

I was sitting down in the reception area at the hospital as I was having contractions. Sharp and constant pain were present. I made the staff aware that there was little time and that at any moment the baby would be born. They ignored my plea as they kept doing paperwork and other procedures.

Finally, I was put on a bed, but left in the reception area. Sharp pain continued. My husband was there supporting me but didn't know what to do either. I don't know exactly how much time I spent calling for help but before I knew it I went into labor. Thank god my husband was there. He helped deliver the baby.

I delivered my baby in the reception area and without the presence of a nurse or doctor. After the baby was born my husband went to look for a nurse.

I felt neglected. I can't understand why they just put me on a bed and ignored my request for help. Nurses were around doing paperwork but I was totally ignored. Finally, after the baby was born, I was taken to a room. Next thing I know, a doctor is present and ordered the nurse to take the baby with them without providing an explanation. I was confused and scared. I definitely didn't have a memorable experience in the hospital, but I am a proud and resilient mother. My "baby" is now a strong, healthy and a beautiful seven-year-old girl.

SEPARATED FAMILY

We work at night. Me, my husband and brother-in-law clean large retail stores at night when there are no customers. The work is very hard and the pay is not much, but we are grateful to have a job. We are undocumented so there are not many choices for us where to work. Just over two months ago, our employer reassigned us from our worksite in St. Paul to work in Red Wing, MN. They [the cleaning team in that location] needed more people. We are two hours away from Red Wing. Our journey begins at 9pm so that we could start working at 11:00pm. We work overnight six days a week, resting Saturday day and night.

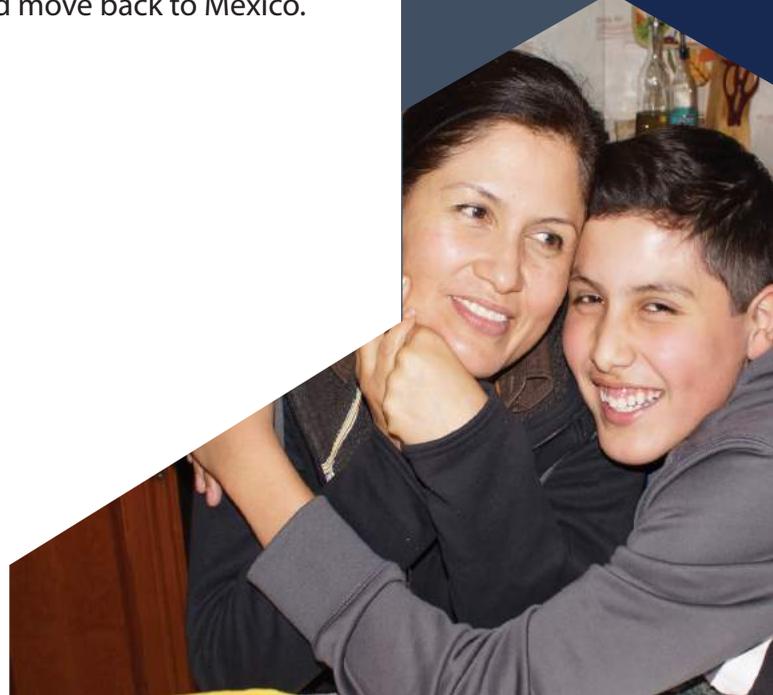
My husband was a careful driver. One day during our commute, a squad police car pulled us over. We are certain that my husband who was driving the car, did not break any rules, however the officer told us that he was doing routine checks on all cars. Unfortunately, since my husband did not have a driver's license, the officer took all of us to the squad car.

We spent one night in the police station. The next day, my brother-in-law and I were released, but they kept my husband. A few days later my husband managed to call me. He shared with me the sad news: immigration had taken him into custody, moved him to an unknown location and was told he would be deported. He had no idea when and at what border (Mexico-USA) location he would be taken to. We were all scared.

I went to a church seeking advice and help in finding my husband, but they couldn't do much. A week later my husband called us from Mexico. I felt relieved that he was safe but sad for being alone; forced to be a single mother by the circumstances.

Health-wise, my children and I are under a lot stress. My children are scared and sad since they don't see their father. Their school grades are impacted. I face the major challenge, raising my two children alone. I have a 7-year old daughter and a 9-year old son. My son doesn't want to eat much, I am afraid he will get sick. My sister takes care of my children while I go to work. It is sad! I can't spend enough time with them, and that's not good. We don't have medical insurance. When my husband was here and we had challenges, we were able to see a doctor, now I can't afford it.

I am sad! I am thinking to leave everything behind and move back to Mexico.



BACK INJURED AND CHRONIC PAIN

I worked the second shift for a cheese processing plant. My responsibility was to be in charge of one of the existing cheese grinders. I worked for a year without a day off and on some occasions on Saturdays when there was high demand for production. In the area that I worked there were two grinders and each one had a belt where we would put pieces of cheese that weighed around 450 pounds. The job is very physical and requires a lot of speed.

One day I felt a strong and sharp pain in my lower back. I remember screaming. I could not move. Even breathing would hurt a lot. A fellow employee took me to a hospital near Waconia MN. At the time my English was not very good. I didn't always understand what they were saying to me and the hospital didn't offer me an interpreter. The nurse proceeded to execute doctor's orders, which I didn't know. An injection helped to almost make the pain disappear. Over the next few days I had several visits to the hospital for medical exams. Finally, the news came. My doctor told me that I was diagnosed with herniated discs, the four and five. I was scheduled for surgery right away.

I spent three days in the hospital and was then released. A week after surgery I went to see the doctor. After checking me, the doctor said I was ready to return to work the following week. I was surprised by the doctor's recommendation because I was hardly able to walk. I thought to myself, how can I go back to a job that requires heavy lifting and constant movement?

Two weeks after my surgery I was back to work. Puzzled by my doctor's recommendation, I went to look for second opinion. I was told the following: I should have waited

before having a surgery because the area was inflamed, as result, according to the second doctor; permanent damage was done to my back.

In addition, the surgery left scar tissue, impacting nerves in my back and legs It has been 10 years since the surgery; chronic pain is part of my life now. I have medications that I take in order to function. I haven't stopped working. I take care of my health as much as I can although it isn't the same.

I know so much more now and would have asked different questions at the time of accident, but I didn't know my rights and I my English skills were not good at that time. When I have the opportunity to talk with my friends, I talk to them about how important it is to take care of their health and encourage them not to lift heavy things (or tell them to do it the right way), but many of them are hurt because they did not receive proper instructions at work and they are mostly in heavy duty industries and without any appropriate equipment such as shoes, belts, gloves, safety glasses, helmets and other items that would keep them safe at work.

We usually work long hours and not always in safe conditions. The truth is that we don't receive much instruction at our worksites. Some reasons are we need the job or lack of English proficiency. Many of us are just so happy to find work, so we don't question anything and don't think about our safety.

PARAPLEGIC DUE TO AN ACCIDENT

I was 10-years-old when I arrived in Minnesota from Mexico accompanied by my mother and my two brothers. As soon as we arrived my mother began to work relentlessly multiple low wage-jobs. My brothers and I started school right away.

Unlike our time in Mexico, my mother had very little time to see us or help us with homework, she had to work hard at several jobs to pay for the bills. After school, the three of us would go to hang out at the park to play. Without parenting support or guidance our grades were low. One day after school, my youngest brother and I were walking around a commercial area of Richfield. Out of nowhere and without any reason a group of guys--gang members-- came up to us and threatened to hurt us. I asked them why since I didn't know them. My question was answered with a slap on my face.

I fell over, landing on my stomach. Then, he pulled my arm behind my back. The last thing I remember is hearing shots and feeling very hot, after that, I don't remember anything until I woke up in the hospital bed. No arrest was ever made. I woke up in the hospital after being unconscious for two days. When I was fully awake I was told that I would never walk again. A gunshot had gone through my back damaging my spine.

I became paraplegic forever and I was only 13 years old! The next 4-5 years that followed were very complicated because my mother, on top of having to work to support my brothers and I, had another weight on her shoulders. She had not only to take me to physical therapy but also psychological therapy to treat my anger and my depression.

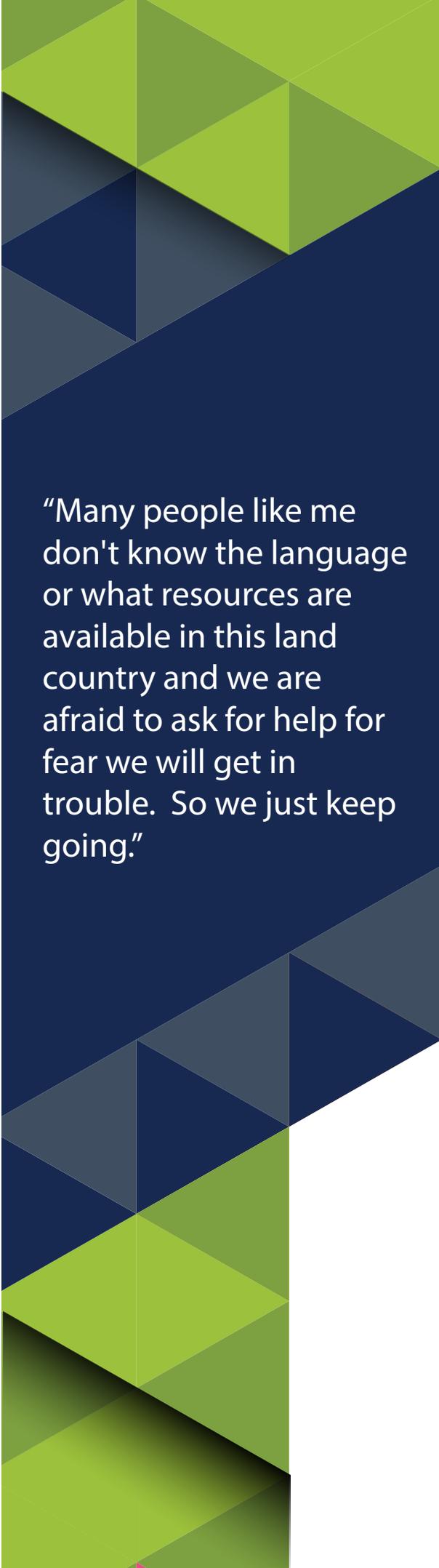
It was extremely difficult for me to become accustomed to the wheelchair. My interest in school diminished. I was in out of school until I dropped out of high school. I was very depressed. Though she worked hard, my mother didn't earn enough nor did she have family medical insurance because we

were undocumented immigrants. Through the years, her health began to deteriorate due to a combination of factors; working so much, sleeping little, the physical toll of caring for me. For example, she developed back problems from lifting my full weight. My mother is a very small woman and I am a big guy. The last place I thought I would end up was at church.

My mother asked the administration to accept me in one their programs. The administration didn't appear convinced that they could help me, however I was allowed to attend a youth group. I got really involved. I was able to explore things that I never had done before. Art, music, camping, and even a leadership program. This program through my church saved my life and gave me new direction and new skills. I was part of something now.

Throughout this time, accessing health care hasn't been easy. Often times I had to return to the hospital for various reasons, but most commonly due to the high temperatures that caused urinary tract infections. Every time I arrived at the hospital, I had to start the registration process all over again. It seems that the lack of medical insurance made every visit treated as a first visit. Additionally, my mother and I had to overcome major barriers to get medical supplies because of the lack of health insurance. I am 23-years-old now. I am in a much better place. I was able to obtain documents.

I work a full-time job in a Collection Agency (on the telephone) and using my Spanish and English skills. I am allowed to take time off when I have health issues. I support my family economically, and although we have suffered many difficulties, I believe we can push through and continue on. I am grateful for all the help I have received along the way and happy to contribute to my family and have purpose for myself.



“Many people like me don't know the language or what resources are available in this land country and we are afraid to ask for help for fear we will get in trouble. So we just keep going.”

STORY OF A CONSTRUCTION WORKER

I was only sixteen when I came to Minnesota. The day I arrived my brother wasn't at the meeting place waiting for me as planned. I sat on the curb of a street I can't remember waiting for him. It must have been the expression on my face showing hopelessness that moved a bystander to offer help. Afraid of the streets or the idea being lonely didn't make me think of the risk of going with a stranger. He offered me shelter. Soon he helped me to obtain employment.

For the next two years, I worked long hours. There were times when I was paid with food only. I did roofing or cleaned large retail stores during the night shift. When I had a chance, I kept looking for my brother. I gave up when I learned from a phone conversation with my mother that he had moved to Kansas. I stayed here in Minnesota because I didn't have the money to go back to my family in Mexico.

Roofing is very hard work but it is easy to be hired. Working in roofing allowed me to earn enough money to rent a room in someone's house and send a little money to my family in Mexico. Roofing work is tough. Workers carry heavy bundles of shingles up to the roof. [A bundle of asphalt roofing shingles typically weighs between 60 and 80 pounds. Workers rarely have time to drink water in spite of working in extremely hot temperatures. The height of the job makes it frightening as well. Roofers can slip and fall very easily. I fell twice but luckily nothing bad happened.

During this time, I worked without protective equipment and without proper training to avoid accidents. Worksites didn't have access to portable toilets or clean water to wash hands before eating lunch. My eyes were always exposed to debris. My hands always had splinters. Many days I came home with a headache. When I talked with my mother over the phone, she would suggested drinking more water.

One time we were removing an old roof. Removing nails and old wood are typical tasks on this job. A piece of wood came loose and a nail punctured my leg, right below my knee.

With the pressure of finishing the job and due to the speed with which we work, I didn't pay much attention. By the end of the workday the cut was itchy and swollen.

At home I cleaned the cut. I noticed an increase in redness and it was swollen. I had no health insurance and only spoke Spanish, so I did not know where to go for help. I called my mom in Mexico and she told me to buy a specific cream called "La Campana" because it would be helpful but that first I needed to wash the area with hot water.

The next day before I went to work I felt my leg a bit numb. I applied more cream. By noon I couldn't feel the itch any more, but my knee was swollen. My fellow friend encouraged me by saying that it would get better soon.

In the evening, at home when I was cleaning the wound, I noticed that it was getting worse. It was more swollen and the spot had become red with a white and purple circle around it. My friend Carlos (not his real name) suggested driving me to a hospital. I told him that I wasn't sure about seeing a doctor because the people that contracted me had told me that it wasn't a big deal. He understood but asked me to call him if my pain worsened.

The next morning Carlos took me to the hospital after I told him that the wound had worsened. At the hospital, the doctor told me that I had a severe internal infection and that I could have lost my leg. I was hospitalized for three days, and I continued to see the doctor so that they could check how my leg was healing.

Thankfully my leg got better and I have not had any issues with it. Carlos probably saved my leg or even my life. The doctor lectured me saying I should be wearing protective gear at work. However, the people that contract us do not care about our wellbeing and do not provide gloves or other protective equipment.





“I met so many great people in Minnesota, they were so kind to me.”

I LOST MY EYE SIGHT

At age five my father abandoned us. Soon after my mother had to migrate to the United States to work to support the family. From that point on my grandmother took care of me. At age 17, I lost my eyesight in an accident. A house fire left me with severe burns on my head and upper body. At age 24 I was hit again by another tragedy. My mother disappeared. I never heard from her again.

For a while, we got some financial help from uncles and aunts that lived in Minnesota but it wasn't enough. Life was difficult since I couldn't work to bring money home. I was frustrated to say the least.

In 2012, I was 25 years old, my grandma and I packed a few things and we went to the Mexico-US border. The plan was to live with my aunt in Minnesota, as she offered us shelter and support. We crossed the border along with a group of people. I don't know how many people were in the group but it seemed by the voices that there were many. We walked for three days through the desert of Texas. The only possessions we had consisted of a small bag with clothes and gallons of water. We spent those days hiding and sleeping exposed to the elements.

On the fourth day of the journey, we arrived in a crowded house somewhere in Texas. We stayed for two days. On day 6, we left to our final destination, Minnesota.

After 6 months in Minnesota, grandma and I wanted to return to Mexico. My aunt, however, wanted to help me and my grandmother did not want to leave me. After long conversations a decision was made, grandma returned and I stayed. I was persuaded by the idea that here [in Minnesota] more resources were available for blind people, so that I would be able to become self-sufficient.

My aunt lived with her husband and two daughters. My new family worked every day of the week. My aunt had two jobs during the day, and her husband worked at nights. I tried to not make any noise in the house, as they were tired

from all their jobs. During this time, I hardly left the house. One day, my aunt invited me to church. I met so many people, that soon they became an important support network. New friends and guitar lessons among other social activities kept me busy. Life was great.

Things were going well until I began feeling sharp pains on both sides of my stomach. I endured the pain for two days until I couldn't any more. I share with my cousins and my aunt that I wasn't feeling well. She prepared herbal tea and gave me pills (I'm not sure what they were). The pain didn't go away; in fact it became more intense. That evening I was taken to a clinic in Minneapolis but I wasn't seen because they didn't have enough staff. I was turned away. Then, I was taken to a second clinic. I heard it was by the "Mall of America". There, a doctor after seeing me, sent me to the hospital. At the hospital I was diagnosed with kidney stones. A surgery kept me hospitalized for two days.

When I was discharged, a social worker connected me with an organization that supports blind people. Unfortunately, due to lack of health insurance and documents they couldn't help me. Staff at the clinic introduced me to other blind people, I made friends. The organization gave me a walking stick, something I never had before.

I met so many great people in Minnesota, they were so kind to me. However, I miss home and i want to be reunited with my grandmother.





This project is part of a \$45 million State Innovation Model (SIM) cooperative agreement, awarded to the Minnesota Departments of Health and Human Services in 2013 by The Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) to help implement the Minnesota Accountable Health Model.