



## SPOTLIGHTS

### Ladene Mendoza: Reflections On Hispanic Heritage Month

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I am the daughter of two immigrants. My parents were born and raised in Mexico, where they were not afforded the luxury of an education. My mother attended first grade before having to stay at home to help, as many children in her community did. My father finished junior high before having to look for employment to find his next meal, oftentimes having to resort to scouring through garbage bins to fill his belly. In hopes of a better future, they both emigrated from Mexico to Indiana, where they would eventually meet.

After working long hours in the factory, my parents were able to purchase my childhood home located in a trailer park in Indiana. Four children and five adults lived in the cramped three-bedroom trailer, which came fully equipped with cockroaches and lice. Growing up, school was socially and financially difficult. I was not allowed to have friends over because of the condition we lived in. I was pulled out of class to do ENL (English as a New Language) testing and felt inferior to my classmates' abilities. I was on reduced lunch and would constantly search coin machines and store parking lots for fallen change in order to pay the full-priced lunch meal so I would not feel embarrassed when the lunch aide would pause to search for my name on the reduced lunch list in front of everyone. Of course, my mother figured it out one day when she caught me in the closet crying while I re-counted my nickels and dimes knowing it would not be enough. She knew my pride was hurt and did everything she could to help me pay for the full-priced lunch. That's my mom. Working 50-hours a week with rashes on her hands from the Fiberglas and plastic uniform, only to pick up shifts on the weekends just to make sure my siblings and I were always dressed nice with our hair combed and ours shoes cleaned.

Knowing that I did not want my family or myself to live like this and

## RELATED PEOPLE



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knowing all the sacrifices my parents made, the choice to follow a higher educational path was not difficult. What was difficult, was catching up and learning on my own. My mother was not able to help me academically since she was illiterate and my father worked day and night to put food on the table. My older siblings were also not able to help me, as my two older brothers dropped out of high school and my older sister struggled in school. I was on my own. Determined to make it out of this lifestyle, I put the stereotypes and built-in excuses away and got to work. I stayed up late reading anything I could get my hands on. Eventually I graduated with academic honors from Plymouth High School and attended Indiana University–Bloomington. At the time, it was difficult being the first one in my family to attend college and not knowing what to expect. As daunting as it was, I knew it was the right choice and my parents were supportive of that decision. After undergrad, I continued my education and received my law degree from Indiana University Robert H. McKinney School of Law before starting my legal career as an associate at Barnes & Thornburg LLP.

My motivation and inspiration has always been my family. Thanks to my parents' determination for a better life, I've had the privilege of getting the opportunity to pursue my dreams. As the first professional in my family, I have gladly accepted the pressure of helping my family and my community. My goal since law school has been to further bridge the gap of "no excuses" that my trailblazers have started and to represent my community and Latinxs in a positive light. As a young Latina professional, I consider it is my duty and honor to help the younger Latinx generation see their potential and share any and all resources I've learned to help achieve their dreams.