

Leana Barra's Migration Story

I have been a US citizen for almost my entire life; however, my roots are in La Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala. I was born on November 21, 2005, in an unknown hospital to me. My migration story is unique as I came to the United States as a baby and went through similar and different legal processes as other immigrants since I was adopted by two US citizens. In fact, I came to the United States with a completely different first name. When I was issued a permanent resident card, it states on the card that I had been a resident since July 20th, 2006. The name on my permanent resident card was Estela Marta Barra. The permanent resident card also states my country of origin is Guatemala, that I was a category IR-4 which is an orphan to be adopted in the US by a US citizen, and an A# which is a persons' Alien registration number.

I was able to come to the United States in July of 2006 at the earliest due to a stall in adoptions because Guatemalan government officials didn't sign thousands of adoption papers. Originally, I was supposed to be able to go home to my parents after 4 months; the date was pushed back to 7 months after a case of international lawyers was brought against the Guatemalan government official and sent him to jail. I was readopted in the US, and it gave me an automatic standing of official citizenship. The fateful time I became a US citizen was October of 2006 when my parents had to go to court and have a judge finalize my adoption.

Having to be issued a permanent resident card upon arrival is a necessary part of the immigration process as an adoptee to show one was admitted into the country legally. It also serves as evidence that a child is in legal and physical custody of a US citizen parent or parents. Automatic citizenship under US adoption took about 3 months for me due to necessary home visits which is a part of any adoption process in the US. I currently hold a New Jersey birth certificate that has

my mother and father's name on it as they are my legal parents and that was the state they called home.

My birth family has Mayan Indigenous roots which my mother has told me since I was a small child. I cannot explain if my birth families' origins are in La Ciudad de Guatemala, Guatemala or if they had internally migrated because certain documents weren't allowed to transfer with the adoption. I was able to know I was born in the capital of Guatemala as the adoption agency my mom used, Growing Homes Agency, was given the hospital name as well as the case manager so they could arrange care for my birth mother. Eventually, I was placed with a foster mom, named Anna, who took care of me till I went home with my mother and father.

In the foster home my family sent clothing, pictures, and stuffed animals for me to have. My sister chose toys of hers that she wanted me to have as well as matching stuffed dogs. There was no agreement between my family and the adoption agency to have photos of me sent back to my parents, but it was standard practice of the agency to do so. My case worker went to all of my doctors' visits with me and made weekly home visits. When my case worker made their weekly home visits that's when the gifts got dropped off and pictures were taken for my parents to have.

My foster mom, Anna, spoke limited English but my case worker was bilingual so there were not language barriers in the adoption process. My mom attested she chose Guatemala, and it was an intentional choice to adopt me. She did not have to go to Guatemala to receive me and take me back but that is what she wanted because she wanted to bring me home herself. My sister and family knew my parents were flying to Guatemala to bring me back so upon my arrival they were happy. My mom said she and my dad could've had more biological children, but adoption was the choice she wanted to make. Some people were confused by this notion but for my mom if someone wasn't going to accept me as her child then they were going to get cut off.

I was adopted by a third-generation Italian immigrant mother; my great grandparents on my maternal side of my family immigrated to the United States from Italy. My great grandparents immigrated here during the 2nd wave of immigration. My family went through typical immigrant experiences during this time. My grandmother's mother was a factory worker, working in the clothing industry and spent hours at the sewing machines. She did not really speak English as the people who were working alongside her were also of Italian heritage or other heritage. (Barra, 2025) It was common for the workers to keep to themselves or only interact with the people who spoke the same language as them. My grandmother's father was a barber and was a boxer in his free time. They were a family of five; my great grandmother, my great grandfather, my grandmother, and my grandmother's two sisters.

As for my grandfather on my maternal side his parents also came to the United States from Italy, but my mom suspects his dad came earlier than his mother since my great grandfather spoke English more proficiently. My grandfather's family lived in an ethnic enclave at the time, the whole neighborhood was basically only Italian, so my great grandmother spoke broken English as she mainly only spoke to other Italians since she was a stay-at-home mother. As her English improved, she did keep her Italian accent.

My great grandfather owned a jewelry store so in comparison to my great grandmother he had a lot more practice with his English. My grandfather lived in a family of ten; my great grandfather, my great grandmother, my grandfather, and my grandfather's seven brothers. My mom said to me that my great grandfather would always say to his sons "My children have to be grateful to be born in the US based on the fact my family had to flee Italy, and all of my children have to serve in the military to honor their US citizenship." He stayed true to his word as my

grandfather and all his brothers served in the US military except for one of his brothers that was exempt due to medical reasons.

Due to the age gap between my grandfather and his brothers they all served in either WWII, the Korean War, or the Vietnam War. My grandfather's family really valued education and being a quote good American citizen. They utilized the public school system through high school, then my grandfather and all his brothers paid for their own undergraduate degrees and medical school. This was during the time immigrants truly believed in the "American Dream." Therefore, it motivated my grandfather and all his brothers to get the best education they could. They all wanted to pledge their allegiance to America and prove they were true Americans by serving for the country. In their adult careers they all had successful careers as a doctor, scientist, or Jewelry store owner. One brother was an OGBYN, the 2nd was a jewelry store owner, the 3rd was an optometrist, the 4th was a jewelry store owner, the 5th was a jewelry store owner, the 6th was an orthodontist, my grandfather was a dentist, and the last brother was a chemist for a lab.

Even though my family has a different country of origin we share the immigrant value of hard work is what gets you somewhere, the next generation should be better off than the previous, and we highly value family. I would say my family has stayed in touch with religion my whole family other than me, my mom, and my sister are Catholic. For each Christmas Eve we retain the tradition of the "Feast of the Seven Fishes" which is a Mediterranean Catholic tradition. When it comes to my own background my mom made sure to get me authentic worry dolls, authentic Mayan woven items, and jade. My mom also learned how to make papa rellenas for me as I am part Incan as well. My mom knew a woman who had traveled to Peru and now I have two Peru shirts and a little woven coin purse.

My family has always treated me like I am blood to them, and I have a very special bond with my grandmother. I would say in comparison to the rest of my family I have faced discrimination based on my skin color where they have not. When I was younger, I would often get asked if I was a US citizen and I would still get asked up until high school. When I was in 7th grade, I quit the cheer team, and the coach was subbing for one of my classes in that class I was in a group of other women of color and one of my friends said a word wrong and me and the other girl started laughing. There were other kids in that class that were louder than us and for a longer time, however, this cheer coach decided to call me out and say, “you must be loud and poor because you’re Mexican!” mind you I’m not even Mexican. This was the first time something that outrageous had ever been said to me all because I looked a certain way. I was offended for myself but also for people who are Mexican because it was not something a person should be yelling especially at a pre-teen.

In the context of growing xenophobia towards Latinos, I was in 7th grade during the 2018-2019 school year. During Trump’s first term from 2016-2020 he was very open about expressing the “need” to build a wall at the Southern border to keep illegal immigrants out as well as other crime. This created and stirred existing views that people who have immigrated from south of the border are illegal, criminals, and lazy or worthless to the “American” people. Most people who did assume my ethnicity would guess I was Mexican because Trump targeted Mexico the most in his campaign due to Mexico being the closest Latin American country.

I will say I think I have faced more prejudice living in the South than I did when I lived in New Jersey and when I to this day visit New Jersey and New York to see my family. I think in part this is due to the increase of Hispanic immigrants in the North in recent years. When I was younger the neighborhood my grandparents lived in it was predominantly Italian, Jewish, and Muslim so I

grew up around people that had different customs than me and looked different than me. This was different to the spaces I grew up in South Carolina with, where most places I was in it was predominantly white. I grew up to accept all people so whenever I was faced with prejudice it was a real shock to me even the small things when I have had people assume that I don't speak English.

My own immigration story is not the most typical way you hear about becoming a US citizen, but I am not the only one. My grandparent's family does align a lot with what history says it was like for a 2nd wave Italian immigrant. They fled Italy for a better life and arrived at Ellis Island than continued their lives in Brooklyn, NY. They did end up assimilating to American culture but also kept some of their Italian heritage. My aunts and my mother can't speak Italian anymore but my grandmother's mother, 'Mamangie', barely spoke English so my aunt told me they did learn some Italian just to be able to communicate with her. We as a family on my mother's side don't speak Italian anymore because my grandmother in grief of her mother's passing refused to speak it.

References

D. Barra, personal communication, October 30, 2025

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/100iZ4Kml3B9mt5xkwyo80X2qB1ZD4QcaphKryMLJvw/edit?usp=sharing>

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