

The final bell of the day rang. Everyone leapt up as usual and began exiting the classroom. I gathered my books and put them in my bag before I started to head downstairs. While I was usually busy after school, today I was free, and I wanted to help out the set crew for my school's play. I was in the show and knew that my friends needed all the help they could get. I went through the double doors that led to the theater before I realized that I had forgotten a change of clothes, and my school's requirement of a dress shirt and pants was not ideal for the woodworking we were going to do. I immediately turned around, went outside, and started walking towards the parking lot where I had tied my bike that morning. It was a hot day in September. I checked my phone as I was walking, and saw a text from my mother, "Be careful coming home, ICE was down the street from your school today." I unlocked the chain on my bike and started riding. As I rode back home to my neighborhood of Pilsen, I avoided the area she had told me about, but I still wanted to go back to help my friends. As I rode, I saw some signs in windows that read, 'ABOLISH ICE' and 'HANDS OFF CHICAGO.' I immediately thought of the mural in Pilsen that depicted immigrants crossing the Rio Grande while being watched over by the Mexican-Catholic icon Our Lady of Guadalupe.

I got home, tied my bike, and went inside. I found my grandfather looking out the window, and my mother sitting in the living room getting some work done. "Hola, Pa, hola Madre," I said as I entered. I started looking for something to change into, and my mother asked where I was going, "¿Dónde vas?" she said. I told her, "I'm going back to the school to help the crew build the set." She stared at me for a moment. She began, "Mijo, you can't go out there, ICE is here, did you see my text?" I told her, "I did, but it'll be fine, the school is secure, and I'm not someone they're looking for." She simply shook her head, "You can't go, it's not worth the risk." I told her, "Madre, my friends need help. It's not fair to them when no one shows up to

support them.” She replied, “They’ll be fine without you. I need you to stay here. It’s dangerous.” I started to get upset, “Madre, they’re not going to arrest me as long as I don’t get in their way, I’m a citizen.” She looked at me sternly before responding, “You can’t go, you can’t put your grandparents at risk, they’re immigrants. You want something to happen?” I shook my head, “This is ridiculous. Madre, this is what these people want. They want us to be afraid to go out. They want us powerless. We have to resist by not being afraid, and that includes little things like going outside.” She kept saying no despite my objections, and I stayed home. That day, I struggled to see my mother’s concerns, but as I reflected, I started to understand her fear, which was not irrational. How could she let her Mexican-Puerto Rican son leave the safety of his home when families were being separated, people were being deported without due process, and citizens protesting for social justice were being arrested?

Yet, these situations are not a ‘were,’ or something in the distant past; they are our present. And, I find myself asking questions of our country as our nation approaches its 250th anniversary. Is this who we are, America? Are we the nation that is the land of the free, when families are afraid to go outside? Are we the nation that is the home of the brave when our law enforcement covers their faces? Is this who we will be going into the future?

Yet, I reject this singular definition of America. I seek to build a future for America over the next 250 years where the dream of Martin Luther King is realized. A nation where the promise of Emma Lazarus’ “The New Colossus” comes to fruition, the famous lines, “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” I see this future within us, and despite my individual irrelevance, I believe in our collective strength. It has always been young people throughout the globe who have led the charge for change and have hope in the future. Over the next 250 years, I seek to build a nation where each individual is treated with

dignity and has the freedom to do what they choose, no matter their background, and each person strives for a nation that supports each other instead of condemning one another.