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Unity Over Differences

When I was 19 years old, I went out grocery shopping with my mom after a long, tiresome day of classes. It was spring semester at URI, but it was March, so the air still held a chill. My mom and I were loading up the trunk of her car. It took us a while since we had gotten an abundance of groceries for our family of seven and because the cold had numbed our hands, making our bodies slow. While we were rushing to put the groceries away, a young couple with a baby approached us in the parking lot. The couple looked incredibly exhausted, but they still wore a smile regardless of their clear lack of sleep. They had on simple clothes, and only the mother had a jacket. The baby she was holding lay swaddled in multiple blankets within her arms.

The man spoke on behalf of his family, entirely in Spanish. At first, it took me a moment to process what he was saying. Then he repeated himself, asking me and my mother if we were interested in buying a chocolate bar. He said he was selling each bar for two dollars so he could pay for formula for his daughter. He explained how they just got here—maybe the state, or maybe the country. I never asked. The man told me he had no work yet and that he just needed enough money to get some formula. I was incredibly thankful at that moment that I had taken four years of honors Spanish so that I could understand and speak to the kind man.

I immediately answered yes, not even looking to my mother for confirmation. I explained to my mom what was happening since she seemed slightly startled at being approached in the parking lot and because she could not understand the man's Spanish very well. My mom handed the man the remaining dollars left in her purse and held up two fingers. He handed us two

chocolate bars. I told him to keep the change and to stay warm. That was the extent of my conversation with the family. The young mother gave us a weak smile before they left, thanking us for helping them. The sheer helplessness that ensued felt like an unbearable weight on my chest. I only wish I could have done more.

When my mom and I got into the car and blasted the heater, we sat in silence for a few moments. That's when she began to cry. She cried while the car sat parked in the lot, and she cried the whole ride home. When we finally pulled into the driveway of the house we own, with the car we own, and with a trunk full of enough groceries to feed seven people for a week, my mom told me something that I have carried with me since that day. She told me that in another life, that could be any of us. That if one decision hadn't been made or one path taken was different, that could have been her and my father.

My parents were lucky enough to have the opportunity to come to America and start a life here. They are hard working immigrants and hard working Americans. I think on that day that my mother recognized a piece of herself in those people—to be outside in the cold selling chocolate bars for an extra few dollars, all to afford baby formula for their daughter. It was heart-wrenching but also incredibly admirable and a true testament to the hardworking nature of immigrants. This moment in my life has stuck to me like glue. It has allowed me to be so incredibly thankful for the hard work of my parents and every single sacrifice they have made for my brothers and me.

In recent years, a negative connotation has been formed with the word immigrant. It has undermined the value of true, assiduous human beings. It has also caused people to forget that almost all of us here in America come from or are immigrants. It has caused a war on basic human kindness and basic human empathy. Meeting that family of three shifted my perception of

the world and has made me heartbroken that any family in this country has to suffer through such hardships.

Immigration is an important issue to me, and it should be for everyone. The process to legalization should be easier, the opportunities should be equal among us all, and basic respect should be given to everyone, regardless of the country they come from. We all deserve a chance to live and a chance to thrive. Growing up, I was taught that America was a melting pot of all different cultures and people. Now, as the days pass, I have begun to recognize that the United States doesn't feel that much like a melting pot anymore. In a melting pot, unity is more important than differences. In America, differences have become seemingly more important than unity. Immigrants are people just like the rest of us. It is time people acknowledge them as such.