

Immigrant parents step out of the shadows

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The Huntington Beach father of three thought he was doing all the right things: He worked two jobs, saved his money, kept a roof over his family's head and always made sure that, no matter what, family came first.

But like other immigrants Florentino had only one thing on his mind when he settled down in Orange County: survival. "We didn't have a clearly defined path. We worked, we spent our money and made sure that the kids were safe, that the family was safe," he tells me in Spanish as we sit in his tidy two-bedroom apartment. He didn't see the big picture beyond his doorstep, beyond his neighborhood, a cul-de-sac of tightly squeezed apartments.

Like Florentino, the cul-de-sac is in constant motion. Children play on the sidewalk. A street vendor hawks fruit from a produce truck. The throaty voice of Mexican singer Alejandro Fernandez floats in from a nearby apartment. Florentino's children most likely would have continued down the same path as their father, working minimum wage jobs and simply surviving.

But a program at Huntington Beach High School changed all that. Called the Parent Leadership Institute, the program — created by the Orange County Human Relations Commission — helps low-income immigrant parents navigate and understand the educational system. Sometimes, that assistance translates into help for the whole family. Florentino is an undocumented immigrant and per Register policy I'm not disclosing his last name so that I can share his story without impacting his legal status.

What's clear is this: Before he participated in the Parent Leadership Institute, Florentino wasn't engaged in his kids' school careers and, as a result, they weren't either. Even stepping on campus to enroll his children in their classes was something he likened to falling into a bottomless pit. "I didn't even know how to approach the school, who to talk to for help."

But with the help of a friend, he enrolled his youngest, Guadalupe, in junior high and was surprised at how simple the process was. Misconceptions, such as his belief that he had to pay for books and uniforms as he did in Mexico, soon disappeared. He then enrolled his then 17-year-old son Jose, who was working at a fast-food restaurant, at Huntington Beach High. But Florentino saw school as a layover for his son, a place where he could learn English before returning to full-time work. "I never thought that he would graduate, I didn't think it was possible because I thought only American-born children could graduate."

But at Huntington Beach High, bilingual community liaison Roxanna Jimenez, who co-chairs the Parent Leadership Institute, repeats a mantra to the immigrant parents and students she works with: "Don't just work at McDonald's, *own* a McDonald's." Soon, because of the program, Florentino and his wife — taxpayers on multiple paychecks — started to see a bigger picture. They learned that not only did they have a place at the school, they had a role to play in their city as well. "We realized we could make a life for ourselves here and we made the decision that we had to participate in this community," says Florentino, who emigrated from the Mexican state of Tlaxcala. "We're here and we should be a part of it."

When Jimenez convinced the school administration to allow Jose to attend a fifth year so he could earn enough credits for his high school diploma, Florentino was a big supporter. Jose graduated in 2007 and went on to Golden West College. Now, 20-year-old Jose's career goals are part of the family's new mission to own their own business. Jose has always loved electronics, and works part-time repairing cell phones. This inspired Florentino and his wife a few months ago to invest the family's savings with a partner in a local cell phone store.

All of that simply because Florentino dared to step on campus. Now, he visits Huntington Beach High daily, to pick up Guadalupe and check in with Jimenez. The family volunteers at fund-raisers, and both parents urge other immigrant parents to join. "It's the key to success," Florentino tells them. "The key so that our children can have a different life, a different outlook."

The proof is with his own children. Jose plans to take business courses at Golden West so, one day, the family can own a chain of cell phone stores. "Before, I didn't know where I was headed," Jose says. "I knew what I loved doing, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. Now, my life has a clear path." And Guadalupe, now 17? She wants to be a teacher.

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