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Oliver Aguilar

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In 1987, my family fled El Salvador and the brutal civil war that would eventually kill nearly

75,000 people. Leaving behind a loving family and one's homeland is not an easy decision, but at the ages of 10 and 12, my brother and I had become draft targets to both sides, so to my mom, it was the only choice.



Lacking the money to secure a travel visa, the three of us made the perilous journey of many immigrants before us. Crossing the U.S. border proved the unimaginable

challenge: we were chased by dogs, lacked water for much of the journey, and had the continuous fear of being caught and deported. We arrived in the U.S. on my birthday, July 26, 1987, and started a life course unattainable in El Salvador.

The challenges were only getting started though. My mom, a single mother, wanted for her children what she did not have: an education and a chance to build a better future. I became devoted to my studies and was selected vice president of my high school class. However, during my junior year, my family became homeless, forcing us to separate and seek shelter with various friends. Despite acceptance by several colleges and universities, there was simply no money for school. Determined to pursue the

American dream, I worked long hours as a dishwasher and cook to save enough money to attend Old Dominion University, in Norfolk, Virginia. I became the first in my family to graduate from college, when I received a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering in May of 2001. My excitement over graduation and starting a career in engineering was tempered as my permanent residency status made finding a job in the U.S. difficult.

I became an American citizen on Sept. 12, 2001, the day after 9/11, and soon after began my engineering career at Newport News Shipbuilding, building the very ships responsible for defending our nation against future attacks.

These experiences helped shape the person I am today. I believe it is best to devote energy to making a positive impact on the world. And I've learned that to be successful, you must take risks. My mother would have been happy making a life for her children in a familiar country and surrounded by family. She took a great risk to leave all that behind for a better life for us, despite not knowing how to read or write. We can choose to remain in the familiar, but growth comes from taking risks and learning new things.

I'm dedicated to mentoring, community outreach and helping people in need. Because at the end of the day, I have been a product of that reciprocity, and it is always best when you do it in return.

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