

# The Beauty of Being First-Gen

Alejandra Vargas

**Abstract:** Alejandra Vargas is an English major at Cal State LA. Having endured a great deal growing up, she learned early on to take notice of the small joys of life, such as smelling a flower, because at times these small moments of happiness were all she had. In this piece she writes about the joy her experience as a first-generation student has brought her. Using imagery and simple language, she focuses on the strength and power of being first-generation and hopes to inspire others who may have doubts about their own path.

To be first-gen means possessing a power within your soul that can never be taken away. It is yours when you hate it, it is yours when you pray for it, and it is only yours when others demand it. As a first-generation Mexican American student, I am traveling on a path many have taken before me, and many will take after me. It is a journey full of high expectations, unyielding pressure, and tormenting confusion. It is a hero's journey full of monsters and curses that continuously try to stop us in our path. Sometimes these monsters take the form of an institution that on paper is fully aligned with your best interest. Sometimes these monsters take the shape of those assigned by God to love you. But with every trial, a new layer of strength is added. We use this strength to carry us day by day. We each exercise it differently, but through every moment of joy, there is an echo that resonates from our darkest moments. An echo with a single whisper saying, "It does get better."

We have a unique lens to view the world that allows us to see and appreciate beauty differently. I see it when I walk among the homes in my old neighborhood that are coated with flowers of all kinds. Roses of every color, star jasmine with the most beautiful scent in the world. I saw it when I watched my grandpa stroll happily in the sunlight. I saw it when he would water our garden, the birds singing all around. This is the garden that fed my soul. Moments that are perceived as small are us exercising the power we hold. The monsters that continuously attack us on our journey in both school and in life are defeated with these seemingly trivial moments. Even the monsters we create, those horrid things we call doubt and insecurity can be defeated by these moments that are worth more than all the gold in the world. These small moments yell at the world that we are not to be messed with and we will always make it through.

What a chaotically beautiful path we are on.

As an English major, I have endured continuous attacks about the function and point of my educational career. It has broken my heart many times because if they all knew just how often my books and my writings have saved them from attending another funeral, they may have seen things differently. It was never only a hobby. That magnificent and unyielding power within us has kept me strong enough to now be at the point of my life at which I feel free. And although my tone changes during the week of finals, I owe my educational career to it.

When school is in session, we enter another world. A world full of like-minded peers, books, and heavy water bottles that we cannot control while in lecture. It is a world that is our own, a world my relatives endured and lost much for us to have, and a world full of strange curiosities. We put on our academic hats for a few hours and then venture off to our other lives. It is a wonderful thing to be a part of so many discourse communities. It is crucial to take notice of all the connections we can form. On my journey, I have met some that claimed that the only way we can pay respect properly to those that immigrated here for us or those that supported our education,

is to be rich and successful by their standards and disregard all notions of “useless” things such as art and music. They claim that they are hobbies, nothing more, nothing less. In my opinion, the proper way to pay tribute to all those that sacrificed so much for us is to attempt to live a life in which we do things that we love. But one of the joys of being first-gen is having exposure to notions and ideas that maybe they never had the opportunity to learn. Perhaps while they were working fourteen-hour days in their country of origin to survive they yearned to create art or music. They are not to be hated, only understood. That is the beauty of being a first-generation student: we can perceive the world differently and offer our sincerest empathy and understanding in return. We are powerful and relentless, and above all, we are nowhere near done with our journeys.