

Biography of Ricardo Flores

Ricardo Flores is a 42-year-old rancher from Mexico. He immigrated to the United States with his family of six children.

I am Ricardo Flores, a husband and father. My family of six children once lived on a very poor ranch near Guanajuato, Mexico. I couldn't afford the Mexican government's fees to dig the wells needed to save my crops from drought. So I abandoned my ranch, a tough decision. Today I live 1,200 miles away in Garden City, Kansas. I work at a meatpacking plant and earn \$15 an hour. That's more than one day's pay in Mexico! I came alone to the United States. Pedrito, my youngest son, cried, "Please don't leave me! I want to live in America too!" I was separated from my family for 13 years. I saw them only twice a year. This was difficult. But eventually I was able to save enough money for them to legally migrate to the United States. This was what I could give my children: visas to the U.S. Here, they could seek their futures.

- *What pushed Ricardo and his family to leave Mexico?*
- *What pulled them to the United States?*

Not once did my wife and I consider crossing the border illegally. Immigrants who swim across the Rio Grande to avoid the border patrol live in fear of being deported (sent back). It would have been far too risky for a family of eight. Getting visas for seven was difficult as well. It typically takes 13 years to get an application processed. Finally, we were scheduled for an immigration interview. Even then, the 1,000-mile journey stretched us financially. We had to pay for motel rooms, bus fares, and Mexican passports. We also had to pay for medical exams and application fees. I worried that my income and that of our U.S. sponsor's might not be enough to support my whole family in the United States. Fortunately, a cousin living in the United States decided to sponsor us too. Our visas were approved.

- *What challenges did Ricardo and his family experience in trying to immigrate?*
- *What do you think the role of a U.S. sponsor is?*

We enjoy our life in Garden City. Twenty years ago, 90 percent of the students in schools here were native-born English speakers. Today, more than half are from immigrant families. All my children, even 18-year-old Nora, are enrolled in school. They are hardworking and loved by their teachers. Slowly they are mastering the English language. I have joined a hometown organization. Nearly 100 workers in the Garden City area meet once a week. Each of them gives \$10, \$20, sometimes \$30 to our treasurer. He sends this money back to Guanajuato. They hope to build a cafeteria for the town's kindergarten. For our next project, we'd like to collect money for a new ambulance. It is our way of helping those in Mexico who cannot realize their dreams in America, as we have.

- *How are immigrants like Ricardo and his family affecting their communities in the United States?*
- *How are immigrants like Ricardo affecting the Mexican communities they left behind?*

Read this biography to learn about one immigrant's experience. Take turns reading each part and leading a discussion of the questions that follow.

Biography of José Rodríguez

José Rodríguez is a 22-year-old baseball player from the Dominican Republic. José immigrated to the United States to play professional baseball.

My name is José Rodríguez. My dream has been to play in a major league baseball stadium in America. Today, that dream will become a reality. I'm from the Dominican Republic, or the D.R. Back home, just about everyone plays sandlot and club baseball. When I was 15, baseball scouts started calling me. They told me I could be a professional baseball player. "You could be famous," they said, "like Sammy Sosa and Pedro Martinez."

- *What is pulling José to the United States?*

I lived in one of the many poor villages in the D.R. For as long as I can remember, I've had a hunger to play baseball and make money. Lots of money. I dropped out of school to train at one of the major league scouting camps in Santo Domingo, the capital of the D.R.

Most kids who trained with me weren't recruited. They returned to their villages to live like vagabonds. Not me. I got a one-way ticket to the United States of America. Before I boarded the plane, my recruiter said, "This is a test. If you fail, you will go back to your village poor. Your family's future is in your hands." I knew then I'd do everything possible to support my family back home. Like many other families, mine would count on money sent from someone outside of the D.R.

- *What is pushing José away from the Dominican Republic?*
- *How might José's immigration affect his family?*

It wasn't long before I was pitching in the minor leagues. My coaches and managers pushed me hard. Within weeks I was the team's ace pitcher, winning five of my first six games. Each pitch brought me closer to the majors. My host family and the whole town welcomed me. I felt like an ambassador of Dominican culture. I sang hymns in the local church choir—in Spanish! In the off-season, I flew back to the D.R. Within three years, a Double-A team drafted me. Three weeks later, I was called up to pitch in the major leagues. This was my chance. Today, I will pitch in the major leagues. I walk onto the field from the bullpen. Fans shout encouragement to me in Spanish. The organist plays "El Toro" ("The Bull") instead of "Charge!" This is my opportunity to turn this American pastime into an international sport.

- *What opportunities has José had in the United States that he may not have had in the Dominican Republic?*
- *How might José and other immigrants like him affect American society?*

Biography of Rachel Tang

Rachel Tang is a 23-year-old medical student at the University of Southern California. She emigrated from China to the United States as a child.

My name is Rachel Tang. I was not born with this name. But when my parents brought me to this country, my teacher could not pronounce my Chinese name, Xiaojun. So she suggested to my mother the American name Rachel. From then on, that was what I was called: Rachel Tang. I was only a small child when my parents demonstrated in Tiananmen Square. With many others, they cried for freedom and democracy in China. Instead, the government responded with bullets. Many protesters were killed. My parents were not. But they decided it was time to come to America to experience democracy and expose me to the best education possible.

- *What pushed Rachel's family to leave China?*
- *What pulled them to the United States?*

At first, it seemed an impossible dream. Because we lived in a Communist country, we would have to sneak out of China. But a relative of my father's who lived in the United States sent us a letter. He urged us to come and sent us a tiny bit of money. It was decided that my father should go first. For two years, I did not see him. My mother and I waited eagerly for his letters. They were filled not only with news but also with money we would need to make the journey.

When we had enough, my mother bought fake papers for us to use when we traveled. But we did not fly straight to America. We flew first to Thailand. When a customs agent asked where we were going, we made sure not to say America. From Thailand, we flew to Canada. Then we boarded a bus to take us across the border. At the border, they barely looked at us. But still my mother held her breath, afraid we would be sent back to China. It was a joyous reunion we had with my father in San Francisco, California!

- *Why do you think Rachel's father came to the United States first without his family?*
- *How might the Chinese communities that Rachel and other immigrants left be affected by their departure?*

I worked hard in my new school. Every day, my mother made me memorize new words from the dictionary. Once I got a B in history. My mother cried that day. I was told again and again that I must succeed. I must help my family's lives become better. Like most Chinese immigrants, I did what was expected of me. When I graduated from high school, I accepted a full scholarship to Stanford University. This year I transferred to the University of Southern California's medical school. I hope to become a doctor. I visit my parents often. They live in a community that is primarily made up of other Chinese immigrants. They own a small restaurant in a strip mall with other Chinese business owners. My mother cooks for me, and I am reminded of the tastes and smells of my childhood. I still feel "foreign" despite having lived here for more than 10 years. I also feel American, but others still see me as different, an

outsider. I hope to become a citizen someday soon. Maybe then I will be accepted into this American culture completely.

- *What kinds of challenges does Rachel face in her new country?*
- *How are Rachel and other Chinese immigrants affecting their communities in the United States?*

Biography of Olanre Nwidor

Olanre Nwidor is a 40-year-old engineer from Nigeria, in West Africa. Olanre immigrated to the United States after violence broke out in his village.

My wife, two children, and I, Olanre Nwidor, are members of the small Ogoni tribe in Nigeria. For many years, the government permitted a U.S. company to drill oil near our village. With an environmental catastrophe growing, many Ogonis, including myself, protested this drilling. The military responded violently. They executed our leader and eight others. I was then denied a job as a chemical engineer in Nigeria's oil industry. Surrounded by increasing violence, my family fled to a refugee camp. Eventually, the United Nations acknowledged our persecution and helped us to resettle in a large American city.

- *What pushed Olanre and his family to leave Africa?*
- *What pulled Olanre and his family to the United States?*

I expected an easy and prosperous life in America. It has not come. Government agencies initially gave us food, health care, and shelter. But now we struggle on our own, with low-paying jobs and health problems. High blood pressure nearly forced me to quit my factory job. In addition, my wife is a tuberculosis carrier. Working the night shift as a hotel maid, attending nursing school, and caring for our children exhausts her. She misses the community and her family back home. I continue to be pressured by family to send money back to Nigeria. Unfortunately, it will have to be my children who provide that kind of support. I am doing all I can to survive in this new and unfriendly world. In the refugee camp, there was no running water. I remember thinking, "When I get to America, there will be running water. I will sleep in a soft bed. I will be accepted. Blacks in America are free and not discriminated against." This has not always proven to be true. I sometimes feel like I'm not treated as well as other people who are not immigrants.

- *How are immigrants like Olanre affecting villages back home in Nigeria?*
- *What kinds of challenges have Olanre and his family faced in the United States?*

There have been a few highpoints to my life here. I recently quit my job to become a caseworker helping women who have no homes or money. I am also enrolled in nursing school. I have dreams for my kids' futures. They feel that America is their home. Not long ago, my wife gave birth to our new son, Karm. He's a true American. I'm Nigerian. You see two countries living in the same home. If an Ogoni man asked me about immigrating to America, I would tell him to not have high hopes. America is not a second heaven.

- *How are African immigrants like Olanre and his family affecting their communities in the United States?*
- *What opportunities has Olanre been given in America?*

Biography of Anna Vinski

Anna Vinski is a 37-year-old professor. She emigrated from Latvia to the United States to find a better-paying job.

I sometimes wonder if I made a mistake coming here. To America, I mean. It is true that I did not make much money teaching at the university in Latvia. I made barely enough to survive. And my husband, an engineer who also taught at the university, did little better. But at least in Latvia we were respected. Back home, people in Riga knew us, and we went to dinner parties sometimes. Here we are nobody.

Like my husband, I have tried to get a job at one of the many universities here in Los Angeles, California. I teach mathematics. But the interviewers tell me that my English is not good enough. And so I work as a playground aide at the elementary school my daughter attends. The kids teach me English, and I also take classes at night. My husband wanted us to come to America. He has needed surgery on his knee for many years now. His brother works as a nurse at a large hospital in Los Angeles. He has urged my husband to come to America to have his surgery. "There are many well-educated, highly trained doctors here," he has told my husband often. We both believed that there would be more opportunities for our children here. But I've seen the kids on the playground tease my daughter about her accent. I want to hug her, but in front of her friends, I cannot.

- *What pushed Anna's family to leave Latvia?*
- *What pulled them to the United States?*

My children, despite struggling to learn this language, have adjusted quickly. They love American movies and television. Twice already they have begged us to go to Disneyland. They have made a few friends. My oldest son, though, he tells me, "Mom, kids here are not as mature as those in Latvia. They talk of silly things, like who wears what kind of shoes. I miss my friends back home." But most of his friends really *aren't* back home anymore. They, too, have found new homes in America, Germany, or Israel. Too many honest, intelligent Latvians are finding that they cannot support their families in Latvia.

- *What are some of the challenges Anna and her children are facing in America?*
- *What are some things about America that they enjoy?*

Other immigrants have settled near us, and we have become friends. There are families from Russia, Poland, Croatia, and Hungary. People who lived to see Communism fall. They gather at my house for picnics and speak in halting English. Many of us can still speak Russian and sometimes that is easier than English. I enjoy cooking foods that remind us of home. My specialty is Latvian *piragi*, or buns filled with bacon.

My neighbors tell me to open a bakery. Maybe someday I will. My daughter, she plays the piano. It is her dream to someday go to the Juilliard School of music in New York City. I tell her she can do this if she works hard. I think it is a dream she can reach. And this — this chance to fulfill a dream — this is why we came to America.

- *How are immigrants like Anna affecting their communities in the United States?*
- *What opportunities does Anna's daughter have in America?*

Biography of Sumatra Singh

Sumatra Singh is a 35-year-old software developer in Madison, Wisconsin. He emigrated from India to the United States to excel in his career.

My name is Sumatra Singh. When I was a child in Bombay, India, I used to dream of living like the Americans I saw in Hollywood films. The fast cars, the glitzy stores, the muscled, smooth-talking men... this seemed like the life for me. America seemed so different from Bombay. In Bombay, there were always crowded streets. More and more people from the countryside were moving to Bombay to find better jobs. The dirty sidewalks seemed a far cry from the elegant Hollywood I dreamed about.

Of course, it wasn't Hollywood that brought me to America. It was technology. As a software developer, I could make much more money in America than India. I could come over on an H1B visa. This is the kind of visa they give only to highly skilled immigrants. That way, I could live in the U.S. for 100 weeks, learn all I could about technology, and return to India an expert in my field.

- *What pushed Sumatra to leave India?*
- *What pulled Sumatra to the United States?*

The America I came to was not the same America I saw in the movies. I had to get a very cheap apartment in San Francisco, California. My wife did not get a work visa, so she quickly became bored sitting in our apartment all day. She watched TV and started to become more like American women. At first it was difficult for me. I was not used to thinking of my wife as an equal. But soon we were shopping together and sharing the household chores like American couples do. There were other changes. I had to learn to drive on the "wrong" side of the road. In India, we drive on the left. I had to work long hours to move ahead in my job. Even then, I was laid off many times. A technology firm in Madison, Wisconsin, finally hired me. But this meant moving across the country. My wife and I spent many days overcome with homesickness. We missed the large family network that had surrounded us in India.

- *What are some of the challenges Sumatra and his wife faced in America?*
- *In what ways have Sumatra and his wife had to adapt to a new American life?*

Even still, there were traces of Indian culture around us. We found a small community of Indian Americans in Wisconsin. They celebrate Indian Independence Day once a year with a parade. My wife wore her *sari* and her *bindi* (a dot on her forehead) for the festival. She looked as beautiful as the day I married her. There were several Indian restaurants nearby that we visited often. We even saw American teenagers with henna tattoos. We laughed at how they'd made a fad out of our traditional Indian custom. But always in the backs of our minds was the day we would return to India. My mother did not believe we would return. "That

American lifestyle will seduce you, maybe even corrupt you!” she would tell me on the phone. But my wife and I knew we would go home. Near the end of my 100 weeks, I flew back to California to attend the Silicon India Career Fair. Recruiters from Indian companies told us of technology jobs back in India. I would return to India to use my experience in the U.S. to help the country of my birth.

- *How are Indian immigrants affecting their communities in the United States?*
- *In what ways do Indian technology immigrants affect their communities back home?*

Biography of Ahmed Al-Mokalla

Ahmed Al-Mokalla is a 38-year-old police officer from Yemen in the Middle East. Ahmed immigrated to the United States after a violent civil war tore his country apart.

When I was 14 and living in Yemen, soldiers came to my house. They took me away and forced me to join the army. I served for three years and fought in Yemen's civil war. When I got out of the army, I came to the United States. Yemen took my childhood. They would not get my adulthood too. My name is Ahmed Al-Mokalla. I have a wife and a daughter, Laila. Laila was born in the United States. She has had a much different childhood here than she would have had in Yemen. In Yemen, girls have very little freedom. In school, if she had missed a fact on her multiplication tables, she would have been hit on the head. Here she can go to school without fear. She hopes to go to medical school in a few more years.

- *What pushed Ahmed to leave Yemen?*
- *What pulled Ahmed to the United States?*

When my wife and I first arrived in New York City, I waited tables while I put myself through college. In Yemen, as a boy, I had watched many American "cop" shows. I decided long ago that I wanted to be one of the "good guys." I joined the New York Police Department when I was 24. Finally, I was a good guy, though it didn't always feel like it. On September 11, 2001, I was stationed at Ground Zero. How to explain what I felt that day? Sadness. When my wife went to pick up Laila from school, another parent yelled at her from his car, "Go back where you came from, terrorist!" It was a difficult time for us, and for all Arab Americans. I am American 100 percent. But I am also Arabic 100 percent. I can't change where I came from, but America is my home.

- *What opportunities have Ahmed and his family been given in America?*
- *What challenges have Ahmed and his family faced in America?*

Soon after the events of September 11, 2001, I moved my family to Dearborn, Michigan. The large Arab American community here welcomed

us. My wife can speak Arabic all day without ever having to use English if she wants. There are eight mosques near us. A billboard on the freeway near our home used to read, "Attend the church of your choice." But many Muslims in my community voiced concerns over this. Today it reads, "Attend the church, synagogue, or mosque of your choice." This is good. But not all is good in America. My daughter is made fun of at school for wearing her *massar*, the scarf that covers her head. Teenage boys threw a brick through the window of a business owned by my Arab neighbors. We hear of hate crimes against Arab Americans often. I hope soon to get a job with the Detroit Police Department, to be a "good guy" once more. Until then, I work in a car factory. My brothers would like to bring their families to America. But my wife and I have no citizenship papers, only green cards. We cannot sponsor them. I tell them to be patient. There will be a new life for them in America when it is time.

- *How are immigrants like Ahmed affecting their communities in the United States?*
- *How has being a Muslim impacted Ahmed and other American Muslims since September of 2001?*