

“We Were Never Meant to Survive” – Denia Perez

Last year, I had the honor of being selected as one of E4FC’s scholars. At first, I was just relieved that my tuition would be one less expense to worry about. However, after attending the award ceremony and meeting the other scholars, I felt overjoyed. I was filled with newfound pride, strength, inspiration, and humility. Growing up, I truly believed that I was the only undocumented student in the United States. Before E4FC, I had never met anyone in my situation and my interaction with undocumented people was limited to individuals in my family. It was difficult and incredibly isolating.

I used to be ashamed of who I was, and I did everything I could to hide my immigration status. For twenty years, I hated and vehemently denied this part of my identity. Meeting other undocumented students in E4FC, and being part of our Legal Services Team and Outreach Team, has given my life more depth and meaning than I will ever be able to fully articulate and give thanks for. Hearing other E4FC students’ struggles, narratives, and aspirations has kept me motivated and hopeful. What I once considered a burden, I now consider a privilege.

Audre Lorde, in her poem “A Litany for Survival,” wrote:

and when we speak we are afraid  
our words will not be heard  
nor welcomed  
but when we are silent  
we are still afraid  
so it is better to speak  
remembering  
we were never meant to survive

When I read this poem, and specifically these lines, I’m moved and reminded of all the amazing people I’ve met through E4FC. As a population facing a myriad of institutional and legal barriers, we, too, weren’t meant to survive. We were supposed to remain silent, passive, and afraid. Yet we have spoken and are still here. We gain momentum and strength from each other and from the obstacles continuously presenting themselves in our lives.

Although it is sometimes difficult to remain optimistic, sharing my struggles and hearing other people’s struggles inspires me to persevere. “A Litany for Survival” speaks to my past and present. I was afraid and sometimes still am to speak out against the bigotries and discrimination I face as an undocumented woman. But because of the unconditional love and support I have found in my peers at E4FC, I refuse to let myself feel overpowered by a broken immigration system. We were not meant to survive – I was not meant to survive – but we are surviving and will continue to do so by remaining in the light and demanding that our humanity be recognized.