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## The Story of Paul

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## The Story of Paul

Growing up in a house with four older sisters, it was nice to have Paul as *mi hermano* for a year. Paul arrived in my small New York town with a couple of bags, virtually no English-speaking ability, and an unmatched work ethic and drive. Within his first week of living with my family, Paul had already joined the varsity soccer team with me. When we talked, he would ask about anything and everything that he didn't understand in English, and I would do my best to explain in Spanish. While making his schedule, Paul didn't back down from any challenges, as he was driven to graduate with a Regents diploma and take upper level science classes.

Right away, Paul was popular in school, easily balancing his time between my friend group, the soccer team, and other native Spanish-speaking students, mainly from Central America. His teachers were extremely impressed by his dedication to his academics, and they loved working with him as a result. It was clear to my family from the start that Paul was different than the other students in his foreign exchange program. Most of the travelling students were younger, at the beginning of their high school careers, and coming from wealthy countries in Europe. These students came to America for a year to travel and gain new life experiences. Paul came to America because it was *su sueño* to make a life here.

Paul was born in Cuba and moved to Venezuela with his mother after the divorce of his parents when he was very young. In 2013, Paul and his mother left Venezuela in fear of their destabilized community where violent crimes were high. When his mother decided to move to Argentina, Paul made the decision to return to the Caribbean to live with his father and step-mom in the Dominican Republic. After years of moving around Latin America and the Caribbean, Paul finally achieved his goal of coming to America, if only for a year.

Growing up in the shadows of American society, as so many Latinos do, Paul aspired to fulfill his goals of living and working in the land full of opportunities. Latin America has been plagued for generations by the grips of poverty, political corruption, and destabilization. The colonial period had widespread devastating effects on the region, as the economic interests of powerful European nations took precedent over the lives of natives of the land and imported African slaves. Rich ecosystems were torn down to make massive plantations of heavily sought out items such as sugar, tobacco, and fruit. Mines popped up in whatever mountains possessed streaks of gold, silver, or other precious minerals.

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As time has gone on, the exploitation of these lands and the people on them has continued. Latin American nations struggle to compete in a globalized trade market, as neoliberal trade policies drive worker wages down for the masses. Struggling economies lack growth in critical modern fields such as technology. Paul was born into this region of the world and knew that there were opportunities beyond what he had on his small island. I remember the day that Paul made it to our house and he called his father. They were both crying over the fact that he had finally made it to the United States. No longer would he be restricted between the shores of Hispaniola. His life awaited him in America.

The year with Paul seemed to fly by. As I spent my time applying to colleges and filling out scholarship applications, Paul studied hard for his Regents exams. It was an interesting time looking back. I was the traditional American student from a middle-class family, set on a path of higher academic success, with virtually no fear for my future. Paul on the other hand, was internally questioning how he could make his dreams come true, as his program would end directly after graduation and he would have to return to the Dominican Republic. He made it seem as if he would reapply for a student visa once he returned home so that he could study in America for college. However, I think Paul already had his mind made up about taking an alternative path in life, one that was much more dangerous and unexpected for everyone that knew him.

Saying goodbye to Paul was really difficult. We had felt closer than ever before during our graduation weekend, so emotions ran high when we left him with his fellow foreign exchange students at a college on Long Island, who were all preparing to fly home the next day. Paul however, never boarded his flight the next morning. He disappeared from the campus briefly after breakfast. I was the first person contacted in my family by a girl from Germany who also went to my high school, wondering if I knew his whereabouts. I remember being at work feeling confused and helpless.

As it turns out, Paul left the college campus and took a bus to Florida where he planned to stay with friends from back in the day when he lived in Cuba. Paul's visa expired that very same night, and he became an undocumented immigrant in the United States. Roughly two thousand students internationally participated in the same high school foreign exchange program as Paul in the 2017-2018 school year. He was the only student who didn't return home at the program's end.

Paul has since moved back up to the northeast. He works hard in a grocery store and a warehouse, and he has begun taking college classes, paying out of pocket as he cannot apply for

any financial aid without a social security number. The time after Paul's unexpected departure from my life has given me the time to find clarity in the events that occurred.

Paul's story is a unique part of the much larger immigration conversation happening around the world right now, particularly in the United States. He feared that he would wait years before getting a student visa, and perhaps would never get one at all. He feared that his dreams would never come to fruition in his home country. Yet, through it all, Paul broke the traditional view of what an undocumented immigrant is supposed to be in the eyes of Americans. He was never deprived as a child; in fact, his childhood was relatively good. The poverty he experienced in the Dominican Republic was relatively low in comparison to those around him, and he felt secure in his village. Paul wasn't afraid of any particular violence that made him flee, such as that of those in the northern triangle countries experience. Additionally, Paul is not a criminal. He didn't come to the United States smuggling drugs or as a gang member. Paul came to the United States because his dreams could never be achieved on the soil that his citizenship status placed him. Instead, his life is in the United States, and he took any steps possible to make it there, risking and losing a lot in the process.

Paul's story is one of immigration as a form of *resistencia*. The struggles that Latin American nations such as the Dominican Republic endure are the result of a long history of colonization which led to the exploitation of people and land. Paul is an active participant of an economic system that was never intended for him. He made the decision to seek out his dreams in an illegal manner because it was the only path he saw that could make his goals a reality. Paul resisted against the historical context of his region which has shaped his contemporary world. He resisted against the unjust immigration system that ranks the wealthy and well-connected European students over him. He resisted against the long wait times of going through the legal process to enter the United States. And, he resisted against the places he came from, depicting the forgotten nations in a new light. No matter how hard one works in a country such as the Dominican Republic, you can only go as far as your borders will allow you, before being engulfed by the surrounding ocean. Paul's greatest fear was leading a life where his dreams could never come to fruition. He made decisions based on the economic system that restrained him and took his life into his own hands, becoming an active participant in social change by immigrating as a form of resistance.