My name is Leslie Irasema Gonzalez and I am majoring in Spanish Languages and Hispanic Cultures.

I am the product of Mexican immigrants that fled their country looking for a better future. This meant that growing up, I had two cultures and two languages. For some children of immigrants, speaking their second language came easy to them. For myself, it was a bit more complicated. I grew up in a predominantly white neighborhood where I couldn't speak Spanish with my friends. When I was at school, I would speak, read and write in English. My parents would constantly be working and when my siblings would take care of me, we would speak English. Up until high school, my Spanish was "pocha." I could barely hold a conversation and eventually I began to get embarrassed of my abilities. My friends would laugh at me when I would speak in Spanish in a joking way, but it happened so frequently that eventually I grew tired of the judgment. I completely wanted to stop speaking Spanish. High school came along and I was forced to take the only foreign language that my school offered, which as you can guess, was Spanish. At first these classes felt very forced, but my monolingual friends were always so impressed that I could speak another language and it sparked a sense of pride in me. They would come to me for help and I would gladly offer the best that I could. Helping them helped me learn and grow with the language. I loved that I was able to improve so much in my abilities. Three Spanish classes later and I became completely confident, not perfect, but much prouder of my abilities. In my Advanced Placement Spanish course, my teacher would always talk about when she studied abroad in Granada, Spain. I became amazed with the idea that I could go and study in another country, but I didn’t think that this was something that I could do because of my first generation and low income background. I put that idea away and decided to just focus on getting to a university.

Coming into college, I didn't know what I wanted to major in, but I knew that I wanted to study abroad. In my lower division courses, I discovered that I really wanted to be involved with Non-Governmental Organizations so I chose to major in Collaborative Health and Human Services. I began taking upper division courses in my sophomore year and realized that I loved the helping professions. I knew from that moment that I wanted to continue studying public administration and social work. Although I was very excited about declaring my major, I still wanted to fulfill that lifelong dream of studying abroad. I pushed myself to attend the study abroad meetings and convince my family to let me go for a year to study abroad in Granada, Spain during my 3rd year in college. Finally my dream came true and when I arrived, I thought that I would just be minoring in Spanish as an excuse to study abroad since I couldn’t take any of my major courses while abroad. While I was there, I discovered that I really enjoyed all of the classes that I was taking. Learning about different cultures and traditions, translating, hispanic literature. It all was so fascinating to me and I also was continuing to improve my Spanish. When I returned to California, I came to the conclusion that having Spanish Languages and Hispanic Cultures as a second major would be extremely useful for my future career in nonprofit management. This is especially true if I work with immigrant families and people who come from diverse backgrounds.

I am very excited as to how far I have come and to see how far I will go. Being a first generation college student, I know that the odds are stacked against me, but graduating with two bachelor degrees proves that we can finish and accomplish just as much as my privileged counterparts. One day, I will be managing a non-governmental organization and it will all be thanks to the motivation and support that I have today. Through studying my majors, I know I can make a difference in the world.