



## **Angelica Acosta Garnett**

Immigration Activist  
Women United March Speech  
January 25, 2020  
Charlotte, NC

Today I am going to tell you the story of two women. The one in front of you, and the one stuck in a tent city in Matamoros Mexico waiting for her asylum claim.

I came to the United States with my parents and two sisters in the year 2000 when I was a 17-year-old high school graduate. The process of moving from one country to another was brutal. I left all of the people I had ever known, my culture, my traditions and my home, and I had to learn a new language.

I was most surprised to learn that I was to be grouped in a category of people called “Latino or Hispanic,” and that this category was for people who looked a little a tan- or a lot tan, spoke with an accent, and were born somewhere south of the border, or it also applied to people who had been birthed by someone who fit the previous description. If it sounds confusing, imagine how it sounded to me!

I had to accept my new identity label, created by people who seemed to need a label to understand ‘who I was...’ And I learned too that I had officially become a minority.

With the label came many strange questions: was my dad was a janitor; had I crossed the border illegally; was I a drug dealer? People expected me to behave in a particular manner, and seemed to have a preconceived idea of what I was and was not capable of doing because I was now a Latina immigrant.

The story people told themselves about me over and over was this: I, like ALL of my counterparts from this so-called monolithic Latin culture- had fled my third world country because I was dying to come to America and become a maid, a sitter, a ‘helper’ in a very ‘white world’. I was one of the lucky ones that had made it. As a “Latina” I was constantly portrayed as uncultured and uneducated, BUT a really hard worker!

Truth be told, the hardest thing for me as an immigrant was coming to this country with ZERO connections and no social capital. Your pedigree, schooling, academic achievements, titles, they all mean nothing in this new country. Your arrival day is your **ground zero**. And look at me now; I went from scrubbing toilets [not by choice but rather by way of scam- long story], to addressing a crowd like I am someone worthy of your time and attention!

What made the leap possible? ALLIES. People who refused the one sided – stagnant story – yes, the one where I am only good enough to care for “their” children and clean “their” home -and instead they stood in the gap for me. Twenty years. Eleven people. These ALLIES saw my potential and my ability, and SIMPLY opened a door, and stood back and watched me reach my potential.

Your connections are powerful. Use this power to see, elevate and connect your immigrant neighbors. Today, I stand before you city of Charlotte, and I ask that you REFUSE to believe the stagnant narrative. Refuse to see people that look like me just as your ‘helpers,’ someone not invited to the ‘big kids’ table, someone different. See me as a Latina woman of color, who can be an executive director, a board member, an attorney, an elder at a church, a government official...you name it.

It was one of my door openers, a mentor and friend, who taught me and guided me in my role as a paralegal, and who lit the spark that led me to my trips to the border last fall to better understand the humanitarian crisis.

I met Naomi a Honduran woman in Matamoros Mexico while I was walking the largest tent city in the southern border. We made an instant connection and Naomi told me how she had fled Honduras to protect her son, who had been taken by the gangs, beaten cut and threatened. She had plenty of proof. I saw the pictures. I saw her boy’s scars.

Naomi had made it into the US where she had told her story to immigration officials. She had passed her interview for asylum. But to her surprise, she was put in a truck and told that she needed to leave the United States; cross the bridge into Mexico, and wait in cartel territory for 4 months until she had her 1st immigration hearing.

US Immigration officials sent Naomi, a LEGAL asylum seeker to Mexico to wait for her turn in immigration court. This was possible due the recent Stay in Mexico policy that forces vulnerable asylum seekers to wait for their cases OUTSIDE of the United States. She had no money. No clothes. No instructions. She joined the 900+ people, ALL asylum seekers, who NOW live in tents right outside of our border without access to food, jobs, health care, schooling, or even proper sanitation.

Her situation is not UNIQUE. These mothers, these children have been turned away and have become victims of crime at the hands of the cartels. Our government has denied entry and sent the most vulnerable people to some of the most dangerous areas in our continent.

**WE HAVE POWER** as American citizens to stand up for those suffering. We can stand for those at the border by learning more, speaking out more, contacting our representatives and telling them Stay in Mexico is not an efficient, decent, humane or moral way to respond to the cry of help of our neighbors. And regardless of where you stand on immigration policy and opinion, remember that humane treatment is non-partisan.

Staring at Naomi was like staring in the mirror. She was an educated, hard working mother of three: a woman willing to risk it ALL for the safety of her son. When I asked her what she wanted me to do, she told me I needed to TELL HER STORY. She wanted me to remind people that she was a person, a mother and that she knew what I knew: if we traded places, I would do the exact same thing for my son.

Meeting Naomi changed my life. I could not go home back to the way things were. I wanted to stand in the gap for her. I wanted to be her ally. As a response to her request to share her story, I created "Living Room Conversations," a talk about the asylum process, the current conditions at the border, and 4 the policies that created them. Would you consider being my ally opening your doors so that I can keep sharing Naomi's story?

Women of Charlotte, our lack of awareness and understanding is robbing us of an opportunity to powerfully respond to the cry of our neighbors. Together we are a force that can change the story of the people at the border. We have the power to stand for these women and children who are powerless and voiceless.

We cannot remain silent! Because our silence is complicit!



WUM Co-Sponsors

