My Life (Translated): College Dreams
by SuChin Pak

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The waiting is over for a lot of anxious high school seniors. The thick letters and the thin letters have all come in, and it's time to choose which college you'll be attending this fall. Let's imagine you got accepted into the college of your dreams, with a full scholarship, no less; this is what you've been waiting for your whole life, and you can afford to go! Pack your bags, and welcome to your new adult, independent life.

But what if your parents don't want you to go? What if your parents insist you stay home and go to a college close enough so you wouldn't have to move out? Would you do it? Could you sacrifice your college dreams to make your parents happy? What if college was getting in the way of what your family said they needed from you? Could you leave?

Meet Sonia. She's a 19-year-old Mexican-American college student who was on her way to a university, but decided to obey the wishes of her traditional parents and stay home to attend a local community college. For Sonia, the priorities are clear: While she is American, she cannot sacrifice the values of her Mexican culture. And that means, according to her parents, living at home, helping with the cooking and cleaning, taking care of her younger siblings and above all, respecting her parents' wishes.

Sonia's day is spent juggling a full-time job, studying for exams, cooking dinner, helping her brother with his homework and, on top of all that, recently she was asked by her parents to plan her sister's quinceanera, a kind of cultural sweet 16 — essentially, the biggest day of a Latina girl's life. As her grades are plummeting, she's realizing she cannot do it all. Something has to give and a choice must be made.

For me, not going to college was never an option, but the decision of which college I would attend was not mine alone — it was ultimately going to be decided by my parents. I went to Berkeley because it was a great school. But also because it was 30 minutes away from home, there would be no dorms, no planes, not even a leisurely drive to get to my school. And that 30 minutes was even too far for my parents. During my sophomore year, my parents left my childhood home and rented a small two-bedroom apartment 10 minutes away from campus so I could live at home and attend school. Come to think of it, had I got into Harvard, I would have probably been the only college freshman to move to Boston with her entire family.

When you're straddling two different cultures, when your parents are from a different country, it's a different set of rules, a different value system. There is no sense of the individual in many immigrant cultures. The decisions I made and still make must take into account the well-being of my entire family. I've never done anything without considering how my parents would approve or disapprove. It's the same way with Sonia.

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A lot of people would look at her story and question her sanity. Is this all-American girl, born and raised here in this country, the first one in her family to attend college, actually considering dropping out of school because it's getting in the way of her family obligations?

What's the alternative? She cannot leave her family, turn away from parents who sacrificed their entire lives to give Sonia a better one. She cannot abandon her brothers and sisters who will in turn need help filling out their college applications one day. And she certainly will not reject a culture and a community that has given Sonia an identity she is very proud of and committed to.

It's a tough choice. There is no clear answer and the only certainty is compromise. Can Sonia be the perfect Mexican daughter and still achieve the American dream? On the next episode of the documentary series "My Life Translated: College Dreams," premiering on May 23 at 6:30 p.m. ET, follow Sonia as she struggles to strike a balance and makes the biggest decision of her life.

November 17, 2004

What's Our Next Story?

It's my final meeting with the producers before I head out to meet Sonia tomorrow. People are always asking how we come up with ideas for the show, but I never have a problem. I have enough stories and ideas for this show to last us for a good 12 years. I wanted to do a story this time around the topic of college. Going off to college is the biggest thing to happen to a teenager ... possibly the first adult decision in a young person's life. I remember the first day of my freshman year in college and just being so scared. The world had suddenly become so huge and all those years I thought I knew something. Well, guess what, none of it counts when you get to college.

I sent out a letter asking kids to write in about their college experience. Sonia's story intrigued me the most, because it was so similar — and yet so different — from my own story. Here's a girl who's about as American as you can get: She works at a health clinic as a peer counselor, she's a business major at a local community college and she's got a serious boyfriend. But at the core of her identity is her incredible commitment to her family and, ultimately, her Mexican values. Her parents are immigrants from Mexico, and while they understand that school is important, nothing is more important than family, not even a college degree. And therein lies the conflict — Sonia wants to do better for herself and have an independent American life, but that means getting a college degree. And that means sacrificing some of her responsibilities at home.

I was thinking ... most of us fight with our parents about curfews and dating. Imagine arguing with them about wanting to study MORE!

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November 18, 2004

Overachiever

Sonia told us she's been seriously contemplating dropping out of school. I could never even imagine that growing up. For me, college was not an option — it was like 13th grade, just an extension of all of my years of schooling. I don't even think my parents came to my high school graduation. They had friends over for a barbecue, but as far as coming to a ceremony to congratulate their daughter on graduating high school? I mean, it was such a given, that making a big deal about it was counterintuitive for my folks. Of course she's graduating high school. Of course she's going to Berkeley ... what's the big deal?

So I was afraid maybe I wouldn't relate to Sonia. But in fact, she's exactly me at 19, a complete overachiever and really struggling to figure out how to be American and still hold on to her parents' culture. The problem isn't that her parents don't want her to go to college, they just don't think it should get in the way of her being at home and helping out the family.

Sonia got accepted to San Diego State University with a full scholarship when she graduated high school, but couldn't go because her parents don't believe a young, unmarried woman should be living out of the house, even if it is for school. So she enrolled at a community college close to her home instead, with hopes of transferring in the next year or two. This is such a huge sacrifice, and I know the first question a typical American would ask is ... why? Why not just move out? Well, if I was faced with that decision at 18, I don't think I could've moved out. Go to college and have your parents turn their back on you? I mean, believe me, I fought with my parents every day of my teenage years, but I could never cut them out of my life. I could never choose anything over family and I would never be happy without my parents' approval. I guess that's the biggest difference between being American and Korean or Mexican. Your family always comes first, or at least you have to figure out a compromise. But that compromise has to include your parents.

November 20, 2004

Family Bonds

It's final exam month for Sonia at school, but she can't even make it to classes, let alone have time to study. Her sister's quinceanera is tomorrow. A quinceanera is like a sweet 16/debutante ball/wedding/bat mitzvah. It's like the biggest day of a young Latina's life and it takes all year to plan. So Sonia, who's had to take the lead in planning the event, is really stressed out and school just seems like something she's just going to have to let go of. It's not like her parents don't want her to go to school, they just don't think it's more important than her responsibilities as the eldest daughter in a Mexican-American family. They argue that she can quit her job or see her boyfriend less, but those are two
things Sonia cannot sacrifice. She needs her job to have some independence and she loves her boyfriend ... so it's school that's suffering.

Sonia's father is quite the character. I don't understand Spanish, so it's hard to really communicate. He comes off very gruff. He's extremely strict, and clearly their relationship is rough. But you can tell he loves her — they just don't get each other. Her mother is the peacemaker, the glue in the family.

**November 23, 2004**

**Growing Pains**

Went to see my mom and dad in California. They're crazy. In a good way. It's amazing that I can have this relationship with my parents. If you would've asked me when I was 16 whether I thought I would ever miss my parents when I moved out of the house or if I would ever be close to them, the answer would've been a resounding HELL NO. But it's true, the older you get, the more you understand your parents. I keep telling Sonia that it gets easier, that this is the hardest part. It's hard when your parents don't speak English or they're not from this country, because you become a third parent in a way. You end up taking care of things for your parents and raising your younger siblings. Sonia's mom said it best: They rely on her because she's always been their little translator. At times, I really resented the fact that I had to go home early to take care of my brother or help him with his homework or that I had to spend my afternoons helping my parents read bills and contracts. You grow up so much quicker. I was a very serious child and a very focused teenager and often the responsibility was a burden, but in the end it all helped me get further in school and in my career.

**December 1, 2004**

**Sacrifice**

Sonia told her mom she was considering dropping out of school. I think she actually thought her mom was going to let her do that. But her mom had a complete breakdown. She told Sonia that she left everything behind to help her children have a better life and that means to finish college and be independent and successful. It was a shock to Sonia. I don't think she had ever seen her mother so visibly emotional. Her mother, it turns out, had wanted to go to college and become a doctor. But she got married and then pregnant and then they moved to America and everything was left unfinished. She has huge regrets. It was a really emotional moment. I get teary-eyed every time I see the tape ... her mom is just so completely desperate to have Sonia live the life that she couldn't.

It's a lot of pressure, to not only live successfully for yourself, but for your entire family. I think that's why I've always been so driven; I think if I was just doing this for myself, I'm

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not sure I would have worked so hard at school, at my job. But knowing that what you do helps your family, that your family depends on your success ... it's a huge pressure, but it can also be a great motivator.

I don't know any first-generation kid who doesn't feel a deep sense of obligation. My parents, like so many others, left a home, a country and a family behind to come to a strange place, with strange customs and a strange language, all because they hoped to give their kids a better life. It's a strangely wonderful thing to understand this, to really understand how much our parents have sacrificed to give us more. When I asked my mom what was more important, the individual or the family, my mom responded by saying that she had no life, that her life was essentially over, because she was living for me.

December 2, 2004

Great Expectations

Sonia is putting a lot of emphasis on her final business exam. If she does not do well on this exam, she will drop out. Flunking out of college is not an option for her; she'd rather drop school and hopefully get to it later in life, when she has more time. But we all know that if she drops out of school now, the chances she'll go back are very slim. And if she drops out of school now, she may regret it for the rest of her life. The stakes are high. Her whole family is depending on her to be the first one, to set the example, to succeed in this country, but is it too much? Is it realistic to expect her to excel in school while taking care of her family?

December 15, 2004

College Dreams

I think it's been an emotional two months for Sonia. And I think she realizes that no matter what she gets on this exam, she has to graduate college. For the first time, I think Sonia realizes that doing the best thing for herself can also mean doing the best thing for her family — and that means graduating college. She seems happier, like a weight has been lifted. She's even talking about business school and maybe even getting into fashion. It's a big change. That's the thing about this time in your life — every day, it's something new. A day is a year, a month is a lifetime.

A lot has changed for Sonia in the last few weeks. Who knows what her future holds ... but at least she's headed in the right direction.

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