

Matthew Pillado

Dr. Heather-Ann O'Loughlin

English 598

30 March 2025

Interview Summary

Name: Leticia Pillado

Date of Interview: March 26, 2025

Format of Interview: In-Person

Kickoff Questions: What was your first memory of going to school?

Expounding on that memory, what subjects do you remember the most at that time?

Now, focusing on writing and reading, what was the earliest memory of that in school?

When was your earliest memory of writing and reading in English instead of Spanish?

What role did your parents play in reading and writing?

What role did the public school system play in reading and writing?

Final Report

The Sponsors

This short story was inspired by and based on my interview questions and answers. It is a true story about my mother, Leticia Pillado, and her literacy sponsors.

Leticia sat in the faded blue 1965 Oldsmobile F-85, its cracked vinyl seats hot against her legs, the border shimmering in the Texas heat. Everyone had the windows rolled down, but it did not matter because the desert air was dry and unmoving. She did not mind the heat or the cramped space beside her three brothers. What made her stomach twist was the man hidden in the trunk, a stranger her parents had said nothing about except that he needed their help.

The F-85 crept one car's length towards the border checkpoint. If she got to the other side, her Mom said a different and better life was waiting for them. Their car was on deck.

Leticia stared as the American immigration officer looked into the car in front, walked towards the back, tapped the doors, and waved the car in front towards the United States.

Her father strolled the car to the young man with the reflective sunglasses. He peered inside, looking over the kids. "What are your names?" Leticia did not know English at age ten but watched her older brothers' lips form their names: Alberto, Ruben, and Miguel.

Leticia's Dad, Jesus, placed a stack of legal documents into the hands of the American. As the immigration officer shuffled and read each document, another American came, peered in, and made eye contact with Leticia. He then looked at Jesus, pointed at Jesus, and pointed toward the trunk. Jesus' face dropped as he got out of the car.

By then, the ICE agent was tapping on the trunk lid. Jesus put his key in the lock, and the trunk lid sprung to life, revealing the strange man Leticia had met earlier.

It was 1975, and immigration laws were much lax then. The Bracero program had been in full effect, and Mexican migrants had been a welcome workforce picking fruit and building roads baked in the Texas sun. Leticia never knew what came of that stranger but vividly remembers the fear and hours-long wait at the border that day. Eventually, Leticia would settle in the far west Texas town of Fort Stockton, Texas.

When Leticia entered the 1930s school building, the teachers, administrators, and students spoke English. Leticia did not know English, so school was initially difficult for her. But she knew the teachers would slap her knuckles with a ruler if she spoke Spanish, so she preferred to remain quiet.

In her first few weeks in America, she met a librarian who would change her life and education. The librarian saw the little girl with tight ponytails sitting with her classmates, not saying a word. The librarian walked over to the little girl and gave her a children's book with pictures and words in English. Leticia had no idea what the words meant, but she recognized the images as she touched the pages and admired the artwork.

Leticia was too scared to speak, but something in the librarian's gentle, patient, and unfazed-by-silence voice made her want to try. For the first time in America, Leticia felt seen.

Every day before school, during lunch, and after school, Leticia would come into the 15 by 20 foot library to be read to and to practice her reading. One day, as Leticia left the cafeteria, she was holding her food tray. On her way to her routine with the librarian, Leticia's homeroom teacher grabbed Leticia by the shoulders, forcing her food tray to crash to the floor. Ms. Smith

demanded to know why Leticia went to the library every lunch period. Just then, the librarian, like an angel appearing quiet and unannounced, pulled Leticia's teacher aside. They were too far from Leticia to hear as she picked up her cafeteria pizza off the floor, but she saw the librarian's face snarl and pointed a finger in Ms. Smith's face. Ms. Smith never questioned Leticia when she left at lunch.

Fear of punishment and the thrill of understanding fueled her. Leticia learned fast.

After a whole school year with that librarian, Leticia realized the value of reading, writing, and speaking English. Each time her mother went to the bank or grocery store or had to talk to anyone, Leticia was the translator. She was good and took pride in being able to help her Mom. Initially intimidated by the impatient English speakers, Leticia was nervous. But over time, she learned to speak without an accent and could handle herself exceptionally well by learning from her voracious reading habit.

By this time, Jesus had left his family on the side of the road on a hot summer day when the thought of taking care of the kids became too much. Leticia and her brothers, including the new baby in Texas, Jack, were now the sole responsibility of Leticia's Mom, Maria. Maria knew math but spoke no English; the only book Leticia ever saw her mother read was the Catholic Bible.

Things continued this way until Leticia got into high school. She lived in the library, learning, discovering new worlds, and studying classics. Soon, Leticia found herself with the white students in the honors classes. Leticia worked hard and studied hard, holding down a job as a night clerk auditor at the local Holiday Inn while attending school full-time. It continued like this until Angelo State University gave her a basketball scholarship. But Angelo State University was over two hours away.

Ultimately, Leticia did not have a support system and returned to Fort Stockton, married, and had a child by age twenty. And her reading stopped.

She wanted more than to live in Fort Stockton, so she moved to Midland, about an hour and a half northwest of Fort Stockton, with her new husband and baby, Matthew. She got a job there working for an accountant.

Leticia watched the accountant wield language like armor, writing letters, controlling contracts, and dismissing women who couldn't keep up. She knew then that she needed that armor, too.

At this job, Leticia realized she needed a formal education. So, she went to the local community college and registered for the night versions of Anatomy, English Composition, and Algebra II. Eventually, Leticia would complete and receive her degree from Texas Tech University as a Registered Nurse.

She never forgot the librarian who gave her a voice or the accountant who showed her how to protect it. When Leticia raised her three kids, she would stare at them as they read English and Spanish books for at least thirty minutes every night through high school. She remembered how much she had learned through the power of the written word.

Eventually, those three children would grow up to be lawyers, executives, and scholars, each carrying the story of a mother who once crossed a border with nothing but learned to read and write her way into a new life.