

I am the I in HII: Oliver Aguilar

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I grew up essentially on a farm with a large family with my grandmother and my grandfather. My mom was one of nine sisters. I would say at least three-quarters of the family lived within the same household, so it was cramped but there was a lot of love going on there. It was a very poor family, so we made tortillas to sell, there was milk to be sold and things like that just to make ends meet, but we also had a lot of fruit trees just growing wild. And I clearly remember myself and several of the cousins just climbing the trees and having a feast just on fruit. It was a great experience.

But the reality of the country that I was living in, at the time they were going through a civil war between the military and the guerilla force. I'll give you an example. My brother and I used to walk to school and you would see dead bodies thrown on the street. You would see people hanging from trees and you didn't think anything of it, right. I mean you felt some sort of sadness for what had happened but you went along your life like nothing had happened -- and that was an everyday occurrence. You would go to sleep with machine guns and gunshots going off in the backyard.

At one point, there was a helicopter above our house shooting down and it was raining all these shells, and we thought it was fun as kids. The reality of it it's that was not a fun thing but as a kid you really don't know any different. So that was the reality that I was living in, at the same time you keep your childhood, in a sense, to some point but in the background there is all these atrocities going on. That's a life experience that I went through and it's something that I share not only with my family but with my friends because it's a very unusual circumstance for I would say a large majority of the world population to go through. Once you go through it, you can't really erase those memories from your mind.

When you think about all the things that are going on, as a kid you really don't think about all the atrocities of wars. I think my mom agonized that my brother and I could get drafted and by "drafted" I mean you would just literally get picked up off the street and they would send you to war. There was no really voluntary type thing. If you were of age -- at that time my brother and I were 10 and 12 -- you didn't know whether you were going to get picked up by the military or you were going to get picked up by the guerilla forces.

My mom decided the better choice was to go north, right, that's where we call the United States -- *El Norte*. We really didn't have anything, so we didn't have money to buy -- at least a lot of the people that come to the United States legally with a visa are not the people that were in my position at that time. For us that wasn't a reality. I just know there was no other way. But

my mom was a visionary. She wanted to have a better life for her kids. She recognized that there were two young men that could potentially do better than her and the family should we move from El Salvador and that's the decision that she made.

We left El Salvador 1987, a day I remember very clearly. So many years go by and you always think about those relationships that you built as a child. You got up and left and you never saw them again. I don't know what happened to all of my friends. I still don't know what happened to them. We were close. That day comes to leave and you never get to see them again.

My mom, she essentially left her entire family down there, to come to a country that not only did she not know but she didn't speak the language and neither did we. And to top it off, we had an adult who didn't know how to read and write. Imagine the circumstances that you have to put yourself in to say this opportunity is better for me than the alternative of staying here. I have my family, I speak the language, I have a regularly job that I can put food on the table for my kids, but I'm going to leave all that behind, go into the unknown and whatever happens, happens. But we're going to make this work and that's really what happened.

So on my birthday in the Mexican-US border to come to the United States. We were fleeing a war. We essentially had to cross the border without any documentation. We started very early in the morning, and I clearly recall that day because the day before my brother ended up getting sick so that night he had a terrible fever. We started to walk. It's a walk, you're hiking essentially through the mountains and the border that we crossed was the Mexico-San Diego border and we started early in the morning.

We had – if you can imagine, I guess this is what would amount to a 32 ounce canteen – and it was myself, my brother. My mom had a visitor visa she had been granted, just herself, so she had sent my brother and I with the person that was cross us over. She went what she thought was going to be the legit path to get into the country. So we were well into our hike and she was denied entry. She didn't know where we were, we didn't know where she was. It took essentially all day.

Throughout it, my brother was sick so he downs the bottle of water within 15 minutes of our walk. The thought was that there was a water tank at the midpoint of our walk that we could get water from so we walk hours and hours. We got to the point where I couldn't even produce any saliva anymore, so you can imagine. It's San Diego and Mexico border, it's pretty desert-like so it was pretty hot. It was dry, no shade. Not only there is no shade, we're trying to figure out ways to hide from helicopters that were kind of hovering above because they're trying to look for illegal entry into the country and drug trafficking.

And I'm saying that to myself, I can only imagine what my brother was going through. But we made it to this tank and it's locked. The guy that was bringing us over essentially takes off his shirt and drops it into a very small crack into the opening and soaks his shirt and he essentially rings it out and that was the hydration that we ended up getting for that day. And we hiked a

few couple more hours and there was a creek and at that creek we thought we were going to get some water but that's when we heard dogs so we started running.

And we were fortunate, very lucky enough that we didn't get caught. But that was an experience that I remember clearly to this day, like it was yesterday. I didn't see it as something that I was doing wrong, to be honest with you. I didn't know that's not the right way to come into the United States until after I got here and we were essentially hiding and doing a lot of stuff then I realized, right, what we did was probably not allowed. So shortly after we got here we applied for the asylum, ended up getting assisted through that program. And at that time we weren't the only Salvadorians fleeing. Because of the war there an exodus not only for my family but for thousands of people trying to flee the same conditions that we were living.

Fast forward to after we became permanent residents of the United States. I applied for citizenship. Another one of my memories that I think kind of defines the path that I'm in right now is that after graduating college I was looking for a job within Virginia, mostly because this is where my family and now my wife's family live, so we wanted to stay local. Because of the large government contractors that we have in the state of Virginia, a lot of those positions require citizenship.

I had already gone through the process of that. I ended up getting my letter saying, "Hey, congratulations, your naturalization will happen on September 12th, 2001." I remember on the morning of September 11th, one of my best friends, we were working out at a gym, got out and said, wow, this is a beautiful day. I was going an internship with Siemens Automotive in the Newport News area. And I remember somebody came in and said, hey, there is a plane that ran into New York tower. Not long after that there was another plane. I really wasn't thinking too much of it until somebody said one of the towers has come down.

We lived through that day and besides figuring out what was going on in the world and why the United States was being attacked, for me it was, "What does this mean for tomorrow? I have my naturalization ceremony, is that even going to happen? Are they going to ship me back? Am I going to get deported?" There was a lot of things up in the air that I was thinking I'm not sure what's going to happen tomorrow. I'm not even sure if I'm going to be here tomorrow just because of what's going on.

I was expecting a phone call throughout the day from the court saying everything has been canceled, because we had thought everything was going to be shut down. No phone call came in, so my wife and I, she was my fiancé, we went to court. It was a very somber ceremony, for obvious reasons, for what had happened the day before. But really stuck to me the most, at the end of the ceremony, the bailiff, as you know, says all rise when the judge enters or exits the courtroom. At the end of the ceremony the bailiff said all rise and the judge said, "No, please sit down. Today I rise for you." I get choked up every time I relive this because it's so powerful.

He said, "Today I rise for you because after what happened yesterday you still want to be an American citizen," and he walked out of the courtroom. It was probably one of the most

powerful things I've ever experienced. From a person of that position to say that to us and for us to appreciate. Americans are known for freedom of speech, for having all of these freedoms that, you know, very few people in the world experience and for us to accept that and to accept the fact that people are going to come after you because you have all that was just very powerful for me.

Ironically enough, I had an interview with Newport News Shipbuilding before having the citizenship position and they said we really can't offer you a job because you don't have a citizenship, and this was right before my graduation. Right after that, I get a phone call from the recruiter, asking "Are you still interested or did you get your citizenship yet?" And he said, "Well, the position that you want is still open, are you interested."

Think about what that meant. I became a citizen of a country that has given me so many opportunities. One, an opportunity to become something that I would never have been in El Salvador, which is go through high school, go through college, become a professional in an engineering field. All of the sudden I am going to be working for a company that builds the crown jewel of the Navy, responsible for protecting the freedoms that I was afforded and I think that's why I'm so passionate about the work that we do. We do a lot of work for the Navy that serves and protects the very things that we love.

But at the end of the day, I think the work that we do at HII is for a cause greater than ourselves. It's supporting the very core values of our country that we dearly love and there's no better way for me to repay a country that has given me so much, with a company like HII.

I think a lot of these discussions are about the diversity that we have within our company and within our country really. We're a melting pot and we have microcosms of that within our own company. It's the appreciation of the difference in stories, like myself, right, this is one of millions out there. Everybody is going through something every day of their life that makes them the person that they are. When we talk about diversity and inclusion and appreciating those differences, that's really what that means. It doesn't mean that you have to be best friends with the person next to you in your cube or your office or whatever but it does mean that you should appreciate where they're coming from. You should appreciate their perspective because at the end of the day that perspective is totally different than yours and it could be a nugget that ultimately makes our company more successful.

So we have to be able to be aware and cognizant that not everybody is the same, that everybody has a story with them and sharing that story not only opens hearts but opens minds. So as you can imagine, you know, growing up with all of that family as a kid, I've always gravitated to family time. So for me, spending time with family and friends, it's – I love it, building relationships, getting to know people and interfacing with them.

For fun, I love hanging around family, you know, whether that is just having a conversation or having dinner or whatever it may be. I love reading. I'm a bookworm and I love reading a lot of

nonfiction type -- biographies, leadership material. But really one of my biggest passions is art. I've been drawing and doodling and sketching since I was little.

I think that was a stress reliever when I was going through war. Several of my friends used to have drawing events to see who could draw the best and I think that was the most stress reliever. And I kind of took that along my life and that's really what it becomes for me. Sometimes when you get stressed out, I pick up a pencil or a pen or, you know, now an Apple pen and just start drawing. You know, it just has a way of getting you into a zone away from everything else that I think it just kind of helps you re-center and appreciate life a little more.