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An Abortion Provider—and Formerly Undocumented Immigrant—Tells Her Story

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## Tells Her Story

Jan 18, 2019, 1:27pm Tina Vasquez

"I think I gravitated toward family planning because even as a little kid in Colombia, I saw how unplanned pregnancies derailed people's lives."

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[Photo: A close-up of a brown woman's eye.]



*When Johana Oviedo reached out to Rewire.News with her story, she said she sometimes wonders how much the United States must hate her. This is because Oviedo is a 32-year-old abortion provider in New York City. She is also a formerly undocumented immigrant from Colombia, and she is Jewish.*

*Her fears are not unfounded. Each of her identities places her in the crosshairs of the vehemently anti-immigrant, anti-woman, and anti-choice Trump administration, which has inspired an increase in hate crimes against people like her, often perpetuated by white extremists.*

*Just days before the Roe v. Wade anniversary, Oviedo spoke on the phone with Rewire.News, detailing her migration to the United States, her decision to be an abortion provider, and what it's like to do this work in the current political moment.*

*Most importantly, Oviedo wants people to know that as an abortion provider, she is proud of her work. Every day, she sees the difference that access to abortion care makes in the lives of her patients, almost all of whom are immigrants and people of color.*

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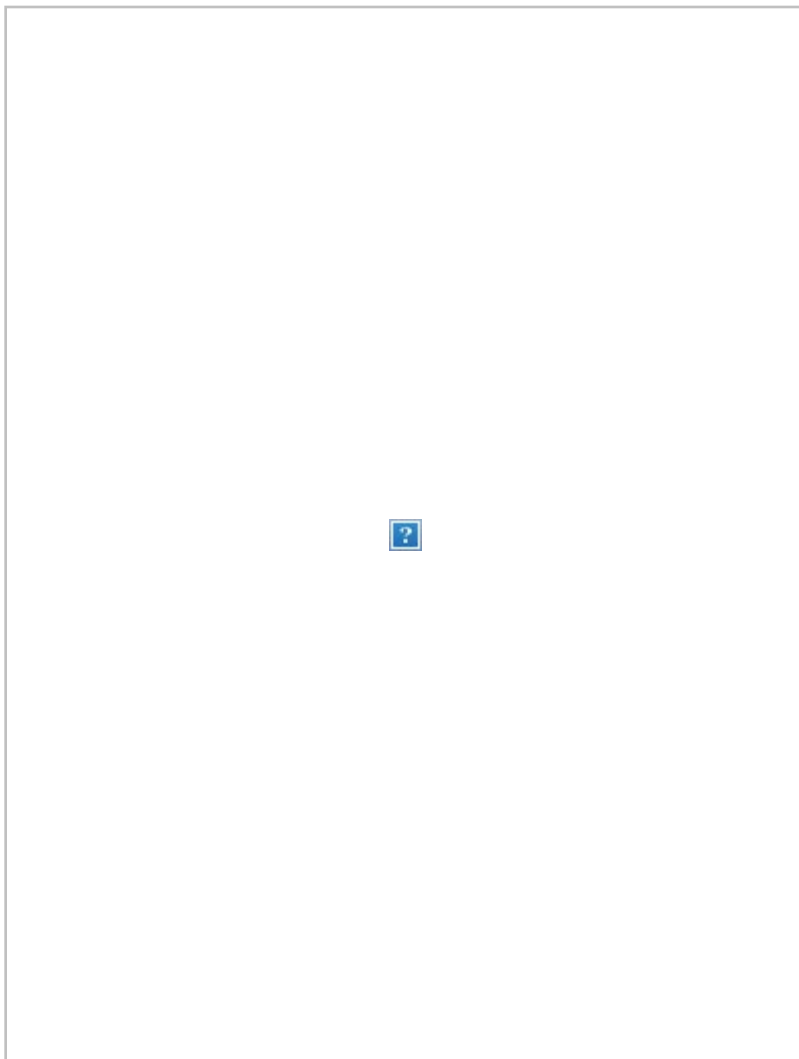
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*This is Oviedo, in her own words:*

Coming to the United States from Colombia was a very good idea for my family, but my mom and I were by no means in a desperate situation. She didn't have to leave abruptly. There was no emergency situation. She saw the differences between our family in Colombia and our family in the United States. She saw that the children in our family in America had opportunities I didn't have or wouldn't have, especially as it related to education. I was going to a good school in Colombia, but there was no prospect of my being able to go to college and being what I wanted to be. Basically, my mom wanted to come to the United States not for her, but for me. So that I could have better educational opportunities.

And she did it all on her own. My father stayed in Colombia; he never wanted to come to the states. My mom got our visas, planned for the trip financially, made the arrangements—she did it all herself. I can't imagine how hard that was, how overwhelming.

I was 9 years old when we migrated here. We lived with family and moved around a lot so as not to overwhelm any



Johana Oviedo, 10, and her mom (Courtesy of Johana Oviedo).

one family member with our stay. I mostly just remember my mom working a lot. She worked for a sewing factory where they'd pay her cents for every casino money purse she completed sewing. She needed to make as many as possible to support us, so I mostly remember her sitting at her sewing machine nonstop.

When I started school in the United States, I didn't speak the language. During my first class here, the teacher sat me in front of a computer and told me to work on my own. I basically did this coloring program on the computer. I wasn't included in the class or what they were working on.

My mom and I were only undocumented for a short time, so I consider us lucky. We spent two years undocumented. We came to the United States with tourist visas, which expired after six months. We were supposed to return to Colombia and we just didn't go back.

My mom went through the whole process alone of adjusting our status. To be frank, as a child, I didn't know what any of this meant; I don't remember being worried about it. I was going to school in Miami, Florida, and being undocumented didn't interrupt my studies. When my mom eventually adjusted our status, I did notice how it changed the work that she did and how she was able to get health insurance for us, but that would come and go for the remainder of my childhood.

Even though no one in my family had a college education at the time, it was a given that I would go to college and that I would be "a professional," as my mom said, which to her meant being a doctor or a lawyer. When I was a kid, she would say, "When you go to college," or, "When you become a doctor," like it was a given. Education was my priority as she worked three jobs.

Something she said then that she still says today is that people can steal your identity, your money, all kinds of things, but no one can take away what you learn.

I think I gravitated toward family planning because even as a little kid in Colombia, I saw how unplanned pregnancies derailed people's lives. Abortion didn't become legal in Colombia until 2006. In talking to my mom about this, she told me she could still remember people who had back-alley abortions, using the spokes of umbrellas or taking unknown pills.

In the United States, my predominantly Latino urban high school had a high teen pregnancy rate. I became interested in contraception and trying to figure out why my peers couldn't access it, or weren't accessing it. The sex education at my school was abysmal, and the only sex talk I got from my mom was about how if I got pregnant as a teenager, she was going to find the tallest building in Miami and throw herself off of it.

In college, I began to focus on abortion. I knew I was going to be an OB-GYN and that abortion would be a large part of my career. There were so many negative connotations attached to abortion; it was so stigmatized. I wanted people to see it as just an extension of reproductive health. I wanted them to understand it's part of comprehensive health care, not separate from it.

Abortion is very safe; it was a given for me that people should have a choice, that they should be able to access abortion.

My medical school was very progressive and it had a strong chapter of Medical Students for Choice. I had access to people who were abortion providers on campus. I had the support to attend conferences to learn more about abortion care. And I had early exposure to the full spectrum of family planning services. I also had help selecting my residency so that I could learn to be an abortion provider. I understand this is all very rare for a medical student in this country. Maybe if more students had this kind of access, there would be more abortion providers in the United States.

As a formerly undocumented Jewish Latina, and an abortion provider, I sometimes think about how many people in this country must hate me for all of the things I represent in their eyes. Like everyone else, I hear the rhetoric, and I see how more and more limitations are being placed on abortion access. It's sometimes hard to process all of it. I sometimes wonder who around me voted for all of this horrible stuff to happen.

I see firsthand the confusion that complicated abortion laws cause for my patients, most of whom

are people of color and immigrants. A lot of patients come from countries where abortion is illegal, and they don't know that it's legal in the United States. I have to explain that it's an option for them, and that it is safe and legal.

Right now, in this moment, I don't feel fear doing this work. I'm fortunate to live in New York City, where I don't fear for my life every day that I come to work. I know that's not true for many of my colleagues. I'm considering possibilities for where to go next, considering if I have the guts to go somewhere where the atmosphere isn't the same as New York City. I don't have an answer for that yet.

I do think that being an immigrant myself and communicating with my patients in Spanish is important. When I walk into the room, like all people seeing a doctor, you can tell they're scared or on edge. They don't know what I will say or do. When I ask them if they want to speak English or Spanish, they immediately become more comfortable. I think I probably get more information than my peers because of this. I never talk to my patients extensively about being an immigrant myself, but it's clear to me that something is understood. Perhaps they can feel that I understand their context.

I do this work because every day I see the difference that it makes in my patients' lives. Whether it's accessing abortion or contraception, I see how empowered they feel knowing that they get to control how their life takes shape. You literally see the relief in their eyes; it's like peace. To be able to provide that to people is incredible, and I wouldn't give it up for the world.

*This interview has been lightly edited for clarity.*

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