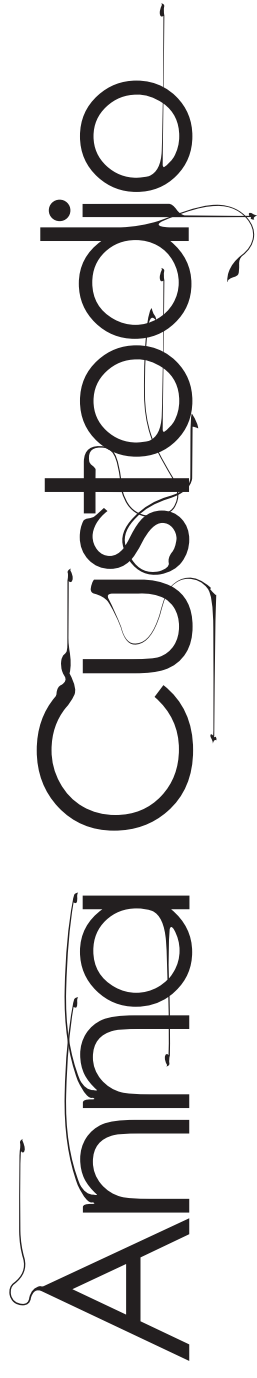


Anna Custodio

The image shows the name 'Anna Custodio' in a black serif font. The text is accompanied by several thin, light-colored lines and arrows that trace the paths of the pen strokes used to form each letter. These annotations are most prominent on the 'A', 'C', and 'o' characters, showing the direction and sequence of the strokes. The 'A' has a vertical stroke on the left and a curved stroke on the right. The 'C' is a simple curve. The 'o' is a circle with a dot on top. The 'n' and 'd' also have some annotations, particularly on their vertical stems and the loops of the 'd'. The 's' and 't' in 'Custodio' have similar annotations, with the 't' showing a vertical stem and a horizontal crossbar.

BREAKING THE CYCLE: IMMIGRANT WORKERS IN THE SILICON VALLEY

How can support like Gregorio's GoFundMe reveal resilience and inequality in Silicon Valley?

Anna Custodio

When rumors spread that Gregorio, the beloved ice cream salesman at Los Altos High, might retire, students flooded social media with messages of gratitude and concern. For so many of us, Gregorio wasn't just the local ice cream salesman; he was someone who made our days better and gave our campus more value. But underneath all the Instagram posts and shared memories of a familiar face was a more complicated question: Why should Gregorio have to keep working after all these years? In a fast-moving area like Silicon Valley, full of tech business billionaires and luxury homes, why can't someone like Gregorio afford to stop?

That's the question at the heart of this story. Although we live in a place known for innovation, opportunity, and wealth, the reality for working-class immigrants is something completely different. For people like Gregorio, who've spent decades doing hard, physical work, the dream of retirement feels completely out of reach. The cost of living is so enormously high that even basic housing and stability are a struggle. According to a 2023 report from the California Budget & Policy Center, nearly 1 in 3 households in Santa Clara County spend more than half their income on rent alone, a burden that hits low-wage immigrant workers the hardest. ("Migration Between States"). Among the findings of the New Americans in Santa Clara County report, "While immigrants make up about 40% of the population, they contribute 54% of the gross domestic product created in Santa Clara County each year – \$255 billion in 2021" ("New Study Focuses on the Huge Economic Contributions of Immigrants in Santa Clara County").

On top of that, immigrant laborers are disproportionately concentrated in industries like construction, maintenance, and food service; jobs that don't often come with retirement benefits or long-term financial security. Gregorio's story is just one example of many that illustrate how community support and grassroots activism can make a real difference, even when the larger system falls short. However, this system is not

just a matter of individual misfortune; it is based on structural inequalities that have deep historical roots and Silicon Valley's economic model. Wealth inequality here has been fueled by policies that favor Tech industries, while relying on immigrant workers to support service jobs that refuse to offer them long-term financial security. What makes his experience stand out is how students stepped up. Not just to help him get through financial adversity, but to show him how much he mattered.

THE MAN BEHIND THE CART

Gregorio's Journey to the United States is full of sacrifice and struggle. His childhood was spent working long hours, going from business to business, with family as well as independently, which is a reality many immigrant workers face. When he first came to the US, survival was his main goal, not success: "I left Mexico when I was young because there was nothing for me there. I wanted a better life, but it was hard. I worked wherever I could: construction, cleaning, and now ice cream" (Gregorio).





He wasn't chasing luxury - he just wanted to survive. In Santa Clara County, survival costs about \$58,000 a year for a single adult; just enough to cover basics like housing, food, and transportation. But many food service workers like Gregorio earn closer to \$35,000 or less, leaving a massive gap in the expenses needed to live comfortably and healthily. This gap is not accidental; Silicon Valley's wealth is built on the backs of immigrant labor, often in industries that don't offer the benefits necessary for financial stability, like retirement programs or health insurance. He worked from sunrise to sunset wherever he could, sending as much as possible back to his family. For years, sleeping in the back of his car with a blanket wrapped around him as if it were armor. After decades of taxing labor, he's still living paycheck to paycheck, in a region where the average rent tops \$3,000 a month. "Seeing Silicon Valley", a book that focuses on the harsh realities the working class faces in a dominating tech world, makes this comment, "In Silicon Valley, it has become particularly hard for us to notice anyone other than the region's elect. Elon Musk could not have built Tesla without the fleshy, sweaty labor of thousands of riveters, packagers, and drivers. The founders of Google could have done nothing without legions of coders, cooks, janitors, and day-care workers." (Meehan and Turner, 6).

Later in that same conversation, Gregorio elaborates on just how difficult his living situation became: "I was sleeping in my car because I couldn't afford rent. I had to save every penny to send back home." This statement illustrates the gravity of his situation and puts into perspective how even the most hard-working and selfless people aren't guaranteed a comfortable life at retirement age. He was going without so many basic things - like a roof over his head - just so he could provide for his family. That kind of sacrifice is heartbreaking, but it's something many immigrants know too well, more specifically within Silicon Valley. Gregorio's story isn't a rare case, and not at all out of the ordinary. In fact, it's painfully common. In Seeing

Silicon Valley, there's Delia, who cooks at a tech campus cafeteria, but still shares a single bedroom with her two kids because rent is so high. Or Luis, a landscaper living in a converted garage with no windows, just trying to get by. These anecdotes don't just illustrate individual hardship, they are part of a larger problem in Silicon Valley, where the growth of the tech sector has pushed housing costs to unsustainable levels, pricing out working-class families and leaving them with no viable way to save for retirement or secure their future. In an article from El Tímpano, a father named Javier discusses spending most of his paycheck on rent, spending the nights in his van, with nothing left for healthcare or even his children's basic needs. Just like Gregorio, they work hard, stay quiet, and keep going, and although their stories don't make headlines, they deserve to.

Matilda Foulds, a junior at Los Altos School who has known Gregorio for years, shared how their connection progressed over time: "Gregorio always had advice for us and he'd ask how our families were doing. He remembered things about our lives - he wasn't just selling ice cream; he actually cared." That might sound insignificant, but it meant a tremendous amount. In rapidly paced and stressful places like Silicon Valley, Gregorio made people feel seen. He became an integral part of the school's community.

THE HIDDEN COST OF LIVING

Despite all of the love and respect coming from the community, the unseen truths behind making a living are troubling. Gregorio's financial struggles are part of a much more systemic issue. Work2Future, a local workforce development program in San José that researches and supports employment trends, explains, "In Silicon Valley, the cost of living, especially for housing and child care, far exceeds the wages earned by many working-class families, making it impossible for them to meet basic needs, let alone save

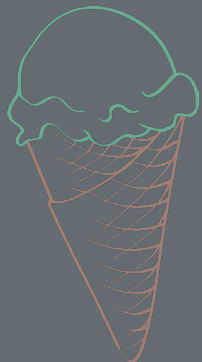
**"AT 42 YEARS OLD, I SEE PEOPLE
AROUND ME AS MY CHILDREN. I'M
HERE TO SUPPORT, TO HELP, BECAUSE I
KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO STRUGGLE."**

-Gregorio

for retirement” (“The Silicon Valley Dichotomy”). That’s exactly what Gregorio is facing. He spent his whole life working, and yet he still can’t afford to stop. A 2023 investigative report by journalist Tran Nguyen, who covers local labor and housing issues in the Bay Area, backs up this reality of long-term struggle: “Stagnant wages in Silicon Valley have left many low-wage workers, especially immigrants, struggling to save for retirement, as the increasing cost of living erodes their earning power.” This excerpt illustrates how the economic system of the United States puts the working class in a trap of some sort. You can work hard your whole life, but still end up with nothing to fall back on.

"I HAD BEEN LIVING IN A CAR FOR THREE YEARS. JUST A MONTH AGO, I MOVED INTO A SMALL ROOM. NOT MUCH OF A DIFFERENCE, BUT STILL, A CHANGE."
-Gregorio

Research from the UCLA Center for Health Policy - a research center that conducts studies on public health policy with a focus on vulnerable populations - highlights this pattern: “Nearly 60% of Latino older adults in California have no retirement income besides Social Security, making it extremely difficult to afford basic living expenses in high-cost regions like Silicon Valley” (“Latino Older Adults and Retirement Insecurity in California”). This issue is compounded by Decades of wage stagnation for immigrant workers, who are often trapped in low-wage jobs without benefits, while Silicon Valley tech giants reap massive profits. The policies that allow for this wealth concentration are part of the structural barriers that make retirement and economic Mobility nearly impossible for workers like Gregorio.



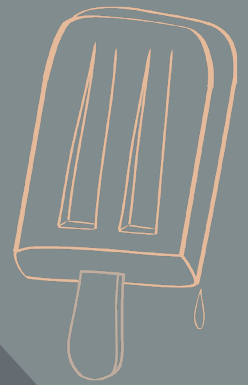
The struggle worsened when Gregorio’s health started to decline. And even then, not once did he complain or ask a single soul for help. For older immigrants like him, the systems that are supposed to provide upward mobility are often out of reach. The California Immigrant Policy Center, a leading Organization advocating for the rights and well-being

of immigrants in California, also sheds light on this issue, reporting that the state’s workforce development systems failed to meet the specific needs of immigrant workers.

This is crucial in understanding why individuals like Gregorio face such barriers despite their lifelong contributions. “California invests hundreds of millions of dollars in a public workforce system, which includes workforce development boards and job training centers, that fails to recognize the dignity and support the needs of immigrant and refugee communities. Lack of access to childcare and transportation, cultural and language barriers, and a complex system of eligibility requirements mean that few can access training programs or living wage jobs. Even when immigrants are able to secure jobs, they earn roughly half the median salary of workers born in the US, and are disproportionately concentrated in low-road industries and occupations” (“New Study Focuses on the Huge Economic Contributions of Immigrants in Santa Clara County”).

However, as his and Matilda’s friendship grew stronger, he began to quietly mention his health problems during their regular conversations. Gregorio went on to say, “He told me he couldn’t see well, and his teeth were hurting him so much that he was eating less. He never asked for help, but we could tell he needed it” (Foulds). That line was so deeply moving because it portrays Gregorio’s pure selflessness and unspoken dedication not to be a burden to anyone.

So many immigrants, just like Gregorio, are used to ignoring this unfair system and choosing compliance over resistance in fear of the consequences. He had been putting off dental work for years. According to a 2024 report from KFF, a nonprofit organization focused on health policy research, over 40% of Latino immigrants in California couldn’t afford the out-of-pocket costs for care. In his case, that meant living in pain until it was too severe to ignore.



BRIDGES, NOT BAND-AIDS

It was around this time that students decided to step in. Matilda described how one day, with the help of a few people, she decided to organize a GoFundMe campaign, hoping to raise just enough to help with Gregorio's dental and vision costs. Matilda explained, "We started a GoFundMe, and it blew up. Everyone shared it. Even people who graduated years ago donated because they remembered him" (Foulds).

That was one of the most inspiring moments I've witnessed in my lifetime regarding kids wanting to get involved with activism and creating change. People came together, even years after graduating, just to say thank you to someone who had made them feel cared for. Not only was every single penny raised, but students' spirits were uplifted when they considered Gregorio might not have to retire after all. In a personal interview, Gregorio attempted to express how it felt to receive that kind of support.

**" I COULDN'T NOT DO ANYTHING...
I'D LIKE TO THINK ANYONE IN MY
POSITION WOULD HAVE DONE
THE SAME."**

Matilda Foulds

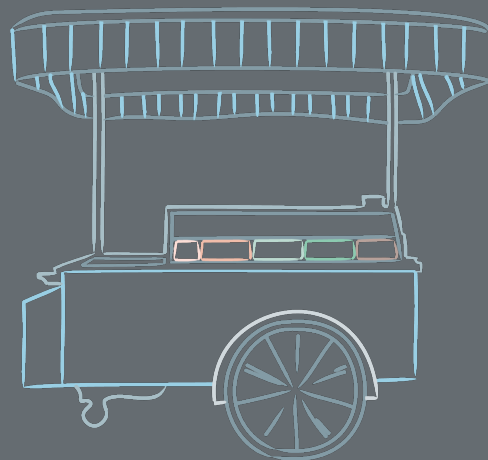
He was astounded beyond words, "I was shocked. I never thought so many people would care. I didn't know what to say. Just.. gracias, gracias" (Gregorio). The gratitude seeping through his sentences makes it easy to understand just how much this act of kindness meant to him. He had never expected that kind of support, and the fact that so many people could come together and contribute to the preservation of his health and well-being, that is what a supportive community is supposed to look like. Even still, after the fundraiser helped pay for his dental and eye surgeries, Gregorio's struggle was far from over. He then shared what his life was like months later after the buzz around the GoFundMe faded." After the fundraiser, people stopped talking about it, but my situation is still the same. I don't have savings. I don't own a house. I have to keep going" (Gregorio). This statement speaks volumes. Students were able to help him once, and although it mattered and helped monumentally, it wasn't enough. That's the hard truth we must face: a fundraiser can make

a short-term difference, but it will not fix the system that left him vulnerable in the first place, and it won't necessarily change the trajectory of his life.

Adjusting the way we address these situations as a community is what that change comes down to. Gregorio's story isn't just a feel-good moment about students helping someone in need, it is a wake-up call. There are thousands of people like him in Silicon Valley, immigrants who have spent their whole lives working long taxing hours, who still can't afford to rest, nearing the final stages of life.

One organization trying to fight and bring awareness to this inequality is The Policy Circle, a national nonprofit that encourages community-based civic engagement. They work to push for policy changes that could genuinely help - things like affordable housing, healthcare access, and retirement saving programs. "What America is seeing at present is a central pillar of the American system of government: federalism. Different states, and even different municipalities, have different policies. If Americans dislike the policies in their current district or state of residence, they have the ability to vote with their feet by relocating and joining millions of others in state-to-state migration." (Migration Between States) By implying that America has the freedom to "vote on their feet" by moving to states with better policies.

However, for many aging immigrant workers, moving isn't a realistic or plausible option. High costs, limited resources, and deep roots keep them stuck. This exposes a flaw in the system, where opportunity is only available for those who can afford to relocate at ease. That kind of systemic and societal change is what we need. No one should have to rely on a GoFundMe or charity from high schoolers just to have access to healthcare.



CONCLUSION

Gregorio's story has opened our eyes and changed the way we see our school, our community, and the people who keep it running. It shows us what's possible when a group of students comes together, but it also reminds us how much further we still have to go. In 2025, the pressure on immigrant workers has only grown, housing is more expensive, healthcare is still out of reach for many, and too often, the people doing the hardest work are still the ones left with the least.

According to research from the Migration Policy Institute, a nonpartisan organization dedicated to studying global migration trends, the movement of workers within the US is deeply influenced by local economic policies. This is particularly important in understanding the disparities faced by immigrant workers in high cost regions like the Silicon Valley, "Policy solutions such as portable retirement benefits, expanded affordable housing initiatives, and immigrant worker protections are essential to address systemic inequalities rather than relying on charity alone" (Aging Immigrants and Economic Insecurity).

Gregorio is one of many. His kindness, presence, and consistency contribute so much to our campus, but he shouldn't have to rely on a fundraiser just to take care of his health. That's why a story like this isn't just something to read and forget. It's a call to pay attention and make a difference in your own neighborhood. You don't have to be an expert or policy maker to make a difference—just go out and talk to someone in your community who might be struggling.

Listen. Do the research. Use your voice. Whether it's raising awareness, helping meet someone's needs, or starting something bigger, real activism begins with small acts of care. One realistic way anyone can help is by supporting local policies that expand affordable housing, healthcare access, and retirement protection for low-wage workers, ensuring lasting change beyond individual acts of charity. Gregorio deserves the support, and so do countless others, and we are the ones who can change that. The next step is ours.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anna Custodio is a student at Los Altos High School as well as Freestyle Academy in Mountain View. Deeply passionate about environmental justice, she also finds joy in creating illustrations and spending quality time with loved ones. Through her artwork and her conversations with peers, Anna enjoys sharing her philosophies and unique perspectives on life, through the lens of a student. She hopes her insight can inspire others to embrace gratitude and find meaning in everyday, seemingly insignificant moments.



Check out my documentary website

