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Breaking the Cycle: Immigrant Workers in the Silicon Valley

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.

Chapter 1: 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.

On a typical sunny afternoon at Los Altos High, a crowd is already forming near the ice cream cart even before lunch starts. Gregorio greets students, some by name, cracks a quiet joke, and hands over a popsicle with the same care someone might use to pass along a handwritten note. More often than not, he'll sell students any treat they want, even if they're

quite short on cash. In the middle of a school day rush, he's a calm and familiar presence and an unexpected friend to many. Even though he's not an official staff member or an officially recognized part of the school, he's touched so many hearts without even realizing it. Not only does he sell sweet treats for anyone to enjoy, but he also listens and remembers people's stories, gives advice, and checks in on us. 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.

Chapter 2: 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 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. 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. Similarly, the Stanford social Innovation Review, a publication focused on social change and innovations in the nonprofit sector, emphasizes that Silicon Valley's wealth disparity is not just an economic issue but one of social justice and access to essential resources. Their analysis brings attention to how systemic inequalities shape the lives of workers like Gregorio: "Less than 5% of Silicon Valley corporations have adopted living wage policies, despite record profits, further entrenching poverty among service workers" ("Tech and the City"). However, no one should have to suffer silently because they are afraid or belittled by the cost of standard care. It reveals a very disappointing truth about our society: that people who give the most are often left with the least.

Chapter 3: 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. 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.

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.

Preface:

This book began with a question that lingered long after the school bell rang and the campus emptied: Why was Gregorio, a man in his seventies, still selling ice cream outside of a high school every day? What started as a passing thought became a driving force behind this project—a journey into the contradicting realities of immigration, labor, and community support in one of the wealthiest regions in the world, let alone the country.

Gregorio is far more than just an ice cream vendor. He is a father, a neighbor, an immigrant, and, for many students, a daily dose of joy. When he began facing serious medical issues, vision loss, and painful dental problems, his ability to work was threatened. In response, students and teachers mobilized to raise money for his surgeries. That moment of action sparked something greater: a collective understanding of how someone so deeply woven into our community could be so financially vulnerable.

This book follows Gregorio's story before and after that turning point, while also situating his experience within a broader pattern affecting countless aging immigrants across California. These are people who, after a lifetime of labor, find themselves unable to retire, not because they want to keep working, but because they don't have the resources or the safety net needed

to stop. Through interviews, personal narratives, and collective data, this book prompts the question: How does the cost of living in Silicon Valley impact the retirement plans and financial stability of working-class immigrants? The answers reveal systemic cracks but also incredible resilience. They show that community doesn't just exist, it acts. My hope is that Gregorio's story helps us see the people behind the statistics and inspires more moments of empathy, advocacy, and structural change.

Dedication:

I would like to dedicate this book to Gregorio, the man who inspired me to make a documentary about his story. Thank you for coming to Los Altos High School every day and touching so many hearts. Your dedication never goes unnoticed, and your experiences have solidified so many students' value in creating change. We're all eternally grateful.

Acknowledgements:

Thank you to my amazing teachers, Mr. Greco and Ms. P, for your undying patience and support for your students. Another huge thank you to my brother, Jake, for always giving me artistic advice and being someone I can look up to. And finally, thank you so much to Matilda for taking the time to be interviewed, and for being a tremendous help for this project.

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.

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Notes on the Use of Generative AI:

Editing for surface-level issues:

“Please edit the following documentary paper to improve its clarity, punctuation, and grammatical correctness. Do not change the meaning, tone, or style of the original text. Focus on correcting surface-level issues such as sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, and grammatical errors. Avoid making any changes to the content or the way the ideas are presented. Ensure the final version reads smoothly, but keep the author's voice intact.”

I did not apply any changes from this prompt, as Chat GPT didn't catch any errors.