

échale ganas mija



Abranna Romero-Rocha is a 24-year-old, 1st generation immigrant born college graduate. Born and raised in Eastside Tacoma, she shares with me her journey of growth, youth and change, which is reflected in her current job as a college prep advisor in Spokane, Washington.

Me: *Can you give me your name and occupation?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: My name is Abranna Romero-Rocha, and I am a college prep advisor for the college success foundation at Rogers High School in Spokane, Washington.

Me: *How has your job been?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Um... It's been good! I've really enjoyed it! I like working with like, highschoolers or those types of students. I think that they are a really cool demographic to work with. Um... like yeah! So far so great.

Me: *Have there been any challenges in that career?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Um... Yeah! I would say age. I think that age has been a bit of a challenge because I am 24 and I have siblings that are literally in High School and around their age so I think that at times it can be hard for them to be like "Oh okay, Ms. Abranna is being serious." Because I am around the age of their older siblings. So that's been a bit hard. Also, being younger and being fresh out of college. I'm working with people that haven't been in college for like 10-20 years so what they deem as college preparation is different than what I deem as college preparation.

Me: *Have there been any students that have stuck with you?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Yeah! I have like... I have a case folder of like 30-something students that I have like... I wanna say like 15 to like 20 students that like are in my office, they come around. They don't leave me alone but it's great! It's great, I love the fact that they don't leave me alone. (Snicker) Um, I actually have a phone-appointment with a student today at 7. I have a good amount of students that are on my case but that's also because I'm on their case.

My sister is not very open about her job. To imagine her being hassled by 15-20 kids on the daily is such a funny thing to think about!

Me: *That seems like a lot!*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Mm... It can be but it's really rewarding, like the work is really rewarding. The last year I came into the job around February it was kind of hard to pick up because the seniors had already applied, cause I work with seniors and juniors. It was a bit hard cause seniors had already applied to colleges, they had already figured out where to go like it was just the finical aspect of it now, right. And it was hard having these difficult conversations with students talking about... "okay, like I know this is your dream school but we're gonna have to reconsider it due to finances." all this stuff and it was just really difficult because I was new to this y'know. They don't know me. It's justified for them to go "I don't know you, why are you talking to me." But it's like, "No! I understand." Trust is built especially with students and the community that I work with.

Robert reminds me a lot of Lincoln. You have students that go through a lot and have been through a lot. That are trying to figure it out, that are trying to make it out. But at the same time, they are not just gonna let you in out of nowhere. It's just the fact that I entered February. Now its my 1st full school year. You can see the difference; you can see how the kids have opened up more. How they are like "Ms. Abranna Ms. Abranna! My grades this and Ms. Abranna that" and it's just wonderful seeing that its not like the kids from the previous year didn't love me cause I still walked away with like 15 kids to this day like there for me and I'm there for them. It's just that this takes time. These relationships don't just come built to the next day. This is something you continuously have to water. I would say that I have at least 15-20 kids that come every day!

The Robert mentioned above is Robert Jones, from the college success foundation. He is a lovely and supportive help to Lincoln students and the Tacoma community as a whole. I had the amazing chance to get help from him while applying for Palmers. To hear that my sister also went through these things with the same man is very heartwarming.

Me: *Did you ever imagine yourself doing a career like this?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Mm... I did! I'd say so. I think that being a scholarship kid, being from Tacoma and then, one of my first experiences with scholarships being palmers, having Mr. Jones around... I wasn't an achiever but having the achievers around, me going on field trips... Having that and eventually going to Act Six to be an Act Six kid all throughout college. I personally went through the positive aspects, and the privilege of being part of organized institutions that are built to help students like me.

I think that having that background of humble beginnings. It really influenced me to apply to this job and to really think about these kind of careers. I've thought about it more after, I wanna say after I spent a summer in Tacoma, cause I spent a summer working at a community center, with little kids, but I think that after that... I think that I always wanted something that gives back to the community. Preferably, I would have wanted to work in the Tacoma community. I'm in the Spokane community, but every community needs help here and there. It just depends on where you are the happiest.

As someone who is currently applying and going through the scholarships process, it's a very reassuring thing to know that family before me has gone and traveled down this path and made it! To see the impact from that even in modern day, with her day to day life is such a powerful thing.

Me: *Was there any moment you knew this was for you?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: I wouldn't say that there was a specific moment. I would say that it's an ongoing process. A career and a job isn't something that you're gonna look forward to everyday, like today was kinda slow, but it's just the fact that there will be multiple moments, multiple days, multiple kids that come in and you just feel like it's worth it.

I feel like for me it's not like a hoorah moment. I don't want it to be just one moment that's "yup this is me" I want it to be continuous. I want there to be multiple hoorah moments, I want there to be multiple times where I'm like "yeah this is super worth it."

Me: *Would it be okay if you could tell me some of the experiences you had in high school during this process that you are describing with the students that you have now?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Oh, for example I have a lot of students who are like "Oh I'm just trying to make it out. I'm just trying to get away from home." And I get that, because I was also on that train. Anywhere but Tacoma! Anywhere but here! I'm just trying to leave! It's just shocking to me because it's not something that goes away. That mindset stays there, depending on what you've seen and what you've been through and stuff. So, I think that it's just that mindset of I wanna get out of here. I see that with my students, and some of them I really do encourage them to leave.

Honestly, I didn't LOVE Spokane. Spokane was okay to me; I mean I'm still living here. It was more of the fact I got to leave and be super independent and be on my own, and not like be 20 minutes away from my mom. I think that that's something that these kids need. They need to understand that some of them have been making it on their own for forever. I felt like I was making it on my own for forever for a bit. I had responsibilities and yeah, my mom supported me but at the end of the day, I was the one applying for scholarships. I was the one trying to do the financial aid. I was the one trying to figure out what I was gonna do, how I was gonna get the money and figure out the rest of my life.

It felt very... alone. And it wasn't until I had advisors that do my job, like I still felt alone but at least I had someone to hold my hand for a little bit. Just enough for me to figure things out. But y'know, when you go to college you do have that independence, have that revelation that you are your own human being.

You gon' mess up. You gon' make choices that you regret, gon' make choices that you love, make friends that you love, that you regret. You gon' do all of it. It's just funny cause I really do see myself in those kids, and how they navigate.

Me: *Could you tell me your relationship with Tacoma, how it was growing up, how you feel about it?*

I could feel the question begin to unravel a complex web of thoughts and feelings.

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Y'know, I think... PHEW.

Me: *(Laugh)*

With delicacy, she began to string her words together.

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Let me give it a moment of silence.

Tacoma was such a love-hate relationship. It was ridiculous. Growing up, I didn't hate being from Tacoma. There's one thing I say all the time, if you meet someone from Tacoma the one thing, they 'gon tell you over and over again is that they from Tacoma. Period. It don't matter, and I think that it wasn't until I left Tacoma that I realized how beautiful it was to be from Tacoma... Cause when you're in it, like every community has their issues but Tacoma had some real issues. They're issues that to this day; you can see that it systematically affects us.

I didn't understand that it was normal that my 1st elementary school principal was Hispanic, that he was Mexican and that he was able to speak to me in Spanish, Mr. Maltose from lister. I didn't understand that my principle from middle was black and brown, and that I didn't have my 1st white principle until I went to Lincoln. I didn't understand that that wasn't normal.

In Tacoma, I had never felt like the minority. I had always felt the oppression of being a minority. There were systematic things, the deportation, the gun violence, the gang violence, the "you from Tacoma, you ain't making it nowhere" (laughs) violence. The hate from the community... but I would say that I just thought that was normality. I thought everybody else was going through it, all the kids from inner cities were going through it!

It wasn't until I left to Spokane that I was like "Oh wow! I grew up in so much diversity. In so much awareness. That I took it for granted." I really did... I didn't even know that the communities in Spokane didn't even know what it meant to be a person of color, what it meant to be oppressed in that way.

There's also different types of oppression! I had a college member; he was the only black kid in his whole high school! And I was like "What you mean!?" I don't even understand that! I can't even envision that! It came with many privileges, like understanding community, knowing what it meant to be a part of the community. Not feeling like an outlier, feeling very seen. But then it also came with this downfall that the rest of the world isn't like that. The rest of the world is very white, very privileged.

And like damn, Tacoma wasn't perfect. It had its own struggles. Like I said before I came in with that mentality of "I just gotta make it out." When I was an adult, I made it out. I really love my community. Tacoma is the reason why I am who I am. All the good parts, all the bad parts, all the all parts!

My parents are immigrants, I go back to the motherland, and yeah this is a part of me, this is my home. I went to Spokane, I went to college here, but at the end of the day I go back to Tacoma, and this is me. I was born, I was raised, I gave back to this community, and it gave back to me. This is where I felt nurtured, this is where I felt seen, and I have the privilege to at least having that.

Me: WOW... *That's very beautiful. That left me speechless! Give me a second to put my thoughts together (laugh)!*

The 1st year you left for Spokane, could you feel that difference in community?

Her answer came shift, like it was something she had wanted to say for years.

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Jesus, I hated it! Oh my goodness... I thought about transferring every day.

Me: Really!?

This took me by shock! I never had known that my sister had these thoughts when she first started her college journey. I was under the assumption that all was well. Hearing her story now, I know that that was far from the truth.

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Every day I thought about transferring. Yes! I hated it, I hated it! I hated Spokane, I hated Whitworth. I hated all of it, and it's because it was the 1st time I felt like an "other." The first time I walked around the city and went "Why are people looking at me?" Because y'know people look at you the wrong way in Tacoma, you get beat up! (laughs) You look at me crazy in Tacoma, you gon' say something!

I was raised to be confrontational! I was raised to be loud, this is who I am! I say all the time I'm from TAC, I'm from 253. I am not afraid to speak up! I am a very loud Hispanic women, and I take up space! And in Tacoma it's like "Yeah, period!" That's an identity hold, that's common. There's another girl down the street that be like that too!

You have this identity spectrum of people of color, and it's like all of it! You got theater kids that are POC, you got math kids that are POC! But here, in Whitworth, there was nothing like that. And it just so happened that I was the loud Hispanic women. It was already the stereotype that I was supposed to be, that I was talking proud, that I'm from Tacoma that's Ghetto that's hood-rat, that's blah blah blah! Cause they already have an idea of my community. And it didn't help the fact that I was loud! It didn't help that fact to when a little someone wanted to talk to me crazy, I was gon' talk to them crazy back!

It's such an adjustment.

In the limited time I've spent in Spokane, I have had my own experiences with what my sister describes above. I recall the long road trip my family had taken to Spokane to help my sister unpack and get ready for her 1st year in college. As we drove to the house she had all her belongings in and stepped out of the car, random bystanders would stand and gawk at us. At the time, I was much younger. I would say around 11, so I didn't understand much but I knew it was strange. No one back home had ever done that before! Around 3-4 years later, when I visited again for my sister's graduation, I went to the local WinCo with one of my sisters' friends (who is also POC). There, as we checked out in the self-checkout isle, the people around us would turn and stare. It even got to the point where the security who overlooks the self-checkout approached us and stood right next to us when we were simply just trying to leave and get our food. I cannot imagine how terrible it would be to experience that in an everyday situation like how my sister had to.

There's this certain word for it, where POC learn how to navigate in white spaces by adjusting its whiteness. It's like respectability politics or something like that! You can fact check it.

What my sister mentions in the statement above is actually known as code-switching. Code-switching is when an individual changes how they act, speak and even behave Infront of groups of people. Code-switching for POC people is often sadly common and a part of assimilating into modern day white American culture. I recommend reading more on this topic to have a deeper understanding, as it's a big modern day issue and a thing many should be educated on.

Me: *I will fact check it.*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: But I wasn't used to that! I was used to being unapologetically myself. That's not how it was at Whitworth. It took me a while and it took my other POC friends a while to adjust. Imagine going from being seen all the time to not being seen at all...

Me: *Are there any lessons you learned from adapting to Spokane's incredibly white space?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: Yeah, sometimes you have to understand that the world isn't ready to be fully changed. And it's okay that you ain't gonna win every battle, cause you ain't meant to win every battle. And sometimes you wrong! (laughs)

Me: *Are there any final words you wanna say to the people of Tacoma, students at Lincoln. Any advice you wanna give us?*

Abranna Romero-Rocha: I would say... be proud! Just be proud of where you are at, who you are, your ancestors. Really sit there and acknowledge the fact that you came from them! Many people from Tacoma, their families come from struggles. It's a generational thing, and the fact that you are sitting in a classroom right now, learning about this stuff... Take advantage! You are in high school! Your life is just starting! Go find yourself these Opportunities.

I understand that it's gonna be hard, systematically it has been hard. If we were to break down statistically all the oppressions that Lincoln has. TopTier underfunded, top for like kids who just go through it. You can fill the blank for what's happening in your life that has been traumatic or not. Let's be honest there's a lot! While it is a part of you, it doesn't define you! You can still do so much! Just because these things have happened does not mean the end of the world.

Trust me I know it, I was in high school going like "Oh my gosh, this is never going to end!" I'm sitting here... in my own room! With a cat that I've always wanted, with a car that I own! I'm not trying to say this to be materialistic, I'm saying this because sometimes you have to envision yourself making it out of poverty. It comes with stuff but it's more than that. You get to a point where you are stable, you get to a point where you can finally work on yourself. Go to therapy! Figure this stuff out. Go to college. Take the tools that you need, don't bite the hand that feeds you, go ask for help!

Make it out however you feel like that is. Have that moment where you go "Wow, my community really is there for me. They helped me make it out." Go use those tools and be proud of that! Be proud of who you are! What you symbolize, and just keep it pushing.

You got it. YOU GOT IT!

Me: *WOW, oh my god. Got me on the verge of tears!!! Well, thank you so much for your time. Thank you so much for your words! This is amazing! And I really appreciate you letting me interview you. I know that some of this stuff is sensitive. It's hard. It's hard to talk about your past like that. I just want to let you know that I appreciate it heavily.*

Hearing such genuine and sincere words from my oldest sister not only helped me, but also inspired me and taught me many things I had never known before this point. I wanted to thrust her voice into the public light because I truly believe

that the things she has faced and gone through deserve to be told. Her upbringing is one of strength and compassion. Despite the cards she was dealt, she pushed on. I hope that through this interview, you can understand the beauty in Tacoma even through all its flaws, and the beauty of its community.