

Brownsville—On the Border by the Sea

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Abstract

The opportunity to learn about and experience diverse cultures, languages and foods is a benefit of living in a border community, such as Brownsville, Texas, which borders Mexico. The youth author highlights his Brownsville experiences and shares how they enrich his personal growth and appreciation for diversity.

Key words: youth development, Brownsville, border youth

Living in a city that is neighboring the Mexican border should not be looked down upon, but rather recognized as inspirational and impactful. There are many stereotypes about border youth not being able to get the proper education or living a low socioeconomic lifestyle their whole life, when in reality there is a universe of opportunities that are waiting to be grasped. Personally, I believe these stereotypes come from those who believe Hispanics should not receive a proper education and strive to pursue high quality careers. Stereotypes like these drive youth to think they may not be able to contribute what society believes they should, causing self doubt and lowered self-esteem. Instead, collaboratively we will rise above these stereotypical comments and be successful, contributing members of society. Being exposed to a border city will give you experiences in aspects such as culture, language, and food.

Culture is one of the many riches where you can heavily immerse yourself. Charro Days, focusing on the unification of the United States and Mexico, is an annual festival that is not to be missed. During this festival, all of the city comes together to view the various schools, city officials, and organizations that participate. An annual highlight is the selection of Mr. Amigo: A distinguished Mexican citizen whose life work embodies impactful change in their country is honored and recognized with the Mr. Amigo bronze plaque and other expressions of friendship.

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Music and Art are implemented heavily within our culture. Not only do we have the luxury listening to American-originated music (classical, pop, country, rock and roll), but we can also listen to Mexican-originated music (cumbia, mariachi, ranchera, and corrido). These music selections can be heard on your car's stereo, in restaurants you eat at, at family gatherings, parades, etc. Artistic symbols like the Virgen de Guadalupe can be found at your local Catholic church (a dominant religion in Brownsville); or the Calavera, a famous work of art for Día de Los Muertos, a holiday originating from Mexico celebrated to remember any loved ones that have passed away.

Language is something I found to love and appreciate tremendously—the ability to become a bilingual individual at a young age, due to the environment, is truly breathtaking. Attending a culturally diverse high school allows me to meet others who may not know the Spanish language, and being able to teach my peers the language gives me a greater appreciation of my roots. Having the knowledge and background of two languages (both Spanish and English) is one thing I am fortunate to possess, especially when using these skills to communicate and engage effectively with those whom I cross paths with during my volunteer initiatives in my community. Being a Brownsville resident has allowed me not only to learn the basic English language, but to also learn the familiar complementary Spanish language. Growing up, learning Spanish was vital to communicate effectively with others. Daily tasks such as talking with family members, ordering food at a restaurant, getting a haircut, or even visiting a doctor's office require a person to learn the language to communicate one's message to the recipient. Learning Spanish may seem like a troublesome concept, but it's actually simpler than you think.

There are also benefits in becoming bilingual. For example, when applying for a job, it may say bilingual is preferred compared to monolingual; or when taking a Spanish course in high school, you will already have the key concepts that will help for success. At Good Samaritan Community Services, fluency in both the English and Spanish language is an important element when communicating with our families, since we do have families that speak and read only English or only Spanish. Language has such a huge impact in my community due to one factor: effective communication. Educational institutions believe learning and speaking the language of the majority will impact the community as a whole positively, which is why a course you are guaranteed to take is "Foreign Language"—code for Spanish class. The dialect used by our neighbor country Mexico positively transfers to the City of Brownsville, allowing us to become unified and share a frequently used method of communication. Working on improving my Spanish speaking skills has not always been easy, yet with practice and motivation from my family, it is not impossible.

Lastly, the best experience of being a border youth is the authentic food from both countries. Being exposed to both options means you get the best of both worlds, literally! Not only tasting the American dishes like hamburgers, hotdogs, and macaroni and cheese, but also being able to try Mexican dishes like enchiladas, pozole, and tacos allows me to deeply appreciate this opportunity. Recipes between grandparents—one side originally from Mexico the other side from the United States—lets us exchange and share their techniques and methods used to devise the dish. Everyone has their own method of preparation along with the flavoring and spices they use; this is evident when eating at various taco stands—the flavor and texture of your taco is different at every stand you go to. Natives of Mexico who have traveled to the United States bring their eating customs with them, such as eating a whole chile with your food to add spiciness to your meal or making your own salsa verde or roja to be put on your breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

I love and enjoy living by the border because it created a new perspective of culture, language, and food for me, which I would have never experienced if I lived anywhere else. Data collected by the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce in 2005 reports 65,364 of the total population are youth, which means youth have become the backbone of the city, so rest assured your voice and experiences do matter. Our [youth] voices matter, seeing that we are the next change makers and generation of leaders sprouting into future politicians, nonprofit directors, educators, store managers, health care professionals, etc. According to sources, youth play a very important role for society in social, political, and economic spheres. Significant change, whether local or global, can occur when voices unite and are given the chance to be heard. Any change you are passionate about being the catalyst for can become a reality; for example, implementing a hunger campaign to reduce the amount of children going without a meal, getting connected with city officials to strategize ways to reduce the number of homeless individuals in your city, building more career opportunities for those straight out of college, etc. You have the ability to make a difference—change starts with you!