

Q&A with Emily Francis, author of *If You Only Knew*

Why did you want to write this book?

My friend Carol Salva encouraged me to write my story beyond just blogging about it. Carol had worked with newcomer students and felt that my story needed to be heard that would reflect their own. She also felt that the world needed to know about my journey. After receiving affirmation and validation about my journey and immigrant experiences, I felt compelled to write my story and have it published for the world to read. I would say that after reading many stories about undocumented minors and English learners, I felt that I had nothing to hide. I felt vulnerable enough to share it so students could read it and be able to connect. I want students to feel empowered and validated by their own stories to share their own experiences.

Who has influenced you as a writer?

I'd say that a variety of authors who write about immigration narratives have influenced me. I find a huge connection and I want more. I want to contribute to the wonderful genre of immigration storytelling. There are several books I've read that have influenced me as a writer,

- *Us in Progress* by Lulu Delucre
- *We are not from here* by Jenny Torres Sanchez
- *Illegal* by Francisco X. Stork
- *Efrain Divided* by Ernesto Cisneros

Why did you write your story in the form of letters to your students, as opposed to a narrative?

I tried a few other formats, like a straight first-person narrative on my blog but it just wouldn't flow. However, as soon as I started telling the story through a letter format, I imagined they were right there with me and the story just came alive. That's when we realized that a letter format was the way to go. It felt like a "two-way communication" like they were right there listening and waiting to reply to me. I honestly want readers to respond to the text - not necessarily directly to me but to the text itself.

How has your identity as an immigrant shaped your role as an educator?

My immigrant story is tied to my identity as an immigrant making it core to everything I do, how I do what I do, and why. My teaching profession as an English as a Second Language educator affords me a great opportunity to work with students who have experienced so much of what I've experienced. My immigrant identity serves as a connection between me and my students. I have been there, walked in their shoes. My identity and my profession also afford me the platform to reach other educators. I'm only one, but if I reach 30 or 300 teachers at a conference, I'm able to have an impact on so many more students.

How do you see teachers using this book with their students?

I hope to first impact the teacher. I'd love educators to love and embrace these stories before even sharing them with their students. As an educator myself, many of the books I've read have

helped me to understand my students' experiences. For example, I've never walked a desert, or ridden La Bestia, but by reading about it, I have in a way, experienced it and I have empathy for those who've had that experience.

Secondly, I'd want teachers to provide this book to students to see it serves as mirrors and windows of opportunities to see their own experiences. When using this book as mirrors, students will feel validated as they see their own stories reflected in the text. This will enable them to share their experiences with others in the classroom community and feel safe.

When using this book as Windows, it will empower students to see others' stories as their own even when they haven't experienced the same things.

Have you let the students you are teaching now know about the book? What is their reaction?

Of course, I have! I had students' input on the title. My students are very excited about me. They can't wait to get a copy...especially because it will eventually be released in Spanish. I believe that knowing that their teacher is publishing a book inspires them and makes them feel that maybe they could do something like this and maybe they could someday share their entire story.

Have you let the students who appear in the book know about it?

I've shared the great news with some of them. Almost half of the students whom I mention are now former students so I have to hunt them down once the book is out. I'm excited to let them know the impact they had on me, not just the impact I had on them. The students I have already shared it with are in awe. They can't believe that their story is so significant to one of their teachers, and may be significant to so many other people.

What impact would you like to see the book have?

My biggest desire is for this book to bring validation and affirmation to all immigrant students who share parts of my journey. As readers read my book, I would like the book to build empathy for those who haven't had the immigrant experience. I want students to take action or transact with the text, meaning, read the story, and brainstorm ways to take action to make changes. Individually and collectively we make changes on campus and in the community after reading a book that impacts us.

What was the hardest part about writing this book?

The hardest part about writing this book was reliving my childhood experiences. Just the fact that I was focusing on details I've forgotten about or don't think about anymore was painful - It breaks you. I had a box of tissues next to me as I was describing my childhood. But overall, it's been a healing process.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing immigrant students today?

I think the biggest challenges facing immigrant students today are themes highlighted in the book. I describe how being separated from my mother left a deep wound in my heart and for several of our immigrant students, this is a reality. Many carry family separation wounds that need attention and healing. Documentation is another big issue. Crossing borders knowing that



you are crossing “illegally” makes you feel guilty and you wish there was another way. An unaccompanied immigrant child who traveled across countries alone or just with a coyote carries the fear that one experiences while traveling without parents. It marks you for life. You travel not knowing if you’ll see the sun the next day. Overcoming trauma takes intentional work. I don’t think you ever recover from all the trauma an immigrant might experience crossing borders but for some...like me...it stays with you forever.

What would you like people to know about you that they might not already know?

I’m pursuing my Ph.D. It is my dream to be a college/university professor. I feel like if I teach teachers how to be better prepared to serve our multilingual learners, I can make a bigger impact on the population I care about the most.