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Feeling lash of discrimination before diversity was a popular word

When I was a little girl, I had no idea what the word diversity meant. It was not as ubiquitous a term as it is now, and there are a few reasons for that. As a child growing up in the 1970s on the North Shore, there simply was no conversation, at least of which I was aware, about diversity.

But as I reflect on my childhood, and things I witnessed and experienced, I realize that while I may not have known about diversity I nevertheless knew about discrimination — it was happening around me, and to my family. I don't think I understood it at the time, or perhaps I was just in denial.

I am the daughter of a Mexican immigrant and a first generation Italian. My two older brothers are my half brothers, my mother's children by another marriage. Once I was born, my mother stopped working, which put a financial strain on my family and meant that we did not share the same standard of living as many of our neighbors.

We did not live in a fancy house, drive expensive cars or wear the latest fashions. But we did live in a house full of love, and my three brothers and I were very close and our parents provided us with everything we needed, including a second-to-none education.

Nevertheless, we were different compared to other families in my town, both socially and economically.

My mother was a brilliant and well-educated woman. Born and raised in Mexico, she started her college education at the age of 14 in Mexico City and earned three science degrees during her tenure. She had great aspirations for becoming a doctor and emigrated to the United States in the hope that this dream would become reality.

She barely spoke English upon her arrival, which she learned by reading Harlequin romances and watching television. Her vocabu-

lary was impeccable, yet she was difficult to understand because she spoke with a thick Mexican accent. She was strikingly beautiful, with jet black hair, dark eyes and a deep olive complexion. Notwithstanding her brilliance and great beauty, she stuck out — and not in a good way.

My mother was teased, ridiculed and treated badly at various times over the years.

I heard the stories and witnessed much of it firsthand. Because my brothers and I also looked and sounded different from other people we knew growing up, we were likewise teased as children.

This continued through our high school years, and once we all went to college we were able to find our way. Because of the wonderful parenting and amazing education we had, the four of us went on to successful and fulfilling personal and professional lives, as our parents had always dreamed and hoped.

It is not only my personal experiences with discrimination that come to mind. I also remember the black family that moved into our neighborhood in the 1980s, which triggered a lot of gossip on the block.

The family was well-established, highly educated and just like everyone else — except for the color of their skin. There were numerous other kids I knew at school that had similar experiences over the years — and were also just trying to fit in and to feel a sense of belonging.

Reflecting on my life as it is today, while these experiences are in my rearview mirror, they are nevertheless still with me and will always remain. I have been practicing law for more than 20 years at a prestigious law firm and my life experience, education, heritage and background are seen as a unique combination and an

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advantage rather than a hindrance.

In fact, many people have no idea I am Latina because of how I look and my surname, and I have received an interesting array of reactions from people when they learn about my heritage.

There has been a lot of talk about the importance of diversity and inclusion, particularly in the

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legal profession, and how diverse talent is chronically underrepresented in the law.

There is much time and effort spent in trying to develop strategic, innovative ways to find, recruit, retain and promote diverse

talent. Women are often included as part of the diversity discussion, given how difficult it has proven to be to keep very talented individuals in our workforce.

Since my time as a young professional, recruiting and diversity have been incredibly important to me on the deepest levels, for all of the obvious reasons.

I feel compelled to experience and achieve what my mother could not during her short 50 years of life and to make good use of all of the gifts that have been shared with me and have enabled me to become who I am today.

A number of individuals have helped me along my journey by providing me with various types of support — emotional, financial and otherwise — and who showed up exactly when I needed them the most. And I feel a strong obligation to pay it forward to the future generations of men and women who have great talent and who like me need someone to believe in them and to help them on their way.

As a profession and as a society, it may feel like we have come a long way — from the 1930s and 1940s when my parents were born, to the 1950s when my mother emigrated from Mexico, to the 1970s and 1980s when I was growing up, to today. We believe that

now more than ever before we have a much higher awareness of all things diversity.

But we must guard ourselves against a false sense of complacency and a mistaken belief that discrimination does not still run rampant in our midst. It is everywhere — at the local grocery store, in our schools, in our social circles and in our business communities.

It is our responsibility to remain forever vigilant, to combat discrimination when we see it and to help create a better path for diversity to grow and flourish.