

Case Study: Esperanza Mesa

Esperanza Mesa, a bilingual (Spanish-English) lesbian born in Durango, Mexico, is one of six children whose parents emigrated from Mexico when she was approximately 4 years old. Spanish was her first language, and she learned English in the public schools. Esperanza was an outgoing child who always doubted her self-worth.

Feeling the sting of discrimination because of her dark coloring and accent when she spoke English, she changed her name to the English translation, Hope, while in high school. When Hope was a teenager, she wondered if other teenage girls were drawn to women like she was. She succeeded in suppressing her feelings, and following her family and cultural dictates, she married and gave birth to a daughter by the age of 20.

Hope never questioned her choices and felt compelled to follow the mandates of her family and Catholicism. Without these buffers, she would have felt even more desperate when people confronted her for being a "greasy, lazy, wetback Mexican who should just go home." As a married woman with a new baby, she felt lonely most of the time, and she knew it was not because she longed for her husband. There was a part of her that she shared with no one. She felt like she did not fit anywhere, particularly with the other wives who gathered together in the afternoon before their husbands came home. She slowly began to realize that her motivation for visiting with this group was different from that of the others and that a strange attraction was growing within her toward one of the women.

Unable to reconcile her cultural values and family loyalty with what she was thinking and feeling (including guilt and shame at wanting to put herself first), Hope told her husband about her dilemma. Hope's traditional Mexican husband could not tolerate the option that Hope proposed—a divorce with her having full custody of their daughter. In fact, he threatened to expose her as a lesbian to her family and church and to take their daughter away.

Because Hope feared her family's and priest's disapproval and rejection as well as the possible loss of her daughter, she sought psychotherapy for symptoms of anxiety, insomnia, loneliness, mood swings, having sex with women in the bathrooms of bars, depression, weight loss, feeling worthless, difficulty concentrating and rage.