

Danilo de Leon (Pt.2)

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DD: I came to Canada in 2009. My first job was janitor at Bee Clean. Then after working as janitor with Bee Clean, I moved to Petro Canada. First I started as food counter attendant; then, after a year I became a retail supervisor. I gained lots of experience as retail supervisor in Petro Canada for more than five years. Then after that I worked in A&W, Red Robin, and McDonalds as kitchen crew, and I worked in 7-11 as a cashier and I worked in the Safeway gas bar in Stony Plain as gas bar manager. Now currently I'm working as a delivery driver.

Q: What are the conditions in those workplaces?

DD: Most of the workplaces that I've seen it's the use and abuse, especially for the foreign worker. Aside from overtime, there's no protection at the workplace. When it comes to occupational health and safety, the managers and supervisors are not treating the worker as a human being. They want you to work like a slave.

Q: Are there differences in those workplaces in terms of the type of exploitation you experience?

DD: Most of them are the same. I've seen exploitation, use and abuse, and like I said, sometimes the supervisors or employers treat you like you're not human. They want you to work more, do multitasking, and they don't care, especially on the safety. As much as they need you, they want you to work for them.

Q: How many hours a day do you work in those workplaces?

DD: With Bee Clean, every night we worked 12 hours six days a week. In retail where I worked as a supervisor, I worked a minimum 105 hours every two weeks.

Q: For Bee Clean, which U of A buildings did you work in?

DD: I worked in different places in Bee Clean because of my job as a janitor. I worked in the Fine Arts building, Business building, CAB, Engineering building, Education, and Humanities. The reason why we work in a different building is every season they move you into a different building as your routine. When I was new with Bee Clean, my first building was Tory and my second building was Education. That was winter. Then when summer came they moved me into the Engineering building, and my second building was CAB. Then when fall come the guy who used to do the carpet steam cleaning went on a holiday. So the supervisors and managers asked me to do the carpet steam cleaning by myself. I worked in many buildings with carpet, especially with the offices and executive offices and conference room with the carpet.

Q: Who are your coworkers?

DD: Many are TFWs. Before it was LMO. In LMO we're 100 plus from Philippines, from Guyana, and from Mexico. We also work with some seniors of the Punjabi community. We see different faces, different people working on the site.

Q: How do you relate with each other?

DD: The thing is, most of the Mexicans I work with don't speak English so much. Same thing with the foreign workers from Guyana and even the senior workers from the Punjabi community. But we often don't speak to each other because the thing is most of the night you work by yourself in a building. You have certain areas of responsibility. Let's say you're working on a second floor, third floor, and fifth floor. So there's someone working in the basement, main floor, and second floor. The job in the past is divided, but most of the building only two or three people working. We often see each other before we start to get our keys; then in the morning to return our keys to the lead hand. And lunch break we see each other, especially in the orange building we see each other on lunch break. We have one big lunch area where it's the big crown on the yellow building.

Q: Walk me through a workday with Bee Clean at U of A.

DD: When I was working with Bee Clean, we had to be at U of A 15 minutes before six. We had to see the supervisor in his office to get our keys and card. Then after that I had to go in the building where I was assigned. Each building there's a janitor's room where you get your cleaning stuff: your mop and bucket, your broom and soap. Each floor there's a sink where you get your water for bucket and mop. When you finish the shift, same thing, make sure you clean the mop and bucket, and put it away in the janitor's room, and return the key to the supervisor. Or sometimes the lead hand comes into your office: pick up the keys and the card. Then after that we go home. We start from 6 p.m. and finish at 6:30 in the morning. I got home around 7:30 or quarter to 8 in the morning.

Q: You had an organizing drive at Bee Clean several years ago. What are the working conditions that led the workers to organize?

DD: First is the working condition and the unsafe condition on the worksite, aside from not paying overtimes and night differentials. When workers started talking to each other, lead hand and supervisor always intervened, because they don't want workers talking about anything about the job, talking about the safety about the job. They don't want it. When SEIU came in, Marion and Anoop spoke to me and asked me about the conditions at the worksite. I started telling them what I've seen or what I experience, and Marion asked us, how do you guys connect to each other? I told him, we don't have any connection to each other; we just met here. But the thing is, we have something in common. Workers on the site have no protection, and that's what we wanted and that's where we started forming a union. That's how we unionized the worksite.

Q: In what ways was the workplace unsafe?

DD: First we deal with a lot of chemicals. Cleaning, you deal with some chemicals. We don't have the proper masks; we don't have the eye protections. Those chemicals can irritate our eyes. And they don't give us nice gloves. They just give us the thin gloves. Once they tear up, you have to replace it; it doesn't last long. Every time we work they just give us two pieces of

gloves, and that piece of gloves will only last for three or four hours. But we're working 12 hours a night.

Q: How did the unionizing drive become successful?

DD: First honestly when I came to Canada I was not really informed about my rights. It was SEIU that explained to me everything. It was SEIU who opened my eyes about the rights that I have. We started with talking with the student union, faculty members, and some employees and some community, and also MLAs like Rachel Notley, one of the MLAs that supported the Justice for Janitors campaign at the University. We do the tabling at each building to let the students know that this is happening in your university; these things are happening and people need to know. So that's what we did.

Q: What happened after you were unionized?

DD: After we were unionized, the workers got protection. But when the workers at the worksite had protection, I only had a few months left because of my work permit. We were unionized in October, and I left Bee Clean on the first week of December and moved to Petro Canada.

Q: So there's no more LMIA from Bee Clean?

DD: The government didn't allow them to get one--it was LMO before; so the government didn't issue them an LMO since then. But they use an agency of the people that they know, an agency of the people that also subcontracted cleaning jobs to them.

Q: What year was this?

DD: 2010.

Q: So in 2010 Bee Clean was not allowed to get LMO anymore?

DD: Yes.

Q: And they started subcontracting to other cleaning companies?

DD: No, what happened is they used the agency. Some of their subcontractors have an agency. So they use the subcontractor's agency to get a foreign worker again. They get some workers also from Guyana and the Philippines.

Q: I've heard that Bee Clean also hires undocumented migrants.

DD: Yeah. Bee Clean has a lot of contracts here in the city, mostly in the downtown area. In most of the buildings in the downtown area, workers are from different walks of lives. You see a permanent resident, a citizen, working for Bee Clean, a foreign worker working for Bee Clean, and also undocumented. It's not Bee Clean who brings them in to work in a building, but it was the subcontractor from Bee Clean. But the office has an idea what is going on, because what they wanted was to get the job done, to get the contract done, and that's all they wanted. They don't care, because at the end of the day it was not Bee Clean who's paying them; it was the subcontractor who paid undocumented.

Q: How were your living accommodations arranged?

DD: The accommodation was not arranged. It was stipulated in the contract we will be the one who will deal with it. Someone that got me a job with Bee Clean arranged accommodation for me. I was surprised because I come from a family of workers who work abroad, migrant workers. When my father worked in the Middle East, accommodation and food were free. My sister worked in Japan: same thing. For seven years she worked there; accommodation and food are free. I have a cousin who works in UAE; same thing, accommodation and food are free. But I was surprised it's totally different here, so you have to pay for your accommodation and for your food as well. It's way different.

Q: Can you talk a bit about your experience with press conferences during the campaign?

DD: It was scary because it was my first time. And I am in Canada, not the Philippines – that's what scared me most. Something in the back of my head: What's going to happen after this? The reason why we came out into a press conference is because when we started to form a union I was harassed many times in the building. People that I don't know, people that don't work for Bee Clean, walk into my building and threaten me. Three people that I've seen approached me and harassed me and intimidated me not to form a union. That's why we came up into coming out into public with a press conference. SEIU knew that it would be better, aside from exposing what's going on at the site and also as my protection. It's a scary experience but after I've seen the support from the community, from politicians, and the media, who really played big roles on exposing the irregularities at the worksite, it's been so effective. It's so effective that Bee Clean didn't say any comment. The Bee Clean kept quiet for weeks, then apologized on radio, saying it was a misunderstanding.

Q: Was Migrante involved in that campaign?

DD: I never met Marco and Cynthia until later after the campaign. The campaign happened in 2010. I met Cynthia in early 2012, then later after a month or two I met Marco. Meeting Marco and Cynthia, then that's where we started talking about having a migrants' organization in Alberta. We met with Marco and Cynthia for several months talking about the temporary foreign worker issue, which led us to form Migrante Alberta in August 2013.

Q: When did you become undocumented?

DD: In 2017 of March.

Q: What were the circumstances that made you become undocumented?

DD: Because my TRP application text and my open work permit and restoring my status was refused. That's where I started to become undocumented.

Q: What did you do to attempt to get status?

DD: I tried to apply for an open work permit and TRPA, but it's always refused. But the open work permit was approved. I ended up working with an open work permit, but I don't have status.

Q: Did you ever find out why you were denied?

DD: Like many others who became undocumented, it wasn't clear. There's no specific descriptions or reason on why your application has been denied. That's why many of us became undocumented. Because of the bad consultant; the immigration policy, it seems, was designed for employers, not for the migrants. Those are the things. That's why I become undocumented. Most of the undocumented: those are the reason why.

Q: What's been your experience with immigration consultants?

DD: Aside from they charge so much money. Migrant workers don't have time; most of their time they are busy working. If the migrants aren't working, they're either doing laundry or going to supermarket. That's why most of the migrant workers get the services of a consultant. But the thing is, most of the consultants charge so much money and they don't explain well to their client what needs to be done. They don't really inform the clients or the migrants about immigration; that's why most of the migrants don't know about the policies. Those are the reasons why most of the migrant workers end up being undocumented.

Q: What's it like being undocumented, living without status?

DD: First it's so hard having no status, having no access to services like healthcare and housing. If you don't have government-issued ID it's hard for you to get an apartment or accommodations, especially during the height of COVID where the undocumented became so vulnerable. During the height of COVID Migrante Alberta set up a system or a group called Serve the People. Serve the People: the reason why Serve the People came out was many migrants

lost jobs; many migrants have no food on the table. So Migrante came up with the idea of bringing groceries, especially to undocumented migrants who lost their jobs, just to help out. When people aren't working, what's going to happen, especially the undocumented, if they don't work? They have nothing to eat. So Migrante came up with the idea of helping those people, not just undocumented, but people who lost their job too.

Q: How do you find housing or have access to healthcare, and how do you find a job?

DD: With the healthcare, with Migrante there's a pro bono doctor that helps Migrante. If you have a referral form from Migrante, all you have to do is fill out the form and pass it to the doctor's office, and they will schedule you for a checkup without asking for any information or anything. For housing, I live with friends. It was a friend who rents an apartment; so I share. But it was so hard. Being undocumented is not easy. You don't have a regular job. You don't know what you'll make in a day. So it's a good thing I have a support system from Migrante. I have the community support and friend support. But for others who don't have a support like I have, it's so awful to see their situation. You see them sleeping from couches to couches, sometimes on the street. It's so hard.

Q: What's the Humanitarian Compassionate Application pathway about?

DD: The Humanitarian Compassionate Application is the last resort of application that the undocumented can apply. But the chances of getting approval is so slim, like one percent. It seems like you're going into the hole of a needle. The documents that you need to provide are so many and it seems like you're begging so much for the government just to approve it. It's not easy; the chances are so slim. Out of 100 percent the chances would be just one percent.

Q: What changes do you think the government should make?

DD: First for the undocumented, the government should create a regularization program for the undocumented. A status for all migrants, not temporary, but permanent, because temporary always leads to being undocumented. When you say undocumented, they came from different



sectors, like workers who became undocumented, tourists who became undocumented, students who became undocumented, and refugee claimants whose applications were refused and they ended up being undocumented too. So the government needs to look into creating a regularization program that will give all undocumented a status.

Q: How do you see that happening?

DD: First we need to organize – organize, organize, mobilize. Like me, as undocumented, I have no rights. We need the support from the Canadian who votes, because their voice is louder than anything. Politicians will listen to them. We need the support from community, from Canadian voters. We need to organize and get the support.

Q: In the summer of 2021 you were elected to be chairperson of Migrante Canada. Tell me about your involvement.

DD: First I was involved in Migrante Alberta before I became a chairperson of. . . Migrante Alberta is a chapter of Migrante Canada. Migrante Canada has 13 chapter members across Canada, and Migrante Alberta is one of them. When I was elected as a chairperson of Migrante Canada, it became an opportunity for me as the face of undocumented, an opportunity for me to help and defend undocumented among the migrants. I've seen the hardship that the migrant workers and undocumented endure, especially during the height of COVID. I took the opportunity as a chairperson with Migrante to advocate and campaign for undocumented and all the migrants to be regularized and to have a permanent status in Canada.

Q: What motivates your volunteer work with Migrante?

DD: First my experience as undocumented. The migrants and my children: it was them who motivate me.

Q: Tell me more about the children.

DD: With my children, when I came here in 2009 my plan was to give a better future for my children. When I lost my status, it seemed like I'm losing everything. But because of them, I'm still fighting and insisting that I need to stay here in Canada. I need to advocate for migrants' rights and protection, and all undocumented here in Canada.

Q: What do you gain from volunteering with Migrante?

DD: First I know that I have a community, I have a family like Migrante. Migrante is an advocacy group that helps migrants. It not just helps migrants, it also protect migrants. With Migrante, we educate people on the root cause of migration, the poverty back home and the lack of opportunity that has put us to work abroad. To educate people that a country like Canada, which uses the Temporary Foreign Workers program, and a country like Canada, which extracts the minerals back home, that also led us to migration because some of us have nowhere to go. When Canadian mining companies went into the southern part of the Philippines to operate their mining, the mining operations sent people away from that area, pushed them to move into a different area. When they go into the city, there's no job. So where do they go? They were forced to work abroad.

Q: Where do you live now?

DD: West side.

Q: Do you live in Jasper Place?

DD: Yes.

Q: When did you move there?

DD: In 2019. I used to live on the south side. I lived on the south side for nine years.

Q: Why Jasper Place?

DD: This is a community where there's a lot of workers, a lot of Filipinos. In the area where I live, in most of the buildings you see Filipino people.

Q: Where is that exactly?

DD: On 156 Street.

Q: Is there a sense that there are two groups of Filipino people living here – those who are TFWs and those who have returned to the community? Or is it just one big group of people?

DD: It's composed of different people. I met a lot of undocumented in this area, foreign workers, residents. It's a mix of Filipinos from different walks of life. But they have the same thing in common – they are all workers. They all work hard to make money, work hard to meet ends, and work hard to send money back home, especially for the family that depends on them.

Q: Are some of the rents better here than in other parts of the city?

DD: Oh yeah, it's way cheaper here.

Q: Are people starting up businesses here to serve the community?

DD: Yeah, there's one here that I know. He's a well known JP, Bill Morris. There's a Filipino who owns a business on the south side, but you see his product here selling on the west side. There's also a Filipino store where you can buy Filipino products like foods and condiments, and aside from that it's also our remit centre, a store where you can send money back home.

Q: Are there places or coffee shops where people meet?

DD: West Edmonton Mall, where you see most of the people in the food court. In this area, sometimes we go in the Tim Horton's here on Stony Plain and 163. When you want some cheaper prices of groceries, you can go here at the No Frills.

Q: I was told that the second language in this area is Tagalog. Is that your experience as well?

DD: Yes. You see someone. You can distinguish if it's a Filipino or not. When you see them, instead of saying hi, you say kamusta, just to let them know that you're Filipino, just to let them know that you still value the culture of the country where you're from. But in some areas, people who've been here for quite a while, Filipino who grew up here, they don't speak Tagalog so much. So it's kind of a mix of Tagalog and English.

Q: Are there some in this area who are second generation?

DD: Yes.

Q: I've also heard that the church is important.

DD: Annunciation Church on 95 Avenue. I can't remember if it's 162 or 163 street, close to the Misericordia.

Q: And it has a big Filipino congregation?

DD: Yes.

Q: I know there's one big church in Mill Woods.

DD: St. Theresa. And there's one, St. Anthony de Padua.

Q: What do Filipinos need in this Jasper Place community?

DD: First I guess a centre, a centre where they can meet and talk and develop skills, talk about the issues of life and the issues in the community, if there are any. To develop a relationship. If you live in a community and you want to develop a good relationship with everyone in the community, you need to have a centre. A centre where people can meet, a centre where people are welcome, and give everyone a chance to develop their skills and talent. I think those are the things that we need. Everything starts with communication. If we have a centre that's open communication for everything, will welcome those kind of things, then that's where small things started and became big in the future.

Q: Tell me more about your work within Migrante with undocumented migrants.

DD: During the height of COVID when we put up the Serve the People brigade, I go after work. I finish my shift around 5 or 6 p.m. So, after work, I go around the city from west to south to north to east to bring groceries to undocumented, groceries to migrants who lost their job, and to show them that there is an organization, Migrante, that's not just advocating but also doing something to help out. Migrante is well known as an advocacy group. We're a non-profit organization, but we do a lot of things. We do a lot of things to help people in many ways. Those are the things that I was doing, the voluntary things that I did during the height of COVID. You will see the smile on their face when they see me coming in with the bags of bread, goods, groceries. Sometimes we have chicken and chips. You see the smile on their face and they really appreciate it.

Q: About a month ago you received a deportation notice and a ticket to leave on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August. What was your reaction to the deportation order?

DD: First I felt scared, scared because I will be shipping out from the country that I consider home. I know if that happens, there's a separation again. That first separation I experienced coming into Canada from the Philippines is one of the sacrifices that I made, because of my goals and plans for my family. Having said that, being deported again, being deported to the Philippines, for me it's a separation to a country that I consider home, separation to a family like Migrante, separation to my friends here in Edmonton. So it scares me. Those are the things that

scare me. The second thought is, what am I going to do if I get sent back to the Philippines? There's no employer that would hire me. There's no good job that I can do back home. When I received the deportation order, as chairperson of Migrante Canada, I informed the executive committee right away. I informed Migrante Alberta, and we decided to have a meeting right away to plan on what to do to keep me here in Canada. So we came up with different plans and initial planning of a week. Then the second week we come up into a concrete plan, aside from lobbying, letters to MPs, to immigration ministers. Ask for support from allies like unions, communities, union leaders, to write the immigration ministers concerning about my deportation. So that's what I did and that's what we did.

Q: You did not hear from Immigration until 24 hours before your scheduled departure. What was on your mind?

DD: It seems like you're in the death row; either you will die or no. So those are the kind of feelings. But good thing Migrante hired a lawyer to look after my legal side. The lawyer that Migrante hired, he applied for [57:51], and after he applied for [57:53] he sent a request to CBSA for stay of removal. But after three days we didn't hear anything from CBSA, we assumed it's a no. Then the lawyer came up into a request of a special hearing for a federal court. A federal court in Ottawa took the request. Then we had a hearing a day before deportation, on August 28<sup>th</sup>. It was the federal court in Ottawa who deferred the removal. It was intense and scary but it was relieving after four hours of waiting on a decision on that day. The teleconference started at 9 or 9:30, the [59:00] was at 11, and then after that we waited more than four hours. So it was intense, scary; and it seems like you're on death row, whether you'll die that day or not. So those are the kinds of feeling.

Q: Now that it's been deferred, what happens next?

DD: It doesn't mean the removal is gone. The removal is still there, but it's good for me and my lawyer because we have time to look more into the legal side of my immigration issues. I have more time to advocate more for the regularization of the Migrante campaign, about the regularization for all, to support the campaign of Migrante Rights Networks about status for all.

To talk to the unions, Migrante chapters and allies, to support the campaign and mobilize to amplify the campaigns of Migrante Canada and the campaigns of Migrants Rights Networks. I guess work hard on my campaign and the campaign to keep me here, the campaign of regularization, the campaign of Migrants Rights Network. I need to double the effort because it feels like this is the momentum. Things are shifting on a positive side after the deferral. So it seems like I have to work hard because the momentum is on the side of undocumented now. But of course we need the support of the community; we need social media; we need the media. We need to mobilize and educate people how is it to be undocumented, why you need to regularize the undocumented, why we need to have a status for the undocumented.

Q: Why was public support so important in getting the deportation order stayed?

DD: The public campaigns and support make a big difference to keep me stay here. People and politicians are being made aware that this is happening. Like with McKenna case, the Canadians' and the politicians' eyes were open that a Canadian-born child was being sent out of the country, which is not right. Undocumented people like me, who've been here for more than a decade, work hard, to be deported. The campaign made a big difference. The campaign helped me and McKenna to stay here and Vangie to stay here in Canada. It's an awareness for everybody, for everyone, that like me as a worker, I have a right to stay. Like Vangie, the mom of a Canadian-born child, has the right to stay here in Canada. The campaigns played a big role to let the public know, to let the people know, what is going on, and to let the public know that there's an issue in our immigration system. There's a problem in our immigration system. That's why I'm here, Vangie and McKenna here, because of the campaign, because of the public support and the lobbying to MPs and also the Migrante chapters that do the social media campaign. Those things help a lot.

Q: Why did you decide to take a public position?

DD: I experienced the life of being undocumented. When I was elected as a chairperson of Migrante Canada, I took that opportunity to represent the undocumented, the undocumented who are like a shadow of the community, undocumented who are vulnerable to use and abuse. I

came out in public to let the undocumented know that we have nothing to lose but we have lots to gain if you come out in public. I took the courage, because that's the only thing that I know, that's the best way that I know, and the best thing that I know I need to do.

Q: What are some examples of the employer's power over the undocumented or temporary foreign worker?

DD: First the wage. Let's say minimum wage is \$15. If you're undocumented they will pay you \$7 or \$8 an hour, and you do the same job like the regular worker is doing, sometimes more. Sometimes those people don't pay you. Those are the things that the undocumented experience.

Q: How do you get, for example, a COVID vaccination, if you're undocumented?

DD: What happens is we have undocumented in Edmonton and Calgary, and we have a group chat. We often talk in the group chat where and how do each one of us access the vaccine. We communicate where to go, who to go, what time to go, so that's what we do to help each other. Having no access to healthcare during the height of COVID makes us more vulnerable, makes us more exposed. We need to help each other and that's what we do. We do it with the group chat or [1:09:32] from Calgary and Edmonton talk on group chat where we meet to talk about different aspects of life and to talk about the vaccine during the height of COVID.

Q: It made no sense to withhold vaccines.

DD: Some don't want to be vaccinated; but we undocumented wanted to, because we need protection. If we get sick, what's going to happen to us? I don't think a hospital will take us. But who pays for the bill? If we get sick, we go to the hospital. The hospital will bill us, but where do we get the money to pay the bill when we don't have a regular job, we don't have regular work? That's why as much as possible we don't want to get sick. Nobody want to get sick.

Q: Can you talk about the interventions in the meatpacking plants in High River?



DD: Meatpackers are the people who process chicken and meat that we eat; they are the ones who process. If one of them gets sick, the possibility that we get sick too is there. We need to ensure that the packers who are preparing the meat for us are healthy and secure. So that's the reason why Migrante went to meet the meatpackers in southern Alberta. Some of them lost their job; some of them when they got sick lost their job. Migrante went there to help them out and check their situations, and how they were dealing with COVID, especially during the height of COVID.

Q: How did Bee Clean attempt to turn workers against each other during the unionizing campaign?

DD: Bee Clean has a contract with U of A. When we started to form a union, the Bee Clean contract was about to expire. So Bee Clean says, if you guys join the union the Bee Clean might not renew the contract, and if that happens you guys will lose your job. So who are you going to support now? The Bee Clean management or these people that try to organize a union here? They wanted workers to pit on each other because they know once the site was unionized there's a protection and they cannot do the things that they've been doing. But on the other hand, the management intervention has been so effective, from 93 workers down to seven who wanted the union. Many were being intimidated and scared that they might lose their job, because they believe what the management says. It became a worker is pitting to each other, telling us not to do it: don't form a union; don't go out in public; we will lose our job.

Q: Talk about the importance of re-establishing the idea that, if a person has to leave their country for economic or any other reason, that should be available to people.

DD: We were forced to leave and work abroad because there's no opportunity back home. The corruption in the government is so rampant, the government is not creating a job. The systematic deployment of workers benefitted the country because of the money that the migrants are remitting. On the other hand, the country where the migrants work is benefitted too. They're benefitting from a cheap cost of labour. The program says temporary but the needs

of the job are permanent, are long term. The program is designed like a revolving door – one worker coming in, one worker coming out. It was designed to benefit the investors, the businesses.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

DD: For me, migration should be a choice, an option. If there's a choice back home, if there's a healthcare back home, if there's a good job back home, I would stay back home. I wouldn't come here and work. Like I said, separation, being separated from your family, from your relatives, is the hardest part of migration. Being away, being by yourself in a country where you don't know anybody. When I came here I didn't know anybody, just one person. It's so hard adjusting into the culture, into the weather. It's not easy. If there was a choice, if there was an opportunity back home, I would have stayed back home. I'm not going anywhere.

[ END ]