

Ms. X's Story

Interview and story written with Tony Hu



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Ms. X is a frontline worker in the cleaning service industry.

I met Ms. X outside a local school on a cold, cloudy April day. She is an elderly Chinese woman, dressed simply wearing a face mask and face shield. Here is her story.

As a frontline worker during the COVID-19 pandemic, she has worked at a factory creating flavoured vape products. The term frontline worker romanticizes the job, making it sound more glamorous than it really is. After all, the terms 'frontline worker' and 'essential worker' sound nicer than the terms 'minimum wage worker' and 'sacrificial worker'. She took three buses to get to work everyday, followed by three buses to get back home.

While she cannot remember exactly how much she got paid everyday, she estimates that she was paid \$10 an hour, lower than the legal minimum wage. Adding to these challenges is the fear that she would get infected

with COVID-19 while commuting or at work.

Ms. X shared that she was an undocumented immigrant. While the difficulties associated with not having legal status in Canada are obvious, how someone becomes an undocumented immigrant is considerably less so. Ms. X became an undocumented immigrant after overstaying her visa to take care of her ill daughter. Both before and during the pandemic, she takes care of her daughter by shopping for groceries and cooking for her.

Tensions are high however, due to her daughter's illness and due to her own lack of status. She has had close encounters with the police and negative experiences with her landlord. During the pandemic, her fears have been doubly magnified. She is living in fear of contracting COVID-19 and getting evicted by her landlord.

My initial impression of Ms. X was that she was reluctant to advocate for herself. I realized that this was a result of her bad experiences with social services and supports. In 2018, she inquired through a social service organization about applying for a temporary resident permit, which would give her temporary status and allow her to travel back and forth between Canada and China while waiting for the Humanitarian and Compassionate Permanent Residency application. She remembers that Miss Kuang, a staff helping her, scared her by telling her that she should not apply because she is currently an undocumented immi-

grant and that Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada would certainly deport her. She is still upset about this experience until this day because without a temporary status, she later missed the chance to accompany her seriously ill mother in China. Unfortunately, such stressful experiences are common for many marginalized peoples accessing social supports.

Fast forward to today, Ms. X describes a heartbreaking experience, one that I cannot even begin to understand. Her mother, back in China, fell ill with cerebrovascular disease. Any decent person should take care of their parents, according to Ms. X. At the same time, leaving to see her mother meant that she would be leaving her ill daughter to take care of herself in Canada. Since Ms. X lacked status, it was likely that leaving for China meant that she would never be allowed to return to Canada to see her daughter. Caught between these two choices where choosing one meant sacrificing the other, Ms. X tear-

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fully explained how she decided to stay in Canada to take care of her daughter. During the pandemic, her mother died. Ms. X became a permanent resident several months ago. Her greatest regret is listening to the advice from social services telling her not to apply for a temporary residence permit, so she did not have the chance to take care of her mother.