

## **Lorena M. Ortega's Story**

My name is Lorena M. Ortega and I currently live in Huntington Beach. I was born and raised in Orange County and have lived here my whole life. I was born in Santa Ana, raised in Westminster, and came to Huntington Beach about 15 years ago.

I would describe myself, in the shortest answer that I can give, as intersections of: A mother, a wife, a sister, a friend, a steward of my community, a student, and a radical woman.

I've had many opportunities here in Orange County – education, employment. To be me, a woman, it's not very difficult. I've had it pretty easy for the last 46 years of my life when just thinking in terms of being a woman of color. When I think about being a mother of color with children who are also of color in Orange County that completely changes the story. I feel exhausted from being constantly hyperaware of the way people look at my children, how they perceive both their intelligence and their socioeconomic level because of where they are growing up in Huntington Beach, CA.

We definitely, definitely do not fit the mold for people who live in this area of town. For me, it's super exhausting to always be in that high alert to make sure that my children are treated respectfully and also turn around and be respectful to other people. But for the most part, I would describe myself as somebody who is extremely respectful, extremely aware of my surroundings and making sure that I meet people where they are at and never take my positionality and my privileges that I have for granted.

My biggest struggle right now is the exhaustion in trying to right the minds of people who directly impact my life. I am talking about our local community forums and Facebook. The bigotry, the hatred, the extreme bias towards anybody who is less than. And we are talking about people who are less than socioeconomically, (less) advantages of education, and people of color. And watching the political divide – it really exhausts me. My inability to just let things go and always wanting to impart knowledge and share the things that I know, that's what I find most difficult for me. Staying out of it and learning to stay in my lane and not thinking that I have the answers to everything.

What I love the most of Orange County is that my family is local to me. I have all my siblings and my mother here in Orange County. But also with that comes a perceived feeling of safety in Orange County. My family and children do theater in Los Angeles in Boyle Heights every weekend. I find that our time there I am always on high alert, and I think that's also because of experiences I've had outside of Orange County; experiences of violence that have not happened to me here in Orange County. This perceived sense of safety when I am here is something that I value. I sleep at night knowing and actually feeling that my children will be okay in the area that we live in, that we've provided them the best schools and the best homes. They are happy here, they have good friends and that's what I love the most of Orange County.

A hate-free Orange County would include people who are willing to work with each other. It would also be an Orange County where those who have not had the ability to have their voices heard have a platform and have the ability to state: "I am here. I am no longer afraid of living in the shadows. I deserve to be heard." I would love to wake up one day and see that happen. I would love for everyone who has felt that they haven't been validated – their experiences are not part of the mainstream, so they are not validated – be *validated*. That for me would be an idyllic Orange County. Free of hate. Free of discrimination, bigotry, and especially for some of our children who have special needs, to not look at them differently and to make sure we meet the needs of every child coming up in Orange County.

My biggest piece of advice, for me right now which is the most important, is to give space to people. Listen, honor, and value the presence of the people who are in your life. When somebody tells you that the effects of the media or the effects of people being disrespectful towards them are impacting them – listen to them, even if it's the most difficult thing to do. Ask them how you can help them at least listen. Definitely if you have something to offer them in terms of support – be there for them. Sometimes the biggest thing we can do for somebody who is feeling disenfranchised is to listen and to validate that what they are feeling is actually real. As opposed to telling them that since my experience doesn't match yours it cannot be possible. So that is definitely the biggest thing that I can ask for people to do in Orange County – just give people space and make that space for them.