



Pura Belpré Young Adult Author Honor Acceptance Speech



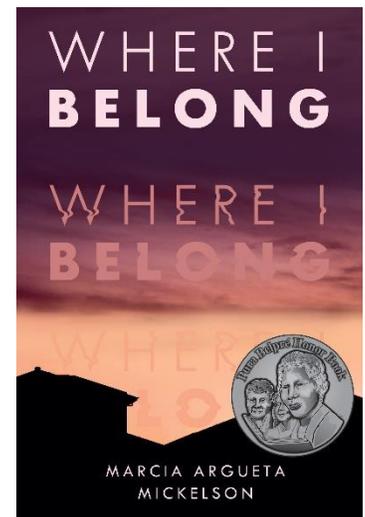
Marcia Argueta Mickelson received a 2022 (Pura) Belpré Young Adult Author Honor for *Where I Belong* (Carolrhoda Lab®, an imprint of Lerner Publishing Group™). She delivered her acceptance remarks at the Pura Belpré Award Celebración held Sunday, June 26, 2022, during the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC.

Thank you for this Pura Belpré honor. When I wrote *Where I Belong*, I opened up my heart and poured it onto the page. Even though Millie is a fictional character, her feelings and emotions are very real. My parents left Guatemala as young adults during a 36-year civil war and came to the United States seeking a new life. They brought me, as an infant, to this new country that would become my home. Like so many people fleeing desperate circumstances, my family was at first undocumented.

Even at a young age, I understood the negative stereotypes and malicious words used against people like me and my family. Other people's opinions fueled feelings of shame and embarrassment. This is how Millie feels. She doesn't quite know where she belongs. Her siblings were all born in the U.S. Millie has lived in Texas her entire life, but doubts of where she belongs always linger. Despite her best efforts to be proud and thankful for her parents making the decision to bring her to the U.S., there are feelings of shame that cloud how she feels about herself.

It is with all these feelings of uncertainty that Millie is thrust into the spotlight when her mother's well-meaning employer who is running for senate, uses Millie's story to highlight the achievements of undocumented immigrants. Suddenly, Millie is having to defend herself on social media against hateful and threatening comments. The news media wants to interview her and push her to speak out.

Millie is a quiet and private person, just as I was at that age. I liked being a wallflower and not being noticed. One day in a high school class, I was stung by a bee and didn't say anything to anyone. I just



suffered in silence until I got home. I could not find the voice I needed to advocate for even myself. I cannot imagine at that age having the courage that Millie must find. She meets Susanna, a young undocumented high school senior who courageously speaks out at a rally despite the possibility of deportation. Eventually, Millie finds the courage to tell her story.

I wanted to write this book for two reasons. First, I wanted to examine and detail the feelings of shame that build up when powerful voices around you denigrate you for being undocumented. Second, I wanted to highlight the courage of young people that I could never find at that age. I am continually impressed by young people speaking out. A few years ago, a student in California spoke in her valedictorian's speech about being undocumented. The March for Our Lives group created a movement that was heard the world over. High school students in Florida walked out of school in protest of their state's anti-LGBT legislation. Young people inspire me because I lacked courage at that age, and it is my wish now to capture it on the page.

I would like to thank the American Library Association, the Pura Belpré committee, ALSC, REFORMA, and YALSA. Thank you to my agent, Kathy Green, and to everyone at Lerner Publishing. The biggest thanks goes to my family. My sister and I have helped each other develop our creativity since we were young girls, creating fan fiction for the soap operas that helped us learn English. She continues to push me in improving my writing even now. Thank you to my husband who has been supportive since the first day I told him I want to write a book. A huge thanks to my sons for giving me the job title I love the most. Gracias a mis padres. I'm grateful for my parents' sacrifice to leave behind their beloved home country of Guatemala and to bring me here in search of a better life. I am truly blessed to live this wonderful life.

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