Board Member Jessica Flores is an attorney and serves as Family Law Facilitator for Sonoma's Family Law Court. She's a long way from La Feria, a small South Texas border town of 4000 not far from Brownsville in the Lower Rio Grande Valley.

Jessica says that until the last fifteen or so years the border was very fluid with cousins living sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other. Even though La Feria was 90% Mexican-Americans, the old Caucasian power structure was still in place. "Pretty much all our instructors were Caucasian, the mayor was Caucasian, and mostly business owners were Caucasian. It was probably when I was in high school or college things started to change a bit." When she was in high school the school board changed hands from historically Caucasian make-up to a majority of Latinos. "That was a really big deal!"

Her parents grew up in the 1960's, were influenced by La Raza movement and made the conscious decision that she would speak Spanish first. This was fine until she started school and didn't know how to tell the teacher she needed to go to the bathroom. Her parents were called in and chastised by the teacher. Trying to address the situation, they did a complete turn-around and began speaking to her only in English. "So I lost my ability to speak Spanish. They were young parents—I'm sure they thought they had cursed me."

Not speaking Spanish became a burden growing up. "It was a real source of embarrassment that I didn't speak Spanish very well. I think it's fairly common. I think second and third generation immigrant groups start losing the native language. It's unfortunate because you really lose the ability to talk with other generations.... It was also a source of embarrassment with other Latino and other Mexican-Americans. It was like, you don't know Spanish?—Your own ethnic group passing judgment towards you, even family members. And you not even having a choice in the matter!" In the years since her childhood Jessica relearned Spanish and is now totally bilingual. "Language is a huge connector—a huge connector among people."

An articulate feminist, Jessica says she's a female before anything else. "Sometimes, you tend to subsume your needs as a female for the larger sort of ethnic struggle. And I don't appreciate that—it really doesn't sit well. I found that my natural leaning was that I needed to do and be whatever I needed to be happy as a female first. Then everything else kind of falls into place."

Education was very important in her family. She remembers her grandparents being especially supportive and realized early on that it was her ticket to the world outside. After attending the University of Texas at Austin she applied to law school and was accepted at UCLA. She was excited because she had met some Latino students from California who were interesting and progressive. Jessica "had a crazy, magical notion of California being this vanguard of liberalism and this fantastic place to go."

When she arrived at UCLA, the campus did not disappoint. The law school was incredibly diverse. She met people from all across the country and the world. What Jessica wasn't prepared for was Los Angeles and the times. As she began law school, Proposition 187 was the hot topic. "I was in a public bus going to classes and struck up a conversation with this gentleman sitting next to me and this issue came up (Prop 187) and I've never had anybody, a complete stranger, just yelling at me—just very nasty comments about these people being here. It was really nasty, really embarrassing."

As if the Proposition 187 controversy wasn't enough, mid-way through law school was when the UC Regents were changing admission policies. "It was not necessarily unique to California, but I think the difference was that in California it was coming from within. It was coming from the
UC Regents whereas in the other states it was coming from the students. They were being sued by students who didn't get admitted."

After law school Jessica moved to the Bay Area where she had some friends. When she was offered a job with Perry, Miller & Johnson she decided to move to Santa Rosa. She spent five years working hard as an associate, had some wonderful mentors, and learned a lot. When she was offered a job as Family Law Facilitator for the Sonoma County Family Law Court she decided to make a change. For her it's been a very good fit. She works with a dedicated staff and now has time to become involved with community activities.

"Overall Sonoma County is probably one of the most liberal and most accepting places I've ever lived in. I'm really impressed with the attitude here at the Courts and the people that I work closely with in terms of their consciousness and their acceptance and understanding of other groups and where their alliances lie. That being said there are certainly odd pockets, even here at the courts, that you're sort of amazed at people's comments. Even in this day and age some of people's racist comments strike you as odd."

"It's frankly, very segregated. It's where people live and how the cultures divide. I'm not sure it's unique to Sonoma County. It was like that in Austin when I went to school there. It was like that in LA. Maybe not so much San Francisco, though it certainly had its pockets. Oakland. I don't know the root of that. I don't know if there were covenants in certain neighborhoods that allowed for movement or not between other groups. I don't know if it's a function of economics, expensive homes, what have you."

"I think that there are a lot of things we can't change. There are a lot of others forces out there that are beyond our control like economic forces and things of that nature. I think that a lot of this attitude change is with one person at a time. In my opinion that's the best way to look at it. It is the conversation that we have with other people. It's the way that you carry yourself. I think it's challenging people. As uncomfortable as that is, really challenging people and pushing their buttons in a positive but critical sort of way and understanding our own actions and what we do. Let me lead by example and talk to you along the way."

Jessica became involved with Listening for a Change because she wants to give back to her community, learn more about how to promote acceptance of diversity, and enjoy the camaraderie of "people who are equally passionate and get ideas about the way that they live and how they influence others." Our organization has much to learn from Jessica as well.