Big Dreams in Mexicali

Alicia Alvarez is a straight-A student who dreams of college. But like Mexico itself, her path to success is strewn with roadblocks.

By Tim Weiner in Mexicali

Alicia Alvarez lives two miles from the American border—and light-years from the American dream. Growing up in the city of Mexicali has made her a realist at 15. She has no taste for romances and soap operas. What she has is intelligence and ambition. She sees a good education as her only route to a better life. It looks to her as likely as a trip to Mars.

"It seems impossible," Alicia says. She has started high school and proved herself one of the brightest girls in her city, a straight-A student with an exceptional aptitude for math. "My family has no money for college. I probably will never get to a university, though I would love to... My education has been hard. My teachers are trained in teaching, not in math and science. It's a struggle for them to teach me what I need to be taught."

Like Mexico itself, Alicia finds herself poised with one foot in the door of opportunity and one stuck in the poverty and powerlessness of the past.

BIGGER PIE, MORE SLICES

Alicia's father works part-time selling used cars. He has good weeks and bad weeks. Her mother keeps house. They have provided their children with the basics of life: food, clothes, shelter. Their deep-thinking daughter is a bit of a mystery to them.

Alicia's uncle and godfather, Abel Alvarez, 56, knows her aspirations. When he was her age, he crossed the border to work the fields in California. He now earns a good living, a self-made man who builds malls in El Centro, Calif., just 15 minutes north of Mexicali. (See map, p.17.)

He has watched Alicia grow up with a mixture of pride and worry. "It's not a lot easier growing up in Mexicali now than it was 40 years ago," he says. "The pie's a little bigger, but a lot more people want a slice."

Mexico's economy has been flat for almost five years. Poverty is ever-present. The middle class is small, and has been shrinking for a generation. Sneaking into the United States is often the only way out.

Alicia has seen what is north of the border, having traveled with her uncle and cousins on short trips. But she says the idea of entering the U.S. illegally to live and work holds no attraction for her. There is no legal path for her, and she does not want to be an outlaw.

Still, Alicia sometimes feels the walls of her cinder-block house closing in on her. The heat rises above 100 degrees in Mexicali for almost half the year. When the little house gets too hot, too close, she finds refuge in books, or when there is a little money to spare, alone at the movies.

In Mexican society, a girl's 15th birthday serves as her official presentation as a woman. The occasion is traditionally marked first with a formal Catholic mass, then with the best party a girl's family can afford.
AN EXCELLENT math student, Alicia hopes to go to college but knows her family lacks the money to send her.

Alicia’s party last year was held in an electricians’ union hall. A D.J. played Eminem. Many of the girls danced in a tight circle, dressed in tube tops and tiny minidresses, showing off dance moves copied from music videos. Alicia danced outside the edge of the circle, moving slowly in her white gown.

COLLEGE BOUND?

The party made her parents happy, and that made Alicia happy. But the ritual was a little empty, and the romance of it all felt rented, like the hall. She was dancing alone, a world apart.

She has once or twice held hands with boys. There have been “little kisses,” but nothing else, she says. “Boys are not what I think about, not that much,” she says. “What I think about when I’m alone is growing up. Because I have to grow up, I have to think about high school, and then how I am going to find a way to go to a university despite having no money [and] if I get there, what I am going to study.”

Mexico has made strides in public education over the past 25 years, but not nearly enough. Only one of seven children entering first grade finishes high school.

“Maybe half the students who finish eighth grade don’t have access to a good high school,” says Rafael Rangel, chancellor of Tec de Monterrey, Mexico’s most prestigious university. “We haven’t built enough high schools or trained enough teachers. It’s a terrible situation. Many of the kids who do make it through high school have no access to a university... There’s no bigger problem in Mexico.”

If Alicia is struggling for answers, so is her country. Her life is a long list of questions, including what she will be when she grows up.

“Maybe the best I can hope for is to find a teacher in high school who can teach me accounting, and then a job keeping the books at some business,” she says. “Still, I would love to be a real scholar, to go to a university and make my life better than that.”