

FATIMA SALGADO

“Echalé ganas, mija. Tu vienes de una familia fuerte. Sigué luchando.” Keep fighting; you come from a family of fighters. This is what my *abuelita* Sarita tells me before I board a small van on the start of my trip back to Chicago from Olinala, Guerrero. The road back to Mexico City is about nine hours using the old road. That is nine hours of reflection of what I was going to take from that journey. Nine hours is a lot shorter than how long it is taking me to fulfill my goal to be an educator.

I have come across several significant obstacles in the process of attaining my Bachelor’s Degree. The obstacles have accumulated over time, starting with when I entered the Chicago Public School system as a kindergartner; not in first grade where I was suppose to be. The school I attended was Avondale Elementary on Kedzie and Wellington. The school was aware that I was a Spanish speaker and needed to be in some sort of Dual Language transition program. This support was not granted to me until I finished the second quarter of second grade. My teacher took me outside of the classroom while we were working on a project and said, “Give this form to your parents, tell them to sign it, and bring it back tomorrow.” I understood what she said because of all of the papers we had to take home throughout the school year. On the top of the paper it had bold lettering that said “After School English Program.” My English at that point was based on repeating the dialogue of Marc Brown’s cartoon show, *Arthur*, on WTTW Kids Channel 11. So, I was able to tell my parents at home what “after school program” meant.

My parents decided to move to Gage Park, a South Side neighborhood in Chicago, when I was in the middle of third grade. My English was better, but I still had to be on my toes. Whenever a teacher spoke, my mind made everything move in slow motion. I could distinguish the slurred sounds, the high pitches, and enunciations of how each person in the classroom spoke this mysterious language. Maybe that’s why I

developed a skill for distinguishing musical instruments just based on their sound. The school that was a block away from my new house was Sandoval Elementary. At the time, it was very overpopulated and students had to wait two to three years for a seat. Due to that predicament, I transferred to St. Nicholas of Tolentine to finish third grade, and then to Rachel Carson Elementary for fifth and sixth grade. This was the school I felt confident in my academics. My fourth grade teacher was Ms. Chapa; she would speak to me in Spanish and was happy to meet my parents as I pulled them eagerly through her classroom door during report card pick up. My sixth grade teacher, Ms. Kemp, did not speak Spanish. Yet, she encouraged me to enter a competition where I had to present a passage from Christopher Paul Curtis's book, *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. She spent hours after school every week helping me with my struggle to pronounce certain words that were not in my developing vocabulary. Ms. Kemp and Ms. Chapa were my positive reinforcement.

Apart from the language being a barrier that affected my speech and test scores on standardized tests, financial help was nowhere in sight after high school. I graduated with a 4.0 from John Hancock High school, a 20 on my ACT, and college credits from passing Advance Placement classes. I wondered, what was wrong with me that I did not deserve at least enough funds for one semester? Navigating through secondary education was a struggle for me and now I had to do it again with a higher education institution. But like my father always told me, "Va aver situaciones que vas a trabajar muy duro, tu sabes que te lo mereces, pero todavia no es el tiempo, sigue luchando. Lo vas a lograr."

My family has generations upon generations of hard workers. We come from the la *tierra que tiembla*, or the land that quakes. My world has been very shaky, almost as if

it really wants me to stay on the warm ground and not get up to try again. Yet, I have family members and people who have joined my family along the way who remind me to not forget about my roots for they will help me find what I am looking for. And I have really strong knees, too.

My mother has been hurt many times, but her faith keeps her strong. She was very insecure as a child and struggled in school all the way to college. Her father worked as a butcher and continues to do so at the age of 84. Her mother had a small grocery store in her home where she managed it and took care of her seven children. Their life in the state of Guerrero was difficult, but my mother's parents always found a way. My mother did not want to see her parents continue to struggle to pay for the education of her siblings along with hers. At the age of 18, my mother packed her bags and moved in with her older brother and sister in the city of Puebla. They would go to school in the morning, and work from noon to closing time, which at times was midnight. Eventually, she attained her degree and came back to her hometown in Guerrero to teach in the *colegio*, or the elementary school. She was 23 and was soon to be married to my father.

Now, my father is a very mysterious man. He is humble, hardworking, and loves to watch *Nova* on Channel 11. But his character can be very aggressive and stern. Working as a roofer for over twenty years has allowed the stress to take over him at times. The times that my mother needed my father to be understanding, it didn't go so well. The times I needed my father to understand the reason why I was coming home so late was because I was trying to finish a paper that was due the next day, did not go so well. He was worried about my well being. I have placed a lot of blame on my father. I blamed him for why I cry every time I see a father and son bonding scene in a movie. I blamed him as to why I cry before I even say his name. It took 21 years for me to tell him

that a boy had broken my heart. But all in all, his character taught me strength. The reason why we have accomplished so much as a family was because we stuck together, and he taught me that family is everything. I am sorry I did not continue to pursue swimming, but I am sure he is really glad I chose to pursue a career in teaching. I know this because he finally said, “I am proud of you” when I passed my ACT with a composite score of 23 (which is the alternative to passing the Basic Skills Test). He did not tell me that after I finished my speech for my high school graduation in 2012. My dad did not tell me that when I got my associates degree from Richard J. Daley College. The one thing he did do was bring me a bouquet of flowers when I finished kindergarten. So, passing my test, finally being able to continue my journey to be an education major, and telling me that he is proud, that was the biggest bouquet he could ever get me.

As a Grow Your Own (GYO) teacher, I plan to implement family values in my classroom. So far, I have accumulated experience in the education field by being a classroom assistant. I have witnessed a lot of young broken hearts. They express their dismay and disappointment through rage and being defiant. The hearts of these children need to be mended so they could enjoy their youth. When I think of my own childhood I see a small girl wearing her favorite white dress, playing in the whirlwind of the beautiful scent of the *linaloe* tree from my parent’s hometown.

My goal is to finish my Learning Behavior Specialist Degree in the next two and a half years at Northeastern Illinois University. Although GYO’s funding has been paused by the government, I plan to find any way possible to continue my education. I have made it this far by working three part times jobs and going to school full-time to attain my Associate’s Degree. Then I transitioned to working full-time as a Special

Education Classroom Assistant in Little Village and becoming a full-time student at NEIU. So I have no reason to stop. I thank GYO for getting me this far. GYO has kept me engaged in education and helped me close my own achievement gaps to make me a better educator. I am determined to do the same thing when I have my own classroom.