

# MARIA ELENA SIFUENTES

## **A Precarious Beginning**

I was born in Texas in the year 1964 to Mexican parents. My father left school at a very young age and had to work to raise his siblings. My mother was born in a family with money and had a maid and cook. She was raised to be a housewife like her older sisters, and her brothers had to go to school. When my parents came to the United States of America with their residency, my father worked as a trucker, mechanic, and a welder. My mother worked in factories. I was raised from the age of two in Pilsen, a neighborhood in Chicago's South Side. My mom told me that a short time after arriving to Chicago I almost died of a high fever at the age of two. She also told me that on the same year I got lost when she walked out of the grocery store and walked away from her. After dropping off my siblings at home she called my father and they contacted the police. After the police drove her around the nearby blocks she saw me in the arms of a lady who was waving the police car down. My mom ran out of the car and grabbed me from the lady as she was explaining to the police officer how her son had found me walking in the streets.

My mother was a woman of strong character. She was a housewife, a mother, and an activist. She actually fought for Benito Juarez High School to be built for the neighborhood children, meeting with legislators accompanied by other parents who did not want their teenage children riding on the bus for an hour to get to school. My father was a welder during the day and Mr. Mom during the night while my mother went to work. My parents have always been a great part of my life and have supported my decisions. My parents would always tell me that life would not be easy. They would say that there was ignorance in the world, even within our own race. My father has been my role model through the years even after he passed away in August 2003. I almost lost my mother five years ago but thank God she is still with us.

I attended Chicago Public Schools until the fifth grade. Then I went to Catholic school from sixth to eighth grades before attending a public high school. After graduation, I attended Richard J. Daley College for two semesters. My memories as a child are not very happy. I remember being molested as a child and bullied in school by other students and teachers. I also remember when I was in first grade my teacher flipped the desk over and almost hit my feet. I ran home and told my mother what happen to me and we returned to school so my mother could report the incident to the principal. I also remember when my third grade teacher would hit the girls on the thigh with a pointer, or punish a student by making them stand behind their seat and reach over to the desk and write the lesson. My mother asked for me to be transferred to another classroom that year. In sixth grade my friend invited me to her neighborhood and I was attacked by a group of boys for being in their neighborhood. I yelled at my friend for not doing anything, but then I realized that she was also afraid. I was also raped as a teenager. I later became a teenage mother during my high school years, just 15 days away from my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday. However, I never regretted having my daughter even after having difficult times as a young mother. I went to school, worked as a receptionist at Mujeres Latinas en Accion (a place that help battered women and men) and at a deli part-time. Most importantly, I took care of my daughter. It was a hard life, but I graduated on June of 1982 and my baby girl was at my graduation.

### **Building a Family**

In 1986 I met this great man and he was a good father for my first daughter. I gave birth to his daughter in May 1987 and birth to his son in January 1989. Sadly, in March 1990 my husband was deported to Mexico. That same year my father took my kids and me to visit my husband. After that I never heard from my husband until 2000. When he decided that he wanted to see his kids. I sent my kids to Mexico with one of his brothers a year later so they could finally

meet their father. I was very nervous because I was not sure if they would bring my kids back and I did not have the money to go and get them. It pleases me to know that he enjoyed the time with his children and that he was proud of how I had educated them because they were very respectful to everyone and well behaved.

In 1992 I started a relationship that resulted in me having a son in June 1994.

Unfortunately, I became trapped in a domestic violence situation and my children were being mentally abused. It was not until our daughter was born that I finally realized that I could not live like this. When our daughter turned five months I gained the courage to tell him to leave and he did without a fight. He still kept in touch with his children, but I had to constantly take him to court for child support. My children are all grown now. My oldest daughter married her long time girlfriend and my second daughter and oldest son graduated from North Park University. My younger son and daughter graduated high school a couple of years ago. My son wants to be a musician and my daughter wants to work at NASCAR. I am happy with whatever my kids decide. I have always had the support of my children. They inspire me to do my best and never quit.

### **Professional Aspirations**

I have worked many part-time jobs through the years: receptionist, cashier, deli attendant, phone operator, secretary, bus monitor, customer service consultant, and security officer; needless to say these jobs never got me anywhere. I felt that my work life was not advancing and I had to do something. While my children were still young I was introduced to an organization, Albany Park Neighborhood Council (APNC), which worked on issues that were a concern to my community and I became a volunteer in 2004. Because of my volunteer work with APNC, in 2007 I was offered an opportunity to join Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) and Grow Your Own (GYO) to become a future bilingual teacher in my neighborhood.

When I joined the program I had the support of GYO students and staff. While attending classes at Chicago State University I had students give me rides to school because I do not drive. Public transportation would take about two hours. I was offered tutors, workshops , a laptop, and books through the program. Everything became easier when the program was transferred to Northeastern Illinois University (NIU) because it was closer to my home. I was able to decide whether to take the bus or walk to school. I have enjoyed my time in school, but I have been struggling with the Basic Skills Test. I have been working very hard to accomplish my dreams of becoming a teacher so I can be a role model for my students. I also want for my children and my mother to be proud of me. Even though my father passed away in 2003 I know he is looking down on me, and I want to make him proud, too. My greatest inspiration to continue my studies is my father. He only completed the fifth grade in Mexico. He was a great dad and better grandfather; my kids love him and miss him very much. The grandchildren loved his drawings, and he amazed me how smart a man he was. If he had the opportunity to go to school I believe he would have gone very far.

I appreciate all that LSNA and GYO has and does for me. I am very disappointed that funds for the GYO program have been cut and suspended. I know that I will graduate; I just do not know how long it will take without the financial support. The candidates are not the only people affected by the cuts. Many staff, tutors, and advisors have lost their jobs.

### **Commitment to Community**

I believe that if one puts their heart and mind into wanting to succeed they can accomplish it. It is nice to know that I have a bit of my mother's and father's strengths to make a difference in the world. I will continue to work on passing my TAP test to earn my Bachelor's

Degree in Bilingual Education. My volunteer work at Communities United (CU) has also kept me invested in community issues. Changing policies and working with elected officials requires numerous meetings, actions, rallies, and press conferences. While volunteering with CU I was involved in many successful campaigns. In education I was part of the Greater Albany Park Education Coalition (GAPEC) as one of the co-founders, Renters Empowering Neighboring Tenants (RENT), Keep Chicago Renting Ordinance, and changing policy in hospital's financial assistance Charity Care program. LSNA has given me the biggest opportunity by accepting me in the GYO program. I was given the chance to teach during one of the summer camp classes that they were giving in a neighborhood school. I was honored with Certificates of Accomplishment from Communities United and Our Lady of Mercy, an award for Parent Leadership from Teach America's Children, and an award from The National Society of Leadership at Northeastern Illinois University. I hope that everyone who reads my testimony will realize that when people are given the opportunity and tools to make a dream a reality, it is greatly appreciated and makes a priceless difference in the lives of families and communities.