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Early Educational Experiences

As I look back at my educational experience I realize I did not have a clear vision of where I wanted to go after high school. All I knew is that I had to go to college and get my degree to feel like I had accomplished something in my life. I also could not let my parents down. I wanted them to see one of their three children with a college degree and a career. Although this was my intention, there have been many detours on my path to obtaining a college degree. Life took me in a different direction and I often walked aimlessly throughout most of my adult life experiences. For many years I thought maybe college was not meant for me until I started to question my future. Then everything in my life started to guide me in the direction of teaching. It was a career I never would have imagined myself doing but it brought out my passion and drive to educate the children in my neighborhood schools.

As a first generation Mexican-American female who grew up in the multicultural neighborhood of Albany Park, I had a pretty normal life. I lived on the third floor of a three-story building that belonged to my grandfather. My grandparents lived on the first floor, and my uncle, aunt and cousins lived on the second floor. My parents, two brothers, and I lived on the third floor. I am the older of two younger brothers. My three cousins, siblings and I enjoyed growing up together. While our parents worked, our grandparents would walk us to and from school a few blocks away from our home. From the very beginning the six of us attended the Catholic elementary school Our Lady of Mercy (OLM). Our family was considered to be one of the first Latino families to attend a majority White school. As the years passed by I started to see more folks of Color at our school, but the teachers stayed the same. There was not one Asian, Black or Latino teacher in the eight years I attended this elementary school. It was not until I went to high

school that I noticed this situation. I do not remember much about school except having pretty average grades, being too shy to speak in front of my classmates, and trying to stay off of my teacher's radar. Years later I realized I lacked the self-confidence to be a leader or state my thoughts and opinions in the class.

Reflecting on Family Upbringing

This lack of self-esteem stemmed from my home life. My parents were loving, responsible, and provided for our basic needs. They worked a lot so we would not lack anything. My father had a fifth grade education in Mexico. He worked hard labor six to seven days a week. When he got home, he was too tired to help with our homework. Language was a barrier. He spoke Spanish and his children spoke English. This was another reason why he did not read to us. Since my dad paid for tuition I guess he expected the teachers to teach us what we needed to know. My mother was born in Mexico but came to the Chicago when she was nine years old. She had no bilingual teacher or classes to learn English in school. She had no choice but to assimilate into the American lifestyle, picking up on the language and obtaining her High School diploma. My parents never had the opportunity to go to college. At home, the burden was put on my Mom to help the three of us with our homework. At an early age, I remember my parents argued about money all the time and dad coming home drunk on the weekends after work. He was a typical "macho Mexicano." He rarely had a calm conversation with mom. He had a hard time meeting my mom in the middle on issues. It got to the point that my mom just caved into my dad's ideas. I resented my mom for not sticking up for herself. She had her own opinion, ideas, and voice. Maybe because of this traumatic experience, my mother was scared to take chances. She hesitated making important decisions and taking action. All she needed was to have courage, self-esteem, and self-confidence. I did not come to this conclusion until a few years ago when I went to counseling. I realized my mother was my role model growing up and I

had developed similar traits. I would keep my thoughts to myself and be afraid to try new things. I became reserved, shy and non-confrontational. My low self-esteem and lack of confidence started at home as a child. My dad wanted to keep us sheltered and protected from harm. He believed in keeping our Mexican culture, language and religious upbringing. My parents really did not have hobbies they were passionate about. Our early exposure to cultural events such as museums, road trips, hiking, and attending theater or operas was the result of support systems like tios/tias, cousins, friends, and school. My parents were “do as I say not as I do” type of people. They did not know any better and they did their best to raise us. The best thing I learned from my counseling sessions was this realization about my family and the need to move on from the past and forgive my parents. I would take on all the good stuff I learned from them but get rid of the other bad stuff. It was up to me to change my destiny in life. If I am unhappy being shy, then I have to take actions to change that part of me. For the last 10 years, it has been a steady but uphill battle to undo those personality traits that have held me back from reaching my full potential.

Decision to Teach

My family experience played a huge role in my decision to go into the educational field. When my brothers were attending OLM, they started acting up in school. They were constantly in the principal’s office and their grades were suffering. They were diagnosed with a “learning disability” with behavioral issues. That was also why I tried to keep average grades so my parents did not have to worry about me. They had too much on their plate attending to both of my brothers. Eventually they were kicked out of the Catholic school and sent to a Chicago Public School that could provide “better” resources to help with their disabilities. My parents were stressed out with my brother’s low performance in elementary and high school. They had IEP’s and were placed in special education classes. My brothers got through the third year of High

School and eventually dropped out. As adults, I see them struggling to survive financially and their opportunities are limited. Life is hard without a career or college degree. I worry most about their children's futures because I do not want them to end up in the same situation as them. I believe EVERY child or individual has the potential to succeed in life. They just need the chance to develop their passions, gifts or talents. Often I see many children in the public school system fall through the cracks.

My parents did not give me a choice in the high school I could attend. I went to Good Counsel, an all-girls Catholic school located on the North Side. I was always the average B/C student. Since I was shy, I tried not to stand out in class. I was not involved in too many memorable extra-curricular activities but looking back, I should have done it. When I got to my third year, I had to start thinking about colleges and ACT tests. It is hard when your parents do not have the knowledge because they never went to college themselves. I did not have parents who could show me the ropes, or the importance of my grades in high school, SAT/ACT, scholarship applications, and extra-curricular activities. It was like the blind leading the blind. I basically had to depend on the school staff and counselors. At one point, my high school counselor, a white male, told my mother that I was not university material and should pursue a trade instead.

I graduated from Good Counsel High School in 1992 and was accepted at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). I barely got into UIC with my high school grades. So I took summer classes before entering in the fall of 1992. I joined LARES (Latino group) and the group helped me maneuver through the process of enrollment and FASFA. I felt so lost and confused in such a large school. I took out \$10,000 in student loans for two years of requirement courses. By the end of my second year, my GPA was so low that I dropped a few classes. I was unmotivated, confused, and unsure about my future. UIC was a big school and I felt like a number. I was still

struggling with low self-esteem, being shy and dreaded class presentations. I dropped out after the second year of college in 1994. I decide to work full-time until I figured out what I wanted to pursue in school. I always had in the back of my mind that I would go back to school and finish when I figured out my life purpose. I tried going back to school a few years later at Wright College, but dropped out after a year.

At the age of 20 I acquired work experience in many different fields such as the auto insurance, banking, and hospital industries. I worked full time for 12 years after attending UIC. By the time I reached my 30's, I was financially comfortable working as an Administrative Assistant at Rush University Hospital. But on December 2007 I quit my office job where I was making \$45,000 a year because I wanted more out of life. I did not have a backup plan but I knew I needed a career change and I took a chance. This was the most important turning point of my life. I left the stability of my employment with Rush Hospital in order to go back to school full-time. I had no idea how I would pay for my college education but I was determined to figure out a way. It is amazing how things fall into our lives at the precise time when we need them. I was offered a part-time position as an afterschool tutor in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) through the organization Logan Square Neighborhood Association (LSNA) and Americorp program. I had no prior experience working with children but through this opportunity, I finally discovered my life purpose. I had a special connection with these children! I was finally excited to go into work every day. The principal at McAuliffe Elementary must have seen the enthusiasm and professionalism I projected when I worked with the students, their families, and staff because he offered me a position four months later as a security guard for CPS. I was hired in the fall of 2008. Working as a CPS security guard from 2008 to 2012, I gained deep knowledge of what it takes to make a community school function. I also developed many valuable life skills and self-

confidence while I worked at the school. I learned how to communicate with the students and their parents by listening and understanding their needs. I also realized how much hard work and dedication teachers put into their profession and the children in their classrooms.

From 2009 to 2011 I took college credit classes part-time at Harold Washington and worked full-time at CPS. When I had enough college credits to apply for a teacher assistant position I applied and was offered a job at Haugan Elementary in Albany Park. I gained hands on experience working with English as Second Language (ESL) and pre-kindergarten students. I could have settled for a stable teacher assistant position and an Associate's Degree but I was ready to move my way up to a teaching position. In order to do this, I had to get a college degree. Thankfully, I was accepted as a Grow Your Own (GYO) candidate to attend Northeastern Illinois University (NIEU) in 2012.

Experience and Passion in GYO

As a non-traditional student, GYO has played a big part in motivating me to continue the road to obtaining my teaching degree no matter the obstacles. It has offered me the opportunity to continue my education through financial and moral support. Returning to school as an adult has its challenges. Working full time and taking classes in the evenings are exhausting but the cohort makes it easier to overcome these daily obstacles. As a teacher assistant I am grateful for all the knowledge I have gained, but it has been a financial struggle. If I could go to school full-time and finish my degree, I would do it in a heartbeat, but it is not an option for me. Every day I go to work, the children are my motivation to finish college and get my education degree. With my bilingual skills and many years of school experience, I would be an amazing addition as a teacher in a CPS school. I am looking forward to the day that I can make a huge impact on neighborhoods like Logan Square, Pilsen, Albany Park, or Little Village. I am invested in these

communities, the children and their future success. Many GYO candidates, like me, are committed to giving back to their communities and sticking around for the long haul. If it were not for this wonderful program, I would have never come this far in my educational career on my own.

So where am I now? I am four years in to the GYO program. I am currently a junior with 85+ credit hours and I only have the math portion left to pass on the TAP test this spring 2016. I am hoping to start the College of Education in the fall of 2016 and my goal is to graduate within 3 years. I will get my degree no matter how long it takes me. This will be an important accomplishment not only for my parents and me, but also for the children in my schools. They need to see the actual proof that even with life struggles Ms. Cornejo was able to reach her goal. As a teacher assistant, I play a major role in my student's lives. I want to be their personal cheerleader as they learn and grow throughout the school year. I want to give them everything I lacked in my own educational experiences. I get so excited to see the growth of each student throughout the year. When I see my ESL students at the beginning of the year they are usually too shy to talk in class but as I work with them they start to develop self-confidence. My students are not the only ones gaining from this experience, I also learn with them. I have come across different types of special needs children and have gained their trust in order to help them overcome their own struggles. I have a special connection with those children who sit quietly in their seats and listen to the teacher. I try to encourage and challenge them on a daily basis. I want to inspire them to be the best human being they can be. Not only am I teaching them factual information but how to be kind, respectful and understanding towards one another.

We, as non-traditional educators of color, can influence our school children. I think it should be our social obligation to do so. I will not give up on our children from neighborhoods

such as Logan Square, Pilsen, Little Village, the West and South Sides of Chicago. I believe they have so much potential, but need opportunities to explore the world around them. I want these children exposed to different ideas, given opportunities to try new things, to discover and develop their talents and gifts. I want to see them develop the love of learning and the lifelong learner philosophy. It is very important to reach them at an early age, but it is never too late because I am proof of it! There is nothing wrong with being a late bloomer. I believe each child CAN make a difference in their families, communities, cities and the world. I believe I have what it takes to be a mentor or a role model for our children. I have the heart, compassion, patience, and hope for every child no matter their background. GYO teachers have drive and commitment to see ALL our children succeed!