

# DIMAS HINOJOSA

## **A Love for Mathematics**

My name is Dimas Hinojosa and I am a Secondary Mathematics teacher who graduated from the Grow Your Own (GYO) program at the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP). There were a few people in my life who helped me realize I wanted to become a mathematics teacher. The first time I realized I wanted to become a mathematics teacher was when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. I realized I liked math more than other subjects. I had a mathematics teacher who made us compete in the class. He was always giving extra points for the students who finished their problems first. I really liked those challenges. Many times, I was the one who came up with the solution first. In this math class I also had a classmate who was really good with mathematics. Even though we were good friends, we were always competing when solving math problems. It was either him or me who finished the problems first. These challenges in class helped me realize that I was good at math and that was a good feeling. My teacher nominated us for the citywide math competition to represent our school and although I did not make it to the finals I was competitive during the event!

My mathematics teacher was not funny; he did not talk much about his personal life, but he impacted my life by his presence and his approach to mathematics. After I realized I was good at math I started tutoring friends at school and friends from the neighborhood. I really liked helping out. My friends were happy with the ways I explained math. I realized then I wanted to become a mathematics teacher. I wanted to give other people what was given to me. I wanted to help others realize that math can be fun and also that they can become good at it with the right motivation. To me it is really important to believe in the students no matter their background. I know that I would have never been the teacher I am now if I did not have the supports I had.

## **My Journey to the United States**

I was born in Abasolo, Tamaulipas, Mexico. It is a small town located northeast in rural Mexico (by the Gulf of Mexico and Texas). A little while after I was born my family moved to Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. Guadalajara is the third largest city in Mexico. I am the second youngest out of eight siblings. My two older siblings were born in Chicago and left Mexico to come to the United States when I was eight years old. When my older sibling turned 21 she was able to grant U.S. residency to my parents. In order for my parents to maintain their residency and hope to someday grant U.S. residency to the rest of their children, they had to live and work in the United States. They made the difficult decision to move to the United States leaving the rest of their children behind. I was 13 years old when that happen. For the following five years we lived with no parents. The older siblings took care of the younger to the best of their abilities. During this time we learned to cope with each other. This learning process was not easy and we had some serious fights. We dealt with alcoholism and drug abuse. We also had some people from the neighborhood taking advantage of the fact that we had no parents to look after us. For some time our house became the hang out place for alcohol and drugs. I remember my younger brother trying to stop me from putting myself in dangerous situations and he succeeded sometimes but other times he was unable to protect me. So I dealt with the consequences and ended up beat up many times. Through life's difficult lessons my siblings and I made strong bonds with each other. We also learned to be independent, to protect ourselves and to look after each other. We learned to be brave. We learned to adapt. Since there was no guidance we made some bad and even worse choices. One of the bad choices I made was dropping out of school when I was in tenth grade. After dropping out of high school I got my first job as a candle maker. Then I switched to working at a tequila factory. Even though these were rough times they were also pivotal learning experiences that made us the people we are today.

We coped with those difficult days in hopes of someday becoming U.S. legal residents. After I turned 18 years old my parents were finally able to grant U.S. residency to their younger kids and I was one of them! Three of my other siblings could not make it because they were 21 years and older and the younger children were next in line with immigration. Two waited another 10 years and the last one 14 years because he was married. In the end, my parents were able to grant U.S. residency to all of their children.

My brothers and I got to Chicago on a Greyhound bus from El Paso Texas on February 20, 1999. I was 18 years old and the only word in English I knew was “can.” I knew it meant to be able to and that it also represented the object can. As soon as we got to Chicago we started English classes first at a church and then also at a library. My parents and my four brothers lived in a two-bedroom apartment at Albany and 61<sup>st</sup> Street. My brothers and I started working on days we did not have English classes. We signed up at an employment office located near 55<sup>th</sup> Street and Kedzie Avenue. We worked different places. It was a different experience each day. I remember working one day in a fridge separating frozen meat, which was no fun. But at least I did not have to do this task by myself. I was always with my two brothers. I remember we took turns paying at the stores because none of us wanted to do it because we did not understand English. My older brother who had been in Chicago since 1994 knew English but he worked a full time job and was not always around us. Even though he was busy, I believe he did a good job showing us around. He made it a priority that we learned English. He tried enrolling us in high school, but they claimed we were too old.

Two months after arrival we found out about Chicago Job Corps (CJC), a type of alternative school. It is a boarding school for nontraditional students located on 3400 South Kedzie Avenue in Chicago. It also happened to have a bilingual program. We applied, were accepted, and in June 1999 we joined. My younger brother and I stayed there for two years.

During those two years we lived at the school and left to go home to our parents only on weekends. There we continued to learn English, got our GED, and became apprentice carpenters. After one and a half years in this country I was able to pass the GED in English. I find this really powerful now that I look back on how quickly it happen. While at the boarding school we made good friends. I still talk to many of them to this day. I have even traveled with some of them.

At CJC we also had dedicated English as a Second Language teachers who helped us succeed. We still keep in touch with our ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers from CJC even though they do not teach there anymore. One teacher works at Daley College and the other one at Kelly High School, but they still teach ESL classes. These two teachers taught me another thing about teaching. They cared about us and they looked after us. They were very dedicated. They not only taught us the language, they also taught us about U.S. culture and education systems. I remember one time our teacher went and bought things from Burlington Coat Factory, took us there, and made each one of us return one item and get a refund. I remember them advocating for us in the dorms when they thought we were unfairly treated. They emphasized our value and our rights. Thanks to these teachers I learned that teaching is not just about teaching a subject it is also about caring and transforming lives. They not only taught us a language they gave us tools for life in our new environment.

In 2001 my brother and I graduated from CJC and joined the carpenter's union. We started working as apprentice carpenters. We also went back to live in the apartment with our other two brothers and parents. With the help of my father I bought my first car that year: a red Cherokee! I needed it for my new job because I had to travel outside the city to work in construction. After we graduated and joined the carpenter union there were more of us in the apartment helping with the expenses. Because we were able to start saving some money, and since we were limited with the space in the apartment, we started thinking of the possibility of

owning a house. We all liked that idea so we started looking. That is when my older brother learned about the Neighborhood Housing Service (NHS) group, a nonprofit organization that helps new homebuyers in low-income communities. They offer affordable housing and they teach about finance. They help people get ready to become homeowners. In March 2002 we became homeowners and moved into a house with five bedrooms, two baths, a basement and garage. On December 12, 2015 we finished paying for that house in full!

### **Deciding to Teach**

I continued working as an apprentice carpenter for four years until I became a foremen carpenter. I worked as a foremen carpenter for a full year. Toward the end of that working year I started feeling unfulfilled. I was making a decent amount of money given my educational background (\$35 an hour). However, I started asking myself “Is this it? Are you going to be a carpenter for the rest of your life?” It is not that I did not like carpentry, but I started thinking I could do more with my life. I like interaction with people and in this job most of the time I was working on my own. I decided to leave my good paying job to look for other opportunities. I had no idea what I was going to do. All I knew is that I needed to leave my comfortable position. I had to let go so that I could grab something else. Many people could not understand what I was doing, and to be honest, neither did I. I just knew I had to do it. My father was mad, but even though he did not understand and neither did I, he ended up supporting my decision.

During the time I worked as a carpenter I also became a U.S. citizen. A friend suggested that I should become a U.S. citizen and gave me information on the Erie House located on 1437 W. Erie Street. He told me that they help fill out the applications for citizenship. I did the application and within seven months I was a US citizen. After this I left my job and within two days I left the country and headed to Montreal, Canada with the idea of staying there. It was a beautiful city. I was fascinated with the idea that this city has two official languages (French and

English). After two months apart from my family I realized I belonged in Chicago so I came back. It was fun exploring a different country on my own. There I worked in a cabinet factory, found a place to live, and learned little to no French. There I also got the bright idea of becoming a taxi driver. I came back to Chicago in middle August 2006. Right away I started preparing to become a taxi driver. I made some calls and I found out about the requirements, classes, and exams I needed to take.

During the process of becoming a taxi driver, I went to visit a good friend of mine who also went to CJC. She started talking to me about a great program that helped people who wanted to become teachers. The name of the program is Grow Your Own (GYO). The idea of the program is to create quality Teachers of Color from the community for the community by recruiting non-traditional students. The program targets teachers who will stay in the community, understand our students, communicate with parents, and value the culture of the students; teachers who will transform our neighborhood schools. She was telling me that she wanted to apply and that I had to apply as well. I was so excited with my plans about becoming a taxi driver that I did not consider applying to the program as an option right away. But she remembered that in one of our conversations in the boarding school I mentioned to her that I wanted to become a mathematics teacher. I told her yes I did want to become a math teacher, but not now and not here.

“She asked me, why not now?”

I replied, I want to become a teacher when I am older.

She then questioned, why not here?

I responded, how am I going to teach here in a language that is not my first language?” And the conversation kept going. For each excuse I brought to the table she had a great come back. At the end of the conversation, I ended up with no good excuse to avoid pursuing

my dream of becoming a teacher and touching people's lives. Both of us applied to the program and were accepted. A new long chapter in our lives began. I still became a taxi driver by mid-October 2006.

### **Preparing to Teach**

I worked as a taxi driver while attending college. It took me seven years to graduate from the program. I was not always a full-time student. At first I was afraid to take more than one or two classes because of my language barrier. As I started gaining confidence in my English skills there were semesters that I took up to five classes. I even took short summer classes, which were real challenges. I took the Basic Skills Test twice. The first time I failed the writing portion. The second time I passed! Going back to school was a real challenge but I am glad I did it. There were times in those years when I really thought of going back to my comfortable position of doing carpentry or just continuing to drive a taxi for pay. I remember in my classes not participating very much. I was very self-conscious about my language barrier. I avoided giving input on things. I was not sure that what I had to say would come out right. At some point I realized that, yes, English is my second language and that not everything I say will come out perfect. I also realized that people in general understand that English is my second language and they will make an effort to understand what I am trying to say. Another big realization is that I felt I was being selfish because everybody was contributing and enriching each other and I was only taking. I realized I have much to say and contribute. After these realizations I started participating more in my classes especially in my math classes. I attended a very multicultural university. As soon as I started speaking up I made a bunch of friends especially in my major. We had a big study group and we ended up teaching each other. Our classes were not easy but together we made it through them. We studied on the weekends. Some of us were good with

language, others good with visualization, and others very good at memorizing. All of our skills together helped us succeed.

The GYO program provided me with a forgivable loan that paid for books and class tuition. It required me to apply for financial aid and other grants and scholarships. Whatever the financial aid and scholarships did not cover the program did. The program not only gave me financial support for school, but we also had cohort meetings monthly that functioned as a support group. I still attend these meetings because they give me strength to keep going. In these meetings I realized I was not the only student who was struggling and that gave me strength. In the cohort meetings we made connections to other candidates and we helped each other. We talked about classes and resources. We shared knowledge. We were informed of the events that were happening in the community and were invited to participate in them. In these meetings we also talked about our mission of transforming education and connecting with students and families. Keeping the mission present also helped me not to give up. The program also provided me with tutors when I needed them. In my case I used the tutors for my writing. I also attended test prep for the Basic Skills Test.

I am really impressed with the strong belief the coordinators have in their GYO candidates. From the moment they chose us to be part of the program they were certain we were going to be great teachers. Their certainty that I was going to become a great teacher was a great factor in helping me complete the program. They provided us with opportunities for leadership in the community. In my case, I have been involved in the seize fire events in the local community. I have also helped Southwest Organizing Project keep count of the vacant homes in the community. These types of events keep us relating to the community even when we are busy working, studying, and looking after our families.

The GYO program has also greatly impacted my family. It helped me become a mathematics teacher for high school; something I dreamed of becoming, but never thought I could accomplish in the U.S. This accomplishment made my family very proud. I also think that this accomplishment is indirectly affecting my nieces and nephews. My oldest niece is now a junior year in college. My two oldest nephews are sophomores in college. My nephews who are seniors and juniors in high school are not questioning whether or not they are going to college. They are deciding which colleges to pick for their first, second, third and four choices! I believe that this program brought possibility to my family and is bringing possibility to the community. I strongly believe that programs like GYO should continue to exist. They not only bring pride and possibility for the families of the candidates, they also create teachers who understand the community. Teachers who are better able to connect with the parents of the students they serve. Teachers who will understand the potential their students have. Teachers who will show nothing but possibilities to the students they serve. Because the program believed I could become a great teacher I became one. I will continue the legacy. I will believe that my students can do great things and they will.

### **In the Classroom**

My first teaching year, since I worked in a nontraditional school setting, I had trouble with some of my students. I was always being careful and when they were not happy, I worried that I was doing something wrong. Also, when students complained to me I was always trying to please them. But I soon learned to overlook those things and focused on what the students needed and not on what they and I wanted. I started not to take personally the reactions of students. I started to have a constant positive attitude in the classroom, and at the end of the school year my students had the most credit recovery in our school. At the end of the year I ended up getting the Teacher of the Year Award, which is voted on by the students in the school!

I had a student with an IEP for mathematics. He was really afraid of working with math; he always left it for last. I noticed that he was really good with History and English. He liked to read and he was not shy at all. His argument for not being good at math was that he had dyslexia. I just told him you already know you have dyslexia. I know you are an excellent reader and also very smart. You should not read mathematics the same way you read other subjects. You must take it easy. Sometimes in math you have to reread a few times before it sinks in. Also, since you know you have dyslexia, just double check your work before you submit. You know the possible mistakes you can make. At the end of the school year, he ended up passing the class and on his last day he told me to give him the hardest math problem I had ever faced and that he would solve it for me some day. That was really powerful!

I also had an incident with another student. One day she overheard a conversation on a subject that she did not agree so she joined the conversation with a very negative attitude. She was insulting one of the students and she was being loud and rude. I wrote her up. I pulled her out of the classroom to explain to her why I wrote her up. She was not happy with me. For the next two weeks she did not talk to me. If this had happen in the beginning of the school year I would have been worried and devastated. I would have tried to make it up to her. But I had to realize that I was not just a subject teacher but I was also a mentor. After the incident everyday I would give her a smile and a good morning when she came in and I would say goodbye as well when she left. The same thing I do every day with all my students. I had to realize that since I am the teacher she was going to need something from me and I was going to be there to provide it. Eventually what I predicted ended up happening and she had tremendous respect for me by the end of the school year.

As I mentioned, my students in my first year were nontraditional students. They left high school for various reasons. I had a student who whenever things became difficult, her first instinct was to quit. Sometimes she even stopped coming to school. I ended up calling her and her mother a few times to get her back to school. She was 20 years old and trying to get her high school diploma. She had to get it before she turned 21 and was worried she would age out. She ended up graduating after several tearful moments on her part and countless words of encouragement from myself and other teachers. What I am and who I am is what I bring to the profession. I bring positivism into the classroom. I show students the bright side of things. I bring happiness. I also bring my open mind into the classroom. I keep calm in the case of chaos.

### **Looking to the Future**

When I graduated with my bachelors' degree I said I was never coming back to school. Now after almost two years I am convinced I am going back to school to attain my Master's Degree. A Ph.D. also sounds like a possibility! This is the transition I am working on right now.