

FROM BEING CONSIDERED AT-RISK TO BECOMING RESILIENT:
AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF ABUSE AND POVERTY

A Dissertation

by

ROSALINDA MERCADO-GARZA

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

December 2008

Major Subject: Curriculum & Instruction

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ABSTRACT

From Being Considered At-risk to Becoming Resilient: An Autoethnography of Abuse
and Poverty. (December 2008).

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This qualitative autoethnographic study was the process by which I, a young Latina, was able to evocatively and therapeutically write about the incestual abuse and poverty experienced from age six until the age of 17. It was also the method by which I decided to disclose how I moved from being considered at-risk and became resilient. This study demonstrated the basic tenets of autoethnography and how by overcoming poverty and ending a cycle of abuse, I was able to embrace the spirit of forgiveness. Insight into the discourse of a dysfunctional family is shared, allowing me to offer a message of hope, and shatter stereotypes. The study concludes that autoethnography as a process permits me to tap into new-found autonomy.

Autoethnographically, this study represents my life journey, but it can represent the life of many readers who have lived in the United States in impoverished conditions and/or have lived through physical, emotional, verbal and sexual abuse by family members or intimate others. This study legitimized and validated my story as a survivor. Consequently, the plot of the story focuses on the violent acts and conditions, not the

people. Focusing on the acts and conditions, while incorporating dialogue permitted me to involve the reader more closely in the story. I leaned on my doctoral studies to expand my understanding of the abuse and poverty I experienced (Holt, 2003). I found that resiliency was central to my life story.

Embracing resiliency empowered me to discover new ways of thinking about my life experiences, which included using a salutogenic approach, or a positive model that offered “alternatives to the deficits-based explanatory models of environmental determinants of health that have dominated the literature” to accept the raw and cruel encounters I was exposed to and turn my thoughts into a healthier way of thinking (Stewart & McWhirter, 2007, p. 490). Tugade and Fredrickson (2004, p. 320) would say that I obtained a psychological resilience to effectively cope and adapt, even though I faced “loss, hardship, or adversity.” Ultimately, I discovered that resilience is a “state, a condition and a practice” (Knight, 2007, p. 544).

DEDICATION

To my husband, Paco: Your words motivated me to keep my academic goals. In our third year of marriage, we moved from College Station to Houston. I wanted to cut back on taking classes so we could afford to pay our expenses at home. You reminded me that my education was a just and worthy investment, as was I. Thank you for believing in me and accepting me with all that I brought to our relationship. Also to my most precious gift of all: my daughter Gisele. My life has come full circle with you in it. It is my greatest hope that you lead a life with God by your side.

To my “adoptive” family: the late Luther Archibald and Cherie Archibald; Norman and Nancy Archibald; Enie & Richard Bourland; Jerry & Erma Meuth; Marilyn & Wayne Terrell. Thank you all for caring for my well being and holding me accountable to my commitments to you and the Lord.

To Sunny Glen Children’s Home: Thank you so very much for your spiritual guidance and financial support in attaining my bachelors and masters degrees.

To my San Benito Church of Christ, A&M Church of Christ & Sugar Grove Church of Christ families: I appreciate your guidance and support in my spiritual walk.

To my natural family: Although, this study is a story about the good, the bad and perhaps, the ugly of what I experienced when I was six through seventeen years of age. It is the latter part of my life that I emphasize the most. It is my goal to share my story of healing, rebuilding stronger relationships and trusting again for the sake of the children (ours and others, who may have had similar life experiences).

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To the members of my committee: Dr. Norvella Carter, who co-chaired my committee and never gave up on me even when I moved from College Station to the Houston area. It was your talk on resilience in my multicultural education class that led me to believe that I had more to offer to my peers. Also, it was your belief in my voice as a professional educator that formed the belief system I carry today.

Dr. M. Carolyn Clark, who co-chaired my committee, you offered your extensive knowledge in qualitative research. Thank you for your endless words of affirmation as well as for holding me accountable to meeting the high standards of scholarship. Your patience with my writing, understanding about my personal grief and constant concern for my well-being were some of the many things I will remember you for.

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Dr. Gwendolyn Webb-Johnson, I thank you for willingly stepping in to my committee towards the final stages of my candidacy. Your enthusiasm can be heard even via e-mail messages. I was blessed to have had you on my committee.

Dr. Carolyn Ellis, I invited myself into your class and hypothetically became one of your students in the *Ethnographic I*. I took your book and sat in your class for many semesters after the initial reading. I wanted to know all about the study of autoethnography. This method was going to allow me to discover who I had become

over the past 18 years since I left my parent's home and made the move to a children's home. Your accessibility and suggestions throughout brought authenticity to my study and guided my work to the very end.

To my friends and colleagues: When I started this higher educational journey seven years ago in 2001, I was a teacher in College Station ISD. Soon after beginning my doctoral studies, I moved to Houston to be an administrator at Amigos por Vida-Friends for Life Public Charter School, which I took on for two years. For the last five years of this study I have been working in Alief ISD. In each of those school districts, I encountered numerous individuals, who offered their unwavering support. Mike & Brooke Horak, Maureen Singleton, Sheldon & Nancy Barr, Dr. Fred & Mrs. Judy Zachary, Jose Alicea & Lesbia Ortiz, Patricia Hurtado, Diana & Daniel Piquet, and Ann Malone: I thank you for your words of wisdom, comfort and encouragement, which in turn made me a more resilient educator.

To my dear friend, Patricia Henry: We found ourselves in the same doctoral program and were able to form a great bond. I appreciate your honesty and critical listening ear. Thank you for believing that I had a voice that mattered.

To Linda M. Garza: Thank you for editing my dissertation in its early stages and for advising me to be more forthright with my story.

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Finally, to the Hardin family: I would like to thank you for taking me into your home soon after I left mine. Your patience, example and belief in me as a worthy individual will forever be incorporated in the stories I share with my colleagues, family and friends.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ABSTRACT	iii
DEDICATION	v
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ix
CHAPTER	
I INTRODUCTION.....	1
Statement of the Problem	2
Statement of Purpose.....	3
Research Questions	3
Operational Definitions	4
Design of the Study	5
Significance of the Study	5
Contents of the Dissertation	6
II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE.....	7
Embracing Resilience.....	7
The Value of Poverty	13
Writing Autoethnographically.....	16
III RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	19
Purpose of the Study	19
Methodology	20
History of Autoethnography.....	21
Telling the Story	22
Research Design and Methods	24
Data Collection.....	24
Data Analysis	24

CHAPTER		Page
IV	THE FINAL CHAPTER	25
	Dad's Condition Revealed	25
	Checking-up on Dad.....	27
	Calling Paco for Help	27
	Paco Reports on Dad's Current Condition	28
	Paco's Grandfather Passes Away	29
	Seeing My Mother Struggle with My Father	30
	Comforting My Father	31
	Planning for the Inevitable	32
	Watching Dad Overnight	34
	Emergency Room Visit	36
	The Outcome of the Emergency Room Visit	38
	Arrival of Siblings.....	39
	Dad's Death.....	40
	Returning Back to Work	42
	Monica's Call	44
	Informing People of the Previous Days' Events	47
	Imagining Myself in Ellis' Class.....	48
V	THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY	50
	Why Tell My Story?.....	50
	Let the Proposal Hearing Begin!	51
	A Story about My Niece, but Wait There's More.....	52
	Reviewing the Initial Proposal	53
	Revisiting the Past.....	54
	Living in the Hardin Household.....	56
	Conversation with CPS Lady	57
	The Decision to Move to a Children's Home	61
	Fumbling through My Native Tongue	64
	I'm Not Poor Anymore, but Mom Still Is. Now What?	66
	Embracing the Past, Accepting the Present.....	68
	Change of Course in My Proposal Hearing	70
VI	MOVING FROM BEING AT-RISK AND BECOMING RESILIENT	74
	Sunny Glen Facts	74
	How I Learned about Sunny Glen.....	74
	Conversation with Children's Home Director	75

	Family Educational/Work Background.....	77
	Inappropriate Advances at Home	78
CHAPTER		Page
	Implications of Living with an Alcoholic Father	80
	The Rebuilding Process Begins.....	81
	Conversation with a Cottage-mate	82
	First Christian Camp Experience	83
	Conversing with My Father.....	85
	Finding Peace Within	86
	Reflecting on Living in a Children's Home	88
	Revisiting with the Children's Home Director	88
	Setting up a Lunch Date with the Children's Home Director's Wife	89
	Getting to Know the Children's Home Director's Wife	90
	Investment in My Future	91
	ACU Bound!	92
	Reflecting on My Educational Goals	93
	Sitting My Parent's Down.....	94
	Financial Contributions Acknowledged.....	96
	Entering a Writing Contest.....	97
	Reconnecting with the Publisher.....	98
	Setting and Meeting Goals	100
VII	IT TOOK A VILLAGE.....	102
	An Article in My College Newspaper.....	102
	On My Own.....	103
	There Are Consequences to Cancelling My Counseling Session	104
	The Aftermath	107
	Meeting Mrs. Wright.....	109
	Sticking with Mrs. Wright.....	110
	Coming Full Circle and Ending the Other: Abuse	112
	The Archibalds in Abilene	114
	Should I Stay or Should I Go?	115
	McNair's Scholars Program	117
	The Meuths in Bryan.....	118
	Making Memories at the Terrell Home in College Station.....	120
	A Conversation over Lunch with Mimi, Enie and Casey Bourland.....	122
	Revisiting the Past.....	123
	Enie's Notes	126
	Mimi's Notes.....	128
	Rising Above.....	129

CHAPTER	Page
VIII VALUING THE EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY	130
High in Numbers, Low in Wages.....	130
Calling Mom to Comfort Her.....	131
Calling Mom to Find Comfort	135
Calling a Voice of Reason.....	138
What Matters Most.....	140
The House is Making Mom Sick.....	142
Mom, Do You Think We Were Poor?	146
It's All In How You Balance It!.....	152
IX RECONNECTING WITH MY MOTHER AS A MOTHER	153
Emotions Expressed through Writing	153
It's a Girl!	154
Mom, Look at What I Learned from Dad!	158
I Got Hurt Twice!	160
Chicken Pox = Two Weeks at Home	162
Hi, Mom. It's Me, Your Daughter	164
My Relationship with Mom Today	166
X SUMMARY	167
Reflections.....	167
Chapter IV	167
Chapter V	170
Chapter VI.....	172
Chapter VII.....	172
Chapter VIII	172
Chapter IX	176
Concluding Thoughts	177
The Role of Resiliency	178
The Charge to End Poverty	179
Reflexivity in Autoethnography	180
REFERENCES	182
VITA	189

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I began my journey to the United States of America as an infant when I traveled to the US from Mexico in January 1974. I was for all intent and purpose considered an illegal immigrant until I became a resident of the state of Texas when I was 16. For many years as a child, I would hide in a closet in fear of being taken back to Mexico. “*Hay viene la ‘migra*. Here comes (the) immigration (truck),” members of my family would say when they didn’t want me to go to the store with them. This was the joke that they played on me. I couldn’t wait until I was old enough to figure out how to become a resident of the state of Texas, so they could stop badgering me. I could not quite focus on my immigrant status until I found a way to cope with the abusive environment and impoverished conditions I lived in.

I lived in a house next to a car wash, in front of a public housing apartment complex that was by a main thoroughfare in south Texas. This humble abode housed my mother and father, 3 brothers and at least 7 sisters at the same time when it was purchased in 1976, from what my mother tells me. Two of my other siblings were already old enough to live on their own. I went to Bouie Elementary, Coakley Junior High and Harlingen High until the day I left my family in the fall of 1990. I moved to Sunny Glen Children’s Home in January 1991. I attended and soon graduated from San Benito High in 1992. “In a legal and ethical sense, the abused are always victims,

This dissertation follows the style of *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*.

because they were targets of serious maltreatment or even criminal justice. While the resilient may have solid control over their adult lives, most know they were victims as children” (Higgins, 1994, p. 289). Higgins continued, the resilient “understand that when they were young, they were ‘unable’ to challenge their abuse due to their inescapable dependency and developmentally limited degrees of freedom” (1994, p. 289).

I have been a professional educator since the spring of 1997. My professional roles have consisted of being a Spanish teacher, bilingual teacher, Bilingual/ESL Lead Teacher and an elementary school administrator. Currently, I am a 35 year old Latina, wife, mother and public school administrator in an urban school system.

Statement of the Problem

Many immigrant children who walk through the school doors have many issues to overcome: language barriers, social adjustment and learning how to maneuver in an ever growing public school system. I had to work on those matters when I was enrolled in first grade at Bouie Elementary at age seven. Ironically, I felt that I could overcome those barriers; although, it meant I had to learn systems that were much bigger than my mind could comprehend at a young age. However, I did understand that I could not overcome the poverty I was experiencing and the abuse I was living in at the moment of my primary school years. After leaving my household to move into a children’s home in my adolescence, I began to see the role that the larger systems played (i.e., public schools educate; children’s homes lend a hand; and higher education offers opportunities). While I experienced positive outcomes that the system offered, I became

interested in studying how the systems worked internally. I did this, so I could teach others how to find a way out of poverty and any form of abuse. It was at this moment in my life journey that I recognized poverty and the various forms of abuse in US households were not solely a concern I held on my own, but were national dilemmas (Daley-Harris & Keenan, 2007; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study will be to unveil my personal life experiences that prompted me to seek higher educational degrees to remove myself from poverty. I will also disclose some challenging moments as a young child that encouraged me to find ways to heal and discuss the sexual, physical and verbal abuse I experienced daily, while I lived in my parents' house. It is not the intent of this narrative to focus on the negative conversations or scenarios but rather to discuss the resilient actions that took place to overcome these adverse situations.

Research Questions

My narrative analysis of living in poverty and encountering abuse will revolve around the following questions:

1. What experiences did I encounter living in poverty?
2. How did my educational opportunities play a role in removing me from poverty?

3. How did the sexual, physical, and verbal abuse impact my relationship with others?
4. How did I move from being considered at-risk to becoming resilient?

Operational Definitions

For the intent of this research, the following terms apply:

Analysis of Narrative: The researcher takes content about the story and analyzes it (Frank, 1995, p. 23).

Autoethnography: Used as both a method and a text; “a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context” (Reed-Danahay, 1997, p. 9).

Narrative Analysis: The researcher understands that “to think with a story is to experience it affecting one’s own life and to find in that effect a certain truth of one’s life” (Frank, 1995, p. 23).

Poverty: “A standard of living below the minimum needed for the maintenance of an adequate diet, health, and shelter” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 219).

Poverty threshold: “The poverty line established by the government based on the minimal amount of money required for a subsistence of level of life. The threshold varies with the size of the family” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 219).

Resilience: A universal capacity of having “an awareness of the self-righting tendencies that move children toward normal adult development under all but the most adverse circumstances” (Werner & Smith, 1992, p. 202).

Design of the Study

Being that this study is autoethnographic piece of literature, I want readers to “keep in their minds and feel in their bodies the complexities of concrete moments of lived experience” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). Furthermore, it is imperative that “the reader becomes an active participant in the meaning making” (Glesne, 1998, p.41).

Autoethnography stems from an ethnographic philosophy that believed borrowing “the eyes of others to enhance our perspectives” was necessary; “at the same time, we should go on valuing our own” (Glesne, 1998, p. 43). Chapter X will offer concluding thoughts of what the story may mean for readers and scholars; although, “the focus will remain on the story” (Ellis, 2004, p. 198). It is the goal of this study to provide a perspective that concentrates on life’s challenges playing a positive role rather than as a deficit.

Accordingly, I framed my writing using a resiliency framework, chose autoethnography as my method of sharing my life story, and intersected my personal experiences with relevant research (Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Significance of the Study

The primary goal of this study is to consider how the role of exposing my life story played in transforming me and perhaps family members who may or may not have moved past our dysfunctional childhood incidents. Secondly, this study is intended to reach readers who have been abused, moved from poverty to middle class, are Latinos, educators, and/or scholars. Thirdly, I would like to acknowledge an audience of readers who have been silent about any abuse or impoverished experiences and are now bringing

them to the forefront. Consequently, this autoethnographic piece looks to share a personal narrative account of my experiences as a Latina, as a woman, as a professional educator, and as a doctoral candidate. Ultimately, this study will offer an analysis of what it is like being considered an outsider by most accounts (Bennett, 2004).

Contents of the Dissertation

Chapters I through III will use a traditional style of format when presenting the Introduction, Literature Review and Methodology, respectively. In Chapter IV, I express how I closed the final chapter in my rocky relationship with my father. In Chapter V, I revisit moments of my adolescent years when I moved into a into a children's home with my doctoral committee during my proposal hearing. In Chapter VI, I share flashbacks and instrumental conversations I had with many individuals who I came to know by living in Sunny Glen Children's Home. Also, I will impart how moving to the Children's Home allowed me to embrace my resilience. In Chapter VII, I converse with my now expansive "adoptive family" and professionals who supported me at some point of my undergraduate career spiritually, financially or emotionally to attain the many personal and professional goals I had set for myself. In Chapter VIII, I explore the lessons learned from growing up being at the bottom financially (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009). In some instances in Chapters IV through IX I reflect on particular memories. Those thoughts will be seen in italics. In Chapter IX, I re-examine my relationship with my mother as a new mom myself and discuss where our relationship stands today. In Chapter X, I offer general thoughts, reflections and recommendations.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Borrowing a term from the health field, the intent of this study is to focus on a salutogenic approach when sharing the many events and incidences that occurred in my life (Antonovsky, 1979). According to Antonovsky (1979, p. 123), a person's sense of coherence is "a global orientation that expresses the extent to which one has a pervasive, enduring though dynamic feeling of confidence that one's internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can reasonably be expected." Therefore, in lieu of thinking about the negative, a shift happens where the focus is on the positive or well being of a human life (Stewart & McWherter, 2007). It is not my intent to focus on the sadness, anger or despair of my experiences. Rather, in telling my story, it is my hope that the reader will have a more in-depth awareness of poverty, seek ways to practice resiliency in their day-to-day encounters, and foster a spirit of forgiveness of self and others when communicating, educating and/or supporting children and adolescents who have been abused and/or neglected. Keeping this in mind, the research that has been brought to this chapter will evolve around the resilience framework, seeing the upside of poverty and appreciating the art and science of writing autoethnographically.

Embracing Resilience

In establishing resiliency as my framework, I will use empirical research to support the process taken to move from being considered at-risk to being resilient by

exploring the following ideas: maintaining strong familial and collegial relationships, embracing poverty, and finding hope in education (Benard, 1996; Benard & Marshall, 1997; Garnezy, 1996; Henderson, 1999; Henderson & Milstein, 2003; Higgins, 1994; Knight, 2007; Stanford, 2001; Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004; Werner & Smith, 1998; & Wolin & Wolin, 1993, 1997). This autoethnographic piece will deconstruct my memories of living in an impoverished home and moving into a children's home. I will disclose the decisions I made along the way that led to me living an improved life.

Werner (1998, p. 2) declared that "not all development is determined by what happens early in life." In other precautionary words, resilience can not stand alone as a way out of adverse situations. Protective factors are needed. Wolin and Wolin (1993, p. 5) "believe that by learning about resilience, you can become resilient." Their words spoke to me as a survivor and gave me hope. I would soon be able to:

- master my painful memories rather than getting stuck on being a victim by rehashing the violence I suffered,
- accept that my troubled family has left their mark and acknowledge that the scars will not completely go away,
- comeback stronger by living a pleasant, healthy life as opposed to spending my time and energy in blaming those who harmed me, and
- break the cycle of poverty, violence and despair by putting my past in its appropriate place.

Wolin and Wolin (1993, p. 5) argue that children "of disturbed or incompetent parents" learn to "watch out" for themselves and are "able to grow in the process." They also assert that "troubled families are not knit together. When members gather, they intensify each other's misery in cold, hollow interchanges or fights." Being resilient is not automatic. The process involved in accepting resiliency as my framework for a healthier

living was a process I did not recognize until I was an adult. It is a process that I have learned to appreciate more and more each and every day many years after I left my parents' home.

Henderson and Milstein (2003, p. 15) also confirmed, "...resiliency building is a long-term process. A snapshot of anyone at any given time does not accurately convey the capacity within to become more resilient." They posited, "Individual effort is only part of the resiliency-building process. The resiliency research clearly states that supportive environments are also necessary" (2003, p. 15). Henderson and Milstein believed, "...resilient children have a sense of purpose and foresee a positive future for themselves. They have special interests, goal directness, and motivation to achieve in school and in life" (2003, p. 8).

Initiative in a young child is evidenced by the child's exploring his or her environment and in an adult by the individual's ability to take action...Insight in a child is evidenced by the child sensing that something is wrong in an environmental situation; an adult shows a more developed perception of what is wrong and why it is wrong. When a young child seeks to connect with others, he or she is exhibiting relationship resiliency; an adult with this resiliency has a complex set of abilities that enable him or her to form relationships with others (Henderson & Milstein, 2003, p. 10).

Additionally, Knight (2007) developed a three-dimensional resilience framework (emotional competence, social competence and futures-oriented) as a universal tool to explore and describe the concept of resilience for educators. Knight (2007) explained *emotional competence* as the ability to have an internal locus of control, sense of humor and positive self-esteem. Having *social competence* meant that a student would have the ability to engage in healthy communication, benefit from supportive relationships and was able to have empathy towards others. Knight (2007, p. 548) suggested that a student

who is *futures-oriented* was able to have a “clear sense of purpose and feeling that one’s life has meaning; sense of optimism; being able to engage in problem solving and critical reflection; and hav(e) the ability to be flexible and adaptive in new situations.”

Benard (1996, p. 11) maintained that “changing the status quo in our society means changing paradigms, both personally and professionally, from risk to resilience, from control to participation, from Eurocentrism to multiculturalism, from seeing youth as problems to seeing them as resources, from institution-building to community-building, and so on.” Some qualitative scholars may argue with my use of Thomas Kuhn’s concept of paradigm shift due to its scientific nature. For the purpose of explaining principles that help me find structure, my understanding of life as I knew it and developing a plan of action when setting future goals, I will use Kuhn’s explanation of paradigm shift when describing how it impacted me personally and professionally. Covey (1989, p. 29) explored the power of a paradigm shift: “The more aware we are of our basic paradigms, maps, or assumptions, and the extent to which we have been influenced by our experience, the more we can take responsibility for those paradigms, examine them, test them against reality, listen to others and be open to their perceptions, thereby getting a larger picture and a far more objective view.”

Covey’s Principle-Centered Paradigm is one that I follow closely. The principles of fairness, integrity, human dignity, service, excellence, growth, patience, and encouragement are “guidelines for human conduct that are proven to have enduring, permanent value” (Covey, 1989, p. 35). I learned about these principles during my first years in my job at College Station ISD. This was another moment where I encountered

my professional life merging with my personal. I am sharing this research and these thoughts here, because it was in this instance where I wondered internally, ‘What are the Archibald and Bourland families doing right in their life that permit them to experience so much glee and comfort?’ Even more so, ‘What can I do to improve my life?’ Covey (1989, p. 40) responded to my internal questions in this way: “People are intrigued when they see good things happening in the lives of individuals, families, and organizations that are based on solid principles.” Covey (1989) warns there are no quick fixes or shortcuts to principle-centered thinking. I decided to hold on to the principles he shared and grow on my own.

Covey formulated seven habits of highly effective people by defining habit as a knowledge, skill and desire. In my adolescence, many years prior to hearing or even reading Covey’s book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, I believed that the “knowledge” I would obtain in high school would be my foundation to meet my educational goals. I felt that the “skills” I had were self-discipline and my work ethic. Ultimately, I had the “desire” to succeed and get out of the barrio. Was Covey talking about the same thing? Covey (1989, p. 47) wrote, “Knowledge is the theoretical paradigm, the what to do and why? Skill is how to do. And desire is the motivation, the want to do.” Covey (1989, p. 47) emphasized, “in order to make something a habit in our lives, we have to have all three.” I wasn’t too far from what he said needed to occur to make something a habit. I forged forward with making positive habits occur in my life.

If we want to change the situation, we first have to change ourselves. Covey (1989, p. 18) believed, “To change ourselves effectively, we first had to change our

perceptions.” By writing about my life experiences, I have accepted that I cannot change the past, but have found a way to understand it (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Higgins (1994) characterized resilient adults as problem solvers, motivated to self improve, attained an education, involved in social change, and had a sense of faith and an ability to find meaning from challenges. Higgins (1994) found that resilient adults did not necessarily see themselves as resilient youngsters. Covey purported, “as we look around us and within us and recognize the problems created as we live and interact within the ‘Personality Ethic’ (or idea that there is something better), we begin to realize that these are deep, fundamental problems that cannot be solved on the superficial level on which they were created” (1989, p. 42). Therefore, a new level of thinking is needed, which is “principle-centered, character-based, ‘inside-out’ approach to personal and interpersonal effectiveness” (Covey, 1989, p. 42). Covey’s explanation of the inside-out approach as a process “that leads to progressively higher forms of responsible independence and effective interdependence” fell in line with my desire to become a more effective adult (1989, p.43).

Wolin and Wolin (1993) went from using “The Damage Model” of thinking to “The Challenge Model.” In the Damage Model...“troubled families are seen as toxic agents, like bacteria or viruses, and survivors are regarded as victims of their parents’ poisonous secretions. Wolin and Wolin felt “children, according to the Damage Model, are vulnerable, helpless, and locked into the family” (1993, p. 13). Wolin and Wolin’s (1993, p. 15) research guided them to look for a new model of thinking for “the number of adult children...who had not repeated their parents’ drinking patterns...” Thus, Wolin

and Wolin (1993) developed the Challenge Model. In the Challenge Model...“two forces are at work as the child and family interact. The troubled family is seen as a danger to the child, and also as an opportunity. Survivors are vulnerable to their parents’ toxic influence, and they are also challenged to rebound from harm by experimenting, branching out and acting on their own behalf” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p.16).

The Value of Poverty

The ‘poverty threshold’ is considered the “official poverty line,” which is determined by the Social Security Administration (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 2). The formula that determines “the minimal amount of money required for a subsistence level of life...is based on a 1955 finding that poor people spend one third of their income on food” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 2). Arguably the formula to determine the poverty threshold is criticized, because it does not take into account inflation, wide variety of cost of living based on location, etc... (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009). Garnezy (1996, p. 7) stated, “The danger to children lies in the 'cumulation' of adversities that exist in many families but are evident disproportionately in the poor.” Lewis (1998, p. 7) defined people who lived in a culture of poverty as follows:

“People with a culture of poverty have very little sense of history. They are marginal people who know only their troubles, their own local conditions, their own neighborhood, their own way of life. Usually, they have neither the knowledge, the vision, nor the ideology to see the similarities between their problems and those of others like themselves in the world.”

Eitzen and Eitzen Smith (2009) referenced Lewis’ theory of the culture of poverty stating in part, the theory explained why people were poor. The culture of poverty

blames a self-defeating culture, which in a sense can lead educators to have a belief system, or a self-fulfilling prophecy, of not having high expectations for the poor.

Another explanation Eitzen and Eitzen Smith offered as to why people became poor was due to the separation by social intelligence. Smart people marry each other and reproduce intelligent children; therefore, this ensures “social classes by level of intelligence” (2009, p. 13). Eitzen and Eitzen Smith challenged both beliefs to state “most Americans believe that poverty is a combination of biological and cultural factors” (2009, p. 15). Furthermore, Eitzen and Eitzen Smith (2009) believe that a solution to the poverty crisis in the U.S. can be found once politicians transform their way of thinking.

Garnezy (1996, p. 7) acknowledged, “we live in a complex world marked by deep-seated problems and many troubled families who share a multitude of risk factors that extend from genetic and biological influences to negative psychosocial factors.” “In troubled families, parents neither sustain themselves nor provide a loving environment for their children” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 23). Wolin and Wolin suggested, “the image I believe is needed is one that will make you proud, fortify against your pain, and instill the belief that you can live well despite a troubled past” (1993, p. 207). Werner and Smith (1998) coincided with the latter statement.

“Poverty is not randomly distributed geographically; it tends to cluster in certain places” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 5). “...The highest concentration of U.S. poverty exists in four nonmetropolitan regional pockets where the economic engine has broken down: the Appalachian mountain region, where poor are predominantly White;

the old Southern cotton belt from the Carolinas to Louisiana delta, where the poor are mostly African American; the Rio Grande Valley/Texas Gulf Coast, where the poor are largely Latino; and the Native American reservations of the Southwest” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 5). Eitzen and Eitzen Smith (2009, p. 7) stated, “...many people on the economic margins move in and out of poverty throughout much of their lives.” Garnezy (1996, p. 7) found that “in poverty there is a heightened possibility of poor parenting, family discord and breakup, inadequate health care, chronic unemployment, welfare status, and inadequate housing. Despite these cumulative effects, there are, at the same time, many impoverished families that give evidence of an effective struggle to escape from poverty.”

Bumbaugh (2009) suggested that in America we need to remove the two societies created by politics: the affluent and the poor. Bumbaugh reported, “Poor people, by and large, have accepted the reality that they probably will not escape the trap of poverty, but they continue to hope that with a little luck, their children might” (2009, p. 216). This optimism is not enough. How long would families have to wait to make this happen? Imagine the pressure the young shoulder knowing that their parents are waiting on them to become successful so they can pave their family out of poverty. We are an educated, resourceful group of people. The poverty cycle is not simply found in families, but in the systems created by elected officials who set policies that do not afford large families in particular a realistic way out of the poverty cycle. I challenge you, like I challenge myself to stop blaming the individual and seek ways to improve

policy for the sake of the children. Poverty has to be considered more universally than individually.

Writing Autoethnographically

Autoethnography is the method I will use to make my story public. In keeping with Ellis (2004, p. 32), my life story will evolve seeing that “autoethnography refers to the process as well as what is produced from this process.” This story will contain vital elements of storytelling (Ellis, 2004). People will be depicted as characters, and epiphanies will provide tension (Ellis, 2004). A “point or moral to the story that provides an explanation and gives meaning and value to the crisis” will be made (Ellis, 2004, p. 32). Thus, using a first person voice I will “showcase concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality and self-consciousness” as I have lived it (Ellis, 2004, p. 38). Accordingly, this study is assembled using a qualitative approach of sharing narratives, which examines “how the story is constructed...and the cultural context of the story” (Merriam, 2002). A psychological approach will focus more on the “the personal, including thoughts and motivations” (Merriam, 2002, p. 287). From a female perspective, writing autoethnographically gives voice to a group of individuals who were once not a part of this genre, much less the principal researcher in this method or style.

This study will allow me to embrace “writing therapeutically, vulnerably, evocatively and ethically” (Ellis, 2004, p. 130). Chapters IV through IX will embark in incorporating more conversations, adding light, sound, and smells (Ellis, 2004; Linde, 1993). The scenes will depict the impoverished conditions I resided in, which include many flashbacks (Ellis, 2004). Chapters IV through IX will also involve a “dramatic and

developed plot line” (Ellis, 2004, p. 141). It is my intent to show you how I lived, rather than tell you how I lived (Ellis, 2004). Nevertheless, I will “operate under an ethic of care” when discussing the sensitive issues involving my family and the dysfunctional acts that surrounded us (Ellis, 2004, p. 149). For instance, I have provided pseudonyms for some of my friends, colleagues and all of my siblings and parents. It is my intent to maintain a balanced perspective sharing experiences among the relationships that once were, and the relationships that I now possess with my family and how they impact me today. In doing this, I will revisit the conversations and experiences I had with my family and how they affected my schooling through a narrative analysis where I will be involved with the story (Ellis, 2004). Furthermore, I will also incorporate an analysis of the narrative as I tell my story, frame it with analysis literature and concentrate on raising questions about the literature, theoretical notions or perhaps generate new ideas (Ellis, 2004).

Ellis (2004, p. 31) explained writing autoethnographically to her imaginary class in *The Ethnographic I* in this manner, “It is part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture.” More specifically, Ellis (2004, p. 37) clarified, ‘Autoethnography refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture.’ A piece of literature, such as this one, is part of “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness” (Ellis, 2004, p. 37). Ellis explained, my personal story will depict “a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, refract, and resist cultural interpretations” while focusing “on the social and cultural aspects of (my) personal experience,” (2004, p. 37).

“Stories are the way humans make sense of their worlds. Stories are essential to human understanding, and (they) are not unique to autoethnography” (Ellis, 2004, p. 32). Like Spanier (1989) I would like to share with you my story of resilience but within my cultural context. From a linguistic perspective, Linde (1993, p. 25) posits that a life story “does not refer exclusively to a particular subset of stories, but also includes the connections that are created within each story and between the stories of the life story.” Linde (1993, p. 22) believes that a life story needs to incorporate “something about the kind of person the speaker is.” Also, Linde feels that the story must have extended reportability and “must either be unusual in some way or run counter to expectations or norms” (Linde, 1993, p. 22). Ellis (2004) offers four goals autoethnographic writers use to guide their writing. One goal for sharing my autoethnographic narrative is to evoke “emotional experience in readers” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). Autoethnography gives “voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry,” which is the second goal of my narrative (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). Thirdly, writing about my experiences acknowledges the value of my story by “producing writing of high literary/artistic quality” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30). Ultimately, it is my personal goal to improve readers’, and any participants’ lives, as well as my own (Ellis, 2004). I will use Linde’s stance (1993) and Ellis’s goals (2004) about life stories as I develop my narrative.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study will continue to allow the reader to visualize my childhood experiences of living in a home environment stifled by poverty and abuse. This study will include some conversations with my “adoptive” family, friends, counselors and professional colleagues about my educational journey and life philosophies. I will also disclose the dialogue I had with my father, mother and certain siblings when discussing my concerns about the abuse I was experiencing, plans for furthering my education, and revisiting poverty. The flow of the stories will remain continuous throughout Chapter IV through IX.

If there are any interruptions to the flow of the story, it may be due to the use of Spanish (in italics). At no point in my life have I had a conversation with my parents in English. I want to honor the authenticity of the conversations I had with my parents. Therefore, at the start of a sentence when conversing with my mother or father, I begin with a word, phrase or sentence in Spanish to remind the reader that I used my native tongue. An English translation of the Spanish word, phrase or sentence will follow soon after.

Purpose of the Study

As I prepared for the next chapters, I reflected on and accepted Linde’s meaning of life story. As defined by Linde (1993, p. 21), “a life story consists of all the stories and associated discourse units, such as explanations and chronicles, and the connections

between them, told by an individual during the course of his/her lifetime..." I have been empowered to share my life story...a life story that is solely mine. Therefore, it is not my intent to represent general examples of the experiences my family lived (Ellis, 2004). Rather, it is the purpose of this study to share with readers the complexity of my life experiences while exposing my inner most thoughts, feelings and theoretical notions about children who come from an abusive and impoverished environment.

Methodology

Since my proposal hearing in the summer of 2005, I spent three years collecting and reviewing the data. In the analysis of the narrative, I accepted Ellis' sandwich example where I built the final study with the bread of "academic literature and theory" in the beginning and end of the study (Ellis, 2004, p. 198). In the middle of the sandwich, I placed the meat or my life story with sprinkles of research within that narrative. I have provided pseudonyms for some of my friends who have requested it, professionals who served me privately and all of my siblings and parents, so there would not be any distinction between any one of my natural family members.

I have been forthright with the individuals in my family who are depicted in my stories by letting them read the portions where they were involved, and/or by telling them what conversations I have written about. It has been difficult for some of my siblings and Mom, especially if they acknowledged that they had ignored the abuse and/or chose to be a part of it. Nevertheless, they did not counter or stop me from writing. I can only theorize that those individuals, who were involved in the abuse or

blatantly ignored it, are well aware that I chose not to press charges when the abuse was reported and investigated by Child Protective Services in 1990. Although at times I feel that if my family hadn't wanted to be written about they shouldn't have behaved so badly (Lamott, 1993).

History of Autoethnography

Preissle (2006, pp. 686 & 687) started explaining the purposes of qualitative inquiry to her students twenty years ago in this manner:

First, it emphasizes description of direct experience and meaning. Second, it specifies conceptual framing while leaving open the 'what and why' of experience and meaning that vary by the philosophical, theoretical and disciplinary orientations that researchers bring to their studies. Third, I present it to my students as a theory–practice nexus where theory and practice are interactive and interdependent in the sense that Dewey (1939) advocated.

While we as humans have gathered information for many years, such as, Thucydides in Greece and Sima Qian in China, the process of collecting and interpreting have been less universal (Preissle, 2006). “The earliest codification of qualitative inquiry” located by Preissle (2006, p. 687) was in “Degérando’s (1969) colonialist but surprisingly empathic 1800 suggestions to French explorers for learning about indigenous Australians.” When Preissle (2006) began her doctoral studies, over 35 years ago from when she published this article, her interest in qualitative work was supported by qualitative work done by male anthropologists and sociologists. Preissle (2006) found that it was not until the 1980’s that qualitative research had become available in the field of education. Preissle (2006) posited that in some studies the research is marked and clear, like in ethnographies or oral histories. However, there are parts of the research design that can

blend together, as found in autoethnographies (Ellis, 2004). Accordingly, this autoethnographic study draws “across boundaries of methods, disciplines and fields” to develop this piece of literature (Preissle, 2006, p. 688).

Holt (2003, p. 2) wrote that an “emergent ethnographic writing practice involves highly personalized accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture” is autoethnography. Ellis (2004, p. 37) described autoethnography as a wide lens that zooms out to make visible social and cultural aspects of personal experience then zooms in to expose a vulnerable self that “may move through, refract and resist cultural interpretations.” Ellis added, “Feminism has played a role in the narrative/autoethnography movement” (2004, p. 47). Female researchers blended their personal experiences by beginning with themselves, make a personal connection with the study and use their own knowledge to assist in the process (Ellis, 2004). I would like to be a part of this history making experience.

Telling the Story

Why is one’s story important? Even more so, what makes it important to tell? This study is interdisciplinary in that the resiliency research can engage readers in the education field, the information I share on poverty may engage sociologists or social workers, and the notion of using autoethnography as the method to represent my study may intrigue qualitative and quantitative higher educational scholars alike. Therefore, not all readers who would be interested in this study are reading for the same purpose.

Yet, in telling the story I am able to break some ground. This autoethnographic study comes from the voice of a Latina immigrant, who has decided to become a statistic that goes beyond numbers. I have come to understand the adversities of living in an abusive and poverty-stricken home, as well as, negated a self-fulfilling prophecy from some educators that believed I was lucky to even graduate high school, resulting in my desire to continue attaining higher educational degrees. I was able to give a voice to my experiences in hopes that others would be able to do the same. As stated earlier, Ellis (2004) described autoethnography as a wide lens that zooms out to make visible social and cultural aspects of personal experience then zooms in to expose a vulnerable self. As I zoom in and out, the differences between my narrative and scholarly voice are at times blurred (Ellis, 2004).

Ellis (2004) herself had not begun using the term autoethnography officially until writing *Final Negotiations* (Ellis, 1995) where she discloses her life journey with then husband Gene. In deciding how to determine what was worthy of scholarship, Ellis (2004) recommended to individuals like me to write about things I was working through or trying to get over. I was definitely working through my past and attempting to find true closure with the old relationships I had with my family and former friends. Writing my story and interweaving it with theory deepened my understanding of the role autoethnography placed in a scientifically saturated research community, but most importantly it brought me full circle with my life story...a story of one who has healed and opportunities become endless and boundless. I no longer have to accept the limitations placed on me. This is one of the many reasons why I wrote my life story.

Research Design and Methods

I framed my writing using a resiliency framework, chose autoethnography as my method of sharing my story and research, and linked my personal experiences with relevant research (Ellis, 2004; Holt, 2003; Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

Data Collection

I reviewed the following data: high school and college transcripts, documents that were kept in files by the children's home, photographs, and a college essay submitted in a writing contest, phone and personal conversations, college newspaper articles, and E-mails.

Data Analysis

Frank's (1995) notion of *narrative analysis* is the best fit to explore my life story. Narrative analysis is a form of dissecting a story based on the idea that stories are analytic and taken as complete. While stories can be represented by an author in many forms, they can stand on their own. The researcher is involved *with the story*. This analysis recognizes that "the stories are the materials that...model theorizing – and living – with stories" (Frank, 1995, p. 23). As I interweave the dialogue with theoretical notions about abuse and poverty, I am able to understand how the experiences affected my life. In this study I focused on telling the story, framed it with the analysis of literature and generated news ideas about abuse and poverty. Plus, I sought ways to live with the story (Ellis, 2004).

CHAPTER IV

THE FINAL CHAPTER

Dad's Condition Revealed

“I got a call from my mother. She said that my *‘buelo* is not doing well. I’m going to go to the Valley, but I don’t know when I’ll be back,” my husband informed me.

“Do you need me to go with you?” I asked already knowing what his response was going to be.

“No, you have two weeks of school remaining. My schedule is much more flexible and if anything does happen, you can fly down here.” Paco was referring to my job as an educator and the need for me to make myself available to my students, parents and teachers as the school year was coming to an end.

Initially, I accepted the plan Paco laid out for us. Paco decided to leave early the next morning with the understanding that we would be apart for awhile. After an intense morning run at Memorial Park, I decided to make a one-day trip to the Rio Grande Valley to see Paco’s grandfather. I took care of some minor details before leaving town, but my decision to go would not have happened had I not gone running. Running gave me time to think things through more carefully and thoughtfully. I left Houston and arrived in Harlingen late that evening. The following day I picked up my mother so that she could go with me to the hospital. She prayed for Paco’s grandfather and mentioned how much stronger he appeared than my father. Later, my mother and I drove back to

my childhood home and chatted about our hospital visit as well as my father's current health issues.

It was then that she revealed that she was not sleeping but three hours on average a night, due to my father confusing his nights and days. Dad would sleep a few hours during the day, but stayed up most of the night and as a result kept her awake. As I was walking out to the front porch, I assured her that the family knew she was doing the best she could for dad.

Almost as soon as I arrived in Harlingen, I had to travel back to Houston. I phoned my mother to tell her that I had arrived home safely.

My mother was glad and offered up a prayer of thanks in Spanish. Then, she reported in a flustered voice, "*Tu papá se cayó*. Your dad fell. He fell from his wheelchair today and landed face-first on the floor."

Unclear of the details as to how the incident occurred, I attempted to assist my mom on the phone by asking mechanical questions, typical of those you hear on a 9-1-1 call: "Is he stable?" Asking questions in such a way would allow me to remain composed about the situation.

"*Se queja mucho*. He seems to be complaining a lot," she described.

"Does he need to go to the hospital?" I wondered out loud.

"*Dice que no quiere ir*. He says he doesn't want to go." This was often a battle my dad won.

"Keep an eye on him throughout the night. Ask Cristian to help you with a shift and call any of the other siblings if you need additional help to monitor him." We hung

up and I prayed for a good night's rest, as I knew I would need my strength for the next day at school finishing projects for the last couple of weeks of school.

Checking-up on Dad

"How was he today?" I asked, knowing my mom would know whom I was talking about. By this time it was 9 o'clock at night.

"Le duele el cuello. His neck hurts. I don't know what to do," my mom admitted in a panicked voice.

"Mom, I can call Paco to go by the house. He's planning to be there all week to be with his grandfather. I'm sure he's still awake."

Without hesitation she said, "Okay. *Te lo agradecería.* I would appreciate it."

Calling Paco for Help

"Paco, my mother needs you. Please go by her house right now. My dad fell from his wheelchair yesterday and she says that he's hurting."

"Well, why don't they call an ambulance?" Paco always seemed to ask a question in the times when an answer was needed. I knew he was right about my father needing an ambulance, but what my mother needed at that time was emotional support.

"My mother needs me. I cannot physically be there for her, so when I suggested that I call you she immediately accepted my offer. I think that she needs you there for support. The ambulance is the inevitable answer, but she doesn't want to be alone when it arrives." More often than he cared to admit, Paco was a pillar of strength for me as

well as for my family. My mother identified with Paco in the same way I did, and in times of trouble, Paco was the one to call and lean on.

Paco Reports on Dad's Current Condition

"Your dad's hurting, Rosey. He has a voice and can speak. He says he wants to go to the hospital," Paco stated matter-of-factly.

"Did you call the hospital?" I asked, waiting for him to confirm the unavoidable.

"Yes, your dad can't wait for the ambulance to come. He's even asking that we wheelchair him to the front of the porch so he can get on the ambulance quicker."

"He must be hurting. He usually never wants to go to the hospital."

"Your dad pointed to his neck. He knows exactly where it hurts. He said he's ready to tell the doctor, so he can fix it quickly." Paco was trying to soothe my fear.

"Do I need to come down there?" I asked as I paced our family room.

"Not right now. I'll check on him while he's in the hospital and I'll keep you informed." Paco was always up front with me when we discussed family matters. He understood that in dire situations I attempted to make myself available for my family. He knew they didn't need me right then.

"Thank you, Paco. I know my mom, or any of the other members of my family for that matter, could have called the ambulance, but it helps to have someone there to offer a voice of reason." I wiped the tears off my cheeks.

"I love you." Paco replied, accepting my words of gratitude. Then, the ambulance arrived, so we hung up so that he could be with mom, then follow the

ambulance to the hospital. His reassuring words lingered in my mind a bit longer and helped me in my sleep that night.

Paco's Grandfather Passes Away

Paco's grandfather died a few days later, so I flew to be with Paco and his family. I phoned my mother from the truck. "*Hola, ma*. I just got off the airplane and I'm on my way to Raymondville to attend a dinner to celebrate the life Paco's grandfather lived."

"Ay, *por favor*... Oh, please send my regards to Paco's mother." My mom sounded tired, and it was clear she couldn't attend the church services.

"I sure will. How are you, ma?" I asked.

She ignored my question and immediately blurted, "*Rosy, tu papá*... Rosey, your dad... He isn't doing well. He isn't saying anything."

"That's good. Maybe you'll get a good night's rest if dad isn't telling you off."

"*Quizás, estés en lo cierto*. Maybe you're right. But, he's not the same as before. He isn't moving his mouth at all." My mom wanted to be sure she wasn't leaving any detail out.

"What was she scared of?" I wondered. Attempting to settle her nerves, I said, "I'll pick you up for the burial services tomorrow and I'll check on dad then."

Sounding relieved she said, "Okay, I'll be ready in the morning. I'll see you then. *Hasta mañana*."

The concern in her voice troubled me.

The doctor sent my dad back home from the hospital with a neck brace within a couple of days after being hospitalized. My mom and sister Victoria had insisted that my dad would be able to bounce back if he were sent home sooner.

Seeing My Mother Struggle with My Father

I prepared myself for an emotional day, but I was determined that I was not going to cry at Paco's grandfather's funeral. I knew if I did, I would be forced to deal with my dad's most recent health concerns.

Dressed in a black dress, I walked into my parents' house, asking, "Mom, are you ready?"

My mom was nervous; she did not make eye contact with me and asked my brother Cristian to respond. "*Cristian, dile...* Cristian, tell her... your dad's not doing well." She was busy placing a seatbelt around my father's waist.

All Cristian could say was, "Uh, we're going to take dad to the doctor."

I was right there. I could see for my self that dad was not doing well. I bent down to my father hunched over in the wheelchair. "*Papi, soy yo, Rosy...* Daddy, it's me, Rosey. Don't worry. We're going to the doctor. You're going to be fine. Relax. We're going to get you the medicine you need."

My father was not responding. For the first time in a long time, I wanted him to tell me something, anything, even if it meant that he was going to curse at me. I could see why my mother was worried. My dad, the strong, vociferous man we once knew was now becoming someone else. I was scared, but I also sensed that my presence was

making my mother more apprehensive. I decided to leave and told my mom that I understood if she could not attend Paco's grandfather's funeral services. She wheeled my father outside while I walked towards the truck and shrugged her shoulders to indicate that she had no choice but to stay behind to care for my father.

I drove back to my in-law's house with a heavy heart. My father-in-law, Arturo asked where my mother was. In a shaky voice I blurted, "My father is not doing well. He's on his way to the doctor's office."

Arturo, seeing my inner struggle, suggested that I follow my mother and brother Cristian to the doctor's office. "Make certain your father is okay. Then, if you're up to it, drive to Raymondville to attend the funeral services."

Comforting My Father

I drove to the doctor's office. I walked in to find my father alone in the hallway among other sick patients. He was shaking.

Rubbing his hand and attempting to make eye contact I quickly reminded him, "*Papi, soy yo, Rosy*. Daddy, it's me, Rosey. Calm down, dad. I'm going to stay here with you. I won't leave you. Mom is seeing your doctor to discuss the medication the hospital doctor gave you." Cristian had gone to the restroom, not thinking that dad would be anxious about being left alone in a room filled with ailing strangers. Finally, my dad began to relax as I sat with him.

The doctor visit was worthless. The doctor could not offer anything new to improve my dad's condition. My mom did not make eye contact with me the whole time

we were there. Not since my childhood had I seen my mother as speechless and as distant as I saw her that day. I could sense she was hurting internally, having to accept that my dad's life was coming to an end and she did not want me to think that she had not done everything possible to make him comfortable. To ease the tension I decided to leave them and go on to Raymondville to attend Paco's grandfather's funeral.

Later that evening my mother had my brother Enrico call me on my cell to tell me that I needed to come back to Harlingen. I drove alone, leaving my husband to attend to his family in Raymondville. After a while almost every sibling who lived in Harlingen came to visit my father at his bedside. My dad moved his mouth a little, but the earlier fall from his wheelchair made it difficult for him to talk.

Planning for the Inevitable

Once the majority of my siblings left for their respective homes, I decided it was time to talk to my mom about the nonverbal exchange we had that afternoon.

"Ma, you appeared so scared when I came by to pick you up earlier. You didn't even acknowledge my presence." I stated sorrowfully, saddened by her distance.

"*Yo se*. I know, Rosey. It was almost as if I hadn't spoken to you about your dad's health. I didn't want you to think bad about me." My mother confirmed my preconceived thoughts.

"Ma, how could I judge how you take care of dad, when I live so far away? All I can do for him is visit for a while and buy him whatever small items he asks for. No child in this family can come back and question your care, because none of us are here

each and every day as you have been for dad. You feed and bathe him, change his soiled clothes, and have stayed up at odd hours of the night to appease him.”

“*Cristian, Victoria y Cesar* (Victoria’s husband) *me ayudan mucho*. They help me out a lot.” My mom wanted to give credit where it was due. She continued, “Somehow, I know you’re right, Rosey, but it was hard for me to see you see me having a hard time with your father. Cristian, Victoria and Cesar are used to your dad’s behavior and appearance. Sometimes, it is easier to tell you over the phone, or while your dad is sleeping, that I’m having difficulty with him than for you to actually see me experiencing the difficult time.” I sensed that my mom wanted to offer reasons for her actions.

All the while my mind was analyzing the significance of the conversation that my mom and I were having. My mom was used to hiding information from us. Since we were children I would see her attempt to maneuver a conversation so none of my siblings could question the role she played in hiding my father’s bad habits or poor behavior. Only this time, she could not hide that some of my father’s bad habits, like his heavy drinking and smoking, had finally caught up to him.

Feeling that we had a healthy adult conversation about the distance we experienced that afternoon, I began to explain to my mom our plans for the night. “Ma, Dad is going to die - just not tonight.” I did not want to be hurtful. However, after seeing her struggle to speak to me about my dad’s health, I felt that all we had left to offer each other was our honesty and directness about the matters at hand.

Watching Dad Overnight

Victoria was planning to stay the night. “Victoria, you have to go to work tomorrow. I don’t. I’ll stay the night. Don’t worry,” I offered.

Victoria was familiar with my dad’s routine, “I want to stay until midnight. Dad usually gets up, scratches his head a little and asks for water.” Victoria decided she would drop-off her teenage children to her home and return to our parent’s house once her family was settled.

In the meantime I spoke to my mom. “You need to go to bed, even if it is only for the three hours that you’re used to taking,” I decided for her. “I’ll stay up until sunlight. You can take over then.” I continued noting that our roles had changed.

My mom showered and napped. She woke up during her usual time at 2:30 a.m. to make sure my dad and I were okay. She saw that Victoria was with me; still tired she went back to her room for a second nap.

Victoria reminisced, “Dad didn’t move at midnight like I thought. I guess this is it, Rosey. What do we do if he dies at home?”

“Call 9-1-1,” I answered.

“I have always known that this day was going to come. And, I’m ready; because I know that God has saved dad’s soul and I have forgiven him for everything. But, I don’t want to be here when he dies,” Victoria stated, resolved in her relationship with dad. She waited for me to respond. Sensing that she needed more assurance, I suggested, “Go home and rest. I’m okay with being here if dad dies. You’ll be the first I call if anything does happen.” Victoria left for her home before the sun broke.

At 6:30 a.m. my mom woke up more energized than she had felt in months and relieved me from my post. I drove to my in-laws' house to go to sleep.

Without time to even dream, I received a call from my sister Victoria at eight in the morning. "Rosey, the nurse is going to call 9-1-1 to request the ambulance to come and pick-up dad."

"Why is there a nurse there?" I asked not familiar with my dad's schedule.

"She comes once a week. She checked dad's temperature and the thermometer read 106°. She placed a towel on his neck and head. The fever seems to be going down. I think we can control it," Victoria exclaimed.

"Victoria, do you remember when you asked me about what to do if dad died at home?" I asked, referring to our late-night conversation.

"Yes. What should I do?" She waited for direction.

"Follow the nurse's recommendations. Dad is not responding like before. You said this yourself. He needs to go to the hospital. You can't try to solve dad's health problems on your own. Let the nurse follow-through with her job." I attempted to explain calmly, knowing that the words coming out of my mouth were from sheer exhaustion from my overnight stay.

"Can you come?" Victoria pleaded. Remembering the conversation I had with Paco less than a week earlier, I realized that I was not needed for anything other than to offer emotional support.

Paco and I drove back to my parent's home planning for a longer stay in the Valley than we had initially anticipated.

Emergency Room Visit

While my dad was being rolled into the emergency room, Victoria made some calls to one of dad's previous doctors so that he could meet us in the hospital's emergency room. Dr. Orgothan was not available because he was out of town that weekend. His medical partner Dr. Maldonado was on call.

Dr. Maldonado arrived and looked at my father's health history. His kind, gentle demeanor aided in accepting the outlook he offered: "Your dad has lived a long life."

These words echoed in my head with familiarity. Often in my teaching profession, parent-student conferences would start with a positive, even though your conference usually had a more negative topic needing to be addressed.

"Yes, he's over eighty years old," I added positively.

"It looks like his bad habits have all caught up to him." Dr. Maldonado was referring to my Dad smoking two packs of cigarettes a day along with daily drinks of beer and brandy.

"Yes. We know he was an alcoholic and a long time smoker," I testified. My mother was next to me as I spoke with the doctor. I could sense she wished I would give my Dad a break when I spoke about his unscrupulous habits.

"When was the last time he drank?" Dr. Maldonado asked, attempting to assess my dad's current health issues.

"The last time *I* saw him drink was a couple of weekends ago on Mother's Day," I declared candidly. My mom was familiar with my honesty, but she was still not used to being so forthright with others outside of the family.

Taking my mother and me aside in case my father could hear, Dr. Maldonado simply stated, “I would be surprised if he made it through the weekend. Your dad has developed pneumonia and any liquid we offer him will kill him. His organs appear to be shutting down slowly.” I wanted him to stop talking. I wanted to appear emotionally strong like when I was preparing my mother for dad’s final days, but I felt my eyes welling up with tears when the doctor officially informed us of my father’s condition.

“What are the next steps we need to consider?” I asked, recording his words in my mind, knowing I would have to repeat them to family members who were calling to see if they needed to come down to the Valley any time soon.

Dr. Maldonado paused for a moment. He looked around the emergency room. Then he asked, “Where is your mother?”

Recalling her need for prescribed medication, I declared, “She mentioned she needed to get medication from the emergency room pharmacy and must have left so that she could obtain medicine to lower her blood pressure.” I offered a half-smile feeling overwhelmed by the care that was needed to maintain my ailing parents healthy.

He continued, “Has your mom decided on his living will?”

“We discussed it. I believe she is planning to sign the necessary documents so that the hospital staff does not resuscitate (DNR) should his lungs begin to fail him.” I stated with tears now running down my cheeks.

Mom returned to the emergency room and Dr. Maldonado updated us on the next steps regarding the DNR document. Hearing the news, all my mother could do was what came naturally to her: pray.

The hospital sent a representative to the ER where my Dad was waiting to be admitted into a room. I translated the major points of the DNR document.

My mom paused before signing and asked me, “¿Y Andrés? What will your brother Andrés think?”

Not surprised by her question, I responded, “Andrés is busy trying to find a bus that will bring him back to Harlingen from his last trucking job. Mom, you’ve done everything. He will understand that this is the end of dad’s journey. Dad was in the hospital earlier this week. How many more hospital visits will it take for you to see that it will be his last visit?”

“Yo se... I know you’re probably right.” My mom said as she reluctantly signed the paperwork, still worried about what others might think of her actions.

The Outcome of the Emergency Room Visit

My dad was in a coma for the rest of the evening and throughout the night. Paco asked me not to stay the night, but to go home and rest. Paco maintained my equilibrium. We agreed in advance that he would be in charge of taking care of my well being, when I had experienced a day full of emotions, difficult decision-making and intense moments with my family such as those of today. I was known for pushing myself a little harder than necessary in times of stress. If I was going to survive this ordeal, I needed to refuel. I left the hospital and my father in God’s hands.

Arrival of Siblings

My sisters Esperanza, Elisa, Deyanira and brother Andrés arrived the next day from the Dallas area. They, along with my siblings already in the area, took turns sharing words of comfort to each other and spoke to my dad announcing they were by his side. The only major change we saw that day was when my father closed his eyes tightly, as my mother called his name. He tightened the grip of his hand when my mom held it.

Relieved to see my father react to my mother's voice, most members of my family chose to go in different directions later that afternoon. Esperanza, Andrés and Victoria went to Mexico to visit my dad's blind brother, Aurelio, and attempted to locate our estranged sister Savanna in Brownsville. My brother Mateo and his spouse went home after their three-year-old son Diego assured his comatose grandfather, "You're going to be alright. You'll be just fine." My sister Monica, Paco and I went to eat dinner at Applebee's to discuss funeral arrangements. My mother, as well as my sisters Ramona, Dulce, Deyanira, Elisa and my brothers Enrico and Cristian lingered a while longer in my father's hospital room or went to the hospital cafeteria.

After dinner at Applebee's Paco and I returned to the hospital while Monica went home to rest with her daughter, Dora. Soon after we arrived, my mom went home with the majority of my siblings to grab dinner with intentions of returning, but after a talk with her over the phone she was convinced to stay at home and rest. My sister Ramona, her son Manny, Paco and I stayed the night in the hospital.

Dad's Death

Dad's fever was taking a long time to return to normal despite the technologically advanced blanket they had placed on his frail body to cool down his body's temperature. Around 12 midnight I asked the nurse and the orderlies on duty to check whether or not the blanket placed on my father was working properly. His body felt ice cold yet his body temperature reading was over 100°.

"Ma'am, we can only lower the blanket's temperature, but your father's temperature reading is correct," the nurse explained. She lowered the blanket's temperature to a very frigid 40°, but dad's ninety-pound body was not reacting to it.

After several hours of having the blanket on his body, my father's body temperature came back to normal. He showed signs of coherence as he coughed, but struggled to speak.

"¿Qué le pasa, Papi? What is it, Daddy?" Ramona and I said simultaneously.

"¿Quiere agua? Do you want water?" Ramona asked.

My father nodded.

I quickly went to locate the pink sponge stick, soaked some water and placed it on my father's lips. Dad immediately started choking.

"Papi, you don't have to do this anymore," I pleaded.

"Sí, papá, ya vaya con Dios. Yes, Dad. Go with God," Ramona implored.

"Everyone has already come by to see you," I stated, as I listed all the names of my siblings leaving Savanna's name out since she was not able to come see my father at the hospital. I was hoping he had not noticed.

“You have fought to stay alive for so many years. We weren’t ready to let you go before. We’re ready now. We have all forgiven you. We love you, Dad,” I continued.

As soon as I finished one statement, Ramona would back it up with another, “Yes, Dad, you have lived a long, good life. You have done everything to assure we’d all be okay. We will miss you, but the family will be fine.”

Seeing my dad’s last breaths coming closer, we spoke quicker and louder. Then, as if we did not have any idea of what was coming, Ramona and I stopped speaking to our father noticing a tear coming down his cheek.

Half asleep, Manny looked in amazement. Paco detecting that our cries were becoming louder placed his hand on my shoulder and said, “It’s going to be okay, Rosey.”

As soon as I turned back to look at Paco to see if he noticed my dad’s tear, I witnessed my dad grant us our request. With the last tear shed he took his last breath and the only thing remaining on earth was his frail body. His soul was now resting in peace.

My father passed away at age 84. His death came unexpectedly, despite the fact that I had been announcing for years to friends, colleagues and anyone who asked about his health that death for my father could not come soon enough. Immediately after I saw my father’s last breath, I felt a sense of relief. I shed some tears, but only to express how grateful I was that my father was no longer suffering.

Ramona and I hugged feeling that we had allowed our father to hear that he was there for our family for the good times. I did think about the bad times, but only to arrive at the conclusion that the successful opportunities or experiences my family members

had could not have happened without dad's decision to move the entire family from Mexico to the United States in 1974.

Returning Back to Work

I came back home numb from the funeral services held in the Rio Grande Valley. I questioned myself, "Was it really true? Did my dad really die? Even more surprisingly, how did I survive the turmoil unscathed?" Shortly after that, I would find out that my dad's death would not be so trouble-free.

Nevertheless, without hesitation I went into immediate work mode. I had already contacted my colleagues at work about my father's foreseeable end. I did this so that I would not have to answer emotionally charged questions when I came back. I still answered a few, and to my disappointment telling the story only opened a floodgate of emotions...emotions, I normally kept private and at home.

I did not forget it was my birthday, but I sure wish I had told someone not to make a big deal about it. Before I could react to take full control of my emotions, Mrs. Miller, the orchestra teacher at my campus, approached my classroom with her orchestra student group, The Birthday Brigade, to play "Happy Birthday" on their violins. Mrs. Miller was not aware that this was my first day back after attending my father's funeral. I sobbed silently and smiled at her thoughtfulness, but felt overwhelmed by all the tender hearts around me.

Brittany, who was one of my fifth grade students stood by me and said, "It's okay to cry. You can let it all out, Mrs. Mercado-Garza. It's supposed to be good for

you.” I could not help but think about the many times life’s situations or problems arose for my students and the numerous times I expressed, “This is life. Some things in life hurt. We need to know how to pick ourselves up, learn from our mistakes and move forward.” Not only did I expect my students to grow cognitively, but I wanted them to have the smarts to make sound social decisions (Benard & Marshall, 1997).

“Could it be that my student Brittany was reversing her role with me?” I smiled. Her words minimized the sadness. I accepted what she said, and turned around to my desk and shed a few more tears before I was interrupted by morning cell phone calls from my family wishing me a “Happy Birthday.”

I insisted to my family that the phone calls were not necessary since I was already preparing myself for a limited celebration, considering that in years past the only members of my natural family who called to send me birthday greetings were my sister Monica, brother Mateo and mom (after being reminded by Monica). Furthermore, how could I celebrate my birthday when I had just buried my father the day before? I needed time to absorb and think about the moments that I had just experienced—even though I knew it would not take long for me to move forward.

My family celebrated death like they celebrated birthdays. To them dad had lived a full life, so we needed to celebrate the life he lived. We needed to celebrate another year filled with blessings and only hope that many more would come. So, on this 25th day of May, Esperanza, Victoria, Deyanira, Mateo, and Monica ignored my pleas and called me anyway. It was Monica’s call that stopped me from crying.

Monica's Call

Monica stated quickly but genuinely, "Happy Birthday, Rose!" I always knew she was sincere when I heard her call me Rose, being that my nickname everyone else called me was Rosey.

She continued without pausing, "I received a call from Dulce at 6:30 this morning. I know this is not the most appropriate time to tell you this, but I have to get it off my chest."

Monica and I shared a common courtesy that when bad news was coming we would prepare ourselves for the worst, knowing that the truth would keep us honest about the relationship we had with each other but lacked with our other siblings. This type of healthy relationship was something I only held with Monica and my youngest brother Mateo. Needless to say, after my father's funeral I continued to find better ways to communicate with the rest of my twelve siblings, but still find it challenging at times.

My thoughts were interrupted by Monica's plea to listen to every detail of the conversation she had with Dulce.

"Dulce called to explain why you and I ended up paying most of dad's funeral expenses," Monica angrily recalled the conversation.

"There is no explanation needed," I thought, not wanting to hear Dulce's interpretation of our financial role in outlining and organizing my father's funeral expenses.

"Are you ready for this?" Monica asked as she prepared me for the conversation she had with her.

“I’ve been crying all morning, Monica,” I quietly pleaded for no more bad news. “Dulce thinks that you and I needed to pay for most of dad’s expenses, because we were his two worst daughters.” Monica spilled out Dulce’s revelation waiting for me to be as upset as she.

I did not disappoint her. I was livid. I was so upset that I retorted, “Monica, I thought this was going to be one of the toughest days of my life. I am so angry at Dulce’s ridiculous words that I am no longer sad, but stupefied at the gall that Dulce has to call you at 6:30 in the morning. Furthermore, I’m upset that she spent all night thinking about how to get back at us for her own insecurities.”

Monica continued, “Oh, I didn’t let her go that easy.”

“Oh, no,” I thought. Monica is infamous for her lectures and direct shots that hit you right where it hurts: your ego.

Afraid to ask, Monica reported freely, “I went off on her.”

“Oh,” I said, sounding aloof, but really wanting to hear how bad Dulce got it.

“Oh, yeah, I told her if she was going to go that route and insist that we were bad daughters, then I was left to question her role as his favorite daughter,” Monica said brazenly.

“What did you say to her?” I gasped and wondered aloud.

“I told her that she had no right to assume we were dad’s worst daughters simply because we spoke our mind and defended ourselves from him.” Monica added, “I told her that she had no reason to talk back to dad considering he gave her whatever she

needed and never sexually, physically, mentally or emotionally violated her in the ways that he had done to us.”

Dulce, seeming to want to plead her case insisted, “Oh, dad hurt me. He raised his voice at me.”

Monica was not buying it. “Dulce, please, you weren’t disciplined with a broom stick, made to walk to school when transportation was needed or touched inappropriately by dad.” This was a far cry from yesterday’s funeral services where I had spoken of my dad as a strong, determined, giving man, which he was, when he was not violating his role as a father by physically and sexually assaulting some of us to his perverted delight.

Dulce apologized, but Monica said that she did not immediately acknowledge it.

Monica was not letting Dulce go so easily, “Now tell me, what gives you room to talk about dad’s funeral expenses when you haven’t even given one dollar to the cause? Could it be that you are calling to tell me this because of your inability to offer any money?” Monica further dug into Dulce’s character and said, “I’m not the one buying Louis Vuitton purses so that others can think that I have money that doesn’t exist.”

“Ouch!” I thought. I did not want to be Dulce at that moment. Then, Monica came back to me as if the conversation had taken her back to the unpleasant moment experienced just a couple of hours prior to our phone call.

“I know I was harsh, but who the hell does she think she is?” Monica said rhetorically.

“I can’t do this now, Monica. I will call you later. I have students to instruct.”

“But,” I added, “thanks for the call. I am no longer upset and will be able to get through this day without anymore tears.”

And, I did. Part of the day I celebrated my birthday with my students and teaching partner, who organized the event. I received red roses from my husband. I called my mom to check-up on her. I was glad that she was still at peace with my dad’s passing. I went home after work emotionally spent. I asked not to be taken out to eat for my birthday, but to be given time to sit and relax while I found ways to communicate to those who were not aware of my dad’s passing.

Informing People of the Previous Days’ Events

Undisturbed by Dulce’s words, but touched by my fifth grade student Brittany’s sweet, encouraging words offered earlier in the day, I e-mailed university colleagues and professors about the recent events that had occurred in my life. I wrote:

I'm sorry I haven't had a chance to get in touch with any of you in the past few days. My dad had an accident and fell from his wheel chair on Sunday, May 15th. He fractured a vertebra near his neck. He did not recover from his fall. My dad went to his Heavenly Father on Sunday, May 22nd. I'm back in Houston and look forward to visiting with you.

Two of the members of my committee wrote:

Rosey,

I'm so sorry to hear about your dad. I lost my own father last year and even though he died after a long illness (Parkinson's), it was very sad. My thoughts and prayers are with you. I hope you are being extra gentle with yourself in this difficult time.

*Take care--
Carolyn*

~~~~~

*Dear Rosey,*

*I am so very sorry to hear about your dad! My heart went out to you the moment I read your message. I must say, however, I am so happy to hear he is with the Lord. I know the sorrow is beyond belief, but the Lord will lighten your pain when you least expect it. I did not know your dad, but I know you, so he must have been a wonderful person to raise a beautiful, dedicated, intelligent daughter in the person of you, Rosey. When my dad went to be with our Heavenly Father, I was so glad to be a believer, because it was the only way to have joy in the midst of pain. I think of my father everyday, but now - instead of sorrow, I smile and sometimes I laugh, because all I can remember are the good times and the joy of him being my dad. He was my gift from God and I am sure - your dad was your gift. Just think you can spend the rest of your life celebrating his life and the role he fulfilled as your dad.*

*You will see - one day, when you think of your dad, you will smile and sometimes laugh, because all the good times will overwhelm your thoughts. I am sure you know - the Lord will heal your broken heart. Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you. Remember, you are in the grip of HIS love.*

*With sincere sympathy,  
Norvella Carter*

I found myself sobbing again after reading their generous and spirit-filled words. Truth be told, I struggled with the interpretation they and others held about my father; along with the assumptions made about what a loving, kind, and supportive person he must have been, considering the personal and academic goals I had attained. My perception about our relationship was so different and much more complex.

### **Imagining Myself in Ellis' Class**

“What’s led me to sharing this story with you?” Some may ask. I reflected on a response to this question as I invited myself to attend Carolyn Ellis’s imaginary class in *The Ethnographic I* (2004). In Ellis’ novel she depicts multiple students who are

participating in a semester long course of which she shares ten class sessions. As a reader, I was able to see how the class sessions impacted students' lives differently. Multiple students' life experiences were depicted and analyzed. A few students still questioned the validity of autoethnographic research. I would add that as I invited myself to join her class hypothetically, my autoethnographic research became more alive and evoked me to share more openly about my experiences. Specifically, I restructured my autoethnographic research, because I wanted "to create an unfolding drama with developed characters that pull readers in to the experience and makes them care about what happens" (Ellis, 2004, p. 99).

Ellis shares multiple conversations with students before, during and after class sessions. In one instance Ellis (2004, p. xvii) is speaking to Valerie, who at the start of the story is a potential student, and is responding to Valerie's question, 'Autoethnography? What's that?' I waited for Ellis' response and listened closely, too. I knew I needed to know what Ellis had to share about autoethnography as one day I would have to defend my study and tell why my lived experience was worthy of being considered scholarship. Ellis (2004, p. xvii) said, "I start with my personal life and pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts, and emotions...By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life, as Reed-Danahay says." Ellis added, the importance of entering and documenting "the moment-to-moment, concrete details of life" as it was "an important way of knowing" (2004, p. xvii). I was ready to do the same.

## CHAPTER V

### THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

#### **Why Tell My Story?**

What is “The Final Chapter”? The idea of beginning Chapter IV of my narrative with the story of my father’s death occurred when I went to present my dissertation proposal to my committee almost two months after my father’s passing. I drove to College Station prepared with a long PowerPoint presentation entitled, “Personal Narratives: The Voices of Six Urban Bilingual Teachers in Grades 1-6 Public Schools,” reference books, and my thoughts. Later, I would discover that it was my thoughts and the conversation with my committee members that would veer me to the direction of writing this autoethnographic study.

My life story will inform the reader of the poverty, pain, anger, disgust, shame and outrage I experienced as a young child and into my adolescence and how those feelings encouraged me in my adulthood to share my story publicly. According to Ellis (2004, p.19), “not only your work, but your personal life is scrutinized and critiqued” when you partake in autoethnography. Acknowledging the critical assessment that surrounds autoethnography, I have chosen to move forward with my thoughts, memories and experiences and utilize those words for the completion of my dissertation. Perhaps this endeavor will also allow me to truly disclose a chapter of my young life that gave me so much ammunition to move onward and upward personally and professionally, despite the many obstacles I experienced. I am proposing that the experiences of my upbringing are connected with the new chapters of my life story. In making sense of my

story I hope to interweave my past with present life and find coherence between both. Doing so will allow me to see how my experiences correlate with the decisions I presently have made regarding my personal and professional lives. Even more importantly, I want to expose a story that inspires victims, educators, and scholars to embrace the tenants of resiliency when experiencing or seeing others in such angst.

### **Let the Proposal Hearing Begin!**

I feel that my current role as a doctoral student and educator have given me the voice to share with readers a sense of hope that comes from the stronger mind, healthier body and renewed spirit that I currently possess. It is with this vigor that I approached my proposal hearing.

I began my proposal presentation by stating to my committee members that in academic English, telling a story is direct and straight to the point, while in Spanish-speaking cultures the academic presentation style is different.

I declared, “In my experience, the Spanish speaker will get to the point after inserting additional information that the speaker feels would enhance the story, so the listener could have a better feel for the whole picture.” The concept works the same for written works. I mentioned that my presentation style would reflect the cultural context I was referencing. The committee members present were receptive to my preferred presentation style. Due to the university summer scheduling only two members were present to listen to and discuss my proposal.

I continued with my oral presentation by telling my committee members about my niece Yolanda's life story, while showing them a picture of my two great nieces and two great nephews that Yolanda bore. Ultimately, I wanted to get to the reasons behind my interest in conducting the study I was proposing.

### **A Story about My Niece, but Wait There's More**

"Yolanda is twenty-two years old and is the mother of these four babies." I have displayed a month old picture I took after visiting Yolanda in her new hometown just south of Dallas, TX a day after father's day in 2005.

"You see, I was supposed to be Yolanda. This is where my life was supposed to take me," I exposed.

"Obviously, I don't have any children at this time by choice. I'm happily married and have far exceeded my own and my family member's academic and stereotypical expectations." I stated this delightfully, but still carried profound sadness knowing that Yolanda was not in the clear emotionally or financially.

I wanted to make a seamless connection to the initial proposal I had prepared. I announced, "As I shared in the introduction of my proposal, I left my parent's home to live in a children's home to get away from the abusive and convoluted environment that surrounded me."

Dr. Carolyn Clark unexpectedly interrupted my words, "I felt like I did not get enough of your story in the proposal. I wanted to know more. Can you tell me more?"



Surprised at her request, I asked quizzically, “Now? Apart from what I prepared, you would like for me to tell you why I moved to the children’s home?”

Carolyn replied with care and sincerity, “Yes.” My co-chair, Dr. Norvella Carter had known me academically for four years at the time of the proposal presentation. Norvella nodded indicating that she too, wanted to hear my story of resilience and survival.

### **Reviewing the Initial Proposal**

Quickly, my mind was running through the words I shared in my proposal to see how I could further expand on my story. These were the words that I scanned through in my mind and were written in my initial proposal:

*My family and I lived in a highly populated Latino community in the Rio Grande Valley. Because I was an undocumented immigrant, my parents did not send me to kindergarten for fear of being sent back to Mexico; so, my public school education actually began in the first grade. On my own, I practiced the English alphabet during the year that I should have been attending kindergarten, because I did not want to fall behind. I can remember a time when my mom was hanging clothes to dry and asking her to hear my request to be placed in school. After promising to behave and to put forth every effort in my studies, I began first grade at the age of seven. However, I attended mainstream classes that simply did not acknowledge Spanish as my first language. This lack of acknowledgement became one of the many obstacles about which my older siblings daily reminded me I would need to overcome. After several years of public schooling and living in unfavorable conditions, I moved five miles south of my hometown to a children’s home at the age of 17. I completed the remainder of my junior and senior years of high school while living in the children’s home. While there, the financial, spiritual and educational support I received from the Home prompted me to think about life past high school.*

*Many years later as a graduate student, I heard one of my professors speak of resilience. The characteristics, traits, and philosophy of bouncing back from adverse situations shared in that class session confirmed the personal and school experiences I had recounted to my students when discussing what school was like for me when I was their age. As I made meaning of my educational experiences, I found that resilience connected my school experiences with the goals and aspirations that I had set for myself. There*

*were many times I could not explain why I was different from my other siblings. That evening in my university course, I heard the explanation that finally brought it all together in my mind. I was resilient. I had an inner desire to succeed, both personally and professionally. I felt that other teachers also have experiences that drive them to set and meet higher goals for themselves and so request the same of the students whom they teach.*

*I have been a professional educator for eight years (in 2005). In this short time I have taught students in grades kindergarten through eighth and have been an administrator for a charter school for two of those eight years. Recently, I left my administrative post to go back to the classroom.*

*It had been an administrative experience that was filled with turmoil, sadness and pre-existing dysfunction. I left the charter school exhausted physically, emotionally and spiritually. It felt similar to the experiences I had with my family in that there was no real sense of security, and there were many negative personalities that needed to be dealt with on a daily basis. Nevertheless, the decision to leave was calculated on my part and supported by my spouse, but a decision that was unheard of to those who consider position a priority. I wanted to leave the education field altogether, but how could I do that? I was in the process of obtaining my doctoral degree in curriculum and instruction. As it turned out my decision to rejoin the teaching field was simple. I wanted to teach students, who, for the most part, were as multifaceted as I was as a student. I returned back to the classroom in a last-ditch effort to regain interest in the field. I sought to recapture the inner desire to continue to meet students with diverse backgrounds and to teach them more than just the subject matter at hand.*

After a brief pause, I added, “You (plural, referring to both committee members present) were aware that my father passed away recently. What you did not know was the relationship I had with my father.” I began revealing more of my story. “My father and two of my brothers sexually abused me from the age of six to seventeen.” As those words came out, I could sense from their facial expressions that Carolyn and Norvella did not anticipate hearing what I had to impart.

### **Revisiting the Past**

Almost as if I was reliving the moment, I shared with members of my committee the last time that I was sexually violated by one of the members of my family.

“One late evening in the fall of 1990 one of my brothers took advantage of me sexually. I went to school the next day, but I was not acting like myself since I was silent throughout the morning. My girlfriend April mentioned to me that I looked different and that I wasn’t my same bubbly self. I divulged the reasons for my behavior later on that morning in a letter, as most high school students did when they had problems to expose to their friends.”

Carolyn nodded, which to me meant that it was okay to divulge more details.

I continued, “Once it was revealed that I was being sexually violated at home, April took my handwritten note to the counselor’s office. I spoke with the counselor who informed me that Child Protective Services (CPS) would be involved. I pleaded with the female counselor to understand the kind of friction her decision would have on me.”

“They’ll retaliate,” I reported.

The counselor did not budge. With sadness in her eyes, she touched my shoulders, “This is for your protection.”

“I can take care of myself. I always have,” I responded with tears knowing what would happen if I went home that night.

“The decision was made that I needed a temporary place to stay while all of the information about me and my family was being gathered, sorted and discussed.” I continued speaking to the committee, all the while thinking that the proposal experience was not at all what I had anticipated just a few hours earlier on my drive to College Station from Houston.

*Living in the Hardin Household*

April's parents temporarily welcomed me into their home while CPS investigated my case. I watched April and her family closely. Almost immediately, and without thinking, I asked, "Why do you let your brother talk back to you? Why don't you hit your brother when he does that?"

Surprised at my questions, April patiently explained, "Rosey, my brother and I don't always agree on everything, but we don't hit each other every time we disagree."

I simply responded, "Oh," but I still thought she should punch him on the arm for calling her names. Seeing my face, April responded, "You don't always solve problems through violent behavior."

"In my house you do." I said. Then, it hit me. I was no longer in my house and violence was no longer a way to resolve domestic issues. April gave me time to think about my last remark without adding any of her thoughts. Undeterred, I began questioning her some more; "Well, then why do you talk back to your parents? They give you everything."

I know that she was thinking that I was not being as appreciative as I should have been, considering that I was invited to stay unconditionally in her parent's home, with her parents knowing very little about me. However, they were aware of one major fact and that was that I had left my home because just a day ago I had been sexually molested by one of my brothers. Later, they would find out that another brother and my father had also touched me inappropriately.

April entertained my questions some more and responded, “Just because my parents give me things doesn’t mean I don’t have my own opinions. I can tell my parents how I feel.”

“And, they don’t hit you?” I inquired, not knowing that I was pushing boundaries and limits. April, acquainted with where I was coming from, just offered me a hug.

Although I appreciated her hug, I continued probing her, and constantly compared her familial relationships with mine. I was becoming more fascinated by the manner in which April and her family communicated. It was so much more different than what I knew or even fathomed could occur.

“Oh, so, you can have an opinion in your family and still be accepted even when your outlook is different,” I noted to myself.

My candor became part of the Hardin family’s daily routine, as I would take note of their typical family dynamics. Most of the time, the Hardin family took my questions to heart and offered a different perspective from which to view the many aspects of life. Somehow, they knew that I needed to know how to handle the hard lessons of life sooner instead of later.

#### *Conversation with CPS Lady*

The CPS lady (as I called her) came to visit me during school hours. She came to check on me and prepared me for what steps she was planning to take in my case.

“I am going to visit your parents. Do you want to tell me your side of the story?” she asked, as she wanted to make certain both sides were heard.

I told the CPS lady about the incident that I wrote in the note, which I had given to April the previous morning. “My brother Enrico arrived drunk. I was sleeping on the living room sofa. He started fondling me by touching my vagina and sucking on my nipples. I was a bit unconscious, drowsy in my sleep, as he came home that night after eleven o’clock. Soon after, I was awoken by the stench of his beer breath, but decided to remain quiet. I could not take any more of my brother’s mishandling of my private body parts, so I pretended I was having a nightmare, and said loudly, ‘No, leave me alone. Get away!’ I wanted him to be scared or conscious that others in the house would hear me. Undeterred by my strategy, he kept violating me. No one in the house heard my plea or at least they did not respond to it. A minute later, I tried again, this time, I guess Enrico had enough and was mindful that someone may walk into the living room. He got up from his knees and went to sleep on another sofa in the living room.

The next morning my body felt sticky from Enrico’s saliva. I got up, showered, and before I headed out the door, I said to Enrico, kicking the sofa, ‘Do you think I was asleep when you did what you did? You’re disgusting, and one day, you’re going to pay for what you’ve done!’ He never looked me in the eyes. He had his face covered with the bed sheets.

I did not know it then, but that was the last time I was going to sleep in my parent’s house and the last day I was going to be violated by members of my family.

The Caucasian CPS lady attempted to place herself in my shoes, but it was immediately evident she had no personal experience with the type of family incidents I was expressing.

Sounding uncertain about how much truth there was to my story, she passively asked, “Have you been sexually active with boys your age?”

“What!” I thought aloud. “Wait! What does that have to do with my brother approaching me while asleep and taking advantage of me sexually?” I asked angrily. “I do not deserve to be harmed by my family. What I do with other boys outside my family is not related! Can’t you see I’m not pregnant? I haven’t run away from home once. I just want to go to school without the fear of being punished for staying after school, because my father has in his mind that I’m sleeping around.”

Noticing walls building up between us, the CPS lady quickly asked, “Could you tell me about other instances where you were sexually assaulted by your father and other brother?”

“Cristian,” I clarified. “My other brother who sexually assaulted me was my brother Cristian.”

“When did he begin to assault you?” She appeared concerned.

Limiting myself, I only shared one memory. I did not want to risk wasting my breath when she may already be questioning the authenticity of my experiences. I began telling her, “I was six or seven years old, living in my parent’s house in Harlingen. Cristian said he would pay me one dollar if I followed him to his room. Everyone else was asleep. We were the only two awake at the time. I whispered, ‘No’ to his request.” Instantly, I felt ashamed and walked back into the girls’ room, waiting to get up again after seeing that other members of my family were awake and walking around the house. I had not done anything with him that morning, but his sexual advances made me

wonder if I was giving him signs that translated to me not being bothered by him asking me to do him this supposed favor. Also, I wondered why he asked this time, considering all the other times he had taken advantage of me when I would be taking naps or asleep and he would invite himself to unzip my bottoms and perform oral sex.

Trying to appear intact, the CPS lady continued, “What did your father do to you?”

Sarcastically, I responded, “What hasn’t he done?”

“Could you be more specific?” the CPS lady asked, uncertain about what my response would be.

“This all started with my father, you know. That is how my brothers learned it was okay to pursue us girls. I’m not the only victim here. I reported to him and my mother every time an incident happened and my father said, ‘It is your fault for not sleeping in the girls’ room with the door locked.’ My mother holding my father’s hand looked away and did not counter his words.”

“You mean to tell me there are more siblings who were sexually assaulted in your home?” she asked surprised at my revelation.

“I’m number eleven out of thirteen. What do you think?” I questioned her professional ability to fully grasp my family situation. I quickly explained, “But, when you go to visit, my sisters won’t tell you that they were violated. As a matter of fact, they will attempt to show you a clean house and a family that is together with a united front. Then, they will tell you that I have slept around with boys my age and that is the real reason I’m doing this (leaving home and communicating with CPS about the abuse at



home). They will further add that I want my freedom to do what I want, because as far as my family is concerned, 'I talk back, and am defiant.' In other words, I disagree with the fact that I should be sexually violated by my family and express my opinion about the matter; usually after I've locked myself in the girls' bedroom so that I would not receive any physical or verbal abuse from my father or two older brothers."

"You don't think that your parents and siblings want to reconcile with you?" the CPS lady asked wishfully.

"No. That's why I'm preparing you for what you will see when you visit my parents' house. It's all going to be a facade to cover up all the years of violence and trauma that they had previously kept silent for so long," I replied.

The CPS lady left the high school that afternoon promising to let my family know that I was okay and that we'd soon be together.

I smiled at her optimistic thoughts, knowing that my family would not be easily convinced or interested in my arrival for that matter.

### *The Decision to Move to a Children's Home*

"After experiencing so many years of physical, sexual and emotional violence, with the aid of high school friends and their parents, I accepted that the best decision was to move away from my parents' house," I recanted straightforwardly to Carolyn and Norvella.

An hour into my storytelling, Carolyn asked, “How did you end up in the children’s home?” I understood that Carolyn wanted me to expand on what I had gone through in order to end up in such a place.

I continued with my story. “Oh, the CPS lady set up a meeting between my parents and me after she visited with both parties.” I allowed myself to reflect on that day. “I informed the CPS lady that a meeting between my father and I would not be beneficial. My father believed that I wanted to leave the house because I wanted money.”

I paused to explain my father’s fascination with money to the members of my committee. “My father believed that if the family just had the right amount of money we would not be suffering, and he would not have to work so hard and be so stressed that he needed to harm his children. The only reasonable connection I can make thus far with my father’s fascination with money is the fact that he was a teenager during the US depression era, which is where he experienced a sense of poverty that no one, not even my mother (being that she was 13 years younger than my father) could understand.”

Despite my efforts to explain that this meeting was not worthwhile, the CPS lady held the meeting anyway in her office.

As I was taken back into the moment, I attempted to describe the scene. “My mother and father sat close to each other. I sat opposite them with the CPS lady sitting on my left and the translator positioned to my right.”

The CPS lady began the meeting with the translator ready to interpret her words. “We are here because your daughter, Rosey, has expressed concern about the events that

have recently occurred in your home and allegedly have been occurring for several years.” My dad sat motionless, but not for long. He did not understand what she had said. Soon after the translator repeated what the CPS lady said in Spanish, my dad grabbed his wallet and threw money at my face while ferociously cursing me in our native tongue.

Although the CPS lady did not understand what my father was saying, she immediately asked the translator to ask him to stop ranting, declaring that the meeting was going to be over and that I still had the right to bring charges against him and my brothers. She turned to me and in a saddened whisper said, “I’m so sorry you had to go through this.”

Keeping families together is the Child Protective Service’s position. After seeing my father’s reaction, the CPS lady went to plan B and showed my parents the forms to sign over their parental rights to Sunny Glen Children’s Home.

My mother held my dad to his seat. She looked at him and said, “Sixto, she does not want to move in with a boy. She has not run away before. She simply wants an education and a better life than we can give her.” My father, not budging, looked at her angrily and motioned with his head that he would not sign any legal document.

She calmly looked at him straight in his face, “*Entonces*, if you aren’t going to do it, I will. And, you will not do a thing at home to cause harm to anyone, because if you do, I will ask Rosey to prosecute you.” Needless to say, this was the first time I had seen my mother stand up to my father. The only rationalization I could come up with was that my mother, prior to meeting my father, had been a confident, independent woman; a

skilled worker, who after many years of abuse began to accept her volatile lifestyle as the norm; that is, until her children started questioning why such erratic behavior was acceptable. I walked away that day knowing that the abuse had ended for my immediate family. Even though my mother had technically lost her daughter, she was not going to lose any other children to abuse. I could see in her eyes that she no longer feared my father's wrath.

I looked at Carolyn and Norvella directly and stated with more strength than the last time I shared that part of my life story, "With my mother's consent I was able to move into the children's home."

Coming to the conclusion that I needed to move quickly to plan B did not come as easy as it was written in the previous paragraph. I had visualized, since I was eight-years-old, what my last "fight" with my family would look like. It would not be physical, as this would represent the end of a cycle of physical assault. I would not mince my words, because my unruffled voice would represent that my family could no longer shake me at my core. It would not be emotionally upsetting, as I knew that I would be vindicated for the many years where many adults ignored my pleas for help, and my siblings sickening silence, which signified their loyalty to our family name.

### **Fumbling through My Native Tongue**

"How long was it before you saw your family again?" asked Carolyn.

“How could I forget?” I thought. Before I shared the first time I was reunited with my family, I felt I needed to preface for Norvella and Carolyn why it took as long as it did to see my family.

“First of all, the children’s home has a policy that any new child to the home cannot visit their family until they have been there for a minimum of three months. However, my family was not interested in seeing me, considering that I had scarred the family name. It was not until my father had a car accident with a bottling company truck in the spring of 1992 that my family asked me to come by the hospital.”

My father recovered from his car accident, but he was never the same again. Of course, the car accident was not my father’s only problem. He had plenty of other vices to keep him suffering for years to come.

In the meantime, my mom, some of my sisters and I had an opportunity to visit in the emergency room, and they soon learned that I had only been living five minutes away from my childhood home. Although my mother did not know how to drive a car, she promised to visit me. Her decision to visit me in the children’s home impacted one of the most significant choices I had to make about my education.

Walking side by side around the children’s home, my mother talked to me.

“¿Cómo estás?” My mother asked.

“I’m good, ma.” I responded in English.

My mother kept asking me questions; after all it had been more than a year since we’d seen each other. I did not realize that the children’s home’s policy of not speaking Spanish would have suppressed my native tongue. I was not able to have a conversation

with my mother without fumbling through most of the Spanish words. My mom did not pay attention to my stuttering. I did.

As I recalled and shared this memory with Carolyn and Norvella, I told them, “It was then that I decided to major in Spanish when I went to college. In my mind I believed that if I was forced to study my native language, then I would be able to preserve my relationship with my mother.”

Carolyn later added, “Your relationship with your mother is, in some ways, as complicated as your relationship with your father.”

### **I’m Not Poor Anymore, but Mom Still Is. Now What?**

Thinking about the most recent experiences, I added, “On my way up to College Station, I wondered whether or not studying for a Ph.D. has been worthwhile.”

Carolyn and Norvella were listening and looking at me intently. I continued thinking aloud, taking into consideration that all I had remaining in my mind that made sense were my experiences. I pondered aloud, “How is it that I am planning to study and discuss with you multiple teachers’ life stories, and how those teachers influenced the students they taught as a result of their life experiences, when I struggle with issues of poverty and lack of educational opportunity in my own family?”

“I cannot explain to you why my mother or some of my siblings are currently living in poverty. I know a lot of people assume that because I have come this far scholastically, I should be able to have the answers to my own questions. To be honest with you, as I search for an answer, I often reflect back on my own experiences being

poor. For instance, my father and mother were only able to buy each of us one pair of shoes, usually at Christmas time. I remember living with head lice until I left to live in the children's home. I even remember taking on a job in high school and paying the phone bill, because in my father's eyes that translated into me doing my part in the family."

"What I was forced to revisit after my father's death was that some of my siblings and my mother have never experienced life as I most recently had known." I knew that my experiences were mine alone, but I was referring to living a life that was not always running on emotional strains, or financial struggles, such as choosing between paying a bill and eating a meal.

As an educator with higher degrees I became a part of middle class America. When I was a kid I remember a few teachers telling me to follow my dreams. While other teachers wanted me to be more pragmatic and recognize that I would be lucky to graduate high school.

"Either way, it was true; you could follow your dreams, and I did. But, there are family members who do not have the same dreams as I do, and as a result continue to live in poverty. Nobody tells you how to deal with that factor." Reflecting on my inner struggle to come back to my centrally air conditioned 2200 plus square foot home where I reside with my family, I questioned myself: 'How is it that my mother at 70 years of age has not experienced that?' My childhood home is a shack-like house with two window air conditioning units. One unit cools the room my father once slept in and my

mother now uses, and the other circulates some slightly cooler air in the living room when guests arrive.

I did not feel that I deserved anymore recognition for how independent I became. I did not need to move any further with my education than I had already, surpassing any educational goal my family had known or experienced. Instead, I needed to help my mother financially and emotionally. This would require giving up some of my current endeavors.

### **Embracing the Past, Accepting the Present**

I continued narrating my story to my committee. “I was telling a girlfriend of mine, Mayra, who shared similar childhood experiences as me that I was preparing for my proposal hearing, but that I really was not considering this event to be the most vital thing in my life. Then, I attempted to clarify my point to my friend by indicating that I did not want to dismiss the support I continued to receive from friends, professional colleagues and ‘adopted’ family. Their support in my educational endeavors has been endless.”

Mayra stopped me from analyzing my situation any further, acknowledging that my husband has been one of my greatest supporters throughout our marriage. Mayra said to me, “We’ve got to give ourselves a break, Rosey. We’ve only known peace as long as we’ve been married.” Mayra was married the same year as my husband and I were.

I paused for a moment to see if my committee was following my story. I tended to randomly intersect stories with the goal of coming to one point, but sometimes did not



know how well I was doing that. Carolyn and Norvella seemed to be in step with the different people I was speaking about.

“I stopped and reflected for a moment about the words that Mayra had expressed. She was right. After all, that is why I was interested in marrying my husband. He knows everything about me. I never held anything back from him. His acceptance of me with all my inner struggles, of my family and their continual strife, and his unconditional support were what balanced my former life with my current life. I had never known what peace and comfort were until I met my spouse.” Telling stories about my husband made me proud as a woman, because his support was not domineering, but more reciprocal.

“After seeing the relationship he had with my middle school nephew Jesse, who was living with me at the time we first met, I was convinced that he was the man for me. I asked Paco to marry me,” I said with a big grin.

Carolyn said with a smile, “You were a feminist far longer than you give yourself credit for.”

“I knew what I wanted,” I said. Paco is three and half years younger and was still participating in undergraduate classes. We could not afford the material luxuries middle class living would offer us. Yet, he was strong enough to accept that money was not the factor that was going to build our relationship; rather growing together spiritually, emotionally and financially would permit us to sustain and maintain a solid relationship. Continuing to disclose my gratitude for my husband’s loyalty, I declared, “Knowing what type of relationship I had with my father and brothers, Paco surprised them all by shaking their hands and hugging them every time he visited.”

Carolyn asked, “Is your husband religious? He must have a tender heart to be so accepting of others who have harmed you.”

I responded, “He is a Christian, but quite frankly he has a wonderful family, too. He has a strong bond with his parents. He understands the significant role parents play and my mother and father, despite some incredibly poor choices my parents made in the past, they attempted to do the best they knew how to rebuild our relationship. Both of us agree that we cannot stand and judge people in our lives such as our parents, because that is not our purpose for being here. Even more important to us are the opportunities we have in showing others in our families what a healthy and loving relationship looks like, such as the one my husband and I have with each other. If we estranged ourselves from members of our family, we would not have opportunities to rebuild or restore relationships.

### **Change of Course in My Proposal Hearing**

Norvella looked at Carolyn and asked, “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

I waited to see if I could interpret what they were thinking, but, I did not have to wait too long.

“Rosey, you’re doing the wrong study,” Norvella stated.

“Yes, Rosey. You are,” Carolyn confirmed.

“Instead of telling us about the life stories of other teachers, we’d like for you to consider writing your life story,” Norvella announced.

Carolyn informed me, “I could tell from your proposal that you were struggling with how to present interactive interviewing principles (Ellis, Keisinger, & Tillman-Healy, 1997) and deciding how much of your story to include when researching the lives of other participants. Telling your story will give you an opportunity to find out what motivated you to become the person you are today, disclose the relationships you choose to have with your students as a result of your experiences and expose reasons why you chose to be a part of the profession.”

I was left speechless, but only for a second. “You are right. I did struggle with my topic.” I thought for a moment longer and stated, “I’m interested in changing my project based on what I understand about how this change could assist me with my scholastic endeavors. But, I will have to confirm with my husband to see if he’s on board with the changes.” While I waited for their response, I reflected on the comment Carolyn made regarding interactive interviewing principles. In conducting interviews, the application of Ellis, Keisinger, and Tillman-Healy’s (1997, p. 121) interactive principles would allow respondents to get “an in-depth and intimate understanding of” the participants’ experiences, in addition to my own, “with emotionally charged and sensitive topics.” I disclosed some emotionally charged subjects regarding the issues of poverty and sexual and physical assault that occurred in my parent’s home, but this time I was not interviewing anyone else. I was being asked to unveil my own personal thoughts and experiences.

“Of course, it is important that we all understand how challenging this project will be.” Carolyn stated. I understood the hidden pain this project would uncover. Ellis

(2004, p. 111) reminded, 'And even if there is pain, writing autoethnography often lessens it...'

"In one way, this project will be easier, because you will not have to meet with other teachers, worry about the IRB (Internal Review Board) process or be at the mercy of another person's schedule. On the other hand, you will be sharing very personal information that can be very difficult for others to accept and as in any literature piece; there is room for criticism from many venues," Norvella expressed.

Norvella and Carolyn looked at each other and were exchanging ways my story could be presented to the committee.

"We can take up Dr. Smith on his offer and create publishable pieces of work and not dissertations that just sit in library shelves for years to come," Norvella noted.

Carolyn reflected, "And to think of how many more pieces of work we could have published had we been given that direction before."

"I guess I'm still unsure as to how my dissertation will look. Will I have to follow the same framework of purpose, methodology, so on and so forth?" I wondered out loud.

Both professors were discussing ways that my dissertation could be presented and were excited to tell me what they had in mind for me. "Don't worry about the methodology. We're going to do something completely different than has ever been done in Texas A&M history. We would like for you to write your story in the form of a novel."

Relieved at their response, I smiled.

Carolyn prompted, “Now, this is a scholarly piece of work. It is not writing a novel for a novel’s sake. You need to include empirical research to support your experiences.”

“I understand. I’m just grateful to know that my story is worthy to tell,” I said.

Carolyn affirmed, “Rosey, it is crucial that educators are given literature that speaks from individuals who are practicing in their profession. Furthermore, there is not enough published literature from the Latino perspective.”

Due to the circumstances that came as a direct result of expanding on my personal story during my proposal hearing, I did not continue with the remaining slides I had left in my PowerPoint presentation. I was never more elated, because now I had a “first-person account of experiences” to write about, and I was humbled that it would be of value to someone else (Merriam, 2002, p. 286).

## CHAPTER VI

### MOVING FROM BEING AT-RISK AND BECOMING RESILIENT

#### **Sunny Glen Facts**

“Sunny Glen is a residential child care facility licensed by the state of Texas.” They “have the capacity to care for up to 40 children ages 0 to 17” (Sunny Glen Children’s Home, 2006a, p. 1). Sunny Glen Children’s Home “in 1945... purchased an 80 acre tract of land in San Benito, TX in order to expand its services to more children” (Sunny Glen Children’s Home, 2006a, p. 1). Construction began in 1948. In 1949, Sunny Glen Children’s Home moved to its present location (Sunny Glen Children’s Home, 2006a). Per Sunny Glen’s philosophy as written on their web site, “Sunny Glen ... exists to provide neglected and abused children a safe, loving environment that emphasizes Christian values and the American work ethic. This is accomplished with a qualified staff committed to the children’s physical, spiritual, and emotional growth. Sunny Glen ... provides long-term residential care, a variety of counseling services and supervised development programs while pursuing the goal of family reunification (Sunny Glen Children’s Home, 2006b).

#### *How I Learned about Sunny Glen*

A high school friend’s mother was familiar with the Home through a student she mentored at her school. She offered me a flyer describing Sunny Glen Children’s Home’s goals and mission.

### **Conversation with Children's Home Director**

"Tell me, young lady. Why are you interested in moving into the children's home?" Mr. Luther Archibald, a retired school principal and current director of the children's home, asked as he sat back in his maroon colored leather chair.

"I want to make good grades. The situation I am coming from does not offer me the chance to do better in school. I want to be an A/B student, but right now I'm a C student," I replied.

"Who decided that this would be the place for you?" Mr. Archibald continued with the interview, perceiving that there was more to my story.

"I did," I responded as if he should have known that my parents were not the most supportive folks that come to mind, considering I moved out of my house and am choosing to be in the children's home.

"How old are you?" Mr. Archibald was trying to get me to see that I was an atypical youngster; compared to the other children whom he had spoke with prior to settling into the children's home.

"I'm seventeen," I stated matter-of-factly.

"Do you realize that this decision you've made as a teenager is one that will impact you for the rest of your life?" he asked plainly. According to Greene (2002), the national average for Latino high school graduation rate was 56%.

"Sir, I know that this decision is difficult. I know that I won't see or be able to speak to my parents for the next three months. Worse, I know that even after those three months are over; my family may not be interested in speaking with me. But, I know that

if I come here, I will have more opportunities than staying in my parents' house. I read in one of your flyers that you support students who are interested in going to college. My parents wanted me to drop out of high school to assist our entire family financially. I already know what happens when you become a high school dropout. I don't want to be in the same place that so many of my other siblings have been in. I believe that I can make it in college," I stated with poise, feeling that I had fully responded to his question. Benard and Marshall (1997, pp. 35-36) stated, "successful learning and development is stimulated by three conditions—caring relationships, high expectations, and opportunities for participation and contribution."

"Normally, we conduct a psychological test on new residents," Mr. Archibald stated with a smile. I waited to listen to him tell me how this would impact my admission into the children's home.

In the meantime, thoughts about my most recent home life experiences were crossing my mind. I knew that my volatile home experiences lead me to search for a way out. In the back of my mind, I hoped that my siblings and family members, who were convinced that the life we were living was normal, would be able to recover, heal and move ahead.

Mr. Archibald continued, "However, your situation is unique. We have never had a child request to be placed in our Home. You seem to have a pretty good head on your shoulders. I am going to request that you not have to go through that process so we can take you in sooner."



Outwardly, I smiled, but inwardly I was jumping for joy knowing that someone else recognized that I was not foolish like my siblings would so often try to convince me. Mr. Archibald did not know it at the time, but the decision he made to forego a psychological test confirmed to me that I had every right to leave my parents' home, and acknowledged that the many times my father and brothers had touched me inappropriately were certainly not made up or acceptable. Plus, even after all the abuse I encountered, I still had some smarts left in me.

#### *Family Educational/Work Background*

At the time that I had spoken to Mr. Archibald, several of my siblings had dropped out of school to go straight into the work force. Many returned to complete their GED, but struggled to find a career soon after the completion of it. Because their job may have consisted of hourly work in a restaurant, local business or in a plant, there was little motivation to remain in the job. Financially, it was not rewarding. Physically, it was demanding. Furthermore, the job did not train them with life-long skills. So, it was easy to see my siblings jump from one job to another. A couple stayed in their jobs in fear that they may not find another.

Unofficially, I began working summers at age 12. I used a lot of the money to purchase clothing and school supplies for myself. Some of the money I earned was also used to pay for legal paperwork to become a legal resident in Texas. Once I received my legal residency, I also obtained my social security card, which permitted me to begin working legally. At 16, I began working at Luby's over the summer. I stopped working

there once classes started in the fall, but soon began working at Hardee's Restaurant because they had later hours. This permitted me to be involved in extracurricular activities and then work until midnight. In my mind, working this late meant that I spent less time at home. I did pay the house phone bill for a few months when I first starting working legally until I realized that I did not have access to the phone, but was being required to pay for the service. I appreciated the metaphoric example offered by Wolin and Wolin (1993) when describing the life of a survivor after living in a dump of an abusive home. They said, "I have seen that many survivors are like desert flowers that grow healthy and strong in an emotional wasteland" (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 6).

### **Inappropriate Advances at Home**

"*Rosy, ven aquí.* Rosey, come here." My dad called me to translate something over the phone as was the routine when he talked to an English-speaking caller. His demeanor was sweeter than normal. So, I decided to approach him with ease.

"Okay. Yes sir, I'll let him know." My dad, who was proud of my ability to translate official business, smiled at me.

I smiled back thinking that I made him proud. "This surely is a different dad," I thought, as I was listening intently to the man on the other end of the phone line.

Maybe, it didn't hurt that he drank iced brandy. It seemed to calm his temper.

I was wrong, again. I should have just kept my guard up and done only what he asked me to do, which was to translate. Smiling was a nonverbal no-no. My dad's hand

was on my cheek and traveled to my tender breasts and then to my vagina. My smile must have falsely invited him to move forward with his filthy thoughts.

I kept my composure together enough to end the call. Then, I looked at my dad and whispered, “No.” Again, I whispered as if I was to be at fault for his mishandling of my body.

He looked at me surprisingly, as if I nonverbally had permitted him to touch me.

I walked away feeling dirty and ashamed, as I did every time my father inappropriately touched my body. I searched to find someone, anyone, in my family who would understand what I was just exposed to. Crying quietly, I walked straight to one of my older sisters, Victoria, and stated, “He touched me, again.”

Victoria knew what I was referring to; she experienced the same inappropriate fondling when my dad was drunk. Still, Victoria opted to defend my father’s actions.

“I won’t put up with it anymore. If you don’t want to stand up to him, then you stay in this hellhole. I am tired of this,” I fumed.

“Rosey, he’s drunk. He doesn’t know what he’s doing,” she continued to justify his actions.

“Victoria, it’s not right. I don’t care if he’s drunk. His hands should not be touching my private parts. My breasts and vagina are not for him. He has mom. Why is he doing this to us?” I questioned.

Victoria was ironically disgusted with my details and unable to respond to my question said, “Unless you have a solution, you have to put up with it.”

“Victoria, let’s all stand up to him. He’ll stop if he knows we all believe what he is doing is wrong.” I proposed in order to find an end to the sexual assaults.

“Rosey, he’ll just hit us like he does mom when she tries to stand up to him,” Victoria ignored my strategy.

“No. He will stop touching me and I’m going to wait until he’s good and sober so he remembers my words.”

Angry with my father for violating me and disappointed at my sister Victoria for ignoring my plea to fight back, I locked myself in the girls’ room again to consider ways I could leave my shack-like house. Of course, the strategy I shared with Victoria would not happen any time soon.

I did not have the guts to come back to the house should my plan fail. I had seen one too many sisters come back to my parents’ house after attempting to live independently and the sexual, physical and emotional abuse continued as if they had never left. At least, the planning kept me from truly going mad and allowed me to realize what options I did have, which at that time were not many. For years to come I experienced many more times where my father or two older brothers fondled my breasts, performed oral and/or digital sex, all which prompted me to vomit after the acts.

### *Implications of Living with an Alcoholic Father*

Who was Victoria kidding? I saw her once hit herself over her head with a glass after experiencing my dad speak to her vulgarly. And now, she is defending him? My father physically abused my mother, at times, leaving her unconscious. I can recall a

time when some siblings ran to the local 7-Eleven store to pick-up some rubbing alcohol so that we could put it under my mother's nose so she could 'wake-up' from her beating. To this day, I double-check myself when I smile at someone of the opposite sex. I want to make sure I did not lead him to think anything other than I am being cordial...definitely not sexual.

### **The Rebuilding Process Begins**

"I have found the perfect family for you," Mr. Archibald welcomingly interrupted my thoughts.

Open for a new-found familial relationship, I smiled at the announcement and replied, "I can't wait to meet them."

I walked with Mr. Archibald to Cottage 6 where Sue and Gordon Slusser were the house parents. I had several other "siblings" who were also living in the cottage. This was the first time in my entire life that I would have a room to myself, but later came to understand that this was done as a precautionary measure, because none of the kids were truly related to me in my cottage and the Home did not want anything inappropriate to happen between residents. I was extremely thankful for the warm welcome from my house parents and longed for a quiet night of rest where I would not have to be afraid of someone entering my bedroom unexpectedly. I did not have any trouble falling asleep my first night in the cottage.

*Conversation with a Cottage-mate*

“Rosey, are you ready to hear the Word?” a teenage resident asked straightforwardly.

“No. Not at this time,” I responded quickly. Before he could question my direct response, I hurriedly walked into the cottage after attending tennis practice. I had seen what life without Christ looked like in my childhood home. It differed greatly from my life at the children’s home. Nevertheless, I wanted to make certain that my commitment to the Lord would be a relationship that I could sustain over a long period of time. I was aware that Sunny Glen was mostly supported by financial gifts from the Churches of Christ. Sunny Glen did not hide the fact that they wanted you to be exposed to a home that prayed, required your attendance at a local church, and drew lines when the schools’ functions did not coincide with the children’s home’s religious philosophy, such as, dancing at school-sponsored events. I was willing to go to church, to follow the rules and to partake in the family functions sponsored by Sunny Glen.

While I knew that I was not directly to blame for the indecent incidents that occurred in my parent’s home, I still felt that I was not worthy of forgiveness...at that moment in my life. I had first hand experiences with sex that I could not erase from my mind. I was confused about what the Bible declared regarding children disobeying their parents and what this meant to me as I chose to leave my parent’s house. Needless to say, I struggled with my former life in the shack-like house that was filled with physical, sexual, and emotional abuse and my current life at the Home, which was being filled with stability, spiritual growth and healthy relationships.

*First Christian Camp Experience*

Several months into my stay at Sunny Glen I participated in a summer Christian camp. I shared my life story in a camp breakout session with the young campers attending a week of worship, praise and time in God's natural splendor. Each group of campers from primary school to high school age was responsible for selecting a story to tell all campers about how they were brought closer to God.

A fellow camper suggested, "We should perform Rosey's story." As I listened to the ideas being shared, I looked for another Rosie in the room.

Then, Ann looked straight at me and asked, "What do you think?"

I was truly surprised and responded with a question, "Me?"

Ann reassured, "It won't be about you. We'll focus on the family dynamics of being in a dysfunctional family and how with guidance and prayer, you can find the light."

"Okay, as long as people don't think I'm a hero. I'm not. I was just the one who got out," I declared.

"We'll highlight the abuse. Show the yelling and screaming that you talked about. We'll let the audience see that life is not as bad as they think. And, we'll also offer a message at the end of the act telling all campers: Life is what you make it," another teenage camper added.

I did not realize that performing a kit in a breakout session would be a life story for all camp goers to ponder. The camp staff was supportive and the girls in my cabin were not judgmental about my life experiences. We presented and acted out a familiar

scene from my previous life. I was acting the part of my father who slapped one of my sisters for having an opinion. Once the scene was over, I saw some campers looking at me in amazement, others cried and I felt empowered to share the final message of the story.

“Don’t be sad. I’m here. I’m okay. Just know that in your life, you have parents that truly want the best for you. I could have prosecuted the members in my family who sexually abused me. You could even judge them, but don’t focus on being angry or upset. Talk to someone. I have a new-found family in my children’s home. I miss my natural family, but I’m looking forward to what lies ahead. So, as they say, ‘if life gives you lemons, make lemonade.’”

I went to bed that night feeling that my message was taken well by the campers and it served its purpose. The unpredicted way the idea of sharing my story came about made the experience even more meaningful. Consequently, I decided to take the next step that the teenage resident asked me about earlier. A few days into the camp sessions after speaking with a minister about my life, I chose to be baptized. I still have the New Bible Dictionary, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. given to me by Minister Meierhofer, who baptized me that summer, in my home library. The dictionary was useful at ACU when I had to take courses on the Bible. Even more importantly, this book represented the numerous resources made available to me while I was living in the Home.

I gave the audience that attended the week-long camp session, a glimpse of my former life. Getting out of the dysfunction was a process. Understanding the consequences of my decision to leave my parents home, albeit positive, was at times



overwhelming to accept as my reality. Encountering the positive experience at camp prompted me to seek assistance when needed. I realized that finding a balance between my former and present lives was challenging. I accepted counseling while in the children's home, interacted with responsible adults about my thoughts and spent time in prayer to begin the healing process.

### *Conversing with My Father*

Upon my return from camp, I walked around the Home's oval playground. Mr. Slusser drove the cottage van around a little slower to inquire why I was talking when no other person was around me. "What's going on, Rosey?"

"I'm talking to my Father." I said simply. I knew that it was his job to question the kids in his cottage about anything in general to make sure that our minds were clear of clutter. Still, I knew that my simple remark was going to prompt more questions.

"Your father?" he asked for further clarification.

"My Heavenly Father," I shed some light to his question. "I walk and talk with my Heavenly Father in the afternoons. I let him know about my new life." Being a father, Mr. Slusser knew that I was searching for a Father who unlike my earthly father would not forsake me.

"Well, don't let me interrupt your conversation. I'll see you at the dinner table." Mr. Slusser drove off and parked outside our cottage.

I grinned and continued to walk around the playground. I returned to my conversation with my Heavenly Father. In my conversation I was revisiting a previous

verbal exchange with my parents. That day I was conversing about my screaming match with my father when he picked me up after school from tennis practice. In essence I was asking for God's understanding for talking back to my father when I was a freshman in high school. I wanted God to know that my words spoken to my dad were not in vain.

### *Finding Peace Within*

*“¡No se por qué tengo que venir a recogerte de la escuela! I don't know why I have to come pick you up from school!”* My dad exclaimed as soon as I got into his blue truck from tennis practice.

*“Papá... Dad, I am a good student. I don't cause any problems at school. I am involved in extracurricular activities and still go to work after practice,”* I defended myself.

*“Tú quieres... You want to stay after school so you can meet up with boys,”* Dad said angrily.

*“Mire... Look at the courts, Dad. No one is there,”* I continued to defend my innocence.

*“No. You have a boy who waits for you and you let him touch you.”* My dad's sick imagination obscured his mind.

*“Lo que... What you should be worried about is all that smoking that you're doing. I don't want to die, because you choose to smoke inside the truck,”* I stated loudly. I was looking to change the subject, as I knew continuing with the initial

conversation only showed my dad's insecurities about the unsuitable encounters he placed me in when he took advantage of me sexually.

He flipped his cigarette out the window. Then, he said without looking at me directly, "*Eres una puta.*"

His words took our conversation to another level. He had tested my patience. I scooted closer to the passenger side of the door and shouted, "You say, 'I'm a bitch!' Oh, if I'm a bitch, then, it's because you taught me how to be one." My dad held on to the steering wheel tightly. To make sure that he did not physically hurt me at home for speaking out, I warned, "And, if you touch me again, I will report you to the police. You're a sick man. And, you call yourself a father?"

While my father stopped sexually assaulting me that year, he did not stop my brothers from doing the same. I surmised that if my father would ask my two brothers to stop the same acts of violence, then he would have to acknowledge that my brothers learned their dysfunctional behavior from him. Even so, my father continued to physically and verbally attack me. I was no longer his "favorite" daughter. I was never more elated to be pushed to the back burner, or *calentador*, as it is called in Spanish.

I concluded my conversation with God. I felt that I had closed the door on my resentment towards my father. I was working on how to deal with the abuse that had continued with my two brothers and the many years that my mother chose to ignore all of the incidents. I decided I would wait to conduct that conversation with God another day.

### **Reflecting on Living in a Children's Home**

After presenting a portion of my autoethnographic study in a college class, I was asked by a colleague, "As an older child in the Home did you feel a need to reach others or did you want to hide the past?" I felt this was a legitimate question that I had not addressed in my presentation. Ironically, I was the odd one in my childhood home, because I wanted more out of life. I stood out a bit in the Home in the same way. Instead of wallowing in pity, or acting foolish, I followed the Home's rules for the most part and sided with the voice of reason. I did offer some advice to younger "siblings," but much like my natural family, my new "family" criticized me. Most of the younger children's issues were different than mine. The only time I deemed it appropriate to share words of advice was when I was asked. I did not want to be in a situation where I was comparing my life with that of another child's.

### **Revisiting with the Children's Home Director**

After six weeks of living in the Home, Mr. Archibald stopped by to visit me in my cottage. "Rosey, how are you doing?"

"Great! You want see my report card?" I asked ecstatically, knowing that Mr. Archibald would be able to see that I met my academic goal. In year's past I had forged my parent's signature during report card time, because they were not interested in my grades.

"Wow! This looks great, Rosey," he said patting my shoulder.

“I don’t have to worry about working after school to pay bills or coming home to an unsupportive environment. All I have to do is go to school and complete my chores in my cottage. Now, I can concentrate on my studies like I promised I would,” I shared out loud without being asked.

“I came to see if you were doing okay, but see that you are more than meeting your goals. I knew you’d excel. On another note, Mrs. Archibald has seen you at church lately and would like to meet you personally.”

“Sure. I’d love to meet your wife,” I said without asking why. I had seen her sitting in the pews near the front of the church, so her face remained in my mind as I anticipated her call.

#### *Setting up a Lunch Date with the Children’s Home Director’s Wife*

Mrs. Cherie Archibald set up our get-together for a Saturday morning. I was excited about getting to know her on a more personal level, because this meant that Mr. Archibald believed I was someone who was worthy of having a more in-depth relationship. I was going to get to know his family more closely.

“I’ll pick you up around 9 o’clock, dear,” Mrs. Archibald said enthusiastically over the phone.

“I’ll be waiting for you,” I responded with a smile, hoping she would be able to hear it in my voice.

While I was getting ready for our outing to the mall, I wondered why Mrs. Archibald wanted to get to know me. It was my observation that when teenagers entered

the children's home, people outside of the children's home were not necessarily interested in building relationships with us. I did understand that most teenagers who lived in the children's home were your stereotypical challenging, difficult and despondent adolescents. However, not all of the teenagers fell into that category or label. But, who was I? Was I that different? If so, why was I?

Maybe, my wondering why others would be interested in getting to know me was because I had always heard growing up that I was "a good for nothing" and thus not deserving of any positive attention. Perhaps, if people were interested in me, then, maybe I did have something to offer. But, what was it? I did not know at that moment in time. So, I pondered, "What made me appear to be an atypical teenager in the children's home that drew others to want to get to know me more deeply?" I decided to ask Mrs. Archibald on our way to the mall.

#### *Getting to Know the Children's Home Director's Wife*

"Well, hello there, young lady," Mrs. Archibald greeted me inside her car.

"Good morning, ma'am," I responded respectfully. After the usual morning greetings, we immediately began having a meaningful conversation. I tended to prefer those conversations. I would be able to reflect later on the significance of the words shared by my new-found "adoptive family."

"Mr. Archibald tells me that you've been working very hard at school."

"Yes, ma'am."

"That's excellent. Your education will take you far," Mrs. Archibald expressed.

“That is what I’m hoping for ma’am.” I was thinking that if I made it at least past high school, then I would have gone further than most of my siblings. Mrs. Archibald was thinking higher education. This way, I would have more professional opportunities in order to fend for myself.

“Tell me what motivated you to leave your family and come here?” she asked knowing that I was open to share my story. I trusted Mr. Archibald shared with her my goals and aspirations.

“Do we have enough time?” I asked jokingly.

With a sweet smile, she said, “I want to take you to JCPenney’s to purchase a new outfit. Then, we’ll grab a bite to eat. I don’t plan to bring you back home until after lunch. We have plenty of time, dear.”

I answered Mrs. Archibald’s initial question and disclosed a bit more of my family history. I became more interested in her family and began conversing about their life experiences that led them to the Home. We decided that we would get together again soon.

### **Investment in My Future**

Mrs. Archibald informed me that she wanted me to meet one of her daughters, Enie Bourland, who was soon going to visit the Valley from Houston.

I met Enie at church one Sunday morning. She had heard about my story through Mrs. Archibald. Mrs. Archibald shared with me that she wanted to offer some financial support to me as I was planning to attend Abilene Christian University.

I was perplexed. I had a difficult time understanding how an individual could offer me financial support without knowing me.

“Mom tells me that you have a pretty good head on your shoulders. She’s mentioned that your goal for coming to the Home was so that you could finish your high school education. I trust you see that there’s more to your education than just high school,” Enie said.

“Yes. I have found that I can move past my high school goals and onto bigger ones,” I affirmed.

Enie did not mention any details about the financial support she and her husband Richard would potentially offer.

I did not get another chance to speak with Enie in detail after our first encounter, but did get invited to meet her family in Houston.

### *ACU Bound!*

Abilene Christian University (ACU) was not my first undergraduate school of choice. I really wanted to go to Texas A&M University. The children’s home at that time continued their financial assistance (i.e., monthly allowance, visits home and potential additional support if grades were above a 3.0) of students if they went to a Christian college that was supported by the church of Christ. Abilene was the closest city to San Benito at 500 miles. Other schools like Oklahoma Christian University and Harding University in Searcy, Arkansas, were not an option for me due to their distance and high out of state fees. I had grown to appreciate the academic guidance and emotional support



I received from Sunny Glen. I did not want to lose my connection with a family that offered more emotional and spiritual stability than I had experienced in years past. Therefore, I applied to ACU even though the expense was more than I could afford.

As it turns out, ACU was the best place for me to start my higher educational studies. Classes were small. Professors held bible studies in their homes. It also provided an atmosphere that supported my new-found relationship with the Lord. I gained a lot of knowledge in my classes. I was fired up. I wanted to learn more, but the reality of the cost of going to school was still my biggest concern. I did not earn the necessary 3.0 grade point average to receive additional financial assistance from the children's home. The small \$100 scholarship I received from a women's group in the Valley, my summer work money I earned prior to going to ACU and the Bourland's financial contribution that year were still not enough to cover all the school expenses. I decided after the first semester that I needed to participate in a work study.

### *Reflecting on My Educational Goals*

The summer after my freshman year in college, I finally traveled to see the Bourland family. I quickly noticed a supremely clean house. All of the decorations were purposeful and clutter was not part of the décor. The Bourland's home was visibly as far away from my parents' house as possible. Their picture perfect home was so far removed from my home-life experiences that I visually recorded these images for my future home. The Bourland's home looked like it came straight out of *Southern Living* magazine.

After I got over the shock of entering a home that I considered a dream mini-mansion, Enie and I sat down for lunch. Awkwardly, I began talking without hesitation about a time where I sat my parents down on our front porch to discuss my future goals. I did not always have the appropriate social cues to know how to start conversations.

I wanted to let Enie know that I appreciated the contributions made to me to help further my education, but I decided that instead of just saying thank you, I would share an instance that would depict how truly grateful I was.

I had this conversation with my parents a few months prior to moving to Sunny Glen. The conversation was not connected to my decision to move into the Home. Looking back, it was another moment that symbolized my desire to expand my horizons.

#### *Sitting My Parents Down*

“*Quiero hablar con ustedes dos...* I want to speak to the both of you.” I began my talk with my parents.

“*¿Qué pasa, Rosy?*” My mom asked what was going on because she was concerned with my decision to have a sit down talk.

“*Necesito que acepten mis planes para mi futuro.* I need you to accept my future plans. I want to go to college. I don’t need money from you, because I plan to apply for scholarships and obtain other funds to pay for my schooling. I just need you to understand that I will not go straight into the workforce.”

My parents looked at each other and chuckled at my announcement. They giggled because they thought I was about to tell them that I was pregnant and had never been asked to listen to the words I just shared.

My nephews Ike and Mike were born just a year earlier to my teenage sisters. The pregnancies were months apart. My sisters were a few years older than me, so by default, I was the next one to get pregnant.

I ignored my parents' reaction to my announcement and remained focused on my point of discussing my future plans.

*“Mamá, ninguno de mis hermanos ha continuado con su educación después de la secundaria. Mom, none of my siblings have continued with their education past high school. This is something new for you and Dad. I just want to give you a head's up so you won't be surprised when that time comes.”*

My parents were now speechless.

I looked directly at my father and stated, “I will be leaving you by the time I turn 18 as you have requested daily. I just don't plan to do it until I have graduated high school.”

*“Que bueno. Si no nos vas a ayudar no te necesitamos aquí. That's good. If you are not going to help us out, we don't need you here,”* my father expressed nonchalantly.

My mother remained silent.

*“Es todo. No quiero tomar más de su tiempo. That's all. I don't want to take anymore of your time.”* I walked away and began working on my household chores.

Additionally, at a young age I did recognize that I had some power that my father or mother did not have. I had the ability to speak English fluently. This is what convinced me that my education is all I had and could not be taken from me.

#### *Financial Contribution Acknowledged*

“I knew that my parents weren’t totally convinced that my plan would work out. Their reaction still did not stop me from daydreaming about going to college as I worked on my chores,” I told Enie.

“Your story is so amazing. Mom told me that you were special,” Enie affirmed.

“Thank you, but all I have ever really wanted is to find a way out of the poverty I experienced on a day-to-day basis,” I rationalized.

“I hope the financial assistance Richard and I have offered has relieved some of your financial strain,” Enie said compassionately.

“Thank you, it has helped tremendously. I will do my best to continue to make you proud,” I declared.

I didn’t have the heart to share that I was just making ends meet. I figured this struggle was part of my needing to find ways to solve problems and search for solutions to overcome adversity. At least, I had completed my freshman year of college, which was further than anyone in my family thought I would go.

## **Entering a Writing Contest**

During the fall semester of 1993, I wrote one paragraph about my life experiences in an assigned essay to show how events in my life were similar to those experienced by the main character of a story for Dr. Morrison, my general studies professor. With that one paragraph, Dr. Morrison took me aside and challenged me to explore writing about my life experiences in more detail.

I decided to accept the task and met with Dr. Morrison in his office. He disclosed that Townsend Press Publishers had a contest open for college students who wanted to write an essay that discussed the obstacles they had to overcome in order to get to college.

I was open to the contest and said instantly, “I’ll do it. Thank you for thinking of me. I won’t let you down.”

“Okay, great. Please know that this writing process may become a little overwhelming at times. I want to help you in the editing of the essay and talk things through to make sure your emotional well-being is secure.”

I smiled at his concern, but thought, “I know where I come from. This stuff doesn’t hurt me anymore.” Then, I responded, “I will begin right away and keep you posted with updates.” We set up a time to meet again to discuss the first draft before I left his office.

Initially, I felt that this contest, if won, would afford me additional funds. I wanted to make certain that families, such as, the Bourland family, would see that I was also doing my part to pay for my living expenses as a college student. I did purchase a

car, which allowed me to apply for jobs off campus. In the end, writing the essay afforded me much more than money. The scholarship provided me a way out of my financial constraints, gave me academic confidence and was one of the many outlets for my inner most thoughts and emotions.

*Reconnecting with the Publisher*

I recently communicated with Janet at Townsend Press via e-mail requesting a copy of the essay I had written many years ago. Luckily, I was able to obtain a prompt response.

*Hi Rosalinda,*

*Your e-mail just found its way to me.*

*First of all, CONGRATULATIONS! You certainly have made huge strides in the higher-educational arena since 1994. Would you have the time to share some details of your exciting journey?*

*And second ... one wonderful thing about computers is that I rarely if ever throw anything away, including files of books printed 14 years ago. A PDF version of your prize-winning published essay is attached. Please let me know if you have any problems downloading or opening it.*

*On behalf of Townsend Press, I wish you courage, strength, and a sense of humor ... AND success ... as you progress toward your goal of a doctorate.*

My signature line in my e-mail closes my electronic messages with the following information:

*Sincerely,*

*Rosalinda Mercado-Garza  
Doctoral Candidate  
Curriculum & Instruction  
Department of Teaching, Learning & Culture*

*College of Education and Human Development  
Texas A&M University*

*“Don’t wish me happiness...wish me courage and strength and a sense of humor. I will need them all.”~Anne Morrow Lindberg*

This information is where Janet made the conclusion about educational steps I have taken and the message about how I wish other to see me in my life. By the way, Anne Morrow Lindberg was famous for her contributions to literature and aviation. After struggling with numerous strokes and pneumonia Anne died at the age of 94 in 2001. Her daughter Reeve Lindberg (2002) wrote about Anne’s last years in *No More Words: A Journal of My Mother, Anne Morrow Lindberg*.

Below is a section of my essay published by Townsend Press (Mercado, 1994, p. 36). I have changed one of my sibling’s names from the original essay published by Townsend Press. I did not use pseudonyms in the original essay, but did opt to use them in this research piece. I also edited a Spanish portion of the essay. I have grown in my Spanish writing ability since my freshman year in college. Grammatical errors have been corrected that were found in the original published essay.

*“Mamá, yo quiero a ir a la universidad. ¡Ándele! Diga que sí. ¿Puedo ir?  
“Cállate Rosy, aquí estas hablando de colegio y nomas tienes seis años de edad.  
¡Tú necesitas pensar en como me puedes ayudar a limpiar en la casa, haciendo cosas  
más importantes en lugar de decir tantas ridiculeces!”*

*¡Ay, Mamá!*

*(I often spoke to my mother and father in Spanish dialect as they did not understand English too well. I translated my conversations with my parents into English for easier reading.*

*“Mama, I want to go to college. Huh? Can I?”*

*“Hush, little Rosey, here you are six years old and wantin’ to go to college. You need to think about cleaning, helping me around the house—doing something useful—and not talkin’ all that nonsense.”*

*“Aw, Mama!”)*

*I guess she was right to distract me and get me out of her hair, since I was not yet enrolled in kindergarten. My sister Monica, however, who was a year younger, had already been in kindergarten and was starting first grade. I would see Monica cry constantly after being dropped off in front of her classroom.*

*I promised, “Mom, I won’t ever cry if you just let me go to school.” Finally, I convinced her.*

*My mother brought me to Principal Pierce’s office to start on the paperwork. She was confused by all the questions and could not recall all the answers. She had twelve children including myself and had to rely on forms to recall all the information (about each of us). Excitedly, I took charge and answered questions, such as date and place of birth, current address, phone number, and so forth. There was no time to waste, I thought. I had already wasted a year trying to convince my mom that I wanted to study.*

*Many people wonder why it took my mother so long to register me in school. The answer was simple. I was born in Empalme, Tamaulipas, Mexico on May 25, 1973. A few months later I was transported to the United States without any visa or birth certificate. My mom did not have a clue as to how the school system worked in Harlingen, Texas, to allow a nonresident of the state to be admitted into public school, and did not want to worry or fret about any structured systems.*

*Nonetheless, I was enrolled in school, but my worries were far from over. Now, I had to prove to my family that I would succeed brilliantly in my academic studies.*

*Eventually, they realized I would do great as I quickly passed on to the next grade, leaving Monica behind in first grade.*

I started my schooling and the many thereafter with a head full of lice, but a brain that was determined to succeed and be promoted each year until I graduated high school. The smell of a new box of crayons, the wonder of the multiple purposes of Elmer’s glue, the numerous books introduced to me and the creative ways some teachers presented their lessons kept me wanting to go back for more. I was learning!

### **Setting and Meeting Goals**

After completing my freshman year in college, I spent some time over the summer with my sister, Ramona. She asked, “Now that you finished your first year of college, what goals do you hope to accomplish next?” I wrote down three goals that I wanted to accomplish in the upcoming school year.



1. I will complete my remedial class and forge onward to “real” college level classes.
2. I will own a car.
3. I will travel out of state to explore other parts of the country.

I was glad that my last remedial class was with Dr. Morrison. His writing lesson extended into a contest that renewed my confidence to take on any academic challenges. Winning second place in the writing contest earned me \$2000, which I used to purchase a car. In the summer of 1994 after obtaining the car, I traveled to Memphis, Tennessee, to be a part of an inner city mission internship. I had met my three goals.

## CHAPTER VII

### IT TOOK A VILLAGE

#### **An Article in My College Newspaper**

The following fall semester, after receiving notice that I had earned 2<sup>nd</sup> place in the Townsend Press writing contest in the spring, Dr. Morrison contacted *The Optimist*, our college newspaper. He and I were interviewed by Kathy, who was a reporter for *The Optimist*.

*I would like to clarify that in the original article, Kathy did not put the correct number of siblings. She stated that I had four sisters and seven brothers when I have said all along that I have 8 sisters and 4 brothers. I did talk to her about it, but we decided that the point of the story was to disclose that I came from a large family...full of different characters...dysfunctional and all.*

I really enjoyed sitting down and being interviewed by Kathy for the article. Although she was a stranger prior to our meeting, Kathy was easy-going and absolutely refreshing to talk to. I don't know Kathy's whereabouts today, but our sit down interview session for the article allowed me to feel how accepting she was of who I was and who I chose to become. I truly respected that about her.

In the Friday, November 4<sup>th</sup> published newspaper article it quoted Dr. Morrison, 'I'd like to have every student like Rosey eager to learn and refreshing to teach. It's not a reflection on other students; it's a tribute to her' (Colvett, 1994, p. 3). Dr. Morrison added that rather than denying what had happened in my life, I gained control of it

(Colvett, 1994). *The words expressed by my professor were matching who I felt I was becoming.*

After reading the article, Dr. Morrison's words continued to motivate me...to move towards attaining my goals and to keep writing. Even more greatly, his words encouraged me to reflect on my current life and what steps I needed to take to continue to make it better...bumps and all. *The distorted person who my family was trying to convince me I was...was slowly dissolving.*

### **On My Own**

I thought I was okay to explore life on my own. Being independent was important to me. I really believed that the counseling I received at Sunny Glen was sufficient. Even more so, I had just unveiled some of the most painful incidents in my essay and I was still standing tall. I soon realized that it was going to take many more counseling sessions before I was ready to begin my life journey on my own. During my sophomore year at ACU I considered receiving individual counseling services to cope with all of the experiences I encountered with my natural family and my need to build boundaries with new relationships. Wolin and Wolin (1993, p. 92) learned that resilient survivors could leave their troubled family behind, but warned "attend carefully to the noisy commotion of your own feelings while making your exit." *I had not done the latter.*

"You don't need to go see the counselor," Angie, who was my roommate part of my freshman and all of my sophomore year, maintained.

“I had an appointment scheduled this afternoon to talk about some of the problems I’ve shared with you.”

“Oh, it’s nothing a little retail therapy won’t get rid of,” Angie recommended. “C’mon, come with us to the mall.” Angie was also from a children’s home. I wanted to truly believe that we would turn out okay even though the odds were against us.

### **There Are Consequences to Cancelling My Counseling Session**

I kept ignoring the calls to reschedule my counseling appointment. Besides joining Angie to the mall to spend money I didn’t have, I engaged in partying with her at local clubs for weeks to come. We found some peers who lived “off-campus” and began hanging out with them. I decided one weekend to stay the night at this new friend’s apartment after going out to a local club. *I should have had some insight into the situation I was about to encounter. I trusted too easily and as a result experienced another sexual assault.* I had mastered “telltale changes in my troubled parent’s walk, breath, and tone of voice” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 67). *I missed those cues in my first couple of years in college.*

I had recently broken up with a boyfriend. I didn’t think too much about our relationship. He had transferred out of ACU. Unexpectedly, a couple of months after our break-up he traveled back to Abilene. I ran into him at a club. He asked for me to follow him.

I looked at my girlfriend, Kimber, whose place I was going to be staying and she nodded. She added, "He can drop you off at the apartment." She knew him too. I followed him to his car.

He drove me to a local park. He asked me the regular questions, "How have you been? How are your classes going?"

I was short in my responses. I was more interested in knowing where he was taking me and what his intent was for taking me away from the group. I observed other people in the park and felt safe. For the mere minute I felt safe, I turned around to open the passenger side door. I thought Darian wanted to walk and talk. I looked up only to feel a shoebox hit me in my lips. Darian threw a box filled with old letters and pictures we had written and given each other. The box cut my bottom lip. In that moment I thought, "I should have kept my counseling appointment."

I immediately started walking away asking for assistance. Darian grabbed my arms. I pulled away. When it was obvious no one was responding to my calls for help, I ran towards the closest street that would lead me out of the park. Darian followed me in his car yelling words of profanity.

As I am writing this account of what happened that night, I experienced "confusion, fear, thinking a mile a minute, and reaching a correct conclusion" about the troubling situation, but I'm not content writing about this particular situation, because the "pieces do not paint a pretty picture" (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 72). However, I am satisfied that I found a way to rise above this situation much like I had overcome the sexual assaults that occurred in my parents' home (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Wolin and

Wolin (1993) presented the notion as Survivor's Pride. Survivor's Pride permits a survivor of any kind of abuse to give him/herself credit for rising above adverse situations and absorb how it feels to truly overcome the past (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). The resilient survivor is not free from ebb and flow of life's circumstances, but even after encountering negative experiences is able to gain insight, develop an understanding of self, knowing what or who is going to be a positive influence in his/her life and sensing danger before walking into it (Wolin & Wolin, 1993).

I located a patrol car and shared with them the details of what had just unfolded. The male officers spoke to my ex-boyfriend and came back to me as I sat in the back seat of the patrol car. They came back with the worst thing that I had heard since leaving my parents' house. "He said that he's sorry, ma'am. He made a mistake." The officers empathized with Darian.

"I am not going back with him. Don't you see my arms? They are bruised from him trying to shove me into the car. I screamed for help and the people who were in the park completely ignored me. I'm sitting in your car with a cut lip. Now, you are going to tell me I need to go with him! I would rather get in trouble with my dorm mother than get in the car with him."

"Okay, okay, calm down ma'am. Where are you staying?" The officer asked.

"I was supposed to be staying with a friend at her apartment. She is waiting for me." The officers didn't ask if I wanted to press charges against Darian. Considering the idiots I felt I was dealing with, I requested to be dropped off at my friend's place. *I remember I asked myself, "What would little Rosey do in this situation?" She seemed to*

*have the right answer or way of seeing herself through a situation. I was searching for that ability to sense trouble, so that I could prevent being in this type of situation.* With my troubled family, I picked up on a pattern where Wolin and Wolin (1993, p. 76) said I did the following:

- “counteracted distorted reflections” of me,
- “located the problem where it rightfully belonged,”
- “reduced the anxiety by making the unexpected predictable,” and
- removed myself “from the line of fire.”

*I’m an adult now. I had to take some responsibility for trusting too quickly.*

My friend, Kimber opened the door and saw how disheveled I looked, “What happened?”

“It wasn’t a good idea to go with Darian. He totally caught me off guard and struck me.”

“I promise that I wouldn’t have let you go with him had I known what was going to happen. That is totally out of character for him.” She seemed flabbergasted, or so I thought.

### *The Aftermath*

It was late. I rinsed my face and considered the events a fluke and that it would be another situation I could deal with more closely the next day. I went bed in a sofa bed located in the living room. Fifteen minutes into my sleep I felt I was having a bad dream all over again much like I did when I was a kid getting abused in the middle of the night.

His lips were saying, “That wasn’t me. I’m sorry.”

While I was sleeping, Kimber opened the door and let Darian inside the apartment. Kimber knew that Darian planned to get upset with me. He had called her earlier in the week to know what my plans were for the upcoming Valentine’s Day.

It took a few minutes before I recognized that it wasn’t a nightmare. Darian had raped me.

I could not believe it. I thought Kimber was my friend. My roommate was gone out of town. There was no one, not even public authorities who I could trust.

After pushing Darian off of me, I requested that he leave and threatened to call the police even though I knew I wasn’t going to do that.

Ashamed of what just happened, I decided to leave Kimber’s place at six in the morning in anticipation of the opening of the dormitory doors. I showered immediately and decided that I needed to revisit some previous issues I thought I had resolved. “Early on, resilient children search out love by connecting or attracting the attention of available adults. Though the pleasures of connections are fleeting and often less than ideal, these early contacts seem enough to give resilient survivors a sense of their own appeal. Infused with confidence, they later branch out into active recruiting-enlisting a friend, neighbor, teacher, policeman, or minister as a parent substitute” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 111). *To some extent the Wolins’ description of a survivor’s search for relationships depicted my failed attempt to obtain friends. However, I also had some immediate experiences of police officers not assisting me positively. I really needed to revisit my situation closer.*



### *Meeting Mrs. Wright*

I called the counseling office first thing Monday morning and rescheduled my appointment. I wasn't ready to be on my own like I thought. I couldn't even decipher between the good and bad intentions of people who I considered my friends. I also changed my social habits and focused my energy on my school and work, as well as, my overall well-being. I wanted "to assert myself and master my environment" (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 136). According to Wolin and Wolin (1993), I was trying to take initiative in finding a way to resist peer pressure and maintain my dignity in the process. Some call this an 'internal locus of control.' I explored the options I had to sustain healthier relationships during my counseling sessions. I worked at solving problems head on (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). Wolin and Wolin expressed resiliency in this manner, "To the extent that you take hold of life rather than letting life take hold of you, you are resilient" (1993, p. 155). Resilient survivors are in search of a better path... "we still need something with stronger explanatory power to grasp the depth and strength of their attachment to 'better,' since their capacity to keep those embers alive strengthens over time, despite some dark developmental periods" (Higgins, 1994, p. 171).

I walked into the office, which was decorated with traditional, classic furniture. I sat on the sofa immediately grabbing a plush pillow and placing it over my lap before looking into her eyes. Mrs. Wright was a Caucasian woman in her mid-fifties. She was soft spoken and warm. I immediately took a liking to her. *I had a couple of counselors at ACU. The one who I have one-on-one sessions is whom I write about. I am not including her real name for confidentiality purposes. She has since retired from ACU.*

I started my first session by sharing with Mrs. Wright the most recent encounter with my ex-boyfriend Darian and my self-realization that I still had difficulty deciphering who to invite into my inner circle. Somewhere in the one hour session I shared with Mrs. Wright that, “I had not been violated like I was that Valentine evening since I left my parents’ home in 1991.”

“I’m so glad that you decided to come. We’ll begin to revisit all of the things that are resurfacing in our next session.”

“Okay,” I said. I got up and began heading out the door.

“Now, it’s important that you come back. Don’t let this be our last session. In time, you will be fine with all that you experienced.”

I smiled and nodded, indicating that I would return and assured her that I would not let my friends influence me to do otherwise.

### *Sticking with Mrs. Wright*

I participated in individual, and then a year later in group counseling sessions, for the remaining years I was at ACU. My relationship with Mrs. Wright grew. She took me to a local clinic so that I could get HIV tested to eliminate any doubt in my mind that a disease was lingering in my body from my past and most recent encounter with Darian. *As a young child, I remember making friends fast at school. I didn’t necessarily have a best friend, because the problems I experienced at home were obvious. I was strange to some. I made huge efforts to talk to other kids. No kid wanted to introduce me to their*

*family. I was damaged and it was visible from my head full of lice, putrid body odor and awkward clothes. Since I was friendly and funny, people tolerated my presence. Later, I found out they just felt sorry for me. So, as a young adult I created a circle of family and friends.* Based on the Wolins' (1993) Seven Resiliencies, I was actively recruiting relationships that promoted healthy love.

Mrs. Wright also introduced me to her husband, who took me to search for my first car. She didn't want me to get ripped off when purchasing my first car. Mr. Wright and I met up one sunny afternoon when I was off from work and window shopped. He gave me information so that I could make the best purchase. I did not feel bad having this car shopping experience without my father. As a matter of fact, it confirmed that I did not need to tolerate his nonsense, because there were other people with good intentions that would like to help out and not expect anything in return.

Still, I had some trepidation about my overall progress in the sessions. Towards the last year of my schooling I asked Mrs. Wright, "When will I be ready? Will I ever be completely fixed?"

She smiled and shared, "Rosey, you weren't broken. You've come a long way. If you're asking, what's next for you before you graduate, know that we will spend more time talking about that in our upcoming sessions. There's no exact recipe. Remember, healing is a process."

I had not engaged in inappropriate social activities since beginning my counseling sessions. I cut off my previous unhealthy relationships with my former friends. I had really spent time reenergizing myself, rebuilding solid relationships and

revisiting the goals I set for myself at the end of my freshman year. I even did not commit to any relationship saying to my family, peers and Mrs. Wright, “I came with the last name Mercado, and I will leave with the same name.” Still, I trusted that the healing process Mrs. Wright was talking about would be one that I would be able to incorporate into my life permanently.

*Coming Full Circle and Ending the Other: Abuse*

“Restoring themselves by responding to suffering in others, resilient survivors champion the underdog, dedicate themselves to causes, and try to impose order at home” (Wolin & Wolin, p. 184). *Soon after I started my counseling sessions, I regrouped and decided that I needed to spend more time working with the community. I obtained a job at a local YMCA, volunteered at a local elementary school and went on several mission trips during Spring Break and summer time.* “By serving, or devoting time and energy to institutions, community, and the world, resilient survivors join their individual selves to the selfhood of humanity” (Wolin & Wolin, p. 184).

In one of my session after seeing the negative effects of social influences, I told Mrs. Wright, “I want to go to chapel and tell the students how allowing others influence you impacts your life. I want them to know that there’s more to life than the weekend fun they think they’re going to have.”

She asked, “Well, why don’t you?”

“Nobody’s asking me to share my life story or opinion for that matter. I think that with all the speakers they have daily, it is a message that needs to be presented from the perspective of a student who has experienced it, and has not succumbed to it.”

She encouraged me to continue living a healthy life and said that my actions would speak for me.

I did live a healthier lifestyle. And no sooner than I had expressed those words I ran into Lanier’s article in *The Optimist* on Friday, April 5, 1996 showcasing six graduating seniors who would, as the title of the article stated, “...express experiences in speeches” during chapel time. I was not one of the students selected by the Campus Life committee. However, I was delighted to see that other members of the ACU community felt the same way as I did.

To my surprise, at my commencement ceremony in December 1996, the President of ACU presented me with the Dean Adams Achievement Award. I must have been nominated by a faculty/staff member. To this day, I really don’t know how they select the two students from the graduating class who receive this award. I most appreciated the words that the award signified as it stood for all I sought to uphold: “exemplary character, outstanding academic achievement and determined perseverance to overcome obstacles in order to obtain an education.”

After the graduation ceremony ended, I was able to hug and thank my professors, counselors, members of the children’s home, and members of my “adoptive” and natural family who attended. It took all of their support to get me there and experience that

moment. “Positive youth development depends on the quality of the environment- the available supports, messages, and opportunities young people find in the people, places, and experiences in their lives” (Benard, 2004, p. 40). Environmental protective factors are found in caring relationships, when given high expectations, and experience opportunities to participate and contribute (Benard, 2004). The environmental protective factors require positive changes in the system as well as facilitate brain and human development (Benard, 2004). Thus, Benard (2004, p. 48) believed “positive development and successful outcomes in any human system depend on the quality of the relationships, beliefs, and opportunities for participation.”

### **The Archibalds in Abilene**

Higgins felt that “...unless young people employ critical reflection, the other avenues that potentially widen during adolescence remain underutilized” (1994, p. 155). Through the competence of my ‘adoptive family’ I saw that they listened and we could resolve what was perceived to be a problem through active reflection and critical self-examination (Higgins, 1994). *Norm and Nancy’s guidance was a much more improved conversation from those I had with my parents when discussing my future plans.*

I received additional support from Norm and Nancy Archibald while I was completing my undergraduate studies in Abilene. Nancy was a one of a kind home artist. She painted custom murals on furniture and in rooms of residential homes. Norm was the great communicator and I got to know him and his family through Mr. Archibald. Norm was his son. At the time, he was involved in everything from his full time job to

being president of the ACU Alumni Association. So, it's no surprise to me that he is now the mayor of Abilene. Norm and Nancy have two great kids: Bryan and Betsy.

During my time in Abilene I had numerous opportunities to visit with the Archibald family. We ate dinner together. We went to the same church (when I wasn't working). I hosted a make-up party for Betsy and her girlfriends on her 9<sup>th</sup> birthday.

One of the most significant conversations I had with Norm and Nancy occurred soon after I graduated ACU. *As I write about some of the programs I participated in and awards I was presented, I felt the need to explain that the intent of sharing this information is not to boast. Instead, it is to show that there were numerous moments and incidents that I experienced, which built my self-esteem. These experiences also gave me a sense of self, as I felt I was headed down the right track.* Higgins (1994, p. 165) wrote, "The evolution of the resilient adolescent's outlook and his or her choice of profession are inextricably mutually influenced, with the added spin of chance circumstance."

### *Should I Stay or Should I Go?*

I became comfortable with being a resident in Abilene. I had gotten to know the community. I enjoyed the small town atmosphere even though it was a rather large city in population. I had established a relationship with faculty and staff members at ACU. Even though the McNair Scholars Program exposed me to other schools to consider for graduate studies, I still felt at home in Abilene. Determined to find an answer to my predicament of staying or moving to another town, I went over to eat dinner and to seek advice from Norm and Nancy. I applied for a job in one school district outside of

Abilene. Bryan ISD contacted me within days of my application submittal. They had a long-term substitute position to offer. I wasn't anticipating the school district to contact me so soon.

"The position is not a permanent position," I said guardedly.

Norm advised, "It's a door that is opening for you."

Unconvinced that I needed to move to another city just yet without a real job at hand, I needed a logical explanation for why I should move elsewhere.

Norm did not disappoint me. He had found a simple, yet, powerful way to explore my options. "Okay, let's look at the pros and cons of staying."

He started writing down what I felt were the pros. Then, the cons were written. There it was in ink. After some more discussion, I came to the realization that I needed to move forward.

Nancy said, "As you know I have family in Bryan/College Station. I will call Mom and let her know what we talked about this evening."

"I guess I'm off to a new place. Thank you for helping me figure out the next steps of my career," I accepted.

What seemed to be the following day, I called Bryan ISD to set-up my interview. Sometime that same week, I visited Nancy to say farewell and get directions to her parents' home. She handed me money to get me going and perhaps to pay for unexpected expenses. I don't recall experiencing any unforeseen circumstances. I probably used the money to pay for gas and food.



“By discovering some success in more mainstream families, disembedding themselves from home, [the resilient begin] to revise their self-definition to include more normalcy” (Higgins, 1994, p. 167).

### **McNair’s Scholars Program**

Abilene is approximately 255 miles from the Bryan/College Station area. I had visited the Bryan/College Station area as a part of the McNair Scholars Program.

The McNair Scholars Program was a new undergraduate research program available to first generation college students. After a grueling interview process, I was invited to participate in the program during my last year at ACU. I was paired with research mentors to prepare me for graduate studies. The program afforded me the opportunity to attend a Reading Conference in San Antonio, called “Reaching the Bottom Third” with my mentor. I also attended the National McNair Scholars Conference in Pennsylvania. In my last semester at ACU, the Program Director asked me to look at a school that I would be interested in attending to further my education.

Since I was already familiar with the College of Education at ACU, I chose to visit the original school of choice I had in mind for my undergraduate studies: Texas A&M University. We took a weekend trip so that I could tour the campus, meet other students and visit the department that I was interested in becoming a part of, which was educational administration.

ACU continues to have the program in place and informs the readers on their web site: “The Ronald E. McNair Post-baccalaureate Achievement program was established in memory of Dr. Ronald E. McNair, a respected astronaut-physicist and Challenger Space Shuttle crew member, to prepare eligible scholars for doctoral education. McNair, who was born to a struggling black family in the racially segregated 1950's, flourished as an honor student, star athlete, talented musician and karate champion. While still in high school he promised himself that he would have his Ph.D. within 10 years of graduation” (Abilene Christian University, 2008, p.1).

Dr. McNair’s mantra, and the opportunities given to me in the one year that I was a part of the program, permitted me once again to set goals past my undergraduate studies. Norm and Nancy continued to support me in this endeavor by showing me that one of the pro’s of leaving Abilene was to take a position in Bryan ISD so that I would have the needed experience to obtain a permanent teaching position. This transition would also allow me to continue with my studies in graduate school.

### **The Meuths in Bryan**

I arrived mid-afternoon to the Meuth household without a problem. Erma and Jerry were Nancy’s parents. They lived in a ranch style home in an older neighborhood in Bryan. Inside her home, Erma had updated the style to have a country cottage feel. I was able to see some of Nancy’s painted murals in the formal living room. After taking my luggage to the guest room, I sat down to get to know Erma and Jerry.

“We’re glad you made it safely,” Erma said, as she handed me a soft drink.

“Thank you. I really appreciate you letting me stay while I consider my options here.”

“Jerry and I spend a lot of time in the family room. I enjoy watching the afternoon talk shows and Jerry joins me in the evening for the news,” Erma shared her daily routine.

“Nancy tells us that Bryan ISD called you right away. That’s great! Our other daughter, Marilyn, works there, as well. Do you know what school you’ll be working at?” Erma asked.

“I’ll be interviewing for a teaching job, but a long-term substitute position is all that they are offering at this time,” I responded.

“You’ve done real well for yourself,” Jerry commended my efforts.

“I’ve had a lot of help. You are part of that.”

Higgins (1994, p, 220) expressed, “It is critical to realize that their sense of being chosen is not meant to exclude others from some essential humanity or to create elitism based on suffering.” Instead, Higgins observed that the resilient, “...recognize that, while we are not able to choose our childhoods, we can at least influence, if not direct, what we do with childhood pain in our adult lives” (1994, p. 220). With regards to faith “the resilient are the last people to boast about their accomplishments or proselytize about their faith” (Higgins, 1994, p. 225). I coincide with Higgins in that my faith “goes well beyond what (I) might have learned within any single religious community” (1994,

p. 225). Higgins (1994, p. 226) recognized the “rugged road the resilient have traveled” and the “determination to live out those (faithful) visions” of a better life. *Even more so, I simply want others to see what went well in my life. The focus has always been on what went wrong, how ineffective I was as a child/adolescent and the hurt that lingered.*

### **Making Memories at the Terrell Home in College Station**

The following day I bumped into Marilyn, Nancy’s sister, at Bryan ISD’s central office. She was there attending a meeting. The last time I had seen Marilyn was at Nancy’s 40<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration. It had been awhile, but some of her facial features were very similar to that of Nancy’s. I reintroduced myself and she immediately made the connection. We hugged and set up a time to eat lunch together.

I ended up staying with the Meuths for a couple of months while I worked, researched potential roommates and got to know my way around another college town.

I spent five years in the Bryan/College Station area and created a lot of wonderful memories including adding more members to my “adoptive” family: The Meuths and Terrells.

Almost two years to the date of my arrival to the Bryan/College Station area, I married Paco. We were united as one in Terrell’s College Station home. Much like the Bourland’s home, the Terrell household was immaculate. Marilyn had already set the background being that she had lighted garland spiraling around her stairs from Christmas decorations. Norm was the minister, who wed Paco and I. Casey, Enie and Richard’s

daughter, was Maid of Honor, Bryan, Norm and Nancy's son, was the Best Man.

Richard walked me down the stairs to meet Paco. Ironically, this January 2<sup>nd</sup> celebration was filled with all the members of my "adoptive" family and local friends. Neither one of our natural family members were present.

To me, the opinion of my "adoptive" family meant more than anyone else's. I told Paco, "My family does not make a big deal about weddings. Most marriages don't last. I'm okay with my natural family not being present. I would like for you to invite your family."

Paco insisted that we would celebrate our nuptials again at a later date with his family and perhaps mine. We did renew our vows 5 years to the date after the original nuptials were declared. *Looking back, it was selfish of us to only include one set of "family" members. I chalk it up to us being young. Paco's family found out we were married three months into our 1999 nuptials. They met my natural parents six months into our marriage. My "adoptive family" had been a part of my life since I was introduced to them by Mr. Archibald in 1991 and it grew more as I expanded my horizons to the Bryan/College Station area. The two sets of Archibalds, the Bourlands, the Meuths, and the Terrells have been a part of my life with varying degrees of closeness. I did find closure, once a full fledge wedding was held in the Valley in 2004. Considering the rocky relationship I had with some of my siblings, it was surprising to see that all of my siblings, who lived in the Valley, made it to the occasion and some from out of town did, as well.*

*Since moving to Sunny Glen as a teenager, I maintained an unofficial 'adoptive' status with the Archibald, Bourland, Terrell and Meuth families (Higgins, 1994).*

Higgins (1994, p. 126) claimed that adolescents “find extensive sources of feedback on who they are and what they can do.” *The experiences I was now encountering were for better than when I decided to leave my parents' home.* Higgins' (1994, p. 129) analogy depicted correctly my thoughts about deciding between staying with my parents or leaving to Sunny Glen: “It is as if in adolescence, the resilient begin to recognize, analyze, and gradually metabolize noxious familial pollutants, eventually drafting and enforcing clean air legislation rather than simply being choked by acrid vapors of withering past.” Higgins (1994, p. 129) continued, “to accomplish this, adolescents must conceptually shift their families from the foreground to the less focal background, leaving room for the advance of another, more effective model of family life.”

### **A Conversation over Lunch with Mimi, Enie and Casey Bourland**

Recently, I set up a lunch date to meet with Mimi (Cherie) Archibald as well as mother-daughter duo, Enie, and Casey Bourland. There I sat with three generations of Archibald women, who for all intents and purposes played a significant role in my young and adult life. I asked to meet with them so that we could have a conversation about the first times we met, how our relationships have evolved and the implications that arose as a result of our new-found relationships.

I now wish that I had recorded our conversation that day at the Macaroni Grill Restaurant. I did not want to taint the conversation by putting a recorder on the table as I spoke with these incredible women about our history together.

I can express that the words shared were honest when discussing the first impressions we had of each other. The words were also ever so gentle when mentioning times I put my foot in my mouth, or made decisions that favored helping my natural family out, even though I knew that they were going to continue to be abusive towards me. There was a lot of laughter, especially when discussing little milestones in my life such as attending my first professional baseball game and my loud cheerleader-like behavior that had me hanging over the guardrail yelling at the umpire or pitcher.

My social etiquette, to say the least, was a little rough around the edges.

This lunch gathering was a culmination of the numerous life lessons that had been afforded to me by a family virtually unknown to me until after I entered Sunny Glen Children's Home. We were celebrating Mrs. Archibald's 82<sup>nd</sup> birthday in November, but were also making up for lost time by reflecting on the wonderful times we spent together.

### *Revisiting the Past*

"How long has it been since we were first introduced?" Enie asked me.

"It's been 15 years," I smiled.

Casey subtracted those years from her current age. I stopped her mental math.

“Yes, I was around during the best time of your life, Casey. You were transitioning into middle school,” I chuckled.

“Oh, my goodness,” Casey recalled that she and her mom, Enie, had classic mother-daughter arguments about clothes, school and of course, her teenage attitude.

I felt a bit uneasy about saying anything else regarding Casey and Enie’s relationship. I decided to at least recognize the fact that Casey had questions about her mom’s involvement in my life.

“I always thought it was important to acknowledge that Enie was foremost your mother and secondly my close, dear friend,” I expressed.

“Yeah, well I wondered what your thoughts were on that.” Casey entertained my lead into that particular event in our lives.

“Before going to Sunny Glen, I lived with my high school girlfriend April’s family. Living with the Hardin’s taught me that I needed to respect the relationships that were already in place prior to my arrival,” I expressed. At times, I noticed that April’s mother compared me to April, wishing that her daughter would be more grateful about life and the things they as parents provided.”

I noticed Casey’s eyes looking intently at me. I continued,

“You are much younger than I; therefore, the relationship that I had with your mom was at a different level than the relationship you had with her. Our relationship wasn’t the same as the experience I had with my girlfriend April and her mother, because when I lived with her, we were both in the same grade and were the same age. Even so, I still



approached my relationship with your mom cautiously when you were around, because I did not want you to think that you were an outsider in our conversations.”

Casey acknowledged that she did feel that there was some competition for her mom’s attention.

Enie put her hand over Casey’s arm and began sharing her perspective about our relationship. “I don’t connect us with Sunny Glen. When you talk about meeting us, you mention that if it weren’t for Sunny Glen, then you wouldn’t have met us.” *In my mind, Mr. Archibald was the gardener, who watered my garden of ideas. As I flourished, so did the number of people who visited my garden. I felt as if I had something to offer...a possible scent of hope or a beautiful view/perspective. My garden did not grow in my parents’ home but it flourished in the Home. I carry that garden with me.*

“Enie, your father, who was the director of the children’s home, introduced me to your mother, who then spoke to you about me. I see a direct correlation with the Home when I think of how we became connected,” I responded unwaveringly.

“Well, here are some notes that I wrote down about our relationship and how I felt it evolved.” Enie handed me two sheets of paper with handwritten notes.

I took the notes knowing that I would revisit them later. Again, I did not want to interrupt the flow of the conversation by reading them at that moment.

Mrs. Archibald pulled her notes out of her purse. She said, “I didn’t know if this is what you are looking for. But, I wrote down things I remembered about your character and why you stood out to me from all the other children.”

I didn't want our conversation to seem as if it was set-up to discuss only what they felt about me because I was writing an autoethnographic piece. I wanted to explore all of the little intricacies that coincide with building relationships, re-establishing new relationships as a result of the "adopted" additions to family and dig deeper into their personal thoughts as events or situations unfolded. Even after the dissertation is written I am still going to be a part of their lives. I am still going to need their support in my relationship with my spouse, when I expand my family and as I continue to rebuild relationships with my natural family.

Ultimately, I wanted to meet with them to acknowledge that their efforts in helping me understand and cope with the many issues I had confronted in my life, and the time spent away from their own families while they supported me in different events and gave emotional support during my college years were not futile.

#### *Enie's Notes*

Enie listed the following points:

- *Met when you were Sr. in high school*
  - *At church*
  - *I remember finally meeting the person mom had told me about*
  - *You seemed very positive and upbeat even though meeting was short*
- *Richard and I had been donating money to an International Organization that we had very little ties to. I felt that I would rather donate to a specific purpose (i.e., person) and have a personal link/relationship through the donation.*
- *Your name came to mind and it seemed to fit. I spoke to Richard about it and he agreed. We decided that we would like to get to know you and invited you to Houston for a visit.*

- *I think it was during the summer and we went to Lake Livingston for the weekend.*
- *I specifically remember you riding a big tube behind the boat. At one point you were screaming and we couldn't interpret if you were excited or scared, etc... We finally stopped the boat because we were concerned to which you said, "No, no don't stop! Keep going. This is great!"*
- *I remember that you never asked for anything nor asked many questions, but you were very observant.*
- *You wanted us to "go first" and then you would follow.*
- *As we got to know you better you became more and more comfortable with us and us with you.*
- *I remember one time that you were coming to see me and we had discussed it over the phone a week or so before. You were driving from Abilene and were planning to go to your sister's house after your short visit with us (next day?). I planned a special meal (which included grocery shopping, preparing food, preparing your room, etc...) and I waited and waited-no message. (Pre-cell phone days.) I became worried and concerned but didn't have a way to contact you since you had left Abilene.*
- *You contacted us the next day (?) and told us you were in Harlingen because your dad was sick.*
- *While I understood about your dad, I was upset that you didn't call.*

Wolin and Wolin (1993, p. 89) found "troubled parents, shattered inside, cling.

Rather than fostering your independence, they make messes that threaten to engulf you."

*When I reviewed Enie's notes, it confirmed my thoughts, memories, and details that I recalled about our relationship. When I went to Houston for the first time to visit the Bourland family, they took me to Lake Livingston. Being behind a boat on a tube was a first time experience for me. I would let others go first on purpose. The only exposure I had outside of my life in the Valley to recreational activities occurred when I went on school field trips and the couple of summer trips I took with my cottage family from Sunny Glen. I did not know what the proper steps were so I followed the leader. I didn't think twice about helping my father out by driving him home to the Valley from Dallas. Enie was correct. I did not call about the change of plans. I did not realize that this was*

*a big social etiquette faux-pas. I was going to Enie's as a social trip and thought that making sacrifices for family came first. A day later I called Enie from my parents' home to let her know my whereabouts. After I spoke with Enie I realized that I had made a mistake, and that I was still allowing my family to guilt me into making poor decisions.*

#### *Mimi's Notes*

Mimi's notes were brief:

- *Came to SGCH on her own-High School Junior*
- *My husband interviewed her and was so very impressed, etc...*
- *She immediately made friends and participated in SGCH activities, including a trip to Florida with the drill team*
- *Always smiling- always a positive attitude- worked very hard*
- *ACU- worked on campus, baby sat my grandchildren in Abilene-they loved her*
- *Took her shopping and lunch in Harlingen*

I read through Mimi's notes and realized that things I would consider day-to-day activities appeared to be significant to Mrs. Archibald. I did come to Sunny Glen when I was a junior in high school on my own. "On my own" meant that I did not have any support from my birth family when making this move. Mr. Archibald was impressed with my interest in moving to Sunny Glen because I was doing this with the support of high school friends and their parents, but not my natural family. I did become involved in Sunny Glen and school sponsored activities, because I did not have to work as laboriously as I did before. The cheerleading squad that I was a part of had earned a spot in the National Championship in Florida. This was not due to my individual contribution, as I was an average squad member, but the exposure and highlight was

positive news for the Home. I did smile often. My smiles came more and more naturally as I was thankful for the educational opportunities, spiritual development and refreshing environment that Sunny Glen offered.

### **Rising Above**

In revisiting my adolescent and young adult life, I found that there were many people who fostered, nurtured and helped me become the person that I see in the mirror today. More importantly, these individuals, families, counselors and directors of programs helped me develop a set of coping skills that permit me to get back up when I am down. I am able to set boundaries in new relationships, which includes accepting who I am today and recognize the issues that may still arise, as a result of the inappropriate sexual, physical, emotional and verbal abuse I encountered in the past. At the same time, I am able to maintain a healthy perception about my body and mind. With the support of many I attained college degrees that I have used to the fullest extent to rise above the poverty.

## CHAPTER VIII

### VALUING THE EXPERIENCE OF POVERTY

#### **High in Numbers, Low in Wages**

There were 15 members in my family: Mom, Dad, Andres, Savanna, Elisa, Cristian, Ramona, Esperanza, Deyanira, Enrico, Victoria, Dulce, myself, Monica, and Mateo, respectively by age. “The importance of household composition is obvious when we consider that it defines both the number of persons with whom the child interacts and the physical nature of the setting, the space in which s/he is socialized” (Werner & Smith, 1998, p. 76). Furthermore, “sociologists and anthropologists remind us that the amount of attention mothers can give their children depends on her workload, the presence of siblings, and the presence of other adult caretakers in the household” (Werner & Smith, 1998, p. 76).

*It is important to note that while there are still members of my family living in poverty, it is not the aim of this chapter to focus on that. In this chapter I share a series of phone conversations I had with my mother and some of my sisters. The conversations depict the impact poverty had and continues to have in my life today. At times, being poor affected our health. We did not have the means to visit the doctor for preventative measures, much less during times we were ill. Poverty created several stressful events that often led to abuse in our house. Even worse, it led to some of us, including myself, accepting the dysfunctional behaviors until we found resources to take us out of the despair. Additionally, “women are especially vulnerable to poverty as they age due to a*

lifetime of lower earnings and fewer retirement benefits” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 4).

Werner and Smith (1998, p. 13) conducted a longitudinal study of resilience of Kauai natives where “more than half come from poor families.” In the Kauai study, “adolescent girls undergo marked pressure to adopt a traditional feminine role and not compete with the masculine world” (Werner & Smith, 1998, p. 45). “...Dependency became a major problem for girls in adolescence.” Of the 42 girls and 30 boys, who were the target group of Werner & Smith’s resiliency research, the children had “encountered at least four or more cumulative risk factors by age 2, but all managed to cope successfully with chronic poverty...” (1998, p. 48). The same could not be said of the two comparison groups (Werner & Smith, 1998). *I share with you this study only to show the saliency among the research and my life story. I value experiencing poverty for the simple reason that it motivates me to push myself and others for the better...health, emotional stability, daily living, etc...*

### **Calling Mom to Comfort Her**

I was on the phone with my mom a few weeks after my father’s passing. This phone conversation was a bit different. I felt that I needed to offer my mom support in managing her future without my father...emotionally, but more importantly financially. I wanted to do it in a way that would not belittle her sense of self. Before I got to that conversation, I needed to check on her health.

“*Mamá, ¿cómo está?*” I asked my usual first question. My mom knew I wanted her to tell me now about her most recent hospital visit, which I heard about from my sister, Esperanza.

“*No, nada, mi’ja,*” she responded.

“Nothing is going on, Mom?” I asked my question sounding unconvinced with her response.

“*Estoy mejor.* I’m better,” Mom acknowledged.

“*Mamá, quiero ser honesta con usted.* I want to be honest with you.” I decided I was going to be straight-forward about my concern for her weakened health, which is partly due to the uncertainty of a future without Dad, by talking about my own health; “*Yo he estado enferma.* I’ve been sick, Mom. I usually get sick when I am not working. I like having a purpose when I wake up everyday. If I have days off from work I feel like I am wasting time.”

Mom understood where I was going with my most recent experiences. She interrupted me to say, “*¿Tú piensas que esto es lo que es lo que está pasando conmigo?* Do you think that this is what’s happening to me?”

“*Sí.* Yes, Mom, there is no medical reason why you should be as sick as you have been. You have never smoked or drank.”

I had found out that Mom was considering taking an oxygen tank home because she thought that she had been having one too many bronchial issues. Esperanza later tells me that her lung capacity was functioning at 98%. That is incredible considering that she had lived with a smoker for more than forty-five years.



Mom shifted the conversation back to talking about work. “*Primero, quiero decir que si siento que deje de trabajar más pronto de lo que quería.* First, I want to say that I do feel that I stopped working sooner than I wanted to. I had to leave my job, because your father would follow me or demand that someone take him to me. It became too dangerous,” she unloaded.

“I want you to be here when I have a child. I know that Paco and I don’t have any children now, but you are too important in my life for you to leave this world so soon.”

“*Rosy, no exageres.* Don’t exaggerate,” my mom stated, wanting to downplay the seriousness of her health. She continued, “I do see what you’re talking about though. When your father was alive I felt that I had to look over my shoulder all the time.” Prior to his death, my father threatened to go to Mom’s work if she didn’t come home at a precise time. My dad’s iron hand approach remained in my mother’s mind as she recalled what he would do to her if she did not follow his way.

“*Yo sentí lo mismo.* I felt the same threat that you did after I left the house and moved into Sunny Glen. It took awhile before I could go to sleep without thinking someone was going to force their way into my bedroom. I felt that I had to check my body before I went to bed and after I got up to confirm that I hadn’t been violated overnight,” I admitted.

“*Mi’ja, lo siento mucho.* Sweetie, I’m so sorry,” my mom attempted to apologize for not taking action when my father and brothers violated me sexually at home.

I quickly interjected, “*No, Mamá, no estoy pidiendo su disculpa.* I’m not asking for an apology. I’ve already accepted your apology years ago. I’m letting you know this, because it’s your turn to heal. I left Dad’s fury and verbal abuse long ago. You have just begun to release emotions that were kept within you. Even worse, you remained by his side until his death, fearing you could not financially be on your own. You have never known what it was like to feel peace or to have a sense of freedom and individuality. Dad took that away from you. You have to digest all that now and figure out how you will survive. You will overcome this, Mom.”

Feeling relieved, she said, “*Es cierto.* It’s true. I sometimes think that I need to get up or I’m going to hear him shout. His words still penetrate and make my body shiver.”

“*Es normal.* That is normal,” I attempted to comfort her.

“*Gracias.* I didn’t know what this feeling was. Now, I know. I don’t have to be afraid anymore or worry myself sick,” my mom relaxed her voice.

“*No, mamá...*No, Mom, you don’t. We’ll work something out as a family to figure out what resources we have to keep you afloat until you begin receiving Dad’s death benefits.”

I hung up the phone after Mom prayed, as she always did, for me and for my relationship with Paco to remain strong.

I reminded her to stay strong.

“While altruism is a purely unselfish form of helping, it does, in fact, rebound to the benefit of the helper” (Bernard, 2004, p. 17). Tugade and Frederickson (2004, p. 320

& 331) studied the concept of resilience and found that some individuals who had psychological resilience, which “refers to effective coping and adaptation although faced with loss, hardship, or adversity...tend to experience positive emotions even amidst stress.”

### **Calling Mom to Find Comfort**

*I rarely told my mother the exact details about work incidents, as I often thought they may be too complex for her to understand. So, when I called to say I had a bad day. I just left it at that. Except there was one time, I was taken aback when I heard my mother say in a prayer, “Lord, I may not know what Rosey is going through, because she is a professional. I request that you give her what she needs to think with her head and not end up looking like an ass in this situation.” (Mother later defended that ‘ass’ is a word in the Bible.) I heard her words loud and clear. Even more, I realized I wasn’t giving my mom enough credit for understanding the situations I came across as an educator. “At the same time, while your family may not want or be able to learn your new curriculum, they ‘do’ generally want continuing contact. However, they typically expect ongoing relationships on the terms that did not work for you in the first place (or you would not have tried so hard to change the syllabus)” (Higgins, 1994, p. 278).*

One evening in the fall, I was rocking back and forth in one of our white rocking chairs on our front porch only to find myself calling my mother to ask her for prayers, because I had a difficult day at work. I let the tears flow naturally down my cheek, as I listened to Mom pray to God to eliminate any harm that came or may come my way. As

I reflected on my ghastly day, I wished that the professional bad move I made that day belonged to someone else.

I called my sister Victoria after hanging up with my mom. Victoria is notorious for having issues larger than I could ever imagine experiencing. Waiting for her to answer the call, I imagined Victoria cleaning my sister Monica's apartment to earn money, because she seemed to always be strapped for cash. Victoria was very creative when it came to making ends meet. She was not at Monica's today. Instead, I located Victoria at her boss' house, where she was cleaning. I got straight to the point so as not to disturb her for too long. The purpose of the call was to invite her to come visit me for the weekend.

"Oh, really? I'm there," Victoria exclaimed.

"Great. Bring Mom with you," I responded gleefully.

"Okay, *mi'ja*. Let me call Mom," she stated.

"I already called her. She said she's coming if you are," I communicated.

"Okay. Then, it's a done deal." I was looking forward to seeing them in the upcoming weekend.

Suddenly, as I walked into the house, I paused, looking intently at my cell phone and thinking to myself, "Do I convey hysterical, almost unbelievable, dramatic stories about my siblings so that I can show how 'normal' I am compared to the situation we all lived in? Do I tell these stories to be able to shine (but not necessarily be in the spotlight) among the many in my family? In reality, I probably have issues that are similar, if not very much the same, as my siblings are currently experiencing.

I continued to contemplate, “Am I inviting Victoria and Mom to come over to my house because this Friday will be my Dad’s birthday?” Before I could think any deeper about my intentions for scheduling this invitation, my cell phone rang. It’s Victoria.

“I’ve got good news and bad news, which one do you want?” Victoria asked.

“Give me the good news.”

“We will be able to come, but not until two weeks from now,” she said.

“What’s the bad news?” I waited for the inevitable response of ‘I have no cash to travel.’

“My car is overheating. I normally fix it when I plan to travel,” Victoria paused for a reaction from me.

I’m thinking about what to say. Then, I thought about her situation to myself, “Why wait for a trip to fix things? Why not prevent a problem from happening?” I decided to bite my tongue and say nothing to her regarding how to fix her troubles or how she could have prevented her car from overheating.

I simply respond, “Okay, well maybe we can figure a way for you to come over sooner.”

“Alright.” We say good-bye and end our call at the same time.

So now, I’m back to giving you another reason why I don’t often invite my family over to my house. If I do invite them over, then I’d have to find a way to get them here.

“Okay, so maybe, I am not so crazy. Victoria is trying to pull a fast one on me,” my thoughts come thunderously to my mind. I feel somewhat better thinking that my general thoughts and feelings or intuitions about my family are pretty close to accurate. The stories of never enough money, broken down vehicles, and limited resources are part of my life story. As I keep going back and forth with my current life experiences and those of the past, I am reminded that I, too, can experience a bad day. I just happen to have a sense of awareness about what steps I need to take to bounce back from an unfavorable situation. Higgins found that most of the adult growth among the resilient revolved “around allowing ‘themselves’ the same compassion that they extend to others” (1994, p. 269). This is still possible only because they have never hardened their heart to human suffering.” Benard (1994, p.17) noted that problem solving skills encompassed “many abilities, from planning and flexibility through resourcefulness, critical thinking, and insight.” Furthermore, Benard (1994, p. 17) added, “The glue that holds them together as a category is a figuring-things-out quality.”

Victoria will probably not come in two weeks, unless I offer her some financial assistance. I did want to offer her some money so that my mom could visit me in the new home I’ve lived in for almost 8 months. I don’t offer anything.

I hung up the phone thinking that I probably won’t see my mom or siblings until I make a trip to the Valley.

### **Calling a Voice of Reason**

I called Monica to tell her about my conversation with Mom and Victoria.

“No wonder Mom called me today,” Monica recalled.

“She did?” I was surprised by the revelation.

“Yes, Mom called me from Victoria’s cell to chit-chat. She didn’t ask for money,” Monica followed my thoughts.

“Wow, I feel terrible. I didn’t want to put the burden on you. It seems that they were trying to find some financial help.” I was questioning Victoria and Mom’s motives again, even though I was the one, who invited them to come over. *I felt badly that my request of my mother and sister would have them create a domino effect of calling siblings to ask for money.*

“I kept asking Mom if she needed anything but she said, ‘No.’ Then, I asked what she was doing with Victoria, and her response was ‘Oh, nada.’ Our conversation didn’t make sense to me,” Monica recalled.

Maybe I should be glad that Victoria attempted to find a way to come visit me.

Perhaps, I need to give her more credit for attempting to come, and just accept that poverty is part of our life. Not having any money was not the worst thing that has happened in our lives.

In the end, it’s more probable that I will remember the visits I had with my family, rather than the effort I had made to get them here. *I had made multiple attempts to start traditions in our family.* With the recent death of my father, I wanted to reconnect with members of my family “making up for the past, reinforcing a positive self-image in the present, and reaching out toward a hopeful future,” but at what cost (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 133)?

*What Matters Most*

It didn't matter that I did not get my mom and Victoria's travel resolved. My initial reason for the call was to get support from my mother.

"What was your reason for calling Mom?" Monica asked at the same time I reflected upon this moment.

"I didn't have a good day at work. A mother of one of my student's, who engaged in a fight, called me a bitch today. She claimed that I was keeping her from maintaining a job, because I was calling her daily to pick her daughter up from school. Here's the sad part, it wasn't even me who gave her child the consequence. I was the administrator that was available to speak to her about the situation," I said with a huff. "MaryAnne, one of my administrative colleagues, said to me, 'You have to be psychologically strong to hold in all of the emotions being thrown at you,'" I told Monica, expecting sympathy from her.

*It's not like I had not heard profanity before. I did hear the same word come out of my father's mouth numerous times. When vulgar language is used, especially in a professional setting, it catches me off guard. I limit myself immensely from using profanity at work or home. Yet, the verbal assaults penetrate my mind and simmer until I reflect on how the event unfolded so that it won't happen again.*

Monica reminded me, "Some days are good while others are not. We are all adults and we need to act as adults. I think that it's important for you take the time to listen to your students' parents. They are just following the chain of command, even if you weren't the one who gave out the consequence. They may feel that it is easier to



“speak to you than another administrator on your campus, who may be involved with other projects. Isn’t it your role to take care of the day-to-day requests, calls and stuff like that in order to assist your administrative colleagues?”

“Yes. I know that I need to do what is necessary so that I am working collegially with my team. I know that students need to be given every opportunity to make progress, but a consequence is a consequence,” I stated. “I was just taken aback when I heard this mother speak to me so viciously. I immediately corrected her, which made the matter worse.”

“Yeah, when you lose focus on the students, because their parents seem too overwhelming, then you probably missed out on an opportunity to help both understand why the consequence was given,” Monica said while holding her newborn infant. “It’s all about balance. You have a support system at home. You have Paco. You have one at school with your colleagues.”

“I do have a support system. Thank you for reminding me.”

I slept a little lighter that night, but not because I gave my mother or sister Victoria the money to come see me. I was able to accept that life’s issues whether they occurred at work or home were going to happen...even to me, despite the many other obstacles I may have already overcome, including poverty. I simply have to approach each issue with the same fervor and diligence I did when I was a young child and adolescent. “There are individuals who seem to bounce back quite effectively, whereas others are caught in a rut, seemingly unable to get out of their negative streaks” (Tugade & Fredrickson, 2004, p. 320). Werner and Smith (1998, p. 89) reported, “The resilient

adolescents in our study were not usually gifted, nor did they possess outstanding aptitudes. What attributes they had, however, they put to good use. They were responsible, had internalized a set of values and made them useful in their lives, and had attained a greater degree of social maturity than many of their age-mates who grew up under more favorable circumstances.” *Incidentally, I relate closely to the adolescents studied by Werner and Smith (1998).*

*In other phone calls with Monica, we use humor to deal with stressful situations. Monica would often say to me, “You can get through this, Rosey. Don’t you remember the numerous nights we slept with the sheets over our head almost suffocating? Why did we do this? Because we had to cover our faces so we wouldn’t be bitten by the hundreds of cockroaches that would come out once the lights were off.” Her point being, I could have a restful sleep to rejuvenate for the next day. This was hardly the case when we were growing up. After putting into perspective my former life experiences with my current ones, I embraced the recent one as another opportunity for me to grow emotionally and professionally.*

### **The House is Making Mom Sick**

“*Mamá, escuche que va a ir a Bay City.* I heard you were going to Bay City,” I attempted to locate my mom’s whereabouts.

“*No, mi’ja, estoy en el hospital,*” Mom said with a strained voice.

“What’s going on Mom that you are in the hospital again?” I attempted to make sense of the situation.

*“Tengo neumonía,”* Mom repeated the doctor’s diagnosis.

*“Ya se.* I know that you have bronchial asthma and pneumonia is part of the illness, but what is happening at home that keeps sending you back to the hospital?” I asked.

*“Bueno, cuando me duermo en la casa de tu hermano, Enrico, el doctor decía que la alfombra era el problema. Y mi casa, bueno, está vieja,”* Mom explained.

*“Entonces...so,* you will not ever be cured of the problem, unless you live in a home that is clean. The carpet in Enrico’s house is filthy and thus it agitates your lungs. Your house is decrepit and probably filled with mold spores, which irritates your breathing,” I concluded, frustrated that my mother still had not found a way to upgrade her home to a standard that would be deemed as livable.

Surprisingly, mom had a solution to share. *“Ya pedí para un préstamo de \$25,000. La ciudad se va a encargar de renovar la casa.”*

*“¿De veras, Mamá?* Really, Mom? You have signed up for a loan through the City of Harlingen. Who’s going to oversee the contract work on the house?” I quizzed her.

*“Te dije...I* told you, the City is in charge of everything.”

*“No, Mamá, no trabaja así.* No, Mom, it doesn’t work that way. You’re going to have to oversee who comes in to do the work and decide what areas of the house you’d like to get started on first.” I really didn’t know if this is how it worked exactly. I was basing most of my understanding of home renovations on what I had seen on the *Home & Garden TV* home improvement shows.

*“No se. Me dijeron que me iban ayudar.”*

*I would like to applaud my mother for searching out ways to make home improvements, but she easily trusted and often times she never was strong enough to follow through with a project. The effort, time and initial leg work in most projects she engaged in would be thrown aside. It has been two years since I had the conversation about reconstruction with my Mom. The house is still having plumbing, electrical and heating issues. No one from the city has begun working on the project. Nevertheless, Mom is still attempting to see this project through. She is waiting on the City of Harlingen to update her on the latest timeline. According to Eitzen and Eitzen Smith (2009, p.16) the structures in place in local government perpetuate her living condition; thus, “...the way society is organized perpetuates poverty, not the characteristics of poor people.”*

*“Mom, I understand that you trust that the City wants to help, but I don’t want you to get ripped off. Please keep me posted with any future plans you may have. You sound better than the last time we talked. I will call you in a week to check on your progress. Mateo will be calling you soon about setting up a bank account to help you with your bills.” When my mother encountered financial strains, she had two ways to solve the problem: take out a shark loan (with an outrageously high interest rate) or rely on one of her children to get her out of the mess. Some of my siblings along with myself wanted to place new structures to show Mom how to save money to pay for her monthly utility bills.*

*“Espera, quería decirte algo sobre este plan.* Wait, I wanted to say something about that plan. Your sister Victoria is moving in with me. She will be paying the utility bills. Don’t worry about depositing any money for my utility bills.”

“Oh my goodness,” I thought. “Should I even engage in a conversation with Mom about Victoria’s ill ability to maintain a job and poor history in paying off bills?” I decided to entertain it in the event that I needed to make reference about this situation in future conversations.

*“Victoria va a vivir conmigo, porque ya no puedo.”* Mom had given up on my brother Cristian, who was her unofficial caretaker, and solicited help from Victoria.

Victoria was definitely skilled in home health care matters. She had taken care of my father, albeit unconventionally, until his death.

*“Pero, Mamá...*but, Mom, Victoria isn’t financially stable. How is she going to pay your bills, when she is having difficulty with her own?” I didn’t have time to beat around the bush.

Mom was not going to attempt to explain Victoria’s reckless record of money mismanagement. Instead, she focused on her health, *“Necesito alguien...*I need someone that will be here and take care of me if I have another health episode. Your brother Cristian leaves to stay at Enrico’s house when he gets tired of hearing me cough at night. I don’t want to be left to die alone in this house.”

I could not be there for her in the way Victoria was offering. I decided to keep any other opinions to myself.

### **Mom, Do You Think We Were Poor?**

*The poverty I experienced included times where I overheard my parents speak of the water bill and the large amount they had to pay that particular month. I decided to do my part and not use much water. Nobody asked me to do this, but I didn't want to hear another argument between my parents. I stopped bathing for a few days. The negative attention of not bathing for several days prompted a lecture from my sixth grade teacher. Ms. Mireles spoke to the class about personal hygiene as she stood by me. Later that afternoon, I walked into the girls' restroom after an hour long cheerleading practice and dirt crumbled from my neck as I cooled and wiped my neck and face with water. I quickly realized the lecture about personal hygiene was directed at me. I decided I would shower and find other ways to help with expenses.*

Not long ago, I had another conversation with my mother over the phone. Our conversations are usually not lengthy. Partly, it was because Mom's life is rather stagnant and partly because she refused to divulge any details that may be a hurdle for her or any of my siblings. I don't press for more sad news. My calls to her tend to focus on her health and overall well-being to which her usual response is, "*Estoy dentro verde y seco*. I'm between (the) green and dry (grass)." Metaphorically, she's neither here nor there. As soon as she says this, Mom automatically moves into her cooing voice, as she solicits information about my firstborn Gisele's developmental milestones.

On this call, I intentionally chose to extend the length of our conversation.

"*Mamá, ¿usted piensa que éramos pobres cuando yo era joven?* Mom, do you think that we were poor when I was a kid?"

*“No, no éramos pobres porque teníamos comida para comer. No, we weren’t poor, because we had food to eat.”*

*The food that my mom was talking about was given to us at times free (without my dad knowing) by a government agency, paid with food stamps(until my father asked her to stop accepting welfare out of pride) or came once per month from a mega-shopping trip after my father got his pay check. The food was not always healthy. I began sharing my concern about this matter when I realized that Mom cooked with lard. I didn’t address or revisit these points in our conversation.*

*“Pero, comida fue un aspecto. Food was one aspect. What about our lack of clothing, poor health, and inability to pay utility bills?” I dared to go deeper with my mother.*

*“Quizás, tienes un punto. Maybe, you have a point. I just thought that if I was able to feed all of the kids then we weren’t considered poor. Your father kept the refrigerator full of food.”*

*Dad and mom both recycled uneaten food, even if flies swarmed around it. I didn’t count that food to be good even if it made the inside of the refrigerator appear full.*

*“Mamá, ¿no piensa que la experiencia que tuvo Papá viviendo en la época de la depresión haya tenido un efecto importante en su manera de pensar acerca de tener un refrigerador vacío? Mom, don’t you think that Dad’s experience with being a young child during the Depression Era impacted his thoughts about not having an empty refrigerator?” I surmised.*

“*Bueno, eso puede ser cierto.* Well, that could be true,” Mom affirmed.

“*En relación con comida, pienso que quizás usted siente que no éramos pobres porque nos cocinaba algo de comer cada día.* Regarding food, I think that maybe you feel that we weren’t poor because you had a meal prepared for us all daily, albeit small amounts. Mom, cooking was your skill. You worked as a cook in Mexican restaurants all your life. You were skilled in making food go along way,” I credited her efforts.

“*Ustedes sí tenían hambre.* You [all] were sure hungry,” I sensed by her jolly tone of voice that I could probe further.

“*Mamá, ¿cuánto ganaba por hora en su trabajo?* Mom, how much did you earn hourly in your job?” I pondered more on our poverty stricken situation. *According to Eitzen and Eitzen Smith (2009) my family and I were living in a place where a lot of families struggled to prosper: the Rio Grande Valley.*

“*Ganaba un dólar la hora.* I earned one dollar an hour.”

“*Pero, está hablando de los 70’s, ¿verdad?* But, you’re talking about the 70’s, right?”

Mom confirmed that she earned \$1 per hour when she obtained her first job after the family immigrated to the States from Mexico in 1974. “*¿Pudo comprar mucho con el dinero que ganaba?* Could you buy a lot with the money you earned?”

“*No, sí era difícil de sostener una familia tan grande.* No, it was difficult being able to sustain such a large family.”

“Despite working, (the working poor) remain poor because they hold menial, dead-end jobs that have no benefits and pay the minimum wage or below” (Eitzen &



Eitzen Smith, 2009). *Poverty permeated my abusive home. It primarily existed because of our immigrant status; it then stayed as a result of two blue collared workers' (my parents) inability to support our large family.* According to the US Department of Labor (2008) web site, “the minimum wage increased to \$2.00 an hour in 1974, \$2.10 in 1975, and \$2.30 in 1976 for all except farm workers, whose minimum initially rose to \$1.60. Parity with nonfarm workers was reached at \$2.30 with the 1977 amendments.”

“*Entonces, sí éramos pobre.* So, we were poor,” I concluded. “I think that your perspective is interesting. That’s why I am asking. I was a toddler and a young child in the 70’s, but when the 80’s came around I observed and felt our poverty. The girls shared one single room, and the boys had to share one of their own, as well. We didn’t have many frequent updates in our clothing. We hardly ever went to see a general doctor, much less a dentist,” I added.

*While I did not want to pile on the poverty we experienced, it was interesting to me that Mom forgot about the times we went dumpster diving to look for additional furniture that might be good for the house. My brother drove us around until we found salvageable pieces. On the day I rode with them, we found a black vinyl sofa, which we placed in the front porch to air out. Unbelievable to me now, all of our visitors, who sat it in it, did not ever know where it originally came from. I cringe at the thought of the other pieces of furniture brought to the house that carried endless germs.*

“*No teníamos dinero para eso. Sí éramos pobres.* We didn’t have money for that. We were poor,” Mom accepted.

“*¿Piensa que somos pobres ahora?* Do you think we’re poor now?”

“*Yo sí, pero ustedes no.* I am, but you’re not,” she chuckled at her own expense and current state of affairs.

I was glad to hear her laugh about her situation, but, I probed for more, “*Mamá, pero usted dijo inicialmente que no pensaba que éramos pobres.* Mom, but you initially said that you did not think that we were poor. Now, you’re saying that you alone are poor.”

“*Ustedes pudieron salir y yo no.* You were able to get out and I wasn’t.”

“*¿Por qué nosotros pudimos y usted no?* Why us and not you?”

“*Eres organizada con tus cosas.* You’re organized with your things. You have your life together,” Mom thought this is what made me successful.

“*¿Está hablando de mi educación?* Are you talking about my education?” I asked, wanting to fully grasp her perspective.

“*Oh, sí.* Oh, yes. You can’t get far without an education.”

I was shocked at her response. “*Mamá, yo pensé que usted no le importaba que continuáramos con nuestra educación.* Mom, I thought you didn’t care for us to continue furthering our education.”

“*No, no era yo.* No, that wasn’t me. That was your father.”

“*Mamá, usted dejaba a papá hablar por usted.* Mom, you let dad speak for you. The time I recall that changing was when I left the house to live in the children’s home.”

“*Bueno, puede que haya sido así antes.* Well, it could have been that way before you decided to leave. But, I did speak up for Monica when she decided to go to school.”

*“Estoy contenta de oír su voz, su opinión de la pobreza que vivimos y en la que dice que todavía continua viviendo. I’m glad to hear your voice, your opinion about the poverty we lived in growing up, and that you say you still live in today.”*

My mother wanted to make certain she added, *“Todos trabajaron por un tiempo para ayudarnos pagar las facturas de la casa. Tu papá y yo no lo hicimos solos.*

Everyone pitched in and worked at some point when you were real young to pay the bills. Your father and I did not do it alone.”

*To make ends meet, the older siblings would migrate to Ohio or Florida to work in the fields during the summer. Deyanira was left behind to take care of Victoria, Dulce, Monica, Mateo and me when she was 9 years old. Mom didn’t mention this in our conversation. By the way, some of the sexual assaults I encountered were not happening to me at the time that my family traveled north for work. However, it was happening to my older sisters in the shack they stayed in while working in the fields. Thus, when I was notified at age seven that it was my turn to work in the fields, I immediately became belligerent, telling my father that I had spoken to a teacher at school, who informed me that I could not be forced to work. I took that angle, because I did not want him to know that I knew he sexually abused my sisters while they were there. It was bad enough that he started sexually abusing me at home. At least, I had school as an escape. “Migrant workers-adults and children who are seasonal farm laborers working for low wages and no benefits- are believed to constitute about 3 million. Latinos are overrepresented in this occupation” (Eitzen & Eitzen Smith, 2009, p. 5).*

I was getting ready to end our call when my mother jokingly said, “Don’t forget your mother. I’m still poor.” We both chuckled.

*“La voy a ver en una semana. I will see you in a week.”*

*“Oh, que bueno. Oh, that’s great. I’ll get to see my granddaughter.”*

I hung up the phone thinking that at least she would be able to look forward to our customary grocery shopping trip to the local H-E-B and soon her refrigerator would not be empty, and my daughter would be in the grocery cart, practicing how to call her grandmother, “*abuelita*” in Spanish.

### **It’s All In How You Balance It!**

*I rely on having a sense of humor daily, as life tends to bring about situations that can permeate profound sadness, such as my Mom declaring she is still living in poverty.* Most of the resilient subjects studied by Higgins (1994, p. 311) relied on humor “as a way of enjoying themselves, counterbalancing the pain.” *Many ask me, ‘how is it that you were able to forgive your mother for letting the sexual abuse happen to you?’ To which I respond by using what Higgins found was the reason some of the resilient survivors stayed around.* “While avoiding darker feelings was a detour for everyone...the resilient are very well aware of how utterly furious and sad their abuse made them feel, not to mention their anguish about losing any normal sense of family as a consequence. Yet, while their legacy of abuse is always in the picture, it is finally a background rather than a foreground concern” (Higgins, 1994, p. 306).

## CHAPTER IX

### RECONNECTING WITH MY MOTHER AS A MOTHER

#### **Emotions Expressed through Writing**

*The sexual abuse I experienced with two of my brothers and father are in the past as is the poverty I lived in, but my present and future relationship with my mother is one that I am continuously working on rebuilding. It's not easy...the relationship, just like me, is a work in progress. In writing Chapter IV, I found that I shared incidents that occurred between my father and that were sexual in nature. Somehow, the physical, emotional and verbal abuse did not feel as profound to me, even though the latter abuse occurred daily.*

“The concept of resilience is increasingly being understood as a life event phenomenon that buffers against circumstances that normally overwhelm a person’s coping capacity. It has developed in salutogenic terms, into ‘coherence’, or the ability to handle stress-related problems...” (Stewart & McWhirter, 2007, p.490). Regarding my relationship with my mother, I would like to pause for a moment and reflect on the significance of the dialogue presented in this chapter. Not only is the dialogue important to hear the voices, but the writing permitted me to therapeutically release emotions about events I had not disclosed previously. Even more, it helped me to share my personal narrative as a member of an ethnic minority group (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Women, who are entangled in an abusive environment, tend to feel that they need to accept the cards

that were dealt to them. In this chapter, I propose that not even your mother should let you fold or coward down to any abuse you are exposed to.

### **It's a Girl!**

My mother stayed with me for a few days soon after the birth of my firstborn child. I thought that I would need her assistance around the house, but almost immediately, I felt some resentment when she decided to offer some of her old wives' tales advice in the presence of my in-laws.

*Was it possible that the same mother who walked away when she saw me getting abused was now telling me how to be a "good" mom?*

I didn't internalize it further. "¿De veras, mamá? Really, Mom?" I asked in a tone where she would need to rethink the advice she was giving me in front of my in-laws.

"Sí, Rosy, tienes que cuidarte, y no tener sexo. Yes, Rosey, you have to take care of yourself, and not have sex," Mom annoyingly repeated her words of wisdom.

"Mamá, ya hable con mi doctor y se lo que tengo que hacer. Mom, I have spoken with my doctor and know what I need to do. Besides, I don't believe in old wives' tales," I attempted to hide my disdain.

Feeling that I had trumped her using the doctor-is-an-expert-and-you're-not card, she continued with how I should feed the baby.

"Mamá, no voy a darle leche de pecho a Gisele. Mom, I am not going to give Gisele breast milk. It's a personal decision."

Mother moved on to offering me advice about how I should not be wearing my one inch heels, bending down, or picking up heavy items. I guess she felt that she had to show the in-laws that she was being helpful and a “good” mother herself.

“*Mamá, no la invite...* Mom, I did not invite you to come to my house to offer me advice. You know that we don’t have that type of relationship. I am going to need you to stop telling me what you think is best for me or Gisele. I know what is best for the both of us. I am 34 years old. I have been married for more than 8 years. Paco and I chose to wait to have a child until now. We are more than ready to accept the responsibility of parenting. I am not a lost teenager whose mate is absent. So, please stop treating me like I don’t know what’s good for me and my daughter.”

My mother and sister in-laws were in the living room when I shared this aloud. Mom looked at me and said, “*Está bien*. That’s fine.”

My husband took me aside and said, “Give her a break. She’s trying to show she wants to be a good mother.”

*Paco did offer balance in my life; therefore, our conversations were usually part stability, had an element of honesty and a whole lot of understanding. “Parental empathy is a primary first step in developing a caring relationship” (Benard, 2004, p. 55). I did not have this type of empathy from my mother before, so for her to try to empathize with me as a mother was not part of the boundaries I felt we set for our relationship.*

“Paco, you know I don’t play phony. This is not the kind of relationship that I have with my mother. I don’t seek advice from her. I usually talk to her to check on her well being. She offers prayers. I thought that I would need her help to cook meals while I

recuperated from my C-section, but as it turns out I'm recovering well. I really don't need her."

"My parents are here," he pleaded.

"Fine, I'll accept what she is saying temporarily, but you need to step in, too. I feel like I'm addressing her on my own. Take her grocery shopping or something, I need to rethink how I'm going to come to a resolution about her futile attempts to show me how to be a good mother and care for myself and our child."

"Okay, thank you." Paco walked towards the living room, while I stayed in our bedroom with Gisele.

My in-laws were well aware that I left my parents' home due to abuse. I disclosed it to my husband and didn't hide it from them. I wanted to leave it up to my in-laws to decide if they wanted to continue to have a relationship with members of my family. They did.

Since I had made time to visit Mother during our many visits to the Valley, it was assumed that we had a close-knit relationship. This was the first time that they had seen with their own eyes the effects the abuse had left on our relationship. I rocked Gisele to sleep, holding her closely and assuring her that I would do everything I could to protect her in life.

When I traveled to the Valley to visit my family, Mom and I carried on in our conversations as if nothing traumatic had ever happened to us or between us. I took her shopping. I visited her in my former childhood home. She visited with my in-laws, who



live minutes away from her house. So, on the outside our relationship looked whole, together, and complete.

Resurfacing my mind were questions I had about the differences between our parenting styles, our commitment to our children, and our communication style with our spouses. Much like Ellis (2007) felt when she wrote about her brother's death, I have continuously considered how I positioned my family members in my story and have been worried what their reactions would be. "I (too) was worried that the mere existence of the story might disturb them," considering my father was now deceased and could not counter my words (Ellis, 2007, p. 14). Many of my siblings say that they know obtaining an education required diligence and hard work. My family has been aware that I have been working on a writing project about my life story, but still I cannot "predict how people would respond to my narrative" (Ellis, 2007, p. 16).

*While I was writing this chapter, I called my sister Deyanira to confirm the details of place, dates and our age while living in Waxahachie. Since I was so young, I was not completely confident that I was recalling all of the details correctly.*

*She recalled the same information after subtracting the difference in our age now. "If I was 14, then you were 7 years old," Deyanira confirmed. Then, she said, "So, you're writing your life story. Good. I hope it encourages others. But, it's hard. I know you kept going with your education and that is not easy. People need to know that."*

*"It's therapeutic to revisit the past. These are old wounds. You just have to make the most of it," I added.*

*"Everyone has a life story. Yours is different than mine," Deyanira shared.*

*“We all do, that is why I am encouraging readers to share theirs. It’s empowering.”*

*“Well, I hope you have a best seller.” Deyanira said as we ended our call.*

Tugade and Fredrickson (2004, p. 331) summarized, “...through exploration and experimentation, in time (resilient individuals) may be able to build an arsenal of effective coping resources that help buffer (psychologically and physiologically) against negative emotional life experiences.” Ellis (2007) posited that writing about intimate others who are alive can potentially open the Pandora’s Box. She added, sometimes we assume intimate others, who aren’t members of the academy, won’t understand what we’re doing...” (Ellis, 2007, p. 17). Ellis (2007, p. 17) recommended that “all autoethnographers must resolve how and what to tell intimate others about how they have been included in our stories.” Ellis (2007, p. 18) shared, “my biggest fears in writing about my mother while she was alive included hurting her and the changing relational dynamics that might result.” *My mother is alive and I have similar fears. Even though I preface our phone conversations by saying, “Mom, I’ve been working on my book...” as if to let her know that I was mentally recording our conversations. Despite my announcement, Mom continues having her phone conversations with me.*

### **Mom, Look at What I learned from Dad!**

*“Mamá, ¿quiere que le brinque encima así? Mom, do you want me to jump on you like this?”* I asked, as I was climbing her belly and thrusting my pelvis backwards and forwards.

*“¿Quién te enseñó eso?”* Who showed you that?” Mom asked alarmingly.

*“Papá... Dad did. Don’t you like it? He does,”* I expressed innocently. I would not have remembered this particular incident, except it was one of those moments during my 7 years of life that I saw in my mother’s eyes that I had done something incredibly inappropriate. I had shown her the gyrating move only because my dad had done it in front of me. When he showed me, I laughed. He smirked back at me. I didn’t know what it meant to move your pelvis, forward and backward. When I showed the same move to my mother, I thought she would think it was funny, too.

She took me down off of her and whimpered in the bedroom for a while. Upon my dad’s arrival to the house, I heard her attempt to talk to him about it. He was not having this conversation with her. He threatened to hit her if she continued with her accusations.

We were living in Waxahachie, Texas at the time and Mom did not have a job that I could recall. Several of my older sisters and one of my brothers worked in a local plant. They convinced Dad to move the rest of the family into the rented house they were living in, because there was promise of more job opportunities. I was already enrolled in elementary school, so as long as I would be re-enrolled, I was fine with moving.

The houses on the streets looked different than they did in the Valley. It made me wonder, “Are we rich?” On my walks home from school I dreamed of opening the door and Mom greeting me with an afternoon snack. Overcoming poverty and living the American dream as pictured on certain TV shows didn’t happen, not while we lived in Waxahachie or ever in the Valley.

What did happen was that Dad continued to abuse me sexually. One particular evening, I was having trouble with my bowel movement. It felt like I had *lombrices*, or a form of a parasite that made my bowel movement itch. Dad woke up and said he would be able to take care of it for me. He started maneuvering his fingers through my vagina. I still felt a tingling sensation. His solution wasn't helping. My dad took me to the living room and continued doing this act. I was crying from the pain and sensation that I felt, but he shushed me. Unfortunately, I can't recall the rest of the evening, because I ended up falling asleep.

I sensed that my mother had now come to the realization that my father had moved on to another daughter. *What I was amazed at, as an adult, was that he was violating me long before we moved to Waxahachie. Was she ignoring all the signs?*

We only stayed in Waxahachie for a few months (equivalent to a school semester). The jobs weren't as promising as Dad felt that they could be. Or, could it be that we moved, because Mom saw no end to Dad's relentless abuse on her and us and maybe thought that the move would change him? Either way, I was never more excited to come back to my former school. I remembered our return to the Valley, because I was about to turn 8 in May and school still was not out. Even if Mom did not have a support system, I had formed one with my schoolmates and teachers.

### **I Got Hurt Twice!**

One winter evening, my sisters were playfully pushing me towards the *calentador*, or gas heater, as we were huddled around it to stay warm. Since we did not

have central anything (air or heat), we gathered around it in the evening to get warm before we headed towards our crisp, cold bed sheets. My sisters continued to push me until I slipped and landed on the heater. I burned a lower portion of my leg and a small part on my chest. Mom and Dad immediately placed home remedies to stop the pain. I was told that I needed to sleep in their room to make sure I would not be hurt any further by my sisters.

I slept at my parents' feet. As irony would have it, my father moved me from where I was sleeping and positioned me in between his legs. He placed my head on his penis, forcing me to perform oral sex.

I did it, unwillingly.

After he was finished getting his thrill, I attempted to walk out, making up an excuse that I needed to go to the restroom to check on my burns. However, prior to unlatching the lock on the door, I vomited.

Mom awoke and attempted to help. Dad remained in the bed, probably satisfied that he got a sick thrill.

I convinced my mother to send me to school the next day, pronouncing that I would be fine. In reality I didn't want to stay home and let my father think that he could weaken my health. Additionally, if I did stay home, then I would have to fear my father coming home early from work and being forced again to perform sexual acts.

Mom sent me to school.

The term 'sexual abuse' includes the kind of explicit fondling I have shared "as well as intercourse, exhibitionism, or posing a child for pornographic pictures. It also

encompasses more subtle assaults that can pass for affection” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 29). Wolin and Wolin (1993, p.30) added, “If you were sexually abused, you were treated as an object, either explicitly or subtly. You were robbed of your innocence, and you were cheated of the right to discover sexuality with an appropriate partner at the right time for you.”

### **Chicken Pox = Two Weeks at Home**

Then, sometime that same second grade school year, to my dismay, I got chicken pox. I cried when I went to the nurse’s office and was told I needed to stay at home for at least two weeks.

“Please, let me stay here. I will not bother other students. I will lock myself in any room you give me and do all of my work.”

The nurse called Principal Pierce to her office as she had not encountered any request like this before.

I pleaded, “Principal Pierce, let me stay here. I don’t want to mess up my perfect attendance.”

She smiled, “Well, that’s very admirable of you, Rosey. I want to come to work all the time, but sometimes, especially when I’m sick, I can’t come to school. The rules are the same for you. I like your positive attitude, but I can’t let you stay. We’re calling someone to pick you up, right now.”

I wailed crocodile tears in the nurse’s office until my brother Andres came to pick me up.

*I learned to have more faith in educators than I ever did in my family when I was a child. Although, I also experienced some educators whispering, “She cries all the time. Just ignore her.” Even so, I kept Principal Pierce’s words close feeling that she knew what was best for me. Higgins (1994) noted that the resilient seek their own path. My relationship with my elementary school principal was one I cherished. Her words of affirmation and belief in my ability motivated me to do more with myself, even though I was not getting the same support at home. Principal Pierce believed in me. I chose to focus on her words and not those of the adults that did not understand what I was going through.*

I slept in the living room away from everyone and told everyone not to touch me, because I was highly contagious. It worked! No one touched me for two weeks.

Principal Pierce announced in our end of year awards ceremony that I could not get a perfect attendance award, because I had chicken pox, which did not permit me to stay at school. She told the audience about the creative attempts I made to stay in school. She asked me to stand up and everyone applauded my efforts. Neither one of my parents was ever present at school functions, but my siblings were in the audience. Principal Pierce did not know that I was trying to stay in school so that I would not get sexually abused at home. I cried when I stood up at the awards ceremony.

Afterwards, my siblings asked, “Why were you crying? She called your name for a good thing.” Perhaps, some of them were also too young then to understand the full scope of what was happening in our home.

After school I decided to revisit the most recent incidents with my mother. I wanted the abuse to stop. I walked home more determined than ever to address the madness.

*“Mamá, ya no puedo... Mom, I can’t do this anymore. Dad is pursuing me and forgetting that I am one of his daughters.”*

*“¿Cómo puede ser? How could that be?”* She asked, rhetorically.

*“Usted sabe... You know.”*

*“No digas nada... Don’t say anything or they will take away your father and send him back to Mexico,”* Mom lied.

I did not have the resources or support at home at that time. I left the conversation, saddened that Mom took his side instead of mine, but I pressed on to bigger issues. I focused on the steps I needed to take to be less available at home over the summer, as it was quickly approaching. My mother’s ignorance moved me to find other ways to protect myself from multiple sexual incidents occurring with my father and brothers. She would no longer be a resource to me. She would simply be my mother.

### **Hi, Mom. It’s Me, Your Daughter**

Eight weeks had passed since I thunderously expressed to my mother that I did not need her advice when it came to raising my child.

I decided it was time to give her a call to see how she was doing and to let her know that her granddaughter’s appetite was growing. *“Mamá, ¿cómo está? Mom, how are you?”*



Sounding pleased that I continued my communication with her, she replied, “*Oh, estoy muy bien.*”

“*Gisele está comiendo y durmiendo todo el día.* Gisele is eating and sleeping all day,” I offered without her asking.

“*¿Cuándo regresas al trabajo?* When do you return to work?” Mom asked, knowing I was nearing the end of my maternity leave.

“*Ya regrese...* I went back to work already. I was looking at Gisele’s daily day care report when I shared with you her feeding and sleeping schedule. The day care staff members write down all the details of her day.”

I could hear it in her pause that she wanted to say something to me about putting Gisele in day care instead of sending her with an older lady who could stay with her at home. Instead, Mom opted to ask, “*¿Cómo le gusta a Gisele?*”

“*Le gusta mucho.* She loves it,” I reported.

“*Voy a visitar a tu hermana Ramona este fin de semana. Vamos a viajar a Dallas para ver a tus hermanas, ¿podría ir a verlas?* I’m visiting Ramona this weekend. We’re going to travel to Dallas to see your sisters. Would I be able to see you?”

“*Sí va a pasar por Houston, puede venir a vernos.* If you are passing by Houston, you can stop by to see us,” I granted, sensing that she was simply wanting to enjoy her role as a grandmother.

### **My Relationship with Mom Today**

In my relationship with my mother I was “besieged with her inconsistencies” (Wolin & Wolin, 1993, p. 34). Therefore, the only pattern I expected from my mother as a child was that she would not follow through. Nevertheless, she is working on this now. If she says, she’s coming to visit Mom calls me the night before to ask if it’s okay, and arrives at the time she said she would come. Mom has not stayed with me for a long period of time since her initial stay in my home after the birth of Gisele. Instead she opted to only stay for dinner, at most, as she made her way towards Dallas or back to Bay City to continue her visits with other siblings such as Ramona or Esperanza. When I was a child/adolescent, I felt her role as my mother was second to her primary role as wife. This has kept us from becoming closer with each other. My mother and I are devoted to seeing each other. We have returned to the relationship I accepted in my adulthood. She is my mother. I am her daughter. Most recently, she became my daughter’s grandmother. I wanted to expose her to my version of motherhood. Our conversations, though not always deep, remain honest.

## CHAPTER X

### SUMMARY

#### **Reflections**

Almost immediately after editing the last draft of my dissertation, I experienced insomnia and tension in my upper back and shoulders every night that I spent writing. I did not know the reasons why. I wondered, “Was it because I had thoughts that kept lingering in my mind and had not yet put them on paper? Were some issues left unresolved?” Even though I did not have all the answers, I chose to keep writing. I was motivated to write, because the process was becoming more and more therapeutic. I was beginning to shed some light on the dark cloud that hovered in my mind on many days. I hoped that the sleepless nights counted for something. My narrative up to now would end in the form of a dissertation, but I gained more insight from the past, am able to enjoy the present and am ecstatic about what the future may hold. Perhaps, I won’t know its effects for many years to come. Nevertheless, I know what this entire process has meant and I plan to share it once I have an opportunity to discuss my life story with the members of my committee, but even more with the readers who may have experienced life similarly to me. The remainder of this chapter will disclose additional dialogue, reflections on Chapters IV through IX and notions to ponder.

#### *Chapter IV*

In Chapter IV, I introduced you to Dulce, one of my sisters. I wanted to take a moment to share with you some recent interactions we had. In fairness to the depiction I

portrayed of Dulce, who I still believe selfishly offered unwarranted, vicious words the day after our father's funeral; I would like to focus on how time healed her hurtful words and closed old wounds. Dulce reflected on her actions that she portrayed the morning after our father's burial. Two years after my father's passing, Dulce offered to pay her portion of the funeral expenses back to Monica and me. Dulce's change of heart and mind about needing to repay us came unexpectedly. Her actions left me to ponder, *"Which words did she hear Monica say so long ago, over the phone that remained in her mind and kept nudging at her to pay us back?"* Either way, she found her peace, which was a peace that I also gained when I closed the chapter on the relationship I held with my father. Perhaps, peace of mind was all she wanted. We paid the expenses to relieve our mother of any stress she potentially could have encountered. Monica and I wanted Mom to solely focus on her grief. Nonetheless, I took the money Dulce repaid me and purchased groceries for my mother. Dulce does not know that I did that, but I hope she understood most of all, that it was never about the money, much like when we paid for Dad's funeral services.

A year after Dulce paid her portion of our father's funeral expenses I called her to let her know that I had visited Mike, her son, at his university.

Dulce said, "I'm so glad that you were able to see him. I miss him, but I don't want to bother him too much." *I understood that she did not have the financial resources to pay for the gasoline to take the 6 hour trip to his college town.*

"He's transitioning well, Dulce. Mike likes his classes and living in the dorm. He's going to be fine." I offered.

“So, when are you coming home?” Dulce asked, knowing this would probably be one of the few times I could pick up Mike from school to visit her in the Valley.

“I’ll be going home for Thanksgiving.”

“Oh, so is this when you want to draw names for Christmas gifts?” Dulce wondered if this would engage me enough to commit to seeing my family over the holiday break and thus dropping off Mike.

“Okay. Sure.”

“Everyone says that I need to ask you to organize it. You’re the glue that holds us together.”

I simply responded, “Oh.” *I was once a shattered piece. I was considered messy for making amuck of the family name when I shared examples of the sexual abuse occurring in the home. I am still taken aback when I hear my family offer words of praise. They are so few and far between. I paused for a moment to take it in. Then, I opted to change the subject.*

“Okay, so we’ll talk about drawing names when we go down for Thanksgiving. Hey, Happy, early Birthday!”

“See, you’re the only one who has all of our birthdays engraved in your brain. No one remembers everyone’s birthday, but you.”

I chuckled. Then, I said, “It’s this Friday. This is going to be a busy week, but just in case I forget to call, I wanted to let you know I did not forget that it was going to be your day.”

We ended our call with a simple, “Bye.”

I am no longer saddened by my families missed opportunities, such as Dulce's inability to afford to travel to visit her son in college. I accept my sister with faults and all. I acknowledge that the door I keep open between us is open so I can continue to have a relationship with my nephew Mike. I want him to excel despite the physical abuse he saw his mother go through in her failed relationships and the poverty he lived in.

### *Chapter V*

In Chapter V, my committee and I agreed on submitting the dissertation in the form of a novel. The Thesis Office has a template or format that dissertations should be submitted in. More specifically, I was awaiting their approval of my two voice approach in Chapters IV through IX. It was not accepted. Currently, I have edited the dissertation to fit the requirements for graduation. Also, I contacted the Office of Research Compliance. This office houses the Internal Review Board (IRB) which approves of studies that involve human subjects. I did not completely get out of not going through the IRB process. I still had to submit an application. There is a standard application and an exempt application. I waited for their call to veer me in the right direction and it was determined that completing a standard application would be the best option. I believe that I may be exempt since my research is based on my own life experiences, and I will not officially be interviewing or surveying other individuals. However, it will not be decided until my dissertation is looked at a little closer. Some of the sensitive issues that I address in my research may impact the results of this application. A month after submitting the standard application the decision came back from the Office of Research

Compliance and it was determined after further review that my study was waived from the IRB review as is the study did not qualify as human subject research.

In this chapter, I also recalled an incident with my brother Enrico in this manner: “I could not take any more of my brother’s mishandling of my private body parts, so I pretended I was having a nightmare, and said loudly, ‘No, leave me alone. Get away!’ I wanted him to be scared or conscious that others in the house would hear me.” However, when I was able to locate the essay I wrote and after I revisited it, I saw that I wrote in 1994 (which was 3 years after the last incident that occurred with this particular brother) that I experienced that same incident this way: “He entered the house looking for me and discovered where I was at. He felt my breasts, but as soon as I recognized where I was at and who was over my body, I jumped and pushed him off” (Mercado, 1994, p. 38). This was the only inconsistency I found in the essay in comparison to how I remembered the incident occurring today. The only question I have for myself is, “*Was I trying to seem more valiant then, than what I really was?*” After all, this was the last time that I was violated. I wonder if I wanted to make it seem in the essay that the last time I was violated was when I chose to make it all end. It wasn’t really. I would have gone back home had my girlfriend April not reported the incident to the counselor. After the counseling I received during my undergraduate years, it was determined that I used to pretend I was asleep and request my attacker to stop as a strategy. Due to my vulnerability, I usually was not as direct in the middle of the act as I depicted in the 1994 essay.

*Chapter VI*

In Chapter VI, I introduced you to Mr. Archibald. Due to his sudden death in the fall of 1997, he never had the chance to fully see me complete my professional goals. However, his commitment to children, as evidenced in his role in the children's home after retiring as a school principal, is one that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. He also taught me to enjoy the simple things in life, like garden-grown green beans. I started eating them once I entered the children's home.

*Chapter VII*

In Chapter VII, I mention only a few of the individuals, programs, and professionals who offered me unconditional support. I did not want to leave without mentioning that Paco and I had an incredible church family with A&M Church of Christ in College Station and later Sugar Grove Church of Christ in Meadows Place, who also embraced us and guided our partnership. With both, we grew spiritually and emotionally, as we became involved in Bible studies and fellowships. Paco and I also received counseling, attended marriage retreats and held each other accountable. This, too, fostered the resiliency in our marriage.

*Chapter VIII*

In Chapter VIII, where I disclosed the poverty I lived in, I did not take the liberty of writing more in depth about my family traveling to other states in the summer to tend to someone else's fields, because I did not have firsthand experience of this journey.



However, I would like to add that because not all the children in my family took the trip, there was a sense and feeling of abandonment that penetrated within me emotionally as I saw the truck leave the house. As a four year old, I asked my then 11 year old sister, Dayanira, “Why did they leave us?” My siblings, including Dayanira, were not savvy enough to explain how poor we were, nor were they able to express that in order to feed us all throughout the year, our parents had to make sacrifices, including leaving the younger children behind to earn “good” money from the crops they picked. Either way, my heart still sank and my mind was left bewildered. I cried for what felt like days wondering, “Why did they leave us?”

Recently, I sat at a Whataburger eating a late dinner with my sister Victoria. I begin our conversation by revisiting the experiences, such as the one noted above with her.

Victoria said, “You know, Rosey, I am okay being where I am.” Victoria was living in the same town we had lived in as children. She had gotten pregnant twice as a teenager and was forced to marry the baby’s father per orders given by our father. Victoria liked to explain the story in this way, ‘Dad was really mad. I was not about to make him mad, again. So, I stuck with the babies’ father.’ Victoria went between staying in the dilapidated house given to her by my sister Esperanza or at my parents’ house, depending on what her funds look like and whether or not she can afford to pay the utility bills. Victoria added, “I never wanted to go anywhere big.” She was referring to my travels with my husband to Spain and France.

“Victoria, I didn’t travel to say that I did it and rub it in everyone’s faces. There’s a much bigger world than the Valley. Don’t you want to experience what that world looks like?”

“No, I have my family. I have God. I have mom. I don’t need anything else.”

“Okay. We’ll I’m not here to convince you to go to the places I traveled. I just wanted to spend some time with you to give you an opportunity to express what your thoughts were about me writing my life story.”

“Why can’t you let it go?” She was not as cordial as she was when we walked in the restaurant. She was clearly offended at the notion that I could expose our parents’ faulty parenting style.

*This is the sister I remember. She was never good at remaining composed very long, but I figured a public setting would permit us to hold a conversation long enough to hear what her true thoughts were without ending up in an argument.*

“Victoria, my study isn’t about making the family look bad. There are people who will read the story and benefit from it. You have to know that we are not the only dysfunctional family out there. I want people to see that you can heal, forgive and still maintain a healthy relationship with those that initially hurt you. Nobody’s led a perfect life. Writing is helping in that healing process. Maybe, if somebody reads my story, they will be motivated to find a way out of poverty and abusive relationships and learn about themselves in the process.”

“What, now you want to be the hero?”

“No, Victoria, but I want young people like my nephews and nieces to know there’s more to life than what maybe can be afforded or offered to them. That is why I write about the important role school played in me getting out of poverty. Education is an investment. They need to realize that spending money on an education will take them farther than spending money on superficial things like going to the movie theatre, which will only last but a mere moment.”

As soon as I said that our nephew Mike walked in to the restaurant. He was coming from a local high school football game. We hugged and he sat with his friends. We returned to our seats and I said, “This story I am writing is for them. Not just Mike, but your kids, too. You have to understand that even though you’re okay with your life the way it is, your kids may want to know a different life that may include higher education.”

“Higher education? What is that?” Victoria was engaged and wanted whatever that was for her kids.

“College.”

“Well, I want that for them.”

“Then, don’t limit your kids’ opportunities simply because you are okay with the lifestyle you are living in now.”

“I get it. I hope you find peace in writing your story. By the way, can I be called Victoria in your story? I don’t know about any of the rules, but I just want to know when it’s about me.”

“Sure. You’re important to the story. You are also a reader that I would like to be a part of my story. I hope you are able to find the positive in me telling my life story.”

### *Chapter IX*

In Chapter IX, I divulged the valiant efforts my mother made to reconnect with me now as a young adult. I did not always make this process easy for her. I decided to write about this process in rebuilding our relationship, because I am well aware that I am not the only one who had a mother who stayed in an abusive relationship far longer than necessary. There were survivors, who as children, were exposed to too much nonsense, by default. I did want my mother to be a part of my newborn’s life. However, as a new mom, I also sensed that it was necessary to expose my innermost thoughts and how I truly felt about my mother’s parenting: a style I did not want to replicate for my own. Ellis (2001) spoke of her mother’s frail body, while I speak of my mother’s frail inner strength and way of thinking. I agree with Ellis (2007, p. 19) in that I would like “to share what I had written with my mother, I still did not want to affect negatively her self-image not take away her hope that she could get better.”

I called my mother on the phone a month before I was scheduled to present my final examination.

“*Ma, ya tengo la fecha...* Mom, I have the date for my final exam. I will be sharing my study with the members of my committee in October.”

“*Oh, ya terminaste...* Oh, you finished writing already?”

“*Sí. ¿Lo puede creer?* Yes. Can you believe it?”

She moaned and then remained quiet. I respected her silence. She didn't want to know anymore. She was well aware that somewhere in the story she didn't do all she could to protect me. Instead of ending the conversation awkwardly, I opted to ask her about her health. As I've stated before, our conversations are not very long, but continue to remain honest.

A few weeks later after we had that phone call, I drove to the Valley to see her and let her to bond with my baby girl. She ate lunch at my in-laws. We went grocery shopping. She thanked me for filling up her fridge. We stayed true to our routine. I figured this was going to be the extent of our conversation.

Except one of the items I purchased for the baby got mixed up with her grocery bags. On my way out of town I dropped by her house to pick up the sippy cup. As Mom handed it to me, she said, "*Buena suerte con tu examen...* Good luck with your exam. I hope everything goes well. I pray that you have all the words you need to discuss with your committee what you have gained from this project."

"*Gracias, Ma.*" I walked away in amazement at my thoughts that came after she said this. "*Wow, she gets it.*" *It did not come naturally to give Mom the credit she deserved for understanding the significance of completing this writing piece in my doctoral studies and to our relationship.* Yet, despite my thoughts, she did know. The forgiveness in our relationship came when the past stayed in its place and the future offered us hopes for a healthier us (Lamott, 1993).

## **Concluding Thoughts**

If I were interviewed again by Kathy from *The Optimist* or any other journalist and was asked, “What experiences did you encounter living in poverty?” I would say that I encountered a young life without medical attention with rotten teeth, a head full of lice and an anxiety filled home due to lack of financial resources to pay things such as utility bills. However, if she prodded further and inquired, “How did your educational opportunities play a role in removing you from poverty?” I would proudly say that education was the greatest contributor to offering me a stronger, healthier and fulfilling life. I have a career not a job. I participated in higher educational classes that continued to challenge my thinking and lead me to understand how the educational system works. Still, the interviewer may wonder, “How did the sexual, physical, and verbal abuse impact my relationship with others?” I will emphasize that I learned to create boundaries, to trust again and to express my frustration by expressing my feelings instead of deferring to the use of verbal banter. Ultimately, the interviewer may ponder, “How did I move from being considered at-risk to becoming resilient?” I would explain that the steps taken, though sometimes small, were necessary in order to move to living an improved life. Moreover, the significance of taking steps that did not warrant self-pity, but focused on my new-found independence.

### *The Role of Resiliency*

The resiliency framework allowed me to focus on the positive outcomes of poor situations depicted in my narrative. Knight’s (2007) three dimensional framework of emotional competence, social competence, and futures oriented summarizes how the

concept of resilience was evidenced in my life. I found the use of *internal locus of control* in establishing an understanding of the dysfunction happening around me and still maintaining a calm self. As an adult when reflecting on previous scenarios in our home, I have found *humor* to be a pleasant, present friend. This journey and all the many years of counseling have added value to my *self-esteem*. I feel emotionally competent. Professionally and personally, I feel that I am able to be authentic with my conversation; thus, it results in *healthy communication*. Several members of my church family, “adoptive” family, natural family and friends are a few the people that are a part of my *support system*. Being an educator, I am able to and relationship to *have empathy* towards others without being a pushover. I feel that I am socially competent. I have come a long way from when I was 17 years old entering the children’s home. This empowerment has allowed me to impact students and family members alike who have sought ways out of poverty and abuse. Once I found that I had a *purpose* and my life had meaning, I became *optimistic* about what life had to offer. Even the bumps on the way to attaining my professional career and educational goals allowed me to *problem solve and reflect critically* on what steps I needed to take next. At times, it required that I be more *flexible* or encourage me to be *more adaptive* to a new scenario. I was futures-oriented.

### *The Charge to End Poverty*

Poverty was looked at differently in that larger systems in America were challenged. Instead of focusing on the individual getting out of poverty, Bumbaugh (2009, p. 217) implored, “We cannot continue a policy which subordinates human

beings to market values without destroying our own humanity.” We cannot be a people who permit children to go hungry, who force children to forced labor, condemn children to despair (Bumbaugh, 2009). All the while claiming to be moral, promote the wealthy to become wealthier, educate our own for success, and think that luxury is a right (Bumbaugh, 2009). It really does take the effort of many to make it happen for the underserved.

I no longer become frustrated about the poverty stricken situations I see when I visit some members of my family. Instead, I offer my family options that include informing them about steps to write, call, or make any public official aware of their situation, if it requires their attention. In the same vein I direct family members who are looking for more financial stability to partake in educational courses that offer certification in particular fields, associates degrees or higher, depending on their interest. Becoming aware of how any system works offers a sense of understanding, but even greater a sense of empowerment.

### *Reflexivity in Autoethnography*

Reflexivity allows me to ask myself, “Who am I in relation to this research?” To which I respond, “I am the instrument and the researcher.” I combined my life story with the literature. I married the two in hopes of bringing a high literary/artistic quality narrative (Ellis, 2004). Consequently, being a reflexive subject permitted me to interweave my role as a researcher and participant (Hastings & Letts, 2006). Writing autoethnographically lead to an improved life of my own and potentially positively



impacted the life of others. Moreover, the method of writing autoethnographically leads to the natural invitation of readers to be a part of the study. It encouraged me to evoke readers to bring their own experiences and make connections where applicable. For women, this study provided a voice that was traditionally left out (Preissle, 2006). Yet, it was the notion of 'becoming' rather than 'being' which allowed my study to emphasize on the "productive, fluid, dynamic yet also historically and socially located" self (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p. 78). There are multiple layers to my role in this study. Out of my life story emerged empirical narrative research.

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