The Gift of the Prejudice

My friends and I always played on the front porch at my little house in San Gabriel. We were considered poor, but we weren’t. At least, to us we weren’t poor. Come to think of it, we didn’t even know what “poor” was. My father provided for us well. He was a drinker, which would be considered bad habit to have now. We didn’t know any better. He would spend his money drinking but was a damn good provider and that’s all that mattered. During the summers, at least once a week my mother would bring home many warm, fresh, organic grapes, and at that time, they would come in crates. My brother and I would take the crates, put wheels at the bottom of them, and call all the neighborhood kids to come and play go carts with us. The group of friends I had was all Mexican, a couple of niggers, but NO ASIANS. Asians were not allowed in our group. We weren’t raciest. Asians just weren’t allowed to be around us then. We also didn’t say nigger to offend anyone. Calling someone a “Nigger” was just a way to describe a characteristic about them. It was the norm, a term of endearment rather, and we didn’t mean any harm by it.

When I was little, I had become close friends with a white boy that went to my school. He would always come over to my house and we would get our hands all dirty while playing soldiers. One day, we decided to go to his house for some sandwiches. He told me to wait outside while he prepared them to eat so that we would be able to sit on his porch and enjoy them together. About 5 minutes past. Then 10, then 20. I began to worry about my friend and if he had forgotten to make the sandwiches so I decided to help him. After all we were close friends. As I walked up his steps, the door swung open and a tall white man, who I presume now was his father, stood with his arms crossed, and there in front of him was my friend. “I can’t play with you anymore. I can’t play with Mexicans so don't come around here, we don’t want you here.” he said, and sadly began to close the door in front of him “Mexican? What’s a Mexican?” I said confusingly, but he continued to close the door and I had never been able to talk to him since. I had no idea what a Mexican was. Back then, the entire neighborhood would call each other “Tijuanas” and that meant we were from the same culture. I lived in the barrio, on the wrong side of the tracks, so it was always difficult to find friends outside of school.

The friends I kept from school were like my second family, and then there was Virginia. Virginia was the prettiest girl I had ever seen. We met in the 6th grade, and she would be in all my classes, even through high school because we were both Mexican. We went well together. We complimented each other. We had never said “I love you”, we would just look at each other and see little hearts in our eyes. She's the only girl I ever dated, but of course her mother and father disapproved of me because I was from “the wrong side of the tracks” which was ironic considering that she were from the barrio too. I loved her. Her parents never stopped me. I remember staying up late at night on the phone talking to her, the phones that you'd have the dialer as a circle shape, and the chord connected to the wall. When she would tell me she was hungry, I’d drive to In N Out, throw the bag on the front porch, and run so her parents wouldn't be able to beat me. We dated all throughout high school and from time to time we would talk about these events and laugh with all the friends we had.

Besides Virginia, I had many friends, just as any high-schooler would have. I didn't go to an all Mexican school, but those were the only type of friends I had. Probably because they would give all the home ec, auto shop, and woodshop classes to the Mexicans and college prep classes to the white kids. I didn't mind, I hated studying. Now that I think about it, I don't even remember studying. I enjoyed my woodshop classes because the teachers would tell me I’d do better here than in the college prep classes. One of my teachers had told me “Why don't you go to the service and quit school, you’re not doing anything good here”, and as any obedient young boy would, I dropped out of high school to join the service, and as any young boy who was madly in love would, I married Virginia the day before I left. Our wedding was a typical Mexican wedding. Everyone was drunk and having a wonderful time but the guest decided to start a riot and trash our venue. Virginia and I left our own wedding just as the cops pulled up and started arresting them. Her in her white gown, and I in my military uniform, tried to find a place to sleep for the night. Many of the hotels were full or wouldn’t allow Mexicans. In those days, people would rent out rooms in their homes for a night and we luckily found a house that was doing just that. The owners of the house were having a beer on their porch. When we approached them and asked about their room, they hesitated and said “Oh, you wouldn't like this room, maybe try the room across from us” which I realize now, was another way of saying “we don't let Mexicans in our house”. So we did what they told us and rented the room in the house across, the house that belonged to a Mexican family.

In the morning, I went to the train station and left to my base. I suddenly realized about half way through my military career that I was no child anymore. I was married, with a new born baby I had never seen, now about to be stationed in Germany. I had to be a good absent father. I missed Virginia and would write to her every day. Mail took about two weeks to reach its final destination. I earned 95 dollars a month and would send 75 to Virginia and the baby, named Julie, and kept 15 for me. When I had enough money I would call Virginia for about 5 minutes, which would cost around 30 dollars. Then, in October of 1962, the Cuban missile crises began and terrified us, and I, a young Mexican adult, was stuck in the middle of it. Tons of soldiers circled around the screen that showed the radar of Cubans ships drawing near. The line on the green circle, moved clockwise and the ships slowly moved closer to the American line. I had never been in a room so quiet. You would have been able to hear the drop of a needle hit the floor. Our hearts were pounding. The boats on the radar suddenly stopped. “Something’s wrong with the system!” yelled one of the soldiers. We were faced with the choice to assume the ships had passed the line and launch the missiles, or wait for the system to come back up. Right before the button was pushed; the ships turned around and started sailing away. We screamed and cried from the joyous relief that was given to us by God. My lovely wife was safe, my baby Julie, my mother, my father, my brothers, and I were all safe. My fellow soldiers, now brothers, all had much gratitude for the fact that we were alive during the rest of our time in the military.

As I went home, reunited with my wife and my baby, I began job searching. Coming straight from the military with no education, I started as a Dumpster man. Mexicans like me couldn't work in nice retail stores or restaurants, just in the factories or doing the dirty work like I did. But, life went on and I soon had two more children, both boys, named Jim and Ruben. I am so proud of them and who they have become: Julie being a nurse and Jim and Ruben being police officers. They have knowledge more than I could have ever imagined having. They have raised good, God fearing and intelligent people. Virginia would always brag about you guys. We already knew you all were so smart, doing the work you’re doing in school, and you going to college. I am so proud of you.

He is so proud of me.

Because of my grandfather, my father was always provided for, and was motivated to do his best in his schooling. This helped him find a steady job right after high school, earn money as a paramedic, and soon after as a police officer. My Grandfathers determinations to give my father the best he can, helped establish a healthy and stable family environment for my sisters and I, and my father learned how to be a loving father by his example. Through his experiences growing up and his will to fight through the prejudice he would encounter every day, serves our family with a role model, one who is always kind, loving, and keeps family close to the heart. My grandfather, Ray, the little Mexican boy who grew up in San Gabriel, my Grandmother Virginia, who took care of my Tia Julie, Tio Jim, and my father, Ruben. I am his grandchild, Madelyn Duran. This is my grandfather’s story, his life, and the gift given to him by the prejudice.

Work cited

Duran, Ray. Personal interview.3 September 2016.