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Defined by Small Actions

For as long as I could remember, Stockton—the fourth largest city in the central valley—has always been referred to as one of the most miserable cities to live in. Reasons for this are because of the several underprivileged communities found within the city, the recurrence of crime—making Stockton appear yet again on Forbes's top list of the most dangerous cities in the nation and finally, Stockton was considered one of the most miserable cities for its absence in leadership from its own mayor, Anthony Silva. Silva's absence in controlling what was happening in the city is one of the main reasons why we had fallen miserably in the first place. Without properly executing his role as mayor, the city took a turn for the worst, and eventually collapsed causing major problems to arise such as violence, crime, and internalized oppression—key factors of which lead the city into a great period of depression.

I still remember the responses I received whenever I told people that I was from Stockton. The typical responses were, “Oh you're from Stockton?” followed by a surprised look or simply having people tell you, “Be safe when you return.” For years, we let others from all over the state—including the nation—define who we were, and because a few people had meager experiences here, that was enough for them to put a label over us, asserting that no one in this city was ever capable of living a successful life. So many of us had been brainwashed with this thought, it was hard to really find the motivation to want to succeed after having been silenced over time. This brings me back to a quote that struck out to me from Keith Osajima's essay, “Internalized Oppression and the Culture of Silence” in which he states, “The impact of internalized oppression on the attitudes, feelings, and actions of the oppressed is profound. First,

it hinders one's ability to think and reflect. Second, oppressed people come to believe that the source of their problems lies, not in the relations within society, but in themselves.” We were conditioned to believe that we were the problem. That because of us, the city was the way it was, and there would be nothing possible in order to change its reputation of thought. Although I never seemed to have been bothered by the negative comments or the opposed representations of what this city truly represents, it became something I devoted my entire time trying to fix when I became exposed to the real problems, and how these problems could affect the future generations to come.

There are a variety of reasons why I took action in volunteering in movements that promised to fix the parts of Stockton from where it was once broken, but nothing inspired me more than the story my mom told me—the story about what her experience was like when she first arrived at this city. Every now and then, I enjoy having long conversations with her about just quite anything. We do this as we’re cleaning the house, cooking together, walking around downtown, or simply just sitting down outside admiring the calmness of the chaotic world we live in. During one of our conversations, my mom and I were outside digging small holes for the colorful flowers we had purchased the day before. As we were removing the excess dirt away from the area, I began telling her how happy I felt to have been given the opportunity to help out at an event called *The Thanksgiving Food Box Giveaway* where I was able to package boxes with food items, and then carry those food boxes for the less fortunate over to their source of transportation. However, I began telling her on just how alarmed I was to see the many problems we still have, including the population of those who do not have homes. I look in her direction and say, “No se como describirlo,” (I don’t know how to describe it) I told her with a confused look on my face, “Pero no entiendo como hay muchos problemas después de tanto año. Siento

como si esta ciudad nunca va terminar con los problemas que tiene.” (I just don't seem to understand how there are so many problems still present, even after so many years have passed) A few seconds later, my mom turned over and responded with, “No es tanto que la ciudad tenga tanto problema, es el querer en superarla a como estaba cuando yo llege” (It's not so much that the city has so many problems, it's the desire to want to fix it as it was when I first arrived.) Her message to me was clear and it at that moment when I began learning more about my mom's history on how she persisted to end up living in Stockton.

My mom, Yolanda Carvajal, was born and raised in Mexico. She was the youngest daughter out of nine children, all born in the city of Lagos de Moreno within the state of Jalisco. From a young age, my mom would describe her childhood as being “Una vida hermosa,” (a wonderful life) but after a few years, that had changed. When my mom turned 18, she crossed the United States border with only a limited amount of supplies to get her through her journey. Because the rest of the details are personal to my mom, the stories about her journey will be kept aside; however, to give you some perspective, just imagine yourself having to rush over to another country you know nothing about with only a gallon of water, a thin fabric sweater and the torn up shoes you have on your feet. With this in mind, just know it was no easy task getting here.

There were many reasons why my parents were committed in moving to Stockton, but above all, the main reason that sparked a decision was the simple fact that the city was small in size, but large in its diverse community. Upon arriving in Los Angeles with my aunt, my mom spent a few months working as a babysitter. She had been doing this until she and my dad met at a local family gathering. After about a year or so, they decided to get married and soon begin searching for a new place of their own. When I asked what their motive was in moving over to

Stockton, my mom responded by telling me that my grandpa had lived here in his younger years, working more than fifty hours a week in the farms that were once so populated with people who had come from countries like Mexico and the Philippines. So after a few months of not finding anything within their budget, she finally told my dad about Stockton, hoping that together they could find a place that would best suite them with their financial situation. Fortunately, it wasn't long before they had found a place to call their own, soon being handed over the keys to their new home on Washington St.

Once arriving here, my mom used the word “vivo”(Alive) to describe how she first viewed the city. Alive and well is what she told me, describing how she would see people doing things one wouldn't normally do today such as going to the park or walking around at night with friends. After placing all the flowers in their designated place, my mom paused for a moment, turns over to me and says, “ Para decirte la verdad, estoy bien feliz que termine comprando una casa aqui.” (To tell you the truth, I am happy that I ended up buying a place here.) And I can tell from the years I have been alive, my mom is happy here. She continued to tell me that, once she and my dad were settled in, the goal for both of my parents, as my mom describes, was for us to have and live the life they couldn't have as children. To one day see us accomplish certain tasks they could not like completing and earning our high school degree and going to pursue a higher degree in college. After planting the final flower in the dirt, my mom neatly put away all the garden tools and ended with saying that she recognizes the problems that this city has developed over time, but it's nothing compared to other places which have it worse. Her advice to me is to look for ways in which I can help change what's wrong in our community. I was so inspired by her story and motivated by her advice, I decided I would do just that... change the city for the betterment of others. As I became more aware of the problems around me, I became getting

involved in organizations that helped improve the environment. In high school, I became president of the Spanish Club where my initial objective was to teach culture and promote diversity, but knowing how bad things were at the time, I decided that we were going to make change happen instead. I had a vision that one day, the club wouldnt just consist of students sitting down in a classroom learning about cultures they know little or nothing about, I wanted to combine the action of knowing how to give back to our communities in Stockton while being exposed to the different cultures found in each event we attended. By far, the best event we had was the Day of the Dead Festival where the club members volunteered to help maintain keeping the festival in order while also given the opportunity to taste food from different cultures, listen to people from different cultures, and to learn how being in a diverse community gives us the power of becoming united as a stronger society. Together, the club and I were able to start up coalitions with Reinvent South Stockton, Painting in the Parks organization, The Stockton Food Bank and many more. As a result of our hard work, a great impact was seen to have played out in the community. Little by little, more families began going to the park with their children, healthier diets were being promoted, vandalism was being taken off the walls of the buildings, trash was being removed from every sidewalk... the city was becoming alive once more in the exact way my mom had described in her story. Together we brought change to the city, and although there is still a lot of problems to fix, we got ourselves a good start. All of this was done from the heart, with a vision to transform what was once criticized for its unsuccessful group of people, to a city which is the first in the nation to Experiment with the Basic Income program which will improve the living conditions of those earning lower than the California median household income of 60k per year. Given our great efforts in providing the city a better representation, we were recognized by the San Joaquin Board of Education and were bestowed a

glass trophy award, reminding us that we were not let unseen and that our work was appreciated by those impacted by it. Our decisions with small actions had transformed into a large impact which gave the city a new purpose.

Today, Stockton is headed towards a better direction. With a new mayor in office who happens to defy the odds of being the first African American mayor and the youngest, Mayor Michael Tubbs is beginning to change the system starting with our youth, hoping they can be exposed to more than what's just barricaded inside the classroom setting. He plans on doing this by including an Ethnic Studies course in every high school in the district so that children can have the ability to learn more about different cultures and their traditions. Within the city, people describe it to be a safer place now. All in all, we have managed to lower crime rates as well as the rates of deaths per year, parks are now being restored to become more family friendly, more businesses are starting up in the downtown area, grocery stores are being constructed where liquor stores were once to promote healthier options... overall the city seems to be alive once again.