

Different SC, Different Me

By María Jerezano

Growing up in an area such as South Central, one had to be best friends with resilience and independence because of the mere fact that this area was created to incarcerate or kill you. It was a location where the uncommon seemed normal due to daily observances, where gender and racial stereotypes labeled a person, and where being a member of this place defined your future. I come from a place where shootings, constant gang-activity, drug-abuse, and teen pregnancy percentages are higher than graduations. I never came to realize the economic and environmental struggle that not only my family was going through but also my neighborhood until I found myself equally struggling. To be classified as important, one had to actually get out of my community and go to college or risk continuing the cycle of generations staying in this community. Since I have been a member of this so-called "hood" from the beginning of my life, I realized that my opportunity to excel and grow was now or never, so I made my move to be someone at the age of seven when I dedicated my time to my education. I learned how to recover even if it slowly ate me away and to primarily rely on myself, both on my own. I was one in a handful who became the closest of best friends with resilience and independence, and am now hand-in-hand with change.

As a young child, the thought of going to school and learning always amused me because I was openly exposed to knowledge that was rather intriguing than difficult. Though I wasn't aware of it, I was always eager to attend class to see what my teacher had in store for us in terms of group activities, class readings, and even snacks. It was all fun and games until I stepped foot into elementary school, Budlong Elementary. It was incredibly bigger than I had sought it to be, and it was utterly chaotic. As a 1st grader, I was way more concerned with what happened inside the classroom rather than outside the school, but little did I know that it should have been the other way around. Fortunately, one of my cousins had the same classroom as I and his sister's was down the hall from ours, so in my eyes, I felt safe. During one sunny Tuesday afternoon, when everyone is eager to go home since it's early dismissal, not only do I see my life flash before my eyes, my life is impacted for the future. As both of my cousins and I are waiting for my mom to pick us up in front of the school, I go from "Look at this eraser! I wanted the big baseball one but it was 50 cents," to dropping to the floor and watching bullets fire from a man's gun in a matter of seconds. Unfortunately enough, I observed this man chase after a car from a block away while not only shooting the car, but also shooting his surroundings until he and the car vanished into the distance in the street ahead of us. I also observed an injured student who was shot in the foot, and the great fear it brought the families knowing that their kids cannot even be safe on school grounds. As a child, I always blamed the school for such a tragic event, but as I grew and reminisced about the whole incident, I came to realize that it was my community that was to blame for traumatizing a seven-year-old child who only wanted to go to school to learn and feel safe. From that day on, I set myself to stay in school and not deal with what happens in the streets because even the innocent ones pay the price

for being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Though it might have been a selfish thought in the beginning, I've had an urge to leave my community so I can get away from incidents like the one I experienced when I was seven, get an education, and finally help my family move to another place that won't harm us emotionally, financially, and physically. Just like that event affected me in the future, I thought about college so it can then help me in the future, too.

Going to college was always an open-minded, challenging dream I upheld because I knew that this decision would not only impact my family emotionally and me academically, it would impact the minority population and my community statistically. My primary sole purpose was to get out of this community regardless of the distance from my home because I knew that this challenge wasn't going to get accomplished if I lowered my standards of my potential. "You're crazy," "You're destined to change the world," "What the hell is wrong with you?" "Make me proud!" "Wow, you're actually serious about this," and "You're ready for college - college isn't ready for you" were constant reminders of the neighborhood I was coming from and what they thought of my future.

When I accepted my admission to UC Santa Cruz, I came to realize that I had also accepted the destination for my future. I was eager to put my resilience and independence to use since I was going to be six hours away from home. A part of me is really excited for this new chapter because I am confident in the young lady my family raised. The other part of me is enthusiastic and prepared because I am confident in the woman I am going to become. Arriving to Santa Cruz gave me the outside perspective that there's more to life than what I witnessed while growing up in terms of people, environment, and education. I arrived prepared to adapt to the new setting, courses, and people, also known as my new home.

Since my time at Oakes, I've noticed myself grow with knowledge and profound emotions. Though my family constantly contacts me to remind me that I'm away from their reach, they always end it with:

"You know what you're doing, honey. Continue to make us all proud. Even though you have a new home at Santa Cruz, just know that your home in LA will be waiting for you when you return. *Te amamos y te extrañamos mucho, mi reina. No tienes límites. El mundo es tuyo.*"

I may be far from being home sick, but I'm fortunate that my family can always be comforting, understanding, and reassuring 353 miles away from me. Above it all, I can finally say that I've become someone important in South Central and Santa Cruz.