Multilingual Inspiration Essay

Cuando yo era niña, odiaba ser latina. No quería ser diferente, porque creí que ser diferente significaba que yo era una niña rara. El acento de mis padres me daba vergüenza. Cada verano que viajamos a México, me sentía desconectada de mi familia. Por lo tanto, nunca quería ir a fiestas o eventos de familiares. Me daba tanta vergüenza traer a la escuela la comida mexicana que me cocinaba mi mamá porque mis compañeros me juzgaban. Asimismo, no le dije a ninguna de mis amigas que era mexicana por muchos años en mi niñez y cuando entré al secundario nadie se dio cuenta de que era latina. Por último, era la cultura que amaban mis padres que me hacía sentir más avergonzada.

By a young age, I understood what it meant to be Mexican in the United States. It meant a lifetime of odd stares, a lifetime of inequitable disparities, and the worst of all, a lifetime of shame. Therefore, I pushed it down. I took my language, my culture, my heritage, and I pushed it down. I pushed it so far down that sooner than later it seemed to cease to exist. At that time, I framed my multiculturalism as a malediction on my character. Today, I understand that it is much more than that. It has shaped my identity and led to growth in my character. My multiculturalism has given me the gift of a community and the ability to find the strength within myself to further my career and educational goals.

I live in the small town of San Lorenzo, located in the East Bay. Encompassed by East Oakland and Hayward, the roots of culture run deep within our streets. Graciously, it has blossomed right on my own campus of San Lorenzo High School. Aquí es donde primero aprendí a amar a mi cultura, y más importante a mí misma. My resistance to Spanish broke down easily and my Spanish class became a safe haven por mi alma. Por primera vez, podía sentir cómoda hablando mi lengua natal. I was in a classroom surrounded by students just like me at a time when I felt nothing, but alone. I was granted the ability to learn what my history courses did not include in our curriculum. I heard and read of the grand stories of strong, Latina women activists like author Claribel Alegría, civil rights activist Julia de Burgos, LGBTQ+ icon Sylvia Rivera, and Chicana leaders like Dolores Huerta and Hilda Solís who have changed the world for the better.

Seeing others just like me achieving things much greater than my imagination could conjure opened my mind to new possibilities, to greater ones. Then, I joined the La Raza Unida club at my school beginning my sophomore year, starting with the position of treasurer and later moving on to secretary. Here, we spent our time fundraising through community events in order to raise money to go on field trips, learn more about our heritage, and discover what it meant for us to be young latinoamericanos en los Estados Unidos.

Little by little, my grudge began to slip away. I began to feel safe enough to be myself in my community. Eventually, I began to see the beauty in the smell of burnt tortillas and the familiar burn of chile, and I grew accustomed to the loud music that filled the air. I found it within myself to accept
that, although it may not be like those on television at the time, my family was charming in our own way. My parents’ accent became a symbol of pride. Their words a reminder of my mother tongue. A reminder that it was still there, and that it always would be. At any given moment, my mother’s voice held that of a million and a half ancestors, rooting for the home team. I no longer needed to find acceptance in others once I had found it in myself, and I knew my community would be there every step of the way, should it waiver. Learning to love myself through my multiculturalism and dispelling my fears of judgement built the foundation for the confidence I required to take hold of my future.

As a child, I always knew being Latino meant something different in America. The bias was ever present. People did not treat my parents with the same respect that I saw given to others. Our Spanish scared passers-by, and my friends and I were constantly being watched when we entered new spaces. The low-income schools I had attended, with a majority Latino student population, were built to cater to systematically racist and oppressive institutions, such as the school-to-prison pipeline. Today, one in six Latino men will be arrested at some point in their lifetime, and as more and more of my friends were swept out of our hallways and into jail cells, this became personal. I grew to become resilient. I grew to become a leader. I learned to navigate systems that were not built for people like me. I refused to stay silent knowing what was on the line. The strength my loved ones had to utilize every day to get through life as Latino immigrants in America had now fermented itself in me. How could I stand down when my parents had crossed borders for my very right to speak? I found passion in legislation and became determined to fight for criminal justice reform and educational equity. Truly, it was my multiculturalism that led to my ability to humanize those who were often villainized, as it was often my community on the line. It instilled within me the strength and tools I needed to navigate fiercely through the world, and instilled the support I needed to fall back on.

Ser latina quiere decir que soy capaz. Hoy, yo sé que soy capaz de ir a la universidad para promover mi educación. No sé qué hubiera pasado si no hubiera tomado esa clase de español el primer año de la secundaria. Lo que sí sé es que tengo apoyo en mi comunidad y en mí misma. Mi confianza está desinhibida. Sí, el español se verá bien en mi currículo. Pero para mí, mi cultura e idioma son mucho más que una línea extra en mis aplicaciones. Son mi felicidad. Son mi familia. Son mi confianza. Son mi poder. Son la voz en mi cabeza que me dice que sí se puede. Son la fundación de mi identidad en el pasado y en el futuro.