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Upgrade to Downgrade

"We're moving to another city, Nataly..." I still remember hearing my mother saying these words like it was yesterday. I knew we had fallen into a really bad place financially, but I didn't think it was bad enough to the point that my parents had to sell the Condo in Montebello that we were living in. We ended up moving to the city of El Sereno, where we currently still live. My mom was able to get a job as an apartment manager which was very convenient for us at the time because she didn't have to pay rent since she was working for the company. Moving day came, and I remember driving into the city of El Sereno and just looking around at the streets and the small businesses covered in graffiti that lined the block. At first glance I knew this neighborhood was going to be much different from the living style my family and I were used to. I was nine years old and it was easy to be quickly influenced by others around me but I knew that I had to choose to decide whether I allowed the people in the neighborhood to influence me for the better or for the worst.

Growing up my family would usually move around from one place to another. I was used to hearing that we were packing up and moving away, but we always moved into really nice high low-income middle class neighborhoods such as Korea Town, Montebello, and Bakerfield. I was used to feeling safe around my community and being able to walk out on the block without my mom worrying too much about me. I never worried about having to walk on broken pavement and tripping over it if I wasn't paying close attention. So it was very new for me to pack up and move into a really low-income neighborhood such as El Sereno that is full of gangsters and dirty streets. It was not only new to me but it was also new to my family, we were always used to going out for walks around the block at night or just driving around the neighborhood with no

worries. But it all drastically changed when we moved into the city of El Sereno, we had been in the neighborhood before to visit family but we never saw us living here until we were hit financially when the economy dropped during and many jobs were lost during 2007-2008. In the song "No Church in the Wild", written by Kanye West, it explains the lives that gangsters carry threw out their life, the oppression they feel within the neighborhood and what they do as a way to manifest themselves such as taking control over their neighborhoods and create fear within the people. Kanye mentions how people in these neighborhood start to live under their own set of rules because there being dictated by a group, "Human being in a mob... [form] a new religion" (West. "No Church in the Wild". Roc-A-Fella Records.2012) This illustrates how the people living in this neighborhood have created their own set of rules to follow in order to stay out of trouble with the gangs, as well as the rules gangs have set for themselves and the people around them. This was relatively new to my family, we never had to oblige under a set of rules in order to stay safe within our neighborhood. We had to learn what streets were off limits for us at certain times and started to follow a curfew that was implemented by the gang members around my neighborhood if you didn't want to end up being shot on accident.

Regardless of what this neighborhood was, we had to continue living our lives as normal as possible. I was enrolled into the nearest public school, Sierra Vista Elementary, which was just down the block from where I lived. I started to attend that school already half way through the second semester which made it a lot harder to make friends since everyone was already comfortable with their group. It was already hard enough moving into a completely new neighborhood and now I had to try to make a new group of friends or at least one friend to get me through the semester. As much as I tried fitting in with the kids at the school I wasn't able to. I spent the last 3 months of school sitting by myself at lunch and watching everybody play with their friends during recess. I felt no connection whatsoever to any of the kids in the school. Everyone just seemed to have a very aggressive and strong attitude and personality. I was

completely different, I cared for my studies and I liked sitting in front of the class and playing with everybody during recess. I started to feel very isolated and excluded from my classmates, it was a completely new feeling to not have a single friend. In *The Streets*, the author, Jorge Luis Borges writes a poem describing his neighborhood in the city of Buenos Aires. Throughout the stanzas Borges explains how he is connected to his neighborhood spiritually "My soul is in the streets of Buenos Aires." Borges felt a strong connection with his neighborhood and his community that he felt it was a piece of who he was. Unlike me I felt completely unconnected to my neighborhood.

The only connection I seemed to have with my neighborhood was financially and having family with the same migrational status here in the U.S. But even with these two connections I still felt completely un-relatable with everybody around me. I soon came to realize that the people in my neighborhood were actually used to living in poverty and having this type of life style so they didn't really seem to bother wanting to escape it. My family on the other hand wasn't used to living in these type of circumstances, we were working hard to get back on our feet again; and we did. Seeing the comfort of these people living in poverty and in a beat down neighborhood motivated me to work hard in school. I was scared of being too comfortable in this community to the point of not wanting to leave. Like in *Tattoos on the Heart*, the author, Gregory Boyle, explains the struggles and experiences of gang members he has come across in his lifetime. Boyle explains how he helped many homies realize that there is a better life out there besides living in low-income and gang infested neighborhoods. I felt a connection with one of the homies, Speedy. He was a really well known gangster for always getting into trouble but Boyle helped him realize he had to pursue a better life for himself "...Speedy moved away from the projects...and [was] surprised...where his story [had] taken him."(Boyle p 58,60). His life took a positive turn once he moved out of the projects and into a different neighborhood, he found a job in an oil refinery in Richmond, got married, and had three children that he loved

reading with and spending time. Like Speedy I hope to move away from this neighborhood and better myself as a person, and look back at this past experience and say that it influenced me to want a better life for myself and for my family.



Fig.1. Palm Trees in El Sereno Image by Waltar, Flickr. *Taco Friendly parklet*. 2013.

I personally connect to the Palm Trees that fill the city of El Sereno because they are a representation of myself and my family. Palm trees are a symbol of overcoming and resurrection. They grow out surpassing everything beneath them. I see myself as these palm trees. I'm trying to grow and reach out of this neighborhood like these palm trees. I want to start of my growth from the very low and be able to over pass this obstacle of living in this neighborhood. These palm trees are also a symbol of my family because palm trees are also considered a foreign plant that was brought over from Mexico and other islands. I consider my family and I as being foreigners to this neighborhood. We moved over for economical reasons and stand out from the rest because of our customs and beliefs are very different from the rest of the neighborhood. As a family we didn't allow the neighborhood of El Sereno to influence us negatively or change our beliefs. Instead to push us to reach out to be the best we could.

I eventually found my escape from the neighborhood of El Sereno. I started to attend school in the next city over, Alhambra. Alhambra was a city I was able to connect with and find a sense of community even though I didn't personally live in that city. I attended school in the

city of Alhambra from middle school to high school and made very close connections with many people in that neighborhood. I was finally able to find a sense of belonging with people that had similar values and perspectives as mine. I was able to find friends and people that included me with them instead of isolating me. This was my way of being one step closer to getting out of the city I didn't want to belong to. I was able to be greatly influenced by many amazing teachers I met over the course of years and mentors that pushed me to pursue my dream of college. Which led me to be where I currently am right now, California State University of Los Angeles. This has helped me find myself as a person as well as the community I truly feel I belong too.

We decide whether we want to allow our neighborhood to influence us for the better or the worst. I chose to not allow my neighborhood to influence me negatively because I knew what life style I would have if I allowed gang related affiliation into my life. Instead I saw my neighborhood as a way of helping me influence my decision of wanting to better myself as an individual and wanting a better life for myself and for my family. As well as learning how to take the positive from the negative and make the best of it.

Works Cited

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