



“An Urban Badge Of Honor”

When you grow up in an urban community, you earn a badge of honor. I have overcome many obstacles and negative elements that were just inches from my home’s front door. My parents came to the mainland of the United States from the Island of Puerto Rico. My mother, Gloria only had a third-grade education, and my father completed the eighth grade on the island and his GED in the states. They came to the mainland looking for love and opportunity. My uncle, my mother’s brother, arranged for my parents to meet in New York City. My uncle was best friend with my father Sebastian. At first glance, mother said she didn’t like my father at all, and she felt like this was an arranged marriage. She was already 28 years old and her siblings insisted she need to get married or be an old maid. After four months of dating, my parents were married in New York City and relocated to Trenton, New Jersey, where my father’s worked. My father spoke more English than my mother, but he often misunderstood what people were saying. He knew a lot of English vocabulary but mostly words associated with the restaurant and cleaning industries. My parents’ transition to a new urban city wasn’t easy. They wanted to rent a small apartment, but many landlords, would slam the door in their faces and say to them, “We do not rent to Puerto Rican.” This made finding a secured home difficult and the future uncertain. Finally, my parents found a house rental, but it was in the areas that was hot spot for drugs and violence.

I recall running to school to avoid violence on the street and running home afterschool to avoid violence on the street. I remember the pounding in my chest as my heartbeat vibrated throughout my body. I remember looking both ways to cross the road but looking both ways to see if trouble was coming toward me. Sometimes I would walk with my siblings to school and sometimes I walked with my friends. Occasionally, I was all alone.

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My primary school was two blocks away from my childhood home, and my mother would watch my siblings and me walk to school. She would stand outside of our home on the sidewalk while we walked to and from school. My elementary and junior high school was in one building, seven blocks from my home. Someday, it was a scary walk as older students teased and taunted the three little Spanish girls who did not speak English well. They would also make inappropriate remarks about our bodies, clothes, and hair.

A guidance counselor told my mother she should stop speaking Spanish to us and speak only English. My mother was convinced this would help us academically. The only problem was that my mother only knew a few English phrases that Mrs. William and Ms. Barber (our neighbors) taught her. She was not by any means fluent in English.

My mother was determined to help push her children to learn English and do well in school. She loved learning and told us that education was the world's most beautiful thing. "If I could have attended school, my life would had been so different. I could be doing something worthwhile." She shared how she, as a child, would cry and beg to go to school but was not allowed to go because she had to do chores to earn her keep. My grandmother gave my mother away to be raised by her godmother because there wasn't enough food to feed her and her seven siblings. My mother was like a servant in her godmother's house, a female entrepreneur who ran a boarding house for field workers. My mother was like a Cinderella with daily chores, and she cooked for 100 workers daily at the age of 9. My mother loved to learn so much that she taught herself to read English using the Trenton Times Newspaper. She would read it aloud every morning and share countless historical facts and current events with everyone she encountered. She loved words, literature, and history.



I was the youngest of four children and I spent the most of my time with my mother because I was a very shy child. If you saw my mother, I was always tucked under her right or left shoulder. I remember crying for two hours during my Kindergarten program which was from 8:45 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. The only time I didn't cry was during music and snack times. Ms. Heaney played the piano beautifully and I sat near the piano to listen to the sounds, rhythm, pitches, and tones. I was musically intelligent. I loved music and I used music to learn English. I learned songs quickly and at times I would remember the words in the songs. I could enunciate the sounds of English but did not fully comprehend what I was saying until the third or fourth grade. My quiet demeanor and conforming disposition made me likable and I was passed from grade to grade without a solid set of skills in phonological awareness, phonics, and word recognition and composition. My shyness got me labeled a slow and lazy student by some teachers and my report cards repeatedly said, "Ana needs to try harder, and make an effort to participate in the school environment." When you feel like you are trapped in an episode of Charlie Brown and the teacher's words are incomprehensible ("Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah, Wah"), how can you try harder and make an effort to participate more? Most of the time I was fighting tears and wondering why would a mother who says she loves me, allow me to be in this place where nothing made sense. I felt lost and scared. There was no "Peanut Gang" to help me.

I remember vividly crying inconsolably in Kindergarten, and Ms. Heaney, coming over to me, rubbing my back, and saying, "Ana, Mami, will be back." Those words made sense. I understood them, and I began to ask over and over again, "Mami, back." Ms. Heaney answered, "No, Ana, just a little while longer." For me, it was like an eternity. The waiting produced fear and anxiety that I can't explain. When my mother finally arrived to pick me up from school, I would begin to cry with such emotion that my mother thought something terrible had happened



to me. In her broken English, she tried to inquire, but she could not understand what the teacher was telling her. I think I was crying, because I was elated to see her return. My mother started asking me questions in Spanish to see if I would tell her what had happened. I wouldn't speak, continued to cry, and clung to her tightly.

I wish I could say that, the shyness subsided as I matured and went into the higher grades, but it really didn't. It followed me throughout my primary and elementary educational experiences. In the second grade, I got some excited that I knew the answer to a particular question, I wiggled myself onto the floor. My classmates laughed at me, and the teacher reprimanded me for my behavior. I was excited because I had the answer, but my shyness did not allow me to be confident enough to raise my hand and wait to be called on. In middle and high school that shyness turned into anxiety and shaky hands. Everyone could see my shaking hands and it was embarrassing. The neurologist calls them "benign tremors" which still plague me to this today, but I refuse to let fear or anxiety rob me of my purpose.

In the Puerto Rican culture, children are taught to obey their parents and teachers as authorities over them. Adults are always right and children or students are wrong. We were taught to never challenge an authority figure and to comply quickly. Why continue to be laughed at and reprimanded? "Just blended in Ana" I would tell myself. This is all you have to do. Become invisible." There was no blending or invisible in the late sixties and seventies when the teacher announced. "Everyone will take a turn reading out loud and everyone will stand up to read." To a shy, nervous, and anxious student struggling with English, this is a horrible idea and the experience was even worse. I stood in front of the classroom perspiring, shaky like a leaf in the wind, as my heart beat accelerated and I could hear the vibration in my ears. I attempted to read the words I knew, but the kids always laughed at me and the teacher made me start again



until I started to cry earning me the title, “Cry Baby.” As I walked throughout the hall, the students would chant, “Here Comes Cry Baby.”

I don’t remember what changed or when was the turning point, but I do know that having some supportive and loving teachers who noticed me, tutored me, and mentored me was exactly what I needed to deal with my shyness and anxiety about school. It has been a long journey, but I found confidence and started to come out of my shell as part of the patrol squad, as President of the Spanish club in high school, and later in college as part of a Caribbean performing arts group. Every day I have to work at it, give myself a pep talk, tell myself to be brave and do it afraid. I, like my mother, loved learning and books and I wasn’t going to give up on my goal of reading and writing well. I still work hard at writing and I have to navigate my bilingual brain that tries to read everything in Spanish. I have learned strategies that I have helped me progress academically that earned me an urban badge of honor. Not every child makes it to age five or makes it out alive from an urban community plighted with violence, but I did. Although the journey was difficult and at times painful, I have seen such growth in myself and I am proud of the accomplishments I have achieved like being the first in my family to graduate from a University with a Bachelors and a Masters. I have fulfilled my mother’s dream to do something significant for the world including publishing my first book in 2022, *The Road to Purpose: The Twists and Turns of God’s Positioning System*.

Respectfully Submitted

Ana I. Berdecia, M.Ed.