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11/7/2015

U of U Humanities

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**How my life has influenced my education**

The first person that had ever made an issue about my race in an educational setting was my principal. I was 6 years old at the time, I didn’t know any better. I hadn’t even known about this particular event in my life until I was 15 years old; old enough to understand a thing or two about racism. While I was too young to understand, and had a mother who was still figuring out how American schools systems differed from Mexican school systems, my father took it upon himself to take this matter upon his own hands and confront the woman that I was soon to call principal.

About a week after my parents turned in the registration forms for Kindergarten at my soon-to-be Elementary school, we had gotten a letter in the mail with the words bolded at the top corner ‘Hillside Elementary School’. My father carefully opened the letter and was greeted by the words “Dear Parents of Sabrina Reyes”. The letter had went on to explain that there was a language test that was necessary to be taken. The ones that passed would have the privilege to be put in gifted classes while the ones who didn’t were to be put through a language program to be tested the next time. Needless to say that according to the people in charge of the test and the score they had received: I had failed. As my father read on and on, his anger and concern worsened and worsened. Many thoughts began to flood his head as he set the letter down on the table and gave me a worried glance (I almost remember it vividly). The story seemed like an understandable “Oh, I failed, so what?” type of tale, but there was one problem that falters that mentality and had really angered my dad about the letter: I had never taken any such test.

Never did I think that my race/ethnicity would ever have an effect on how my educational experience would be like. Had it not been for my father walking right into the principal's office that following morning and yelled (literally) at that poor blonde haired woman and set her in her place, I more than likely would have been pulled out of my classrooms by teacher’s aids my entire elementary school experience simply to make sure I understood a language my parents (and Dora) had been teaching me since before preschool. My mother had always made it a point to teach my siblings and I how to be fluent in *los dos idiomas* (the two languages) because she felt that if we wanted to grow up successful in the American society, it was important to learn the dominant language, but no matter how successful we would get, it was always important to keep the native tongue so that we would never forget who we are and where we came from.

First grade was when I began to learn more about how elementary school life as an American student was like and was really the keystone of how it had affected the rest of my educational experience. Having to only speak English in the classroom, read new books that I had never thought existed, discover my love for art and just waiting for it to be coloring time everyday. It really was a much simpler time, but compared to how it would end up being for me down the road, it also had it’s share of ups and downs; maybe even more downs than there should have been.

I had little to no friends for the majority of that year. I would have friends for a little while, but one particular girl and her group of brats would step in and say things such as “Don’t play with her! She’s the smallest girl in the whole class!” and “Come play with us! She’s weird and is a bad friend, we’re your real friends!” Oh how gullible and naive us children are. I remember trying to defend myself one day from that one girl in class that was bullying me and taking all my friends and being scared out of my wits when I heard scream the dreaded words in my face, “I’m telling teacher!” Going home crying to your mother every day after school because someone was tormenting you in a place that was promised to be safe and wholesome is never a good feeling. Especially if the teacher would believe her stories over yours and your mother was best friends with her mother and didn’t want to go and confront her about her daughter's actions towards me in fear of confrontation and “losing a friend”. I remember feeling sad, helpless and alone and left to wonder if this was how school was going to be like for the rest of my life.

Second grade was a little better; better in the fact that she was gone, and the fact that I was finally able to make and keep friends. I was able to realize that maybe there really was more to Elementary school than just bully’s, coloring and language barriers. My teacher was the same one I had had in first grade. She was as ancient as she was smart (maybe that’s why she knew history so well). My mother had also decided halfway through the year that she had wanted to assist us in learning another language. Every Wednesday she would come into our class and teach us all how to speak in spanish. Heck, when the annual Christmas sing around came along, our entire second grade sang Silent Night in spanish, and my mom was the one who taught us all to do it.

My mother ended up playing a big role in my school life from that point forward. She turned herself into a teacher’s aid, and would go into many different classrooms to teach the students spanish. She never had a negative outlook on what she did and there never was a dull moment whenever she taught the classes. My mother taught me, in a sense, that learning and continuance of learning was important and no one should ever feel ashamed to be taught and to continue wanting to be taught.

Third grade came my first ever transition of getting taught by a new teacher. She was a young, spunky, sassy 30 year old who would never really put up with any of our simple 3rd grade mischiefs. It was this grade that I had began to have a feel for math in my life. Mrs. Down (that was her name) seemed to always know what she was doing, because as far as learning about times tables, the songs and rhymes she had made up for us have always stuck with me; even unto this day. We would sing at least one of those songs before class would start, just to make sure it was easier to pass the tests. Although it was pointless and dumb for us to learn them over and over, not a day goes by where I don’t use those melodies to help me remember what 4 times 7 or what 5 times 3 is. Needless to say they worked and definitely helped prepare me for the next, oddly peculiar year.

Fourth grade was a mix between actually working and getting stuff done and giving up for a while and listening to my teacher tell her stories. Mrs. Wick was a very interesting character, who always played Jimmy Buffett and basically had us all memorize Don McLean’s “American Pie” because of how often she would leave it playing in our class. I believe the best way to describe her was that she was a crazy, hippy, country woman who was stuck in the 60’s living in the 21st century, and she was rocking it. Her class was the year that I had discovered my love for stories and desire to go explore our world. The woman had made it a point in her life to take her and her son to all 50 states, even the ones that no one would think of going to. Whenever she put on her cowboy hat and sat on her chair, you knew it was time for one of her amazing stories. They would generally be around whatever it is we would be discussing in class that day, but her stories always ended with a moral and a punch line. Her tales about her many travels and adventures made me really open my eyes to the world out there and realize that there really was more to the world than just Utah, and her and her stories gave me the desire to see as much of it as I can.

Fifth grade was a lot more tamer compared to that previous year, but it was the year I had developed my first ever crush. Looking back on it now, it was rather silly, but I know it was a moment I was never going to forget. He was tall, skinny, had black hair and was one of those kids who would rather play football than actually pay attention in class. Up until that moment, all I had focused on was my school work and making sure I turned everything in. Funny how much impact a silly little crush can have. Needless to say his feelings were mutual and just like most fifth graders are, we got our share of being teased for it. That year also brought in new ideas of who I wanted to be when I got older and what I wanted to become. They slowly started to emerge as our teacher talked about many different things he had done prior to teaching and from reading all the fantasy books we all read as a class. I wanted to become a writer. My love for stories began in my fourth grade year and it began to grow with my fifth grade teacher and the many fantastic stories he would read to us.

Sixth grade was the year I fell in love with books. Harry Potter, Percy Jackson and many other adventurous tales began to fill up my backpack and my imaginations. My dream was to become that fantastic writer that wrote all the best fantasy/adventure tales that made me happy and enacted as an escape as a child. I wanted to write stories that would do the same for many other children out there, just as it did for me. I was never really a talkative child. Mostly because of how much I had let the bullies get to me. With words being tossed at me left to right such as “You’re so weird!”, “You’re not like most Mexican girls!” and “Why don’t you act your race?” really made me lost, confused, and not know where I was supposed to fit in. Yes, I did have friends, but they were mostly the ones that were also a victim to what the other kids had to throw at them. We all sat under a big oak tree, talking about our books and our dreams and how much we wanted to learn more about the great big, wide world that we were living in.

There were many fantastical stories that I had grown to love, but nothing caught my attention more than one particular story by Jerry Spinelli called “Stargirl”. It was one of the many books that I spoke to me the most. It was one of those books that almost made you feel like it was written for you. It’s too complicated of a story to simply sum it down to one sentence, but the one factor about it that has always made me so attached to this book was the fact that one of the main characters, Stargirl, was one of the most peculiar girls to ever roam her school campus, so peculiar that no one, not even the main character telling the story could ever define her. She was unique in her own way, and she was happy and proud of that. Of course there were times when people would try to tear her down, but nothing ever worked, simply because she knew who she was and was contented with it. It wasn’t until this book that I had opened my eyes and realized that for the first time in forever, I didn’t have to care about what anyone thought about me.

Seventh grade was the year that my whole world almost felt like it flipped upside down and all around. Not only was it my first year of dreaded middle school, but it was the year that I had transferred schools and basically had to start all over again. As if I wasn’t bad enough at that in elementary school. Transitioning from a public school to a charter school is almost never easy, especially since public school is all you’ve grown up knowing all your life. The school was called Monticello Academy and as far as I was concerned, I was completely unprepared. I was unprepared for having to wear a uniform that looked like something an adult would wear, the different curriculum that was expected to be followed, being taught things high schoolers needed to be taught at the time and having to deal with the fact that instead of being 1 out of the 1,000 kids in my grade, I had to be 1 out of the 70.

The student’s weren’t as welcoming, considering I was a “newcomer” and not one of the kids they had basically grown up seeing every single day of their lives. It was me and about 3 others who felt the rejection of being the “new kids in school,” and it is one of those experiences that I knew deep in my heart I was never going to forget. Throughout all the rejection and unknown hatred that I was getting, I was able to make a particular friend. This friend was just as rejected as I was and had a lot in common with me than I thought possible. Our birthdays were the same, Our favorite songs were the same, we were in almost the same classes together and would sit together alone in one particular spot of the cafeteria. Needless to say we became very close. She was small, energetic and nothing could match her prideful nature, how her and I ever became friends, I’ll never know, but whatever it was that had decided to bring us together somehow, knew exactly what it was doing, because my life was never the same after her (Let’s call her Miraj).

Eighth and Ninth grade were filled with dramatic highs and dramatic lows as I and my new friend traveled down many different experiences together. Some of those experiences left wonderful memories to last a lifetime and most of them left big scars that will never seem to heal. Miraj ended up becoming an influence for most of my and my other friends lives as she knew exactly how to manipulate and control everything that had happened to us in our lives. One of them was a boy who was madly head over heels in love with her (let’s call him Loverboy) and dreamed of one day to have a chance to be with her, but that is a whole other story. Just like I had mentioned before, nobody could ever match Miraj’s prideful nature. Her influence of the importance of a social life and popularity began to overcome my ideas of who I thought I was and who I thought I needed to become. Eventually overtime, It had gotten to the point where I had cared more about what my peers thought of me and what my “popularity status” at school was more than my grades and education. I had stopped reading the books; my desire to become a writer had just about disappeared; thoughts of insecurities and negativity towards others began to replace the childhood happiness and innocence that was once there. I had even begun to question my faith, points of views, and the people around me that I had been calling “friends” for so long.

I had almost completely changed, so much that I was blinded by the fact that maybe the one thing that was giving me all the bitterness, taking away all my hopes and dreams, and manipulating me to the point of toxicity was Miraj. Never did I think that the small, sad, quiet girl sitting alone in that cafeteria would ever turn me into something else entirely; somebody that I wasn’t; something that she had lead me to believe that I was. I was left faded, hated and pulled in to fit in her perfect little box, and no I was not taking it too well. There are still days when I do wonder what my life would have been like had I just decided to completely leave her there.

It wasn’t until the 10th grade when I decided to take the next step in going to another charter school, this one a bit more bigger than the last. My plan from 7th to 9th grade while I was going through that middle school identity crisis, was that I was going to go to Hunter High School right after Monticello; it made more sense that way. It’s close to my home, I’m in the boundaries, and most of my old friends from my church and my elementary school were going to be there so I didn’t have to worry about starting all over again and making new friends. I was dead set on this decision until I was talking to Loverboy about it. Yes, he was the one who convinced me to go to AMES. Him and I had started becoming closer and closer throughout the years that we had been friends with Miraj as we kind of relied on each other for support whenever she had anything new to throw at us. He had started going there in the 9th grade when he decided that her continuous rejections and the poor excuse of a middle school were beginning to become too much.

He always told her and I about how great AMES was and how badly he wanted Miraj and I to go (Miraj, especially, of course). I remember constantly telling him no because I was dead set on my Hunter plan, until one unusual day. We were sitting at the porch of my home, confessing to me about his love for Miraj as usual, until he started talking about AMES again. This time he talked about the uniqueness of the school and how It was nothing like a regular high school. Yes, it was nerdy, but the fact of the matter was that nobody really cared about who was popular or who wasn’t; that they all embraced the fact that they were nerdy or weird in their own ways and they all kind of meshed together as one rather than stereotype everyone and put them in their own clumps. It was almost like a lightbulb that turned on my head and deep in my chest that said “Sabrina, you need to go there.” It almost sounds like it was a manifesto from God, if you believe in that kind of stuff, but whatever it was, It definitely woke me up and, sure enough, took me there. I and Miraj (who was basically conjoined to the hip with me at that point) started AMES our 10th grade year and needless to say, Loverboy was not wrong.

I had many life changes that year, some that helped shape and mold me into the person that I am today. One of which was the day I found out my mother had cheated on my father. It’s never easy learning that the person who had always taught you right from wrong, someone that you had always looked up to for guidance and admired, does something that they had always taught you never to do, and watch them make excuses and try to hide the fact they know what they did was wrong and now have to face the consequences of their actions. Coping with the life-shattering disappointment that I had developed towards my mother made me open my eyes about everything: my dreams, my education, my end goals, my friends, and inevitably Miraj. It wasn’t until I met two particular people that I began to realize how toxic she really was, and for this paper’s sake, their names are Bluejay and Badger. Had it not been for those two helping me and Loverboy drop that toxic relationship we had with her, we wouldn’t have realized how held back on progression in our education and life we were.

It was around the end of my 10th grade and early 11th grade year that I stopped being friends with Miraj. As quick as it happened, I began to notice the changes it made to my life. I remembered again what it was like to not care about what anyone thought of me. I stopped caring about how popular I was and recognized again that my education was more important than my social status. Boy, was I happy to finally regain some sort of direction again for my life. I picked up the books again, I drew on my sketchpads, I began to build relationships with people that were actually going to bring me up vs. pull me down and I even ended up finding a new career path. For years I had dreamed I was going to become this spectacular writer, until I finally stopped caring about what others thought about me enough to realize that what I really wanted to do was to become a psychologist.

In almost every social group that I was in, I was always seen as the quiet, patient, good listener that mostly served as a shoulder to cry on whenever times got tough. I realized that I loved being there for people emotionally and I loved helping people smile and get them back up on their feet to keep moving forward. As I began to learn more, I realized that if I wanted to be that kind of person, the career choice that I needed to look for was Psychology.

As soon as I found a new career path, I was able to find other paths to look forward to to help me get there, and inevitably it came down to this: there is no way I was ever going to reach my dream destination without my education. Now that I am in 12th grade I am finally able to realize how much of an impact education and having the right kind of people around truly can be and the understanding of how important it is, especially in my life right now that I am a High School student, working a “lovely” minimum wage job, facing all the “wonderful” challenges of boys and dealing with my many different anxieties, to get and grab hold of the education that I need to have to continue on with my life and my dreams.

I guess if I had to sum up everything that my life has taught me about education it would be something like this: Education is important. It is important to have so that you could be able to chase after your dreams, goals and whatever it is that life wishes to offer you. Don’t care so much about what people say, do or think of you because in the end, the only ruler and controller of your destiny is you. You can either choose to cling on to the things that are pulling you down away from what’s important, or you can learn to let go, move on, and start anew if necessary, just to make sure you’re staying on track to your end goal; your happy ending. Last but not least: Don’t be afraid to take leaps of faiths once in awhile and don’t be afraid to learn new things. We as humans were never meant to be perfect and we are always learning something new, each and everyday. Learning and being educated about the world around us and our own lives is practically inevitable, but in the end proves to be important, because without them, where would we be today?