

Hard Work, Tough Lessons

OP-ED: UC scholar credits the work life of his day laborer father with inspiring him to pursue higher education.

By Alvaro Huerta

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In light of the rampant xenophobia in this country, I reflect on the lessons that I learned as a tween day laborer many years ago. Working alongside Latino immigrant men during a hot summer in Malibu, I learned firsthand the trials and tribulations of manual labor. This grueling experience became the impetus for my academic trajectory, scholarship and lifelong commitment to social justice.

While most of my childhood friends played basketball at East L.A.'s Ramona Gardens housing project, my brother Salomon – now an acclaimed L.A.-based artist – and I performed landscaping duties as day laborers for the wealthy in the seaside city.

When it came down to manual labor, as a 13-year-old, I represented the typical U.S.-born kid who avoided physical work like the plague. I can still hear the voice of my late mother, Carmen, telling me to clean my room and make my bed. Miraculously, she kept our rooms tidy while toiling as a house cleaner on the Westside. A job she performed for over 40 years.

Despite the fact that I excelled in school, especially in mathematics, my mother – a Mexican immigrant – always encouraged my siblings and I to do well in school. Like most immigrant parents, she implored us to maximize our educational opportunities to avoid the pitfalls of immigrant jobs associated with meager wages, low status and dismal upward mobility options.

Given that she couldn't help me with my algebra, my mother did what any rational woman in her situation would do: She told my late father, Salomon, to take my brother and me to work as day laborers. To borrow from President Obama's lexicon, she created a "teachable moment" for us.

My father originally came to this country as an agricultural guest worker under the Bracero Program during the 1950s. For him, working as a day laborer represented a walk in the park. For my brother and me, however, it was a nightmare.

First, we had to wake up at 5 a.m. Then we took a two-hour bus from the Eastside to the Westside. Thereafter, we joined other day laborers to compete for scarce resources. Never in my life had I witnessed a group of grown men competing for the attention of wealthy whites in their BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes; the drivers sought men to do tasks from digging ditches and clearing brush to painting homes and loading trucks.

I was initially embarrassed to see my father – a proud Mexican immigrant – running toward the luxury cars, trying to convince the driver to select him and his two young sons. I always wondered how this impacted his manhood and self-esteem. This is an entirely different world from privileged children who see their parents go off to work as doctors, lawyers and CEOs.

Once my father secured a landscaping job for us, the day only worsened for me. Like most children of immigrants, I was translating for my father with the employer regarding our measly wages and job duties. I felt like a prisoner negotiating with the warden for my undesirable work assignment.

It was only 8 a.m. and I found myself with the laborious task of pulling weeds all day. Just like when I attended church, I checked my watch every second, wondering when the work would end. My back, knees and arms ached after hours of pulling weeds from an enormous and idyllic backyard.

“OK,” my father said in Spanish. “It’s time.”

Thinking the job ended, I rejoiced. I quickly realized that it was only lunch time with another four hours to go. Not saying a word, I had my first epiphany: I have no other option but to attend UCLA.

Educational advantage

Now that my 11-year-old son has entered his final year of elementary school, my wife, Antonia, and I regularly discuss which prestigious university he will attend. Unlike my wife and I – who grew up with parents from rural Mexico without formal educations – our son has two parents with advanced degrees from the best universities in the world: UCLA and UC Berkeley. Apart from having a mother as an educator at the primary and university levels, he will very soon have a father with a Ph.D., working as a professor at a major university.

While we regularly take our son to educational trips and museums – including math clubs, chess tournaments, soccer lessons and community service activities – that will foster his success in school and life, I can’t wait until he turns 13 so that he, too, can learn firsthand from the honest, hard-working men who seek work every morning on the corners of America’s cities and suburbs.

These Latino immigrant men are not the so-called villains that Republican leaders scapegoat for America’s ills. They are decent human beings who deserve to be treated with respect and dignity.

In short, day laborers, like Latina domestic workers, should be treated as honorable individuals for their hard work and sacrifice in order to provide for their families. From my personal and scholarly perspective, they are true heroes.

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