Dafney Blanca Dabach, Two Stories

Key Note Address: Two Stories on the Occasion of the Latino/a Welcome Luncheon

By Dafney Blanca Dabach

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As a twelve year-old in a court room observing the proceedings, I was certainly out of place, particularly in a legal case that dealt with business transactions and contract law. What was I doing there? My father, an immigrant of diverse origins (with family spanning the Middle East and Venezuela), was the defendant and was being sued by his former partner, an American businessman whose grown children were lawyers.

Like many immigrants, my father came from humble origins with great hopes that coming to the US would fulfill his material dreams, dreams imagined in a childhood of poverty and scarcity—dreams nurtured by an older brother’s letters from a faraway place where exaggerated tales of prosperity created a hunger to migrate to the “land of plenty.” Joining his brother in the US, my father quickly began painting houses for a living during a period of economic expansion. Despite his lack of formal education, his brilliance was unmistakable; this combined with his charismatic and jovial personality lead others to want to open doors for him. Easily befriending contractors within his newly emerging social networks, he eventually entered into business deals that provided more means than his manual labor alone. However, because of his struggles with English literacy and his deeply rooted cultural practices which honored oral agreements, eventually he came to sit in that courtroom, with me looking on, as his former business partner swindled him legally through the court of law. Because my father had oral agreements with his partner, he thought they would be honored. Because my father’s partner saw an opportunity for exploitation and gain, and knew the workings of the law, he was able to use the law to his advantage—as a vehicle to steal, and win. As a twelve year-old, the unfairness was clear to me. Even young children understand the concept of fairness and unfairness—listen to any discussion on a school yard at recess. But in this case, the consequences were not restricted to the school yard.

Story #2: Published in The Sun, May, 2008, Readers Write: Chance Encounters

I had been bumped off a flight a year before and had a free plane ticket on TWA burning a hole in my pocket. If I didn’t use it soon it would expire, and with my love of travel I knew I couldn’t let it go to waste. I could go anywhere in the continental US or Puerto Rico, but I was mostly unemployed (having left an awful but stable administrative job that had dulled my sense of purpose). My sense of adventure said: go somewhere you’ve never been. My pocket book said: make sure you stay with friends. So Boston it was.

Having grown up in an immigrant family in California and excelling in school despite many challenges, I decided that I would make a special trip to see the Harvard campus. For a nerd like me, Harvard seemed like a great place to visit, but once I got there I was a little underwhelmed. This is it? I thought; the name and fame seemed to outweigh the physicality of
the old brick buildings. (How could its name ever match up?) But just as I was thinking that, I started to chit-chat with a Harvard professor in the School of Education who was quite welcoming. She asked me lots of questions about my interests. The minute I passionately described my undergraduate work in the field of Immigration Studies, her eyes lit up as she made a connection. Her close colleague was looking for a Spanish-speaking research assistant living in California to help with a major study about immigrant children and families. She gave me her colleague’s info, and I contacted her right away. Before I knew it, I returned to the campus to interview for a job that could have only existed in my dreams….The more my future boss talked about her project about immigrant children and families, the more I felt compelled, as if my life’s work was waiting before me. Everything she talked about was directly related to my personal experience and intellectual curiosity. I smiled broadly as she described the work involved and thought, “I can’t believe I’m gonna get paid to do this!”

Amazingly enough, before we met she was sitting in her office thinking to herself, “How am I going to get a Spanish-speaking research assistant who lives in California to work on this project?” I guess you never know who is just around the corner.