

Winner of the 2015 Living History Essay Contest

My First Trip Away from my Mom

by Ruby Aguilar

Moving from a Spanish-speaking country to The United States is the hardest thing to go through, especially for a little boy. Not knowing the language, culture, or expectations of a different nation can truly make a big impact on a lonely child. Having family members that actually went through strong hardships, like crossing the border, stirs a sort of appreciation of life. My father, for example, truly depicts what suffering alone as a child really means. My father Jose Aguilar was born in San Miguel, El Salvador in 1973. He was raised by a single mother and his two older sisters. His mother and two sisters were the only close family that he ever had, so to him, family was everything. But it all ended soon after his mother realized that El Salvador was under attack and she must do the hardest thing a mother could do.

It was around 1976 when El Salvador was being invaded by guerilla groups that stirred that nation. Everyone thought that this nightmare would end soon, but to their surprise, it was just the beginning. The warfare was called "The Salvadoran Civil War" (1979–1992). It was a conflict between the military-led government of El Salvador and the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN), a coalition of five left-wing guerrilla groups. The civil war lasted for over twelve years, and there was extreme violence from both sides. It included the terrorizing and targeting of civilians by death squads, the recruitment of child soldiers, and other violations of human rights by the military. It was a time where every mother feared for their children's lives, especially my grandma. My father claims that around every corner you would see children tall enough to hold a rifle, being dragged into the military. He remembers his mom crying and praying for God to protect the family and to not let the guerrilla groups take her little boy. He claims, "It was confusing and scary watching my mom cry so much every night. I did not know what to do or what to say. All I remember thinking was that everything was going to be alright. Just obey and make mom happy."

The war was getting worse by the hour. The cold sound of guns going off, and sirens wailing loud as can be, resulted in a decision that changed the life of my dad forever. My grandma had enough when she saw little boys being recruited to the guerilla gang. She made up her mind that it was time to send her son to the free world. When she mentioned moving to the United States my dad was thrilled! Grandma promised him new white shoes and a new backpack. He said, "I couldn't wait to get to California! I thought it was going to be the best adventure ever. I was excited to show off my new white shoes to all the Americans. It was all I was thinking; my new white tennis shoes." However, his feelings changed soon after he realized that his trip to California was a trip he'd take by himself.

It was four in the morning when he was packing up his one outfit and new shoes. His mom gave him *Plátanos Fritos* for breakfast to fill him up before making the long trip. By seven-thirty, he was already getting on the bus. The weather was hot and sticky yet he was beyond thrilled for the trip. His mom prayed for him and embraced him in her arms. He said, "She began to cry uncontrollably. She held me tight to her chest and I could actually hear her heart beat! It was beating fast and she was shaking all over. That was when I realized what was going on. She was letting me go to America by myself. I was riding the bus without my mom! Soon after I discovered this, I hugged her and kissed her! I began to cry and beg her to come with me." But that was not the plan. My dad was sweating and he was getting nervous. He remembers being scared because he has never been away from his mother for more than a day. He claims, "I was not prepared for this. I thought it was going to be a family vacation not a going away trip!"

All of a sudden he grew cold. He was trying to stop crying to show his mom that he would be okay but he couldn't. He got on and sat by the window. He saw his mom crying and blowing him kisses. She was yelling, "*¡Te quiero mucho mijo, te quiero mucho!*" He felt cold and sick in his stomach. He put his hands against the window and he was waving goodbye as the bus was moving. He felt the heat of his own breathing and he felt the room spin in circles. His heart was broken into pieces. He hugged his backpack and closed his eyes thinking this was a nightmare and that he was soon going to wake up. He opened his eyes and he could still see the old rugged bus. It smelled like sweat and bathroom. Soon thereafter, his cry turned into hyperventilation. He couldn't breathe and someone had to calm him down. He grew quiet and then he fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning. He noticed that the bus had stopped and there were people checking everyone's bags. "It was all pretty fast. They

checked our bags, we got off, and I followed everyone else," he said. Soon after getting on the other transfer bus, they stopped in Mexico. That was the place where he met his uncle. They rode together the rest of the trip, which soothed my dad a little because he was not totally alone anymore. My dad said, "We struggled not to get caught. There was a point where I had to hide under a car in order for the police to not catch me. I was to obey the exact orders of my uncle and that was what I did." A few days later, they arrived to San Diego, California. They passed the first inspection but the second time they were thrown in jail.

They were locked in jail for a few days but like my dad said, "at least we were together." The jail police were nice according to my dad. He said, "We mopped the place and as a thank you gesture the police brought us Kentucky Fried Chicken. It was my first time eating that and it was the most delicious meal I had ever had." Throughout their jail time, their legal papers were being processed. All they were waiting on was the okay from the officers of the embassy, the INS, to let them go. A few more days later, they were released and welcomed to the United States of America.

According to my dad, "The hardest part of the whole trip was leaving my mom behind. I cried every night and I was anxious to hear her voice. She called me every Sunday after church and I thanked God for it." He was living with his Tia Livida in San Valley, California and church was one of the agreements she proposed to my dad. He was expected to go to school, go to church, and do his chores. He learned English by studying the Spanish-English dictionary and he learned his way around town by walking to school every day. He then graduated High School at the top of his class. He was working in a dry cleaners store and then he was soon able to buy his first car. He states that "California was a long journey for me. In ten years, I learned a lot of things the hard way. I experienced drive-by-shootings, witnessed my best friend being shot, and I unfortunately lived thousands of miles away from my mom. But I then fell in love with the most beautiful girl and she helped heal my hurt. I married her as soon as the 1994 earthquake ended and we started a whole new chapter in Atlanta, Georgia."

My dad grew up far away from his mom and his home learning the customs of America. It was an experience he will never forget and I admire him for trusting God throughout his first ten years in America. He is the man he is now due to the hardships and struggles he went through as a kid. And now he has a family of his own, doing the best he can to provide and open doors for us that were shut on him growing up. Jose Aguilar is my hero and I am proud to call him my dad.