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One Day, It'll Pay Off

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I was born Jessica Valeria Marcelina Pereira, but at home, I was always Valeria. If I ever heard Jessica, I knew I was in trouble or I was needed for something important. It was not even Jessica that I heard, I heard *Yessica*. With a “y”. I always heard the Hispanic version of that name; and in my eyes, the normal version. It wasn’t until non-spanish speakers couldn’t pronounce Valeria correctly, that I began going by Jessica. I didn’t like the sound of Valeria with an accent, so I preferred going by Jessica. This started around the time I began encountering more non-spanish speakers, or around the end of middle school. This is also when I began to realize that being Hispanic was a huge part of my identity and how essential it was for me to embrace this identity in a place foreign to me. I was soon to be part of a world in which I felt that I did not belong. This is similar to the experience my parents had.

Twenty-eight years ago my parents traveled from Guatemala to the United States with the dream of living a better life. This was my father’s second time coming and my mother’s first. Since my parents didn’t have much money, they were forced to share a small apartment with my dad’s sister, her husband, my dad’s uncle and his family. Life in the US was much different than in Guatemala. Here the language was different; people dressed differently and if you looked different, you were treated differently. This was something my mother experienced first hand a few months after arriving to the US when she was in the hospital waiting to give birth to my brother. Before she went into labor, my mother was in a room with another pregnant woman (whom was not Hispanic) and she noticed that the nurses kept checking in on the other lady, but not on her. They would offer the other lady softer pillows, painkillers and such, but to my mother, nothing. She didn’t even see the doctor until my brother was almost out. The unfair and painful treatment she received at the hospital was one of the reason why she waited nine years to have a second child, me. I came in to the picture on October 22, 1993. By this time, my parents were much more settled into their life in the US, and although we still lived in an underprivileged, low-income town, we at least had our own home. Since my brother was nine years older than me, we were never that close and during the time he lived with us, he was never really around.

In my home, my family only spoke Spanish. I somehow managed to learn English watching television shows such as Sesame Street. By the time I started pre-school, I was bilingual. This was something my pre-school instructors were impressed with. They congratulated my parents because even though they only spoke Spanish, their four-year old was already bilingual. My parents said they remember me sitting on the couch with a book in my lap and although I could not read, I would go through the book as if I was reading, making up my own stories, in English, based on the pictures I saw. This is when my parents began to notice my interest in learning and in school.

Through elementary school, I would always have outstanding grades and I constantly received praises from teachers on report cards and during parent-teacher conferences. In 5th grade, we were required to take reading tests to determine at which grade-level we were reading. I was reading at an 8th grade level when most of my peers were at 3rd or 4th. I wouldn't say school was a priority for me, but it *was* the only thing I had on my mind. After school, I wouldn't hesitate to get started on homework and I never left an assignment unfinished. I didn't think of myself as a nerd, I just thought getting homework done well and on time was what everyone else was doing and what was supposed to be done. This theory of mine began to change when I noticed that I was the only one constantly being named "Student of the Month" and that not all my peers made it to the Principle's Honor Roll ceremony every semester. At the end of the school year, there was a big ceremony where all types of awards were given out to students. I received "Most Likely To succeed." My mom even encouraged me to put a binder together with all my honors and certificates so that they wouldn't be scattered around my room. That is when I knew, personally, that I was ahead of my peers.

In middle school, the good grades just kept rolling in and the honors classes were normal to me. A few weeks into 7th grade, a tall, white man walked into my class and asked the teacher if he could pull me away for a while. I was shocked when she said yes since no one got pulled out of class unless they were in trouble. As we walked to his office, Eric Eisner assured me that I was not in trouble and that this encounter was actually for good reasons. He informed me that his job was to search for academically-gifted students and that my performance in school had caught his attention. He said that he would help me, if I wanted, to apply to private high schools. I thought, "Me?! In a private school?! How??" This was a huge shock to me since I had never pictured myself going to school anywhere outside of my community. At the time I did not know this, but I was in a school district where 65% of students are predicted to drop out of high school, a percentage nearly three times higher than the national average. Mr. Eisner said he saw greater potential in me, and that he was there to help. This is when all the dots started to come together, and when all my past self-discoveries began to make sense.

I had always imagined walking to high school with my elementary and middle school friends. Now, all of my visions of the future were changing. Several personal statements, entrance exams, and interviews later, I was accepted into Brentwood School. My Brentwood interviewer, Dave Velasquez, who would also turn out to be my high school advisor, was one of the first glances I had into Brentwood. He made Brentwood seem like the perfect place for me to be, and it was simply up to me to choose. I had to decide whether or not I wanted to leave

behind my friends and the neighborhood I had grown up in, to go to a school hours away from my home.

“*Te vas a tener que levantar temprano*, you’re going to have to wake up early,” my mom warned as we sat in the living room discussing the matter, “You have a tough time waking up, it’s going to be four whole years.”

“I can do it mom, it’s *only* four years,” I responded confidently, even though I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

Then my father said something that I hadn’t really thought about,

“*Yo no mas no quiero que vayas a ver cosas que otros tienen y después nos las vendas a pedir*, I just don’t want you to see things that the other kids have and then come ask us for those things.”

I hadn’t put any thought into that, and I didn’t know what he was talking about so I quickly responded, “No, that’s not going to happen. I know what I’m going for; a better education is the first and only reason why I ‘m doing this.”

That’s only one example of some of the things I hadn’t thought about at the time. Another thing I had not realized was that I would soon go from being part of the majority to a minority. I was so used to going to school with people of my race for my whole life that when I thought about private school, I realized that most of the students there would probably be rich, white kids. I had taken a few classes at Brentwood over the past summers but it was usually with kids also from Lennox so I had not had the true, full experience of being a student at Brentwood. But, from the time that I had spent there, it seemed that being a real student there would be fun. Plus, the campus was beautiful, much better than the schools I was used to. I weighed out the advantages and disadvantages and decided to take a different route than that of my elementary and middle school peers. I did not want to be just another student at Lennox, and I even though I knew I wasn’t likely to drop out and add to the statistics, I wanted something more.

In the fall of 2007, I began attending Brentwood School. My routine changed drastically from waking up at 7:30 am to waking up at 5:00 am so that I could be at the bus stop at 6:00 am. From there, I took a two hour bus ride to the school. The first few bus rides to Brentwood, I sat in the front since I didn’t know anyone, and I stared out the window for pretty much the whole ride. Looking out that bus window, I was able to literally watch as my world transformed. When I got on the bus, I was surrounded by old buildings that were tagged all over and by streets that seemed as if they all led to dumpsters. As the bus made its way to Brentwood, I saw the streets become cleaner, and the houses become bigger. Even the people, who were on the streets, were different. Instead of seeing a pregnant Hispanic mother pushing a stroller with a five year old by her side, I saw a white lady jogging, with a white, well-groomed poodle by her side. I kept stretching my vision to try to get the first glance at the school, but I couldn’t. For some reason, I thought it would look drastically different than how it looked the previous

summers I had been there. All I saw was green, bushes everywhere surrounding everything. Everything felt so private. I mean, the houses in my neighborhood all had fences around them but all the houses were visible. Here the only thing you could see was the driveway that led up to the house, literally, because most of the houses were on a hill. The school was the same, except the school was in a bowl, and the bus didn't go down the driveway. We were dropped off at the top, and we had to walk down to the ivory-colored, brick-like building that looked like the country vacation house of a royal family. By the time I got off the bus, I was in a different world, one in which I felt I did not belong.

Going into Brentwood, I had only thought about how the academics were going to be more challenging than what I was used to but I had not put much thought into the type of people I would find at Brentwood. On the first day of school, I found myself drowning in a sea of white faces, blonde hair and blue eyes. Of course, not everyone at Brentwood had blonde hair but coming from a school where *everyone* had dark hair, blonde was all I saw. Even though I understood the language being spoken around me, I could not help feel that I was improperly dressed, and that I did not fit in. I was in absolute shock.

The first two weeks were the worst. I did not have any of my old friends with me, I was buried up to my ears in homework, and I was sleep deprived. One of my first experiences in a classroom at Brentwood was in my history class. As I walked in and scanned the room for a seat, I heard someone say, "Oh, look, a Mexican!" This shocked me a lot. For one, I had never been identified or singled out by race or ethnicity and second, I'm not Mexican. During breaks and lunch, I didn't know where to go so I found myself in the library a lot and since we weren't allowed to eat in the library, I went to a place called the Student Life Center, alone. This just added to the negative perceptions I was adding up during my first days at Brentwood. After getting home two hours later than I was used to, I would sit in front of my computer, stare at my French homework sheet, and let the tears roll out of my eyes, down my cheeks, and onto my work. What did I get myself into?? I felt alone, I had tons of hours of reading to do, I had received my first C, ever, and I did not understand French. Who spoke French?? Why did I need to know how to count in French?? I was miserable.

Then, Vanessa, also a student at Brentwood, came into my life. I had met her before, during one of my meetings with Mr. Eisner in middle school. Little did I know she would turn out to be one of my best friends in high school, and a very significant and influential person in my life. She and I had a lot in common. In fact, she lived two blocks away from me, and was also an Eisner student from Lennox. But with the size of Lennox Middle School, you could go there for three years and not know half the people in your grade. With her, I no longer felt so alone, and since she had been at Brentwood for two years, she introduced me to people she already knew: Kaiya, Jacob, Derwin, Farid, and Miguel. All people

who I would become very close to and hold deep in my heart. Although Vanessa and I were in the same grade, she was someone I looked up to and admired for making it through the transition I was going through, successfully. Seeing her gave me hope that I could do it as well, and that I did not have to do it alone. Vanessa and Kaiya were my two very best friends. We were inseparable. Whenever one of us was alone, someone was bound to ask where the other two were because it was rare to see us apart. The greatest part was that we were all different, yet we still got along so well. Vanessa loved history and had an incredible vocabulary, I was good with numbers, and Kaiya was an amazing dancer. Vanessa was also a very significant person in my life because she introduced me to Luis, my high school sweetheart, and someone else who I owe a lot to for helping me get through the transition and always urging me to do my best.

Everything was going well, both academically and socially. Instead of being intimidated by the sea of white faces, I embraced my Hispanic culture even more. There was one other girl, also Hispanic, who came into Brentwood that same year. Unfortunately for her the intimidation was too much and she forced herself to try to conform. She lightened her hair and got highlights, denied that she understood Spanish, and never participated in anything that involved the Latino community at Brentwood. I did the opposite, I engaged in every Latino Student Association meeting, convinced others to get involved and became the president of the association. I didn't have to make sure people knew I was Hispanic, since my appearance did that on its own, but I did make sure people knew I was proud to be a Latina. In 2008 I went to the People of Color Conference & The Student Diversity Leadership Conference in New Orleans where there were workshops specifically for minority students in independent schools. In those workshops we learned about the importance of diversity, retaining our identity and issues involving racial/ethnic identity development. So much was my involvement in the representation of Hispanics and minorities in the community that I was chosen as the female representative of the school's Diversity Council. The Diversity Council was made up of the few-colored faculties of the school and a couple of non-colored teachers who were interested in bettering the situation for minorities in the school. By being part of this project, I, along with the male student representative, put together a presentation called, "From a Student's Perspective." It focused on teaching teachers about the experience of a minority student at the school, and the negative role they were playing in our lives by treating white and colored students differently.

Along with my involvements in the different ethnic clubs, I was also involved in sports. I joined soccer, lacrosse, and my favorite, Drill Team. Even though staying after school for sports made me get home even later, I didn't mind anymore. Brentwood was no longer a foreign land that once intimidated me. I still

viewed it as another world, but to my great surprise it started to grow on me; the next thing I knew, it had become my second home.

During the time I spent making Brentwood a place not foreign to me, I began to lose touch with what was happening in my real home. Being involved with sports and all, I would literally get home around 7:00 pm, eat, shower, and lock myself in my room for the rest of the night to do homework and sleep. This was along with the two days a week that I would go to church from 7:00 pm – 9:00pm, *then* start homework. In a matter of a few days, I witnessed that while my brother was beginning to make a life of his own with his fiancée, Rachel, my parents' marriage was falling apart.

The day of my brother's wedding was one I, along with many others, had been anticipating for a while. They had been together for 6 years; it was about time. I like weddings. Every time I go to a wedding, I am happy. Now that my own brother was to be the groom, I was even happier. But what happened the morning of the wedding was something I never imagined would happen during the course of that day. It was a Thursday and I had school but this event was worth missing a day.

I was in the living room, eating cereal and watching TV as I waited for my hair to dry in preparation for the wedding. Suddenly, I heard my mom on the phone, I wasn't sure if she had called or if someone called her. I remember not paying much attention to it until I heard my mom's voice cracking like when one does when they want to cry. That is when I started paying closer attention to the words my mother was actually saying. I couldn't hear the full sentences she was saying, I just remember hearing, "not be marrying you", or "She said that you said that he said..." things like that. That is when I knew she was talking to Rachel. There had been some tension between her and my parents since the relationship began, but now it seemed to be at its height. A conflict was created when the colors of the wedding were being chosen, a small thing. Rachel had told me to tell my dad to wear a certain color suit, even though he had already bought a suit of a different color that my brother had said was okay. That little wardrobe issue turned into a whole situation about how the wedding should not be happening. I remember thinking about the irony of the situation. A wedding, which is supposed to bring two families together, was about to happen, and the wedding itself was tearing my family apart. The worst part was that I was stuck in the middle because whenever Rachel wanted to tell my family something, she would tell me. But the thing that worried me the most, was something that I knew, that no one else in my family knew, Rachel was pregnant.

I was the only one that knew. The only one that she had trusted enough to tell that she was expecting a baby. You might ask why she trusted me so much with such a big secret; I was kind of surprised myself. But the truth is that even though her and my parents didn't get along very well, we were really close. She

was like the big sister I never had. We met when she first started dating my brother; I was about nine or ten. Although my brother was not very happy about it, they would take me along on their dates. In my innocence, I didn't know they were on dates, I thought they were just hanging out. We would go to the mall, to the beach, and to watch movies. Sometimes she would even sleep over and we would stay up until two or three in the morning talking about all sorts of things. Now, eight years later, she had told me she was pregnant.

There was a baby on the way, and it was the day of the wedding that my parents did not want happening. I remember thinking, "I don't want this baby to come into this life with a destroyed family." Then, my aunt came in; she relaxed my mother, and we proceeded in getting ready for the wedding because my mother realized it was not her place to try to stop the wedding. Except for taking pictures, me, my parents, my brother and Rachel, were not together for most of that night.

It was after this event that I began to pay closer attention to my family's state of being. I began to notice how when I was locked up in my room doing homework, my parents were in the living room arguing, yelling at each other for really stupid things. I noticed how the small moments when we were all together as a "family", my parents hardly spoke. This devastated me and I did not know what to do. All I could think of was the baby. I did not want him coming into a broken family; he did not deserve it. But what could I do? College applications kept rolling in and I had to focus on my studies. I just prayed. At church, before meals, at night before going to bed, I prayed.

By the time the pregnancy came to light, I could see the little broken pieces coming together. Rachel and my brother would visit more often, and although I could still see the differences between my parents, when the baby became the topic of conversation, they were on the same page. Finally, our home was ready for the baby. Around this time, I found out about another pregnancy in the family, which was not as welcomed. My cousin, a month older than me, was pregnant. I couldn't believe it. It hit me so hard that when I found out, I cried. I didn't cry for the baby so much as I did for her, for her future. Here I was, working as hard as I could, always being the best I could be in hopes for a better future, and now her life had completely flipped around. Her life would no longer be about her, and the rest of her future would now revolve around another human being dependent on her. As clear as it was, I could not wrap my head around the situation, and it scared me. The statistics of high school dropouts and teen pregnancies that I had grown up around were closer than ever, and my determination grew even greater. Even though I still knew that I would not be part of the statistics, I felt the responsibility of changing the way girls of my race were looked at and taking advantage of all the privileges and opportunities that had been made available to me. So that is what I continued to do. In college

applications I would talk about how I wanted to make a change, how I wanted to be the difference.

I never really had a “dream school,” I just knew that I wanted to go to college. I mostly applied to the colleges that my high school counselor told me about, in California that is. He told me about colleges on the east coast that he saw being fitting for me but when I told my parents about it, it was an automatic no. They thought I was crazy for bringing up the thought of going to school on the other side of the country. For most people, this would be normal, but my parents didn’t go to college. They didn’t even go to high school. The highest level of education my father received was 8th grade, and my mom, 6th. When they were growing up, school wasn’t a necessity. It was a luxury. If your family could afford not to have you working, you would go to school, if not, too bad. This was the mentality they had, but at the same time, they knew the US was different. While they knew it was essential for me to get an education, they had a hard time letting go of the ideas they had grown up with. After hours of struggling over which schools I could apply to, I was down to my final list. I wasn’t that happy at first, since the farthest school I was applying to, was only a few hours away from my house. Loyola Marymount University was on that list. It was the closest to my house, and by far my parents’ favorite. I had seen the campus a few times since my boyfriend was already going to LMU and he would invite me to go do work with him at the library on some weekends. From what he would tell me, LMU sounded really fun, and going to college with my boyfriend sounded even greater. This added to my anticipation and excitement to hear back from LMU but at the same time I was still looking forward to hearing from other schools. When the acceptance letters started coming in, I was really happy, but then I would see how much tuition was for each school, and the happiness would go away.

Then, on March 20, 2011, I received my LMU acceptance letter. It was unreal to me. Time had gone by so fast and all the work I had done from middle school to high school had finally paid off. Now the only issue left to deal with was the money. LMU was really expensive and I didn’t yet know how much financial aid I would be receiving.

In the blink of an eye it was time for Preview Day at LMU. I showed up with my parents that Sunday morning and went to the designated area for students in the Bellarmine College of Liberal Arts. At the time, I was a Psychology major, so I got to meet students who were currently Psych majors and talk to them about their classes. As excited as I was to be at LMU, hearing about the typical life of a psychology major was not that appealing to me. I began to question the decision I had made; I knew that I wanted to go to LMU, I just wasn’t sure psychology was what I wanted to do.

I talked to Luis about this, “You should choose a science major,” he told me.

“But, I don’t like science,” I responded, “I mean, I was good at it in high school, but I’m not sure if that is what I want to do with my life.” He then proceeded to tell me about a summer program he had done at LMU before going into his freshman year. The program was called ACCESS, A Community Committed to Excellence in Scientific Scholarship. He said it was a good opportunity for me to explore my interests in science or engineering, that I would get a lot of wonderful opportunities from the program, and if I decided that it wasn’t for me, I could always change my major. I got in contact with the director of ACCESS, Dr. Edward Mosteig, who would also turn out to be my advisor and a huge blessing in my life. He informed me that I had to be a student in the Seaver College of Science and Engineering so that is when I decided to change my major to mathematics. During the first orientation session in June, I had my interview with Dr. Mosteig for the program and that same day, I received my acceptance letter to the program.

A month later I was moving into LMU, ready to begin this three-week science program, and my first experience as a real college student. Everyday was a new experience and a lot of fun. There were 17 other students, and four TA’s. We all lived together, ate together, had our classes together, and did our projects together. Needless to say the friends I made during the program are all my closest friends now. During the program we were introduced to various resources that we could find on campus and we got a taste of what school would be like once the fall semester started. ACCESS was absolutely amazing and I am so grateful that I got to be a part of it. The only sad experience I had during ACCESS was that last day when everyone was packing to move into his or her fall dorms, I was packing to go home. When the fall semester began, I was ready to begin life at LMU. Although I wasn’t able to live at LMU due to financial hardships, I am still very grateful for being here and I feel more and more blessed each day that I am here.

During my first spring break, I had the amazing opportunity of going to El Salvador through Campus Ministry with 11 other LMU students. The experience was absolutely amazing and completely life changing. While we were there we visited various places in El Salvador such as several chapels, war sites, museums, and natural parks. We also had the opportunity of going to the Island of Espiritu Santo and were able to stay there for two nights to get a taste of the life of the people. The houses were poorly constructed, the house floors were dirt, there were no cars, there was no sewage system, and there was no running water. Living in these conditions completely changed my definition of “under-privileged” and touched me very deeply. It reminded me of the stories my parents told me of when they were growing up in Guatemala and I was able to have a better understanding of where my parents had come from. I couldn’t believe that people still lived in these types of conditions and still managed to live happy,

hopeful lives. I felt so ungrateful. I used to believe that I was living in a bad community because I would compare my home to the houses my mom cleans.

I thought back to the houses I had seen back in Los Angeles when I accompanied my mom to clean those beachside, three story mansions. I pictured my mom on her hands and knees cleaning tubs and Jacuzzis of people who had bedrooms and cars to spare. I pictured my mom and dad mopping floors of places with people who didn't care where they were from. That is what my parents did when they came to the US, and they did it for me. I knew this already but my trip to El Salvador engraved it more in my heart. I came back with the desire to not just make a change in my family's life, but also in the lives of others. Others like the children in the orphanage that I saw in El Salvador. When I came back I was more determined than ever to succeed.

Since I don't live on campus, in between classes I go to the library and work. The hard work I did at my previous schools got me this far, but I know there is still much more for me to accomplish and I know that with the help of God and the support from my family, I will be able to do it. My family is very proud of my accomplishments, and closer than ever. My nephew, Eleazar has been the biggest blessing to come into my family and although I still do not spend as much time at home as I wish I could, my family knows that I am working towards a better future that one day, with the help of God, will pay off.