

Introduction

When the train hit, we all felt it. Maybe not physically...but with a tidal force that rapidly unearthed a pain that none of us were ready for. From Ghana to Ecuador, Benign to El Salvador, Lebanon to Taiwan, Gujarat to China, Burma to Kenya...we were wounded. This jolt of agony traveled in a variety of paths- text, phone call, social media, police visit, or in person. Yet in no matter what language we received the news, it didn't seem tangible. Nancy was dead. نانسي كانت ميتة Nancy était morte. नेन्सी मरी गई हली. Nancy estaba muerta. *Nancy estaba muerta.*

When I began teaching nineteen years ago, I had no idea that I would be blessed enough to one day, work with families and teach students who were English Language Learners. For years, I met the most resilient, hard working, determined, high school age dreamers! I had twenty five different languages and students from all continents. I learned the value of home visits, spoke with parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. I sat with students while they cried over missing their country, shyly smiled over speaking their first words, and yelled with exclamation when they walked across that graduation stage and were accepted into universities and the workforce. I learned the stories of their parents, their "why" for coming to America, and their goals for the future. I worked with their teachers to teach them that language did not equal intelligence, and that our kids deserved an anxiety free place to learn at all times...and that as they accommodated and supported them, they would thrive.

Every day, when they entered our ESL classroom, they were slapped in the face with a banner that asked "What's Your Plan?" This banner quickly became a yearly tradition and stayed up every single year. As students graduated from our program and entered college, trade schools,

and work, we threw them a celebration on graduation day and they were finally able to place their coveted signature on that banner, along with a picture of where they were going next. “What’s Your Plan” became the mantra of our ESL family. They stood up for each other, encouraged each other, translated for the beginning level students, and studied together. In our classroom, they knew that surviving in America or returning to their country could not be their only plan.

I taught every member of the Lopez family...and in reality, they taught me more about the world than I could ever teach them. Sergio, my very first ESL student, graced my classroom...followed by Henry, Jeffrey, Jeffrey from Las Vegas, and finally, Nancy. Nancy, the youngest and only female niece in the family, was, like her brothers, a light in the world. At the age of eighteen, a few months after graduation, she died while walking on the train tracks a mile from our school. She never heard the Acela train that came from behind. Watching Nancy and her brothers graduate from school and thrive in the world was one of the greatest teaching moments of my career.

Planning her funeral, taking her parents who spoke no English to identify their daughter, working with police, and planning and hosting her funeral for her parents was one of the most daunting but important experiences I have ever had. The Lopez family, along with other students we have taught from all over the world, represent the bilingual garden that is blooming in America. Filled with layers of hope and despair...change and opportunity...resilience and growth...joy and fear. I am proud to say that I’ve seen them all...and they bloomed anyway.

I hope that the stories that lie ahead inform, influence, and inspire every American to recognize what I know for sure: that learning a second language is an asset, not a handicap. When we

look into the eyes of the garden variety that surrounds us, let's water it with kind words, gentle ears, and supportive hands. Let's point them in a direction to thrive.

Nancy's hand was the last thing I held. The night before her funeral, I received an unexpected call from the coroner. I recognized the number immediately, but was unsure why he was calling. "Ms. Bitner?" he quickly asked.

"Yes?" I responded.

"I have an idea."

Nancy's parents had been begging to see her. The train had severed her into parts, and through teary eyes, the funeral director and I had shared with them days before that seeing their daughter to say goodbye was not going to be an option. The casket was going to be closed, and our hearts were broken. The community had showered Nancy's parents with support. At no time over the three weeks that it took to host her funeral were they left alone. Food, prayers, hugs, tears, money, and words of heartfelt sympathy poured in from every crevice of the earth. Nancy's father, a pastor, smiled through his tears, and repeatedly whispered "Gracias para todos". As I stood beside him each day and watched this tragedy unfold, I could barely speak out the word "Gracias." Prayer and compassion for others were constantly radiated by Mr. Lopez. Now, it was his time to be the recipient.

Then one day, while Nancy's parents were wilting, it happened: the funeral director discovered a gift from above. Nancy's right arm and hand were intact. Her gold rings were still on her fingers, her nail polish was vibrantly pink, and her hand was ready for holding. "I can assemble her in a respectful way, and have her hand ready for her parents to hold," he said. Bring them

over in an hour. I can cover her so that they can sit with her for a while...I can give them the goodbye they deserve...Puedo darles el adiós que se merecen!"

Walking Senor and Senora Lopez into the tranquil, dimly lit room was one of the most daunting moments of my life. I respectfully kept my eyes down ,and held Mama's hand to steady her so that she was able to make the walk to spend time with her baby girl. As I turned to leave the room and wait in the lobby, she turned to me and said, "Senora Bitner, it's okay. You go first. Go see her. Talk to her. Hold her hand." To this day, I can't articulate without choking tears back, how I survived that moment. Yet in that moment, kneeling behind Senor and Senora Lopez, I watched three amazing human beings exemplify the strength to come to America, separate their family for years, work towards getting Visa's, learn a new language, and then...hold that beautiful, vibrant hand with sparkly pink nail polish and golden rings, and know that the very next day, it would be passed on to hold with the higher power above her. For that, and for many, many other lessons that I have learned from the English Language Learning families that I have had the honor to work with, I am forever grateful. I hope that the words that lie ahead of you in this text inspire you to do what Nancy and the other students asked of me.

"Ms. Bitner..Mira La Mapa!" Look at the lives of others. Consider each of their experiences. Realize just how big the world is out there...and in every instance, choose to water the garden to help it bloom.

