



By **STUDENTS FROM ALAIN LEROY LOCKE HIGH SCHOOL**

With a foreword by **HÉCTOR TOBAR**

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FOREWORD

Dearest young writers of this book. Scribes and students of greater Los Angeles. I offer you a big and a hearty hug. And my sincerest congratulations. You are now published authors! This work, with its bound pages and its narrow spine, will now occupy a spot on a shelf alongside other great works of literature. Shakespeare, Woolf, Cervantes, Morrison.

Like you, those writers all put their writerly hearts into creating something new. They looked at the beautiful and tragic world around them, and its history, and they told a story of human truth. In your book, you have tackled one of the biggest events this big city has ever seen. The days in 1992 when the city burned and seethed, and the aftermath of those events. I lived through that “uprising,” that “riot,” or as the Spanish-speakers of the day called it, “los quemazones,” the great burning. I dreamed then of a kinder, more just city—a place where young people believed that words and ideas could be as powerful as rocks, gunfire, and flames. Now that day has arrived. You’ve shown us the Los Angeles that was born from those days of destruction. You’ve told tales of classrooms and family homes, of bedrooms and border crossings, of injustice and ambition. You’ve shown us some of the scary and wonderful things to be found in the places where you’ve grown up. Like any great author, you’ve put a lot of yourself into your work. You’ve written drafts and revised them, and you’ve accepted the wise counsel of editors who’ve helped you find what was there inside you waiting to be born—your voice.

All of us as readers are better off because you believed you had something to say and because you did the work to say it. Thank you for being brave enough to invite us into the worlds you know. Thank you for bringing us along on the journeys you’ve undertaken to get to where you are today. You have made us feel what it is like to be a young person in the first decades of the twenty-first century. One day, in the not-too-distant future, other young people will pick up these bound pages and they will read your words and know what it was like to live in this time. When they read these tales of your lives, they will know what you felt. As if by magic, they will become you. Writers like you who pull off this feat of wizardry are known by a title I am proud to bestow on you. They are called artists.

In closing, dear authors, I’ll ask you the same question I pose to every published writer I meet: *What are you working on next?*

—Héctor Tobar



An aerial photograph of a residential neighborhood, showing houses, trees, and streets. The image is rendered in a dark blue, halftone-style texture. Two bright pink banners are overlaid on the image, containing white text. The banners are connected by white lines that form a zig-zag pattern.

WE'RE NOT ALL

LIKE THAT

ANDY MENDOZA

We're Not All Like That: An Interview with Sam Joo

In 1992, people all over Los Angeles got tired of not being heard by the government. The legacy of the 1965 Watts Riots could still be felt throughout the city, and decades of anger made African Americans thirsty for justice. As Congresswoman Maxine Waters explained to the congregants at First African Methodist Episcopal Church shortly after the uprisings, “Riot is the voice of the unheard.” And after years of feeling unheard, people throughout South Los Angeles started riots in a call for social justice.

At that time, **Sam Joo** was a young UCLA graduate who had just started to work at the Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP) on 54th Street and Crenshaw, near the '92 Riot epicenter. His explanation and understanding of why the riots took place is extensive, and his own personal story of what happened around him on those six days is equally fascinating.

I felt nervous going into the interview, but that went away right after I asked my first question. Sam immediately opened up to me. He was kind, friendly, and inviting, like we'd known each other for a long time. I knew I'd feel comfortable talking to him if I was having a hard time, like one of his clients at the AADAP. Even though we didn't know each other before the interview, Sam and I had a lot of things in common, from being first-generation Americans to being proud Angelenos.

Sam's hard work and big heart have served him well in his work as the Director of Children and Family Services at Koreatown Youth and Community Center (KYCC) and on the First 5 Best Start Metro LA Community Guidance Body. I felt honored to interview someone who cares about helping the people in his community, regardless of their race.

In this condensed version of our conversation, Sam shares key insights about the tense relationship between African Americans and Korean Americans (a tension that has brewed over many decades), explains how the Korean American community of LA has changed in the years since the riots, and opened my mind to what it truly means to be a Korean American in Los Angeles today.

AM How did you first learn about the riots?

SJ I was actually living in the Valley at that time. I remember distinctly just going home, turning on the TV and the news was buildings on fire and the streets were dark, and you saw just LAPD sirens going off and honestly, I thought it was somewhere on the East Coast. I had no idea this was happening in LA. This was that first evening. [The] first thing I did when I found out it was LA and—at that time we called it South Central—first thing I did was call my work because I worked at an adult residential drug treatment facility so these are clients that actually live there. I wanted to make sure they were okay and I couldn't get through. No one was answering. So the next day I went to the office and they [said] there was a lot of anger in the community and that luckily there were some neighbors who came out to help. A lot of the residents [or] the clients were on the roof watering down the roof just in case because there were buildings that were on fire near there.

AM When we look back at Los Angeles in the early 1990s, there are several cases of racially charged violence, like Rodney King's beating and the shooting of Latasha Harlins. What do you think was the primary trigger for the riots?

SJ There were all these issues prior to what happened. And I think that's really, really important. It didn't all of a sudden just happen. It wasn't Rodney King. I think that was the straw that broke the camel's back, but there were all these other issues that were happening and as you guys are studying this, you'll probably find out. But there were all these telltale signs that the tension, the anger—especially in the African American community—and where Koreans also played a role in that because there was a high presence of Korean American store owners that operated stores, liquor stores, other types of businesses in South LA. So I think it was just a convergence of all these things that happened that escalated.

AM In 1992, you were working at the Asian American Drug Abuse Program. Located at 54th and Crenshaw, the AADAP was in the eye of the hurricane at the epicenter of the riots. Much of the tensions during the riots were between Koreans and African Americans. Did the AADAP feel that wrath on you and your team?

SJ No. Not at all. AADAP has a really interesting history. In the '50s and '60s, after the Japanese Americans—they were in the internment camps during World War II—after they were released from internment camps, they couldn't go anywhere they wanted to. A lot of neighborhoods wouldn't allow them to move in. So one of the areas that allowed them to move in was the Crenshaw community.

If you drive around Crenshaw, you see certain homes that have these gardens and they're like Japanese gardens, and these are the Japanese Americans who moved in there in the late '40s to early '50s. So when AADAP first started, there was a good representation of Asian Americans in that community. But since then, it's really drastically changed. So although the name is Asian American Drug Abuse Program, the individuals and the families that they serve are probably majority non-Asian. And so when I was working in that residential program, we were licensed for thirty eight adults. I would say only about thirty percent were Asian. The others were White, Latino, African American. A good number of African Americans.

AM We know that in 1992 the riots were all over the city. There was devastation everywhere you looked, as African American people were in a racial war with Korean American people. How did it make you feel to have to journey every day to the epicenter of the conflict?

SJ I never felt fear for my safety. And people asked me all the time like, "Man, but you're Asian. You're Korean. Aren't they going to dog you?" And there was honestly—the twelve years I was there, I've had one negative

comment thrown my way from a community member. Just one. And it was [at] the liquor store [from] the movie called *Boyz n the Hood*; it's called FJ Liquor—I worked right there. And I was going in to get something to drink and someone was coming out, and this is right after the Latasha Harlins case, where that Korean store owner shot the young girl. And the gentleman just said to me, “Would you kill for an orange juice?” But another gentleman just said, “Don't mind him. We're not all like that.” So he kind of smoothed that situation, and that was it.

AM Korean Americans suffered more financial damages than any other group of people as a result of the riots. Two-thousand, two-hundred and eighty Korean American-owned stores were looted, burned, or damaged, amounting to millions in losses. How did the community respond to those damages and how long did it take to recover?

SJ I think we're still recovering. Like I said, Koreatown suffered \$400 million worth of damages. By far more than any other neighborhood. And if you see images from the riots, you'll see people spray-painted “Black owned.” And so, it was, I believe, targeted. They were targeting certain businesses.

AM What does the relationship between Korean Americans and African Americans look like today?

SJ I think it's improved, but not enough. That's my honest opinion: not enough. In Korean, we call this day “429” because it was April 29, so literally that's what it's called, Sa I Gu which means “4-2-9.” We don't call it “civil unrest.” I don't think the relationship between African American and Korean American leaders has improved to the point that it needs to. And now you've actually got a majority in the Latino community in most of the LA city neighborhoods. And so how do we work with that community?

I think what we share oftentimes is that immigrant experience. Although our immigration patterns are very different and

we came here for different reasons—maybe not different reasons but different causes—but I think we still have a ways to go. I think there has been a better understanding of Korean culture, especially through the media. I talk to a lot of young people and a lot of them like K-Pop, so there was a desire to learn about Korean culture and Korean performers and entertainers, so I think that has bridged the gap a little bit. I think as for true social issues, I don't think we've really addressed enough.

AM Do you think Korean Americans are more involved today in the larger Los Angeles community?

SJ Yeah, I do. If anything came out of that period, I think there was this need, like, “We need a pipeline for leadership.” Because Fox TV used to say, “Well we would have interviewed the Korean community, but who?” Now, we have the first elected Korean American city council member David Roo, who just got elected to office, and he's only one of fourteen. There's only one Asian on there and he was the first Asian to be elected since 1980-something. I think politically we're getting more involved and more active. And in that sense, I think that this was a huge wakeup call.

AM Can you tell us a little bit about the work you're doing today and if there are ways in which your work over the last twenty-five years has been shaped by what happened in 1992?

SJ I always talk about leveling the playing field. I believe that not everyone starts at the same place. I think if you're poor, I think if you're an immigrant, I think if you don't have access to education or healthcare, we don't start at the same place. That's why when people say, “You work hard and you have the same opportunities as everyone else,” I don't necessarily believe that. I feel like first we have to level that playing field.

The work that I do is trying to help level that playing field; I felt that back in '92, and I still

feel that today. Whether it's after-school programs, whether it's counseling programs, gang prevention, housing—whatever our organization does, I really feel speaks to

making sure that it's not only about opportunity, but to make sure that we get everyone to that starting point where they have the best opportunity to succeed.

As I talked to Sam, he showed me that one of the main reasons why racism occurs is the incomprehension of cultures and styles of living that are different from our own. He taught me that a big problem that existed during the riots and continues even today is a social hierarchy based on the color of people's skin. It reminded me of my Spanish class, in which we were studying mestizaje in America, a sixteen-caste system created to separate classes of people based on the color of their skin. America has a long history of degrading people of color, and unfortunately the events that led to the '92 Riots were no exception.

If we just come to understand that race is only a matter of the color of your skin, and that we all have the same value as human beings, there would not be so many conflicts. Sam is a person who understands that skin color doesn't mean anything, and that the only thing that matters in a person is their heart and their way of thinking. People should be valued for what they do, not for what they look like. The tension between Koreans and Black people before and during the '92 Riots teaches us about the dangers of stereotyping. The riots could have been avoided if the government had acknowledged that everyone deserves justice and to be heard, regardless of their race. If we treat everyone as humans—not as Mexicans, or African Americans, or Koreans, or White People—but just as humans, we can strengthen our society and finally close the book of racism in America.

About the Author

Andy Mendoza is maybe not the smartest or most serious, but he always gives his best effort. He is going to prove to all the people who never believed in him that he can accomplish his dream of becoming a civil engineer. He is very positive and open-minded, even though he has been through a lot of challenges. If you are looking for him, you can probably find him on the basketball court.

ELIJAH MONTGOMERY

Finding Peace: An Interview with Aqeela Sherrills

Aqeela Sherrills is an activist combating gang violence who started a peace treaty between rival LA gangs the Bloods and the Crips. He began organizing the movement in 1988, and on April 28, 1992, the treaty was struck. It was the day before a verdict was reached in the trial of the LAPD for the beating of Rodney King.

Sherrills started his work as an activist in Jordan Downs and Nickerson Gardens, which are both public housing apartment complexes in Watts. There was a tremendous amount of violence happening in the neighborhood, he says, and he started losing family and friends.

EM Why was 1992 the year you decided to make a peace treaty between the Bloods and the Crips?

AS I'd like to think that we decided, but I think it was the times. They called for it. It was just a tremendous amount of violence happening in the neighborhood. I was losing a lot of friends and family members to this war that was raging out of control in the community. Actually, 1989 was the beginning of the work we started laying the foundation for. So [in] 1992, we actually had been laying work for four years already when we actually organized the peace treaty.

EM Were you nervous when you first started the project?

AS Yeah, I was terrified. Interestingly, we [had already] started a group called the African Brothers Collective, and every Wednesday night we would meet at the house of a friend of ours on the west side of LA. We would talk about how we could actually stop the killing in the neighborhood. So we decided that we would start marching in all of the housing developments—a group of Black men bringing this message of peace and reconciliation and beginning again, resolving our conflicts differently. The first march that we were going to go was in the Nickerson

Garden housing projects. I grew up in Jordan Downs housing projects, which is [in] a Crip neighborhood. Nickerson Garden is [in] the biggest Blood neighborhood in Watts. We had serious conflicts, and I had some enemies over there from being a kid [and] gangbanging. I was a little concerned about what could potentially happen if we ran into the wrong folks.

The day before we went on the march, we had a meeting over at Ted Watkins Park. I was recounting to the team how I had a dream the night before that we went over there [where I] got shot. But we didn't let that deter us because, again, there were so many people losing their lives in the neighborhood—not just people being murdered, but also people being shot and terminally maimed [as well as] folks being incarcerated for the rest of their lives. I pushed through the fear and we did it. We marched into Nickerson and, of course, the first group we ran into [included] individuals I had conflicts with when I was gangbanging. But I started talking real fast. Interestingly the guy was like, "What you all are talking about is important, and I'm down!"

EM Was there anybody that was close to you who influenced you to join the gang?

AS Absolutely. You grow up in the neighborhood

and, pretty much, you're guilty by association. So all my partners that I grew up with and ran with—my brothers, my cousins—they were all immersed in the gang culture, and so it was an influence.

EM What did you think about the riots in 1992? Did it influence you to make the peace treaty?

AS Interestingly, the peace treaty actually happened a day before the Rodney King verdict was read. They happened almost simultaneously. A lot of people associate the peace treaty with the civil unrest in '92, but the peace treaty actually happened first. We [had been] organizing the movement since 1988, and April 28 was the day that it culminated. And I would say the riots were a little fuel to the fire for the work.

EM Who influenced you to start the peace treaty? Who helped you?

AS My brother Daude, I would say, was chief because he was heavily involved with the politics of the hood. He was gangbanging and a very reputable cat in the neighborhood. So my brother Daude and [former Cleveland Browns fullback] Jim Brown, the Football Hall of Fame great and social icon, who has been my mentor and friend for the past twenty-five years. Brown was the first one who really invested in us and our work. Congresswoman Maxine Waters—she worked at a policy level to deal with a lot of the state violence that was being perpetrated against folks in the community. So law enforcement was busting heads and taking numbers and the congresswoman was instrumental in helping us to deal with that. And then there [were] key cats from each one of the housing developments: Donny Juberg and Big Hank from the Nickersons, Tony Bullard, Dwayne Holmes, [and] Sister Souljah from the Imperial Court housing project, and a bunch of our big homies from the Jordan Downs. All of those individuals were really influential in making the peace treaty happen and influencing me.

EM Did you think it would be easier because the protests of police violence in 1992? Did you think it would be easier to start the peace treaty?

AS Nah man, it was a war zone in LA. I mean literally. I didn't know what to expect. And the truth of the matter is is that I'd love to just take all the credit for organizing the peace treaty, but this was really a spiritual movement. And I just want to name it and say that God gave us the vision for what to do. I mean literally in a vision told us if we brought the Nickersons and the Jordan Downs together, that we would create a domino effect for peace across the city. So we worked on that strategy. Minister [Louis] Farrakhan was the real spiritual leader of the movement. In 1989, he was doing the Stop the Killing tours all across the country. When Minister Farrakhan came to LA, he drew thousands of people to the sports arena, and there was about 1,500 Crips and Bloods from all across the city who went to hear the message. We took about twenty-five of our homies from the projects in Jordan Downs from Grape Street. That's where I grew up and where I was from. I would have to give a tremendous amount of credit to Minister Farrakhan and [Jim Brown] because at the time they were really the vanguards of the Black community.

EM What were your feelings about the LA Riots and the altercation between Rodney King and the police?

AS It's so interesting. We were just watching this on the news a couple of days ago and they were saying, "There was a Rodney King trial," and I always tell folks that it wasn't a Rodney King trial. Four cops who beat the [hell] out of him were on trial. But [people] always call it the Rodney King trial, and it wasn't the Rodney King trial, it was the LAPD that was on trial. My feelings were that [police brutality] was happening all the time. The only time I've ever been to jail was being attacked by the police in the projects—violating our civil rights. I could've been the first Rodney King. I could've sued. And this was an ongoing thing. This was happening all the time. I can't tell you how many times I've gotten up out of my bed at twelve o'clock at

night because one of the homies is knocking on our door because the police just gave him some flashlight therapy, meaning that they threw their big flashlight out of there vehicle and bust them upside the head, and would take 'em and drop 'em off at the so-called enemy's neighborhood. And they make it back to the neighborhood half alive, telling us what happened, and then we get together with them and go down to SouthEast to file a complaint that most of the time fell on deaf ears because, you know, the police was a gang, too. So they would take our reports after we would file them at the front desk and they would throw them right in the trash until Carl McGill, a cop over at SouthEast, told us how to file a report properly. That ended that practice, to a certain extent.

EM Do you think having camera phones helps stop police violence?

AS No. I think that everybody has cell phones. So, I'm highly critical of the city of LA spending sixty-seven million dollars— something like that—on body cameras. I don't think that we need body cameras. That's a foregone conclusion. Everybody got cell phones now. So why are we spending all this money on body cameras? They don't deter nothing—the cops could just turn 'em off, like they've been doing.

EM How do you feel about the neighborhood now in comparison to how it was twenty years ago? Do you feel like it has gotten better or worse?

AS It's absolutely gotten better, I think, as a result of the peace treaty. What was born from it was several individuals started organizations in the neighborhood to look at addressing the violence. The legacy of our work is the Watts Gang Task Force, the Community Safety Partnership. We have thirty cops now, and each one of them is in developments. They happen to be good folks. We had three consecutive years in a row of no murders in Jordan Downs, which is significant. And the city of LA has experienced ten consecutive years in a row of decreases in violent crime and murder. Violence has only been beginning to spike overall in the city in the last year and a half. But if you look at the areas where there are gang intervention programs—that's about twenty-three areas in the city— violence is down ten percent in those neighborhoods. Watts is a real leader in this movement to [reduce] incidents of violence and violent crime.

My talk with Aqeela Sherrills changed my point of view about gangs because I never knew you could bring two enemies together and make peace. Usually, bringing rivals together fuels the fire. This changed my perspective on gangbangers because this means they are not all bad and some want change.

I felt the need to talk to him because I've also seen police brutality and gang violence. Not long ago, a man by the name of Kenny got shot on my block by the police while I was in school. I came home to yellow tape all around my block; I wasn't able to go home. I was angry because I couldn't get to my house, but I was also sad because someone just lost their life at a young age. As Sherrills says in the interview, the police were seen as enemies of the whole community. He felt the LAPD didn't protect and serve; they killed and destroyed families. They destroyed more than they protected. I feel that way, too.

About the Author

Elijah Montgomery is a seventeen-year-old African American fan of the Los Angeles Clippers, who are the best basketball team in the world. Elijah plays basketball and is the best at the school. He hates reading, especially math. He thinks school takes up too much time in the day. If there wasn't so much time consumed by it, he could practice basketball more. Then he would be the best at all schools, instead of just one.

GISSELL DIAZ

Life Gives Us Lessons to Recognize Our Mistakes

One day I got mad at my mom and brothers because of lack of communication. I was fourteen years old, and my brothers Angel and Henry were four and five years old. We shared the same room. My brothers and I could not have our own space because my mom and stepdad do not have enough money to buy a house or rent an apartment with three or four rooms. Everything began when I heard my brothers making a lot of noise. I was lying down because after I finished cleaning, I felt a little tired. My brothers woke me with their yells, and I don't know about you, but when I'm sleeping and someone, without need, just wakes me, I wake up angry. Then when they didn't let me get some sleep, I stood up, and what do you think that I saw? Well, let me tell you. What I saw was their toys on the floor. They were play-fighting and yelling. I felt frustrated by this; I really don't like to see things out of place. After I saw what they had done, I felt upset, and sad too because they were not appreciating what I did. I asked them, "Why did you make a mess again after I had cleaned the house already?" They didn't answer me. Then I asked them again, but this time I was a little more upset. In fewer words, I yelled at them.

My mom was in her room. When she heard me yelling, she came to our room to see what was happening. She asked me what was the matter, and I told her that I had cleaned the house and that Henry and Angel made their mess again. Also I told her that she never punished them, that I always have to pick up all their mess in the house, that they are annoying, and that they don't like me. The anger made me yell at her. My mom, with a sad look and a sad voice, told me, "If your brothers don't like you and if you don't want to live at home with them, you can leave. I will not have you living with us if you do not want to."

I felt something strange inside me. I didn't want to yell at her, but I did. I didn't respect her, and I guess what I was feeling inside me was *remordimiento* because I didn't respect her as my mother. After she told me that, my eyes were full of tears. I started crying, but I didn't look my mom in the face again because I didn't want her to see me cry. I wanted to demonstrate to her that I was strong and that whatever she said to me would not affect me; but inside I knew that I wanted her to tell me, "Hija, I don't want you to leave, I want to have all my hijos together." That didn't happen.

I put my shoes on and I left the house. My mom didn't stop me. I guess she let me go because she wanted me to learn from my decisions. When I left home, it was between 6:30 or seven o'clock at night. It was dark and quiet; there were only five or six people walking on the other side of the street. I just heard the sounds of cars driving slow because the street was small and if they drive fast there could be an accident. I thought that one of the cars would stop and kidnap me, or something similar. I started feeling a little scared and lonely. I started feeling that I wanted to cry.

I had no idea about what I would do by myself on the street. Walking, I started thinking that maybe if I had tried to solve things in a good way, talking with my mom and brothers about how I felt when I saw that they didn't appreciate that I had cleaned the house, talking instead of shouting and blaming them, it could have been better for everyone. No one would be experiencing this bad time. I felt guilty and I wanted to go back in time to fix my mistake.

I stopped at a gas station. In front of it was a taco truck. The owner of the truck had Mexican music playing. There were a few people eating tacos. On the other side of the street a few people

were filling their tanks at the gas station. Also there was a public phone. I sat down by it, and suddenly the smell of the carne asada from the taco truck came to me and it smelled delicious. I had six dollars in quarters in my pocket, and I asked myself, “How much were the taquitos?” because I was hungry. But instead I decided to call my grandma in Honduras to ask her what I should do. I decided to call her rather than anyone else in my family because I know that she has had more experiences in her life, that she wants the best for me, and that she would tell me what was best. In addition, I trust her more than any other person because I grew up with her. She is like my second mom, and when I lived with her, I felt safe and loved.

Before I called her, two young Black men dressed in elegant suits passed near me. They saw me sitting by the phone and asked me, “Do you need help?” I told them, “No, I’m fine.” They looked like good men, but I could not accept their help because I didn’t know them and I didn’t know their real intention. They left but then after a few minutes they came back with some food that they had bought at the taco truck. They gave it to me and I said thanks. They just said, “You’re welcome,” and kept walking.

After they left, I called my grandma. She was sleeping. I knew it because her voice sounded sleepy. She was happy that I called her. Then she asked me, “How are you, hija?” I told her that I left home because I had a little argument with my mom. When I told her that, I heard worry in her voice. She told me to go back home, get into my bed, and the next day talk with my mom to fix the problem because we had to regain the time that we had lost together. I had been in this country eight or nine months since I came from Honduras, and, to be honest, I didn’t know my mom much, and she didn’t know me. We had spent seven years without seeing each other, but that’s another story.

I wanted to go back home, but at the same time I didn’t, because my orgullo wouldn’t let me. To not worry my grandma more, I told her that I would go back home and do what she told me to do. When I hung up the phone, a car passed in front of me. I saw my neighbor get out from his dad’s car and walk toward me. He sat down next to me and told me to get in the car to go back home, because it was dangerous for me to be alone in the street. I was already sleepy and I didn’t want to spend the night in the street. I said, “Okay.” We stood up and walked toward the car. When we went to the car I saw my mom driving it. I didn’t know that she was in the car, and when I saw her I felt angry again, but I felt happy at the same time.

I was confused, and I told him that I would not get in the car. He asked me, “Why? Your mom had been worried and has been looking for you since you left your house.” When he told me that, I felt that my mom really cared for me. At this time it was 9:30 PM. Something made me feel that destiny was giving me another opportunity, and I decided to get into the car. My mom didn’t look at me; she was crying, and I felt guilty for her tears. I said, “Mom, I’m sorry for the tantrum that I had.” She gave me a hug and told me that everything was okay. On the way back home, I accepted my mistake; I felt embarrassed and I didn’t say a word.

When we arrived home, we went directly to sleep; both of us were tired. The next day we talked and expressed how we felt and discussed what we can do to not have more fights between us—not to be a perfect family, because nothing is perfect, but to be a happy family. When we finished talking, I started thinking about how the lack of communication makes us fail, and how pride does not let us accept our mistakes.

Now on weekdays I help my mom with my brothers. She works, and her work starts at 4:00 AM. My stepdad works too, and his work begins at 5:30 AM. Then I wake up, and as the older sister, I

take care of my brothers. I wake them to get ready for school, I take them to school, and sometimes when we have time, I make breakfast.

When we walk to school, it is a little cold in the morning, but we enjoy it because we talk, and sometimes we see new things or talk about different cars that we see. On weekends when I wake up, I make breakfast; I like to cook for the family, but to my taste. Also, I still clean the house, but not all the time.

My brothers sometimes make their mess; but now they are a little bigger and they know that they have to pick up their stuff. Henry is the youngest and the lazier one. He is the one who I have more problems with about his stuff, but when he does not want to clean his mess I just tell him, "If you don't pick up your things, when my mom comes from work I will tell her, and she will punish you." Instantly he picks up his stuff. Angel is the one who understand that he has to clean his things. I have another brother, Edzon. He is fourteen , but for now he doesn't live with us. But that is another story.

My mom and I share more time than when I first came from Honduras. We have experienced hard times, but in the end we face and solve the problems that we have. My relationship with her is better; we are more connected. When we feel like something is wrong with us, we talk about it. I still have a little problem with my pride, but then I recognize that I'm wrong. It is not easy for me recognize my mistakes, but I do.

About the Author

Gissell Diaz was born in Honduras and lived there until she was twelve. Now she is sixteen and living in Los Angeles with her mom, stepdad, and brothers. She likes to walk to the beach. She wants to be a teacher or a doctor. She likes to watch scary movies. She likes to go to church, but only on weekends. Her favorite foods are baleadas or pollo con tajadas from Honduras. Her favorite dessert is milk and white chocolate. Her favorite drinks are natural juices or smoothies. She loves to eat tacos made of lengua, asada, pastor, or labio. She loves her family and likes to spend time with them.

JANAE WARD

Poom Poom

Hearing a soft voice sing, “Love and happiness, something that can make you do wrong or make you right, love.” Seeing pearly white teeth smiling back at me, making my heart feel happy like a child getting candy. Being able to smile every day feeling protection. Beautiful afternoons full of bonding, soul singing, and dancing. Every Sunday morning going to Magic Johnson Park, feeding the ducks, watching the clouds move in different directions.

Being with my dad brought a joy to my heart like winning the lotto worth unlimited trillions. Always being under the heart and glue of the family, keeping everyone together and in unison. Being two peas in a pod. I was his baby girl. I went from hearing, “You okay, poom poom?” every day to not being able to hear or see him at all. The fight and struggle of not being able to sleep normal anymore. Things changed for the worse.

It was a hot Thursday afternoon and I was at school, and around 3:00 PM, I started bugging him like flies bug people because I was hungry. I could tell I was bugging him because after a while he started answering the phone saying, “What, poom poom? Daddy tired.” I was calling my dad bugging him to make me food. He got tired of me nagging so he started declining my phone calls. He told me after my dance practice my food would be done. It was around ten in the evening and my mom and I just got home and realized something was off. When we get home there is usually a routine the house goes through, and that time it didn’t happen. Soon as I would step in the house I would hear my dad say, “My big baby home, any problems today?” I didn’t hear that so I started to feel something wasn’t right.

After a couple of minutes, I called my dad waiting for a response, but I did not get an answer. So I started to ask my mom why my dad wasn’t answering me and she told me that he’s probably asleep. My father was the type of person that if you wake him up out of his sleep, be ready for world war ten. So me being sensitive, I avoided trying to wake him up so I wouldn’t get yelled at. As time progressed my mom was making noise and yelling to try to wake him up but still no movement, no sound. That’s when we knew something was wrong. I tried not to think so much or disturb him, so I got in the shower and continued to let him “sleep.”

I got fed up and yelled at my mom and told her to check on my daddy because, me being his baby, always under him, I knew something wasn’t right. Soon as I lay down and got comfortable here goes my mom screaming, busting in my room yelling, “Poom poom, call 911! Your daddy is gone.” It didn’t hit me. I didn’t understand what she meant or what she was saying at the time. All I could do was listen to my mom. It didn’t hit me until I walked into my mom and dad’s room and saw my father’s body lying there. It happened too fast; all I kept saying in my head was, “This is not supposed to happen, it’s not true.” When I walked in the room there was a smell I couldn’t describe. It’s like his whole scent took over the entire house. Looking at his pale stiff face I noticed that when his body shut down, some mucus had discharged from his nose. I was the only brave enough one to clean his face up, and as I started to clean up the mucus there was blood coming out of his body as well. It felt like I got stabbed in my heart. I wanted him to just open his eyes and just say, “Poom poom, I’m just playing. You know daddy not going nowhere.” It didn’t happen. In that moment I knew my heart was gone. I went outside and I sat down on the curb and prayed everything was a dream. I waited outside and the ambulance and police pulled up. Ten to fifteen minutes after they walked in the house they walked up to

me and said, “You were his baby, huh?” After I heard them say that, I broke down because it hit me that my everything was gone.

The morning after that, I went to school. My mind and heart didn’t let me stop, it made me go even harder. I had to get out the house because things were hard to stay there. I kept hearing his voice, I kept seeing him walk in the hallways, and it was affecting me. I had many things change to where it was hard for me to keep going day by day. Certain things we ate I couldn’t eat for a while. We loved boudin: a type of sausage filled with meat, rice, and spices. We would buy it out of a meat market on Alondra and Wilmington. Certain places we went to together, people started asking where he was, and it was just hard to keep trying to tell these people my dad had died. I had to let it sink in that I will never be the same. I couldn’t even sleep at night. I then figured that I had something called “sleep paralysis.” It’s something you feel when you’re in your sleep and it’s scary. When I fall asleep and the sleep paralysis hits I see a dark body figure and face. It feels like someone holds me down and it’s a huge weight on my chest. I have it constantly and I don’t understand why. I don’t want to say it feels demon-like but it does not let me sleep. I usually stay up to four o’clock in the morning because it gets that bad.

In the months since then I have been focusing on positive things and thinking about how proud I’ve made my father. Also, his love that he has given me helps me get be through day by day. Just thinking about the things he would say when I’m stuck in certain situations helps me get through lots of things and make better decisions. The situation has most definitely made me realize a lot about myself. I noticed I was way stronger than I thought. An epiphany that led me to realize I was strong was seeing my mom struggle.

Seeing her scrape up coins trying to help us get through the day, I knew she needed my help. I would watch her go through a piggy bank she and my dad invested in to try to get change for water and other things she was able to purchase. I would watch her every second of every moment crying because she wanted my dad back. I knew I had to be the support system my dad once provided her. I started selling candy and chips to bring income into the household, and to help my mother clean up so she could have less stress on her shoulders.

The biggest and hardest experience I’ve been through was losing my dad. Having him pass away at a place I lay my head at every night definitely has taken a big toll on my everyday life. I learned how to keep my head up, heart up, and guard up. Even though it hurts like hell it has molded me into a bigger, better, and stronger person. I’ve noticed I’m human: I feel, I hear, I see, and most importantly, I understand. Many people don’t have the ability to be different and keep rolling with the punches, but I do. There’s never a day that goes by that September 29, 2016, doesn’t occur in my head. I got the ambition, drive, and determination from him. He’s instilled this in me and I’m so grateful. I also know that he and all of my other passed-on relatives are really proud of me and that’s what I want them to be. Every day I grow and realize I have to keep my head on the swivel and beat the person I was yesterday.

About the Author

Janae Ward was born in Long Beach, California. Her position in basketball is the power forward, middle player at Locke High School, where she is also the captain of the drill team. She is also the captain/coach of the dance and cheer department with the LA City Wildcats organization. She believes

wisdom is the key to get where you need to be. She loves music and embraces struggle. Her motivation and determination is very high. Lastly, she is the baby/last child of Johnnie Ray Ward, Sr.