

Home is The Rio Grande Valley

By david rice

A few years ago I was presenting at Saint Edward's University in Austin, Texas and I was taking questions from students. One of them made a comment. He said I was changing the names of the characters in my stories into Spanish, and passing them off as Mexican American stories. The professor was a bit worried, knowing I speak my mind and often with too much color. The class was Literature of the Southwest and the students had read Mexican American writers so they had some knowledge of Chicano/a stories, and yet this insulting comment was made.

After class the professor Cory Lock, a good friend of mine, apologized for the student, but I didn't expect a white student to fully understand Mexican American literature. At the class is being offered and he took it. I brushed off his comment because I know when we tell our stories we honor the names of our hometowns and families and I have met my share of folks who don't want to learn about our culture. I have met plenty of Mexican Americans who don't speak Spanish and I that's okay with me. My Spanish is terrible, but I don't run or hide from my Mexican heritage. You won't hear me saying I'm Hispanic. I'm Chicano, Mexicano and Mexican American, but I will never be Hispanic. I love being Mexican American and it's a great feeling to belong to The Rio Grande Valley. But I didn't grow up reading about Mexican Americans in Texas, much less The Rio Grande Valley. The Mexican culture was around me with family stories going back over a 100 years, but we weren't in the books. The only story I knew with Mexicans was the story about The Alamo in

San Antonio. How the brave Texans were surrounded by the Mexican troops and how the Texans fought with honor for Texas, but the textbooks didn't say anything about how the Texans wanted slaves and Mexicans were against slavery.

Mexicans were the good guys and now Texas hides its shameful past in school textbooks under issue of state's rights. March 2, 1836 known as Texas Independence Day is also the day 5,000 African slaves were chained to fields across Texas, and by 1860 there were 58,161 slaves in Texas.¹ But imagine if Mexican American students knew Mexico was against slavery? If Mexican American students knew we were on the right side of the issue we'd have a stronger self-esteem. I think it takes a dose of healthy self-esteem to write about your culture, but living in your culture is not enough. You have to reflect on your personal experiences and study your culture. Talk to your family and ask them about the elders. Learn your past, through books about Mexican Americans and through the oral tradition. And embrace the present and clear a path for others. Every short story, screenplay, play, and poem is based on my life experiences growing up in the Rio Grande Valley. The well of material is vast and Valley writers have universal truths all around us. The novel I have been working on for ten years takes place in my hometown of Edcouch and Edcouch is often a character in my work. Edcouch is not just a town, it's a family member and it loves to talk. I think everybody's town wants to be heard.

In 1980 my family left Edcouch for Austin. I was 16 and didn't know anything about Austin. The furthest I had been was San Antonio and it felt like the Valley, but Austin had bigger buildings and it was and still is, very white. I couldn't get my

¹ Texas Historical State Association

bearings in Austin and though my school was a good mix of students due to mandatory busing, I was missing home. I didn't know I was Mexican until I left the valley and I didn't understand what a Mexican American was until I joined the Chicano Culture Committee at U.T. Austin in 1985. Several friends from the Valley moved to Austin and we became active in the Chicano Committee: Francisco Guajardo, Miguel Guajardo, Jaime Vela, Yvonne Cardenas and others from across Texas. We had help from faculty: Rolando Hinojosa-Smtih and Ricardo Romo. The committee organized conferences and symposiums on Mexican American topics, invited guest speakers who explored the roles of Mexican Americans in American Society and challenged us to speak up for others and more importantly create a space for Mexican American voices and stories. And all the while, we were building our own education.

In December 1989 my brother Roger was killed in a car accident and his death was the beginning of my writing journey. Before his death my plan was to be a politician or maybe go to law school. I was happily married and my wife was supportive of my career choices. I figured with my white last name and my brown skin, I could go far in politics or law, but my passion was writing, but I didn't have the guts to write and who'd be my audience? The Chicano Culture committee focused on social issues and didn't invite any Mexican American fiction writers.

My grandfather David and some high school teachers, Mrs. Zavaleta, Mrs. Meader, Mrs. Nixon and Mr. Ochoa said for me to become a writer, but it was almost an impossible task since I didn't like to read. After Roger died I thought every day about how death comes too quickly even if you live to be 101. A day not doing what

you love is a wasted day. A few months after my brother's death I told my wife I wanted to be a writer. She said what we both knew.

“A writer? How are you going to do that? You don't like to read, you can't spell and you can't sit still for five minutes.”

She was right and to top it off I have dyslexia and ADHD. My brother and I weren't allowed to drink coffee or sodas as kids and I still don't drink coffee or sodas. Writing was going to be a challenge, but my wife didn't stop with my lack of skills. What was my subject going to be? I told her I was going to write short stories about being Mexican American and growing up in the Valley. My wife, who was born and raised in Arkansas and had been to the Valley several times, was quick.

“Mexicans don't read and don't buy books. If you write about being Mexican no one is going to read your stories or buy your books. You'll be broke all your life.” In 1987 I was a reporter at Southwest Texas State University, The University Star and I had some experience in writing and meeting deadlines, but those were news stories, and I wanted to write fiction. I did my best to persuade my wife and explained how I thought there was a market for Mexican American stories, not because I wanted her support, but because I loved her and didn't want to lose her. But honestly I didn't know any Mexican American writers. I had met Rolando Hinojosa Smith in 1986, but I didn't know he was a writer. I had never read a book by a Mexican American writer and by 1990 there were plenty: Rolando Hinojosa Smith, Tomás Rivera, Sandra Cisneros, Dagoberto Gilb, Américo Paredes, Gloria Anzaldúa and many others. But I didn't read any of their works in school or college.

My wife and I went through a painful separation and I decided to focus on reading. I was not in college at the time and drove a UT shuttle, going round and round all day. Before I drove a bus I used to work for the Austin public library and shelved 100's books a day. I knew there were lots of books on how to write and I used to thumb through the pages wondering if I could be a writer. I had a copy of *Fiction 100: An Anthology of Short Stories*, fourth edition by James H. Pickering. I began to read the stories in the collection very slowly, as I read anyway since I have dyslexia. I'd go to the public library and look up dissertation abstracts on the stories. I'd sit at a table and read the bio of the author and essays about the story. I wanted to learn how to deconstruct a story and put it back together again. I needed to learn how stories work: paragraphs, transitions, foreshadowing, metaphors, double entendre, etc.. My grandfather David, who died in 1984, told me a self-educated man can do anything.

In the spring of 1991 I took a creative writing class at Southwest Texas State University and my professor, Karen Brennan didn't like my story too much, "Guilt Shaped Cookies." I later changed the title to "Heart Shaped Cookies." She said she didn't understand it and I told her I didn't write it for her. I was an older student, 27 and had a sense of urgency to my writing. Brennan said she didn't think she could help me but she did what a good teacher should do. Find the right mentor for a student in need. She introduced me to Jaime Mejía who was from Donna, Texas. Brennan and I became good friends. Mejía at the time was the only Mexican American faculty member in the English department. I showed him my story and he read it in front of me and when he finished, asked what Mexican American writers I

had read. My answer was a disappointing none. Mejía, an avid reader, loaned me some books and said he wouldn't help until I read the books. Fair enough. I read books by Rolando Hinojosa Smith, Tomás Rivera and Sandra Cisneros. The books by Hinojosa and Rivera were great because they had a Valley feel to them and I could relate. When I was reading Rolando Smith Hinojosa's books, I think it was *Dear Rafe*, I felt as though I knew his writing style and it came to me. It was the mid 80's and I was flying from RGV to Austin on Southwest Airlines and the flight magazine had one of his short stories, "The Gulf Oil Can Tin Santa Claus." It was a great story about home and I wanted to keep the magazine, but thought it best to leave it for someone to read.

I returned the books to Mejía and he had a lot of questions regarding the stories and we talked for over an hour. Mejía wrote his dissertation on Hinojosa Smith and just being with the man who studied one of my heroes, Hinojosa, made Mejía my hero too. It was the beginning of a good friendship but also of high expectations. Mejía asked what my plans were for writing. I told him I wanted to write a collection of short stories and have it published by the time I was 30. I thought if I could write a book by 30 my wife might take me back. I could show her how serious I was about my found passion. Three years to write and publish a book seemed possible.

Mejía has an expressive face and gave me a good dose of reality. He said I was arrogant to think I could write enough stories for a book and he was right. I didn't have an MFA and not even a college degree. But I was determined to write and said I'd follow his advice and commit myself to the discipline required to write my book.

Mejía nodded and said we'll see. A month later, one Friday night, Mejía and I were at the Showdown bar in San Marcos having a drink. It was a good night and I had a few friends there. Half way into the night, Mejía leaned over to me and said, "You know what Hinojosa is doing right now?" I didn't know and thought maybe Hinojosa was giving a big talk at a conference. I said I didn't know.

"He's writing and you're here drinking," Mejía said with a disapproving shake of his head.

His line stung deep and to this day, when I'm goofing off, I think Hinojosa is writing right now and I get to writing.

Over the summer I took a short story class with Robert Randolph. It was a short session class and I didn't miss a day. Randolph, like Mejía, was good at deconstructing stories; something I enjoyed because I knew the key to writing stories was studying how they worked. Between Mejía and Randolph I began to work my "Guilt Shaped Cookies." It took weeks of re-writes. Writing what you know is a great place to start, but you still have to write it well and re-writes are the best part of writing.

My parents were not too keen on me being a writer. I think for most Mexican American parents being an artist is a bad idea. College is meant for getting a degree so you can get a job. A degree in business, science, law or to become a teacher. Something practical because we don't have the luxury of being artists. I'd show my parents my work so they could see I was doing my best, but three magic beans don't mean much to most people. I didn't think of writing as a way to make money, but maybe I should? One day I was in the computer lab of Flowers Hall at Southwest

Texas. I spent many hours there working on my stories since I didn't own a computer, but I did own an Olivetti electric typewriter and I used it a lot. The lab director Beverly Braud was super cool and let me print as much as I needed. She even read my drafts and encouraged me to keep writing. The lab assistant, an M.A. graduate student named Mark, was a nice guy too and one day he had a damn good line. I was working on my stories and this girl came in and started flirting with me. After a couple of minutes of giggling Mark came over and kicked her out. I was dumbfounded.

"Why did you do that?"

"You come here to write, right?" Mark asked.

"Yeah."

"When you're here you think your writing, but you what? You're not writing. You're making money. Writing is making money. Get back to work," Mark said with a jab of his index finger.

In the Spring of 1992 I submitted my story to the college literary magazine, *Persona*. In 1987 when I was a reporter I'd read *Persona* and thought, there's no way I could ever be in this fancy literary journal and I never saw a Spanish surname name in it, but Mejía liked the story and so did my parents and I did too. If the journal passed on the story, it'd be okay because my audience was the Rio Grande Valley not central Texas, but of course I wanted to see the story in *Persona*.

In the fall of 1992 *Persona* published "Guilt Shaped Cookies" and though I wrote the story, I didn't write it alone. My parents, Mejía, Jeff Trejo, Eddie Ray Bills, David Robledo and Frank Guajardo read my drafts and to this day, they still

encourage me to write as if I'm writing my first story. Frank Guajardo was teaching high school at Edcouch-Elsa and he began to use my stories in his class. These were drafts mind you, but Frank thought they were good enough to share with the students. He even invited me a to speak to his students. At the time, I thought it was good practice and I had been practicing my stories at a coffee shop in San Marcos called the Blue Pearl.

A friend of mine, Courtney Dever, said I should read my stories in front of a live audience. Every Thursday they had open mic at Blue Pearl and a lot of graduate students read their material, so I might as well too, right? By the time I got to Edcouch-Elsa, I had plenty of practice reading out loud and I knew the audience in my hometown might like the stories. I thought if you were Mexican American and liked reading, you might like the stories. But people like stories they can relate to regardless of cultural background or level of education. You don't have to be a bunch of graduate students hanging out in a coffee shop. The best stories are often told at quinceañeras, weddings, funerals, around the breakfast table and bar-b-que pits. People like stories about themselves. Better yet, if we're the heroes in our own story, and don't forget, Mexicans were against slavery.

What I didn't know was the impact of what I was doing. I think Frank knew because he was a teacher and believed Mexican Americans needed to celebrate their stories. A student in one of my presentations at EE was Juan Ozuna. Juan became a teacher and a few years ago I visited his students and he said, when he saw me read my stories, he thought. I can write my own stories too. It was good to hear Juan say he wanted to be a writer and there have been so many more saying they want to

write valley stories. I think it's progress for our region and our culture. Edcouch has a lot to say and so does every town, city and neighborhood in the Valley.

My first collection was all about me and about proving something to me. I didn't think too much of how the stories could help in the classroom or help others find their own story. I was a selfish writer - maybe most are?

On June 22, 1994 fourteen stories I wrote were accepted for publication by Bilingual Press. *Give the Pig a Chance and Other Stories* was the title though I thought of maybe calling it *Heart Shaped Cookies and Other Stories*, but *Give the Pig a Chance and Other Stories* was a better fit given I did need a chance. I think Mejía and Hinojosa had something to do with the book getting published. Mejía and Hinojosa knew Gary Keller and I'm sure they asked him to give me a chance. Hinojosa gave my book a blurb, something I didn't ask for, but much appreciated. Mejía helped edit every story along with Frank Guajardo and my parents. The stories had been tested in front of audiences thanks to Frank and my visits to the Blue Pearl, but Mejía suggested I remove the story, "The Circumstance Surrounding my Penis" and to take out the profanity. But I said I wouldn't censor my stories.

"High schools won't be able to buy them and it'll hurt your book sales," Mejía said.

I think what Mejía meant was the need for the book, not about book sales. And looking back I wish I could change the book, but I can be pretty terco. Mejía did give me some stern advice though. He gave me a big lecture on how I didn't deserve to have a book published. How the stories weren't bad and there were better writers out there. I just got lucky.

“You’re young and you can play up the book, but you have a choice. You can be famous or you can be a writer. Let go of the book. Don’t hold its hand.”

I wasn’t about fame or money. I wanted to be a better writer. I wanted my stories to be judged not on who wrote them or who can read them the best out loud, but for the content. In a time when fame is important and that’s every time and recognition from their peers brings validation, well, I get it, but it’s not me. Writers die, story on.

Mejía was right about the book sales. Schools couldn’t buy it and it still didn’t bother me, at first. I got invited to quite a few schools to talk to students and I wasn’t good at it. There’s a lot that goes into it. Part performance and throw in as much as you can on teaching how stories work. As I visited schools I notice a lack of Mexican American books on library shelves and classrooms. In 1996 there were quite a few Mexican American writers, but not enough in the classroom. I visited a school, I think it was Edinburg and a teacher let me have it. He asked why I put stories in my book he couldn’t use in the classroom. I said I was a writer and wasn’t going to censor my stories. He gave me an almost angry look.

“Oh, this is all about you, huh? I need books I can use in my class and all you can think about is what you want.”

His comment echoed in my head for months and he was right. Schools needed books Mexican American students could relate to and use to spring board to other stories. I think Chicano/a literature is important, but it’s good when they bridge to other stories in the canon and there are lots of great stories in the canon.

Sometimes our students need stories with a Mexican American cultural experience they can relate to so they can grasp other stories in the canon.

In 1996, a couple of months after *Give the Pig a Chance* was published I received a letter from Harry Mazer. Mazer found the galley for *Give the Pig a Chance* at the Strand Bookstore in New York City and read the galley. He contacted Bilingual Press for my address and asked me for a story for his new collection, *Twelve Shots: Outstanding Short Stories about Kids and Guns*. I couldn't believe he wanted a short story based on the galley and I knew I had to write a good story if I was to build a working relationship with Mr. Mazer. I wrote, "God's Plan for Wolfie and X-Ray" and his editor at Random House, Lauri Hornik read the story and emailed me for a meeting. I was spending a lot time in New York in the 90's and met her at Random House to talk about the story. She asked me to consider writing a novel. I didn't think I was ready for a novel and I didn't like writing or reading long stories. I'd read a big book and when I was done reading it, I'd say why didn't you just say so in the first chapter?

In 1996 I was flying from New York and in the hop from Dallas to Austin, I met Rob Johnson. We managed to sit together and started a friendship still going strong. He wanted a story for his collection, *Fantasmas: Supernatural Stories by Mexican American Writers*, Bilingual Press 2001. The anthology sounded great. I submitted "The Devil in the Valley." The story first appeared in *The Llano Grande Journal* in 1998.

In 1997, when I began to writing the stories for *Crazy Loco* I was surrounded by students. At the time I was working at Edcouch Elsa High School for the Llano

Grande Center for Research and Development. How I wrote the stories with students walking in and out of the office is beyond me, but I think their hope for the future and their constant talk of home life was inspirational. Writers are told to write at a desk in solitude, but I wrote my first collection in a computer lab at Southwest Texas State University surrounded by college students. I like to write with people around me. I'm not sure what it means, but if I am going to write about people, best to be around people.

In 1999 I gave Lauri the short stories and to my amazement, she accepted the collection, but again these stories had been tested by students, friends and family. Edcouch Elsa students read my drafts and the staff of the Llano Grande Center. My editors for every story were Frank Guajardo, Yvonne Guajardo, Jaime Mejía, Samantha Smith, Natasha Sinutko, R. Renee Rice, Lisa Bell, Christopher Caselli, Laura Cloud, Michele O'brien, Laura Rodriguez, my parents and anyone else who took the time to read my stories. Sometimes I'd step out of the office at Llano Grande and come back to find a student reading one of my stories I left laying around. It was a great feeling.

Beats me how many folks have read a draft of my stories, but each one had a valuable comment. And each reader, made the story better. I don't write alone. Given all the support on *Crazy Loco*, Lauri and I had long conversations on each story. She had lots of questions and I was able to answer them, not simply because I grew up in the Valley, but because I was working for The Llano Grande Center and our interest was pedagogy of place or what some call, place-based Education. To study one self in depth and express yourself in print, audio and video.

Frank Guajardo was the one of the founders and the director of The Llano Grande Center, and to watch him from go The Chicano Culture Committee in 1985 to The Llano Grande Center in 1996 was not surprising. And to watch Frank go from high school teacher in 1992 to Dr. Frank Guajardo and my college professor in the fall 2013, was a complete circle. Frank is never without insight into learning. A good friend to the last.

Crazy Loco was released in 2001 and was well received. It won Best Books for Young Adults 2002, was a finalist for the Pura Belpre award, Notable Books for a Global Society, and finalist for The Pen USA children's literature award and a finalist for the Tomas Rivera award. But best of all, we got a play out of it. The story "She Flies" was adapted for stage by Mike D. Garcia. Mike is from McAllen and one of the founders of Nushank Theater Collective in Austin. Mike pulled together the cast for for the 40 minute play: Marita De La Torre, Gavino Barrera, Anika Treviño and Ellen Stader. Music by Brian Ramos. U.T. Gear UP funded the play to travel across the Rio Grande Valley and over 9,000 students saw the play. I'm happy to say the play, "She Flies" is in my last book, *Heart Shaped Cookies and Other Stories* and schools can read and perform the play whenever they want.

Reading is supposed to engage students and moreover get them excited about literature and the possibilities. Mike D. Garcia has an essay in the book to show the power of a writer and playwright working together. Lots of stories can be adapted for stage and screen and students in our region can bring stories to life.

Though *Crazy Loco* did well with critics and sales, I felt the stories were maybe too long? I thought about what the teacher said years before. Write stories

teachers can use in the classroom. I believe literature can lower the drop out rate, but we can't wait till students are in high school to read Mexican American stories. We have to get 4th and 5th grade students hooked on reading. I thought about writing flash fiction, one page stories with them in mind.

I think stories are written in three levels. First is the plot of the story. Second is the devices used in stories such as metaphors, symbolism, double meanings and foreshadowing. The third level is high concept. What does the story mean and get the students to discuss the characters and their motives. The upside and consequences of the characters' actions. Stories can teach life lessons and maybe keep students from making the life mistakes.

The idea of flash fiction was a hard sell. Dial Books wasn't too keen on the idea and neither was Bilingual Press. René Saldaña knew I was working on a book of flash fiction. I thought it would be fun to write 100 flash fiction stories and I shared some with René. He was contacted by Jon Scieszka who was putting together an anthology of flash fiction titled *Guys Write for Guys Read: Boy's favorite Authors Write About Being Boys*, 2008. I submitted "Death of a Writer" and it was accepted. René too has a story in the collection. Two valley writers, two valley friends in a collection again. Our first collection was Rob Johnson's anthology and now Jon Scieszka and in the future, it gets better. *Juventud! Growing up on the Border*, VAO Publishing, edited by René Saldaña Jr. and Erika Garza-Johnson, 2013. *Arriba Baseball! A Collection of Latino/a Baseball Fiction*, VAO Publishing, edited by Robert Paul Moreira, 2013. And while it's great to be in a collection with René, it's also an honor to be with so many other valley writers and it's only going to get better. Best of all we get to meet them

at schools and literary festivals. And least we forget all the writing going on in middle schools and high schools. Teachers are encouraging students to create books of poetry and stories and others, like David Bowles have started publishing houses, VAO Press. No one writes alone in the Valley.

In 1996 I got a call from Anne Mazer, the daughter of Harry Mazer. She wanted a story for collection she was editing, *Working Days: Short Stories about Teenagers at Work*, 1997. I wrote a story about my brother's death, "The Crash Room." It wasn't an easy story to write, but where I can I write about my family in my stories and Roger is quite a few of them. In 2004 "Tied to Zelda" was published in *Tripping Over the Lunch Lady and Other School Stories*, edited by Nancy Mercado, Puffin Books. Nancy worked for Lauri at Dial Books. I'm happy to say Nancy and Lauri are still in my life. Nancy asked for another story for *Baseball Crazy: Ten Stories that cover all the Bases*, Puffin Books, 2008. I wrote "Tomboy Forgiveness." Three months went by and Nancy had not contacted me so I called to ask what's what.

"David, I've read all your stories and this one is the best you've written," Nancy said.

A nice thing to say but that's one reader in the world and that's what's great about stories. You share your stories with your parents, family, friends and colleagues and stories are measured by the reader, not a literary critic or an editor in New York City. The best judge is someone who reads your story, and a forgotten door in their mind opens to the possibilities of their own story.

In 2011 *Heart Shaped Cookies and Other Stories*, Bilingual Press was released. The book is what the teacher asked all those years ago, at least I hope it is. *Heart Shaped Cookies* took stories from *Give the Pig a Chance*, stories published in anthologies, flash fiction and “She Flies,” the play written by Mike D. Garcia. Karen Van Hooft at Bilingual Press wasn’t sure about the collection idea. But I knew the book could do well in schools. Not for books sales, but for the simple need. *Heart Shaped Cookies* book had tested stories. Most of the stories and the play had been tested with students and live audiences. I knew the book was unconventional and most likely wouldn’t get a book review from the critics who give out awards, whoever they are. I knew the best argument for publishing *Heart Shaped Cookies* was based on the book sales of *Crazy Loco*. Every six months I get a sales statement of *Crazy Loco*. At the time over 50,000 copies of *Crazy Loco* had been sold and I told Karen Van Hooft *Heart Shaped Cookies* could maybe sell as many.

Publishing houses like Bilingual Press, VAO Publishing, Arte Publico, Cinco Puntos and Wings Press have to sell books to survive. We have to support publishing houses who print regional stories. When I watch a Mexican American writer present, I buy their book and sometimes I can’t finish the book because I don’t like it, but we still need to support the home team.

I’ve been working on a novel for over 10 years and it has been difficult because I think most stories have been told. How do I write something fresh? I wrote a working draft and Dial Books for Young readers and they said they were interested in the novel and so I began to work on it, but again, I found the story boring. After months of working on it I felt as there was nothing left to write and I

submitted *My True Father* in 2010. In 2011, they rejected the book. I don't blame them one bit. My novel was a wreck. The character were shells and the spine was not strong enough to hold the book together. It's shameful to bother an editor with a lousy book, and I have read enough books to know what's lousy.

In 2011 I was knee deep in co-producing two movies in the valley: *Gone Hollywood* and *Los Scavengers*. I, along with Valente Rodriguez, and my co-writer David V. Garcia were having meetings and exchanging 100's of emails weekly. We managed to finish both movies, but it was difficult to bounce back. Both movies went straight to DVD. Producing both movies pretty much got in the way of giving my novel the attention it needed. And on a personal note I lost a wonderful girlfriend, Julie. But that's another story.

In the spring of 2013 Frank Guajardo suggested I try the MFA program at UTPA and the thought of going back to college didn't sound appealing. I had been around MFA creative writing types in Austin and they didn't know the first thing about play dough, much less writing. The best they can do is eavesdrop on conversations because they have very little life experience. They are good writers, but have no story.

I talked to Rob Johnson and he said the MFA was good enough for poet Erika Garza Johnson, and I came to learn poet Amalia Ortiz was also in the program. And I could study with screenwriting with David Carren who had over 100 screenwriting credits. Frank also said I could work on novel and it would work towards my degree. After lots of thinking I applied and was accepted. I was on a mission in the

MFA program. I wanted to take classes to help my writing. To make me a better writer and I was going to make the best of the program.

The first semester in the MFA program I saw Eric Williamson on campus and he asked me why I was in the program and I told him to study with screenwriter David Carren and fix my novel. He asked me how many copies of *Crazy Loco* had sold and I told him over 50,000 copies and he said I'd get published because publishing houses decide to publish you based on previous sales. I laughed and told him it wasn't the case with my novel. My novel needed a major overhaul, but what was going to hold it together? I wasn't sure and though I had plenty to write about the novel had to have a strong spine.

Family dynamics in the valley are interesting, because of the language, cultural, history and region. I have noticed a lot of Mexican American writers focus on external factors. Gangs, drugs and violence in a Latino family, but I think the real struggle is internal. Not man vs. society, but man vs. man. How does a family cope with itself? How does it keep from flying apart because families are always changing; births, deaths, marriages, divorces and family reunions every weekend. I seldom see an official family reunion in the valley. Because they're not a once a year event, they're every weekend.

A novel has to be real for me and I focused on four books, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Ordinary People*, *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *And The Earth Did Not Swallow Him*. *Catcher in the Rye* and *To Kill a Mockingbird* are great reads, but I don't believe the main character in each book. The attention to detail each character has is over the top and I don't expect characters to be so insightful. Scout Finch is only eight and I

think she remembers too much in detail. And though Holden Caulfield is 17, I still don't believe him much either. Both characters have too much control over scenes and dialogue. *And The Earth Did Swallow Him* is spot on, maybe because I'm Mexican American and the stories open a door in my mind to my own family memories. *Ordinary People*, like *Catcher in the Rye* is filled with internal struggle. Both families in the novels are falling apart over the lack of remorse of a son/brother. The struggles fit perfectly with the religious and loyal Mexican American family. Love may not be able to keep a Mexican family together, but loyalty will.

Many Mexican family members are loyal to each other and it leads to lots of internal struggle. A brother puts up with his brother-in-law simply because he's the husband of his sister, and the father of his nephews and nieces. A Mexican American family will always leave a door open for a family member, even if it brings nothing but pain to the family. The internal struggle makes the family even more religious. In many situations if a family can't talk out the pain, they will pray it away.

The internal struggle is far more destructive than the external struggle. As I mentioned earlier using gangs and drugs as the reason for problems in our families is not the issue. Our families have a difficult time with direct conversation. We are polite to a fault and often hope the problems in our families will go away with prayer or time. Mexican Americans love watching movies and TV dramas as a way to communicate. If you go the movies in the Valley you'll see lots of families sitting together, and I imagine on their drive home they talk about the movie. But in reality they're talking about themselves or trying to use the characters on the screen to make a point about what's bugging them.

Valley families, regardless of church affiliation, all suffer from Catholic guilt. I think half of what Mexican Americans do everyday, is do their best to avoid Catholic guilt. But I don't think it's wrong to make someone feel guilty for not putting family first. Family is priority one, from your valuable time, to the money in your pocket. It's hard for Mexican Americans to get rich, because there's always a family member who needs help and you can't put a price on family loyalty and love. The funny thing is, Mexican Americans would rather have your time over money. To help with the yard, wash the cars, clean the house and put up holiday lights or anything requires action. Mexican Americans appreciate the effort and the willingness to help to each other.

If we as a culture addressed our internal struggles, there would be far fewer external struggles. Our families would be strong and healthy if we could talk about our problems. We love each other so much that we can't bring ourselves to say something critical because we want to be nice, and so we let it go until it becomes an external issue.

My novel is about a family questioning its loyalty. The story center is a father (Alberto) and son (Abel). Abel is rumored not to be the biological son of Alberto. Alberto rejects Abel even though he raised him from birth. Alberto's wife is having an affair and Alberto thinks Abel is covering for his mother. Abel's brother (Adam) who is the biological son, takes Alberto's side in the father and mother conflict. The mother leaves the family, and Abel is left to reconcile with his father and brother. In the novel, Alberto violates an unspoken reality in the valley. Love of family is more powerful than the blood in your veins.

In the Valley it's not uncommon for families to take in children from other families. My father was adopted by my white grandfather, David Hume Rice, in the 1950's. And my tía Mare raised a girl who was given up at birth. She's my cousin and David Hume Rice is my grandfather. Both by heart and it's more important than blood. I know this to be true, but so does every valley kid.

The best stories for valley students are the ones they can debate in class and come to a new understanding. I try to challenge students to think about what they say, and to reflect on their actions. In the novel, Abel's biological father is gay and it's not an issue for Abel or Adam, but it's an issue for Alberto, the father. Valley students know love is more important than blood or sexual orientation. The older generations in the valley have a long way to go in regards to sexism and homophobia, but students in our region will turn the tide. I know they will. But it will take brave administrators, daring teachers and more stories about our region. Stories students can share with their parents. I encourage students to take the stories home to read with their parents, and to come back with questions the parents have. We can't rely on movies to be the catalyst for conversations in our families. Stories and poems read at the kitchen table are more powerful than any commercial media. And stories and poems written by students, and read at the kitchen table, strengthen the foundation of families. Our region is built on story and we are natural storytellers. We as writers, teachers, students and parents must spend a little more time at the breakfast table to tell a story of the family. The phrase, "One time your. . ." creates new doors to insights and future memories.

The UTRGV MFA program has helped with proper instruction, and lots of writing workshops. I know there are critics of writing workshops, but if it makes you a better writer, then share what you write. And poetry is key. I read somewhere that a Raymond Carver said poetry makes you a better writer. I think he's right. And the best thing about the program was being part of a group of valley writers. I also pursued my certification in Mexican American Studies to learn more about my culture. I learned more about the external writing struggles of my culture and how many solutions were internal. If we find our voice, we can rise above the noise. To believe in ourselves as a culture, region and a people with a great history. A people on the side of justice, and the right side of history.

Years ago I was accepted to Breadloaf at Middlebury College, and I almost went. But I thought, if I go there and I have any writing success they'll take credit for it. I'm not from a loaf of bread. I'm from Edcouch. I'm from pan dulce and Mexican chocolate on sweet Sunday mornings with my family. Walking across UTRGV campus gave me a strong sense of belonging to the valley and my region. My fellow students made me happy. I know they'll write stories, plays, screenplays, poems and Texas will be better for it.

My novel, *My True Father*, has lots of Spanish names, takes place in Edcouch and it's not for everybody. The Castillo family in the novel is falling apart and doing its best to hold on to its family name. Only to learn love is more important than a last name. I hope my parents like it and my friends won't mind. I hope students like it too, but wouldn't it be great if students in middle school and high school had read

lots of Mexican American stories before they read my novel and look me in the face and say, "Your book isn't good. I can write a better one."

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