

The Life of Graciela Guzman_Romero

Graciela lives in Chinandega, Nicaragua, where she has lived her entire life. Chinandega is a small town near the city of Leon. Graciela has five children. The father of her children is a dockworker. He and Graciela were never married. He also drank excessively during their years together, and was verbally abusive to Graciela and her children. Sometimes he was even violent.

Graciela raised her children on the meager earning of her husband (or what was left after the amount he spent on alcohol, approximately \$600 cordobas a month—about \$43 US. Her husband did not permit her to work outside of their home. They lived in a small, three-room cement block house with very sparse belongings—a few chairs and mattresses on the floor. They did not have indoor plumbing although they had electricity. Graciela made wood fires outside to prepare meals. The family had never been to the movies nor taken a vacation. Life was about the daily struggle to eat and to stay in school.

One day when her son, Alejandro, was twelve, he needed a notebook to be permitted to complete the current semester at his school (in Nicaragua, school is “free,” but children must pay for their uniforms, notebooks, and textbooks in secondary school). Graciela had no money and told Alejandro to ask his father, who turned him away saying that school was a waste of money. Alejandro, an excellent student who had already won many academic certificates, was desperate to continue school. Graciela found a one-cordoba coin in her purse, purchased a few sheets of wrapping paper, cut them into squares, and sewed a notebook for Alejandro. When Alejandro was thirteen, he was selected as one of the top students in the nation to be sent to Pittsburgh, PA, to play baseball with little league teams in Pittsburgh in a special home-stay visit and tournament arranged by KDKA radio! He spent two weeks in Pittsburgh in the summer of 1994, and began a friendship with a Pittsburgh family that continues to this day.

Finally, after years of living with a man who was often drunk and unreliable, Graciela asked the father of her children to leave. She found another small, cement house in an equally poor neighborhood of Chinandega where she currently lives. She does not feel very safe in this neighborhood as gangs of teenagers are often on the street sniffing glue. Sometimes these teenagers act menacing and ask for money. Graciela’s daughter, Lucrecia, who lives nearby, is afraid to be home alone.

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Graciela found herself faced with the dilemma of trying to provide for her children while at the same time helping them to continue their education. She has always believed that education is the only way for her children to escape lives of dire poverty like hers. With a sixth grade education and no particular skills, Graciela fought to earn enough money to support her family by creating her own “micro businesses,” such as cleaning and washing for others, buying and reselling household items, making desserts to sell, and cooking for families having large parties. Finally, with help from her relatives in New York and her friends in Pittsburgh, she has been able to stay afloat by selling basic necessities out of her home, like eggs, sugar, toilet paper, laundry and dish soap, etc.

One night, Graciela saw an advertisement on their small, black and white television for scholarships to study in a university in Cuba being offered to excellent Nicaraguan high school students. Miriam woke up Alejandro, and took him on a long bus journey to Managua to the Cuban Embassy the next day, the last day to apply. Graciela and Alejandro waited in a line several blocks long for Alejandro’s turn to submit his application. Graciela continued to call the Cuban Embassy everyday for a few weeks. One morning, a car pulled up in front of their house, and a man delivered a message that Alejandro had been selected and needed to be ready to go to Cuba in three days! He would receive a full scholarship and the University of Havana as long as he kept good grades! Alejandro, who was facing a future without further education or a job in Chinandega, was ecstatic. He is now in his fourth year of medical school in Cuba, and has helped his brother, Oscar, to secure a scholarship as well. Oscar is studying sports medicine.

Graciela has suffered many tragedies along the way—one daughter was treated for tuberculosis and another lost an eye in a sudden accident, resulting in the need to purchase a false eye and glasses to strengthen the good eye. Graciela herself has been in the hospital for heart problems related to stress. She does not have any health insurance. At one point, her daughter was told to leave the clinic, because they could not afford to pay for the bed. The TB medicine and false eye cost more money than Graciela makes in a year.

In spite of her difficulties, Graciela’s faith in God and love for her children has sustained her through the years. She believes that God will provide what her family needs, and that one must always be grateful for what one has. She is a strong woman who refuses to relinquish her hope for a better future for her children and grandchildren. She has been and continues to be a solid rock for her family through their many struggles, always counting on God and their love for each other to meet the future with hope and anticipation for a better life.
