

READING

A Strength of My Neighborhood

Juan, a high school student in California, came to the United States when he was three, and he was raised in New York and Los Angeles. He writes about his neighborhood in Los Angeles and how it helps him feel connected to the culture and traditions of his family's "old world" heritage in Mexico.

One of the strengths of my neighborhood is that we gather to celebrate a special day in honor of our lady, the Virgin Guadalupe. The Virgin of Guadalupe is the mother of Jesus Christ, and she is celebrated in the Mexican community because she has appeared in many locations throughout Mexico. On the Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe, friends and families walk on the streets with votives showing her image. We also sing church music, and sometimes it feels like we're on American Idol because people are all competing against each other to see who can sing the loudest. The men dress in slacks and nice shirts, and the women look beautiful in their best dresses and high-heeled shoes. The air smells of cookies and fruit punch spiked with tequila.

Once we finish walking the neighborhood, all the children and adults have drinks in their hands. One of my favorites is called champurado. Champurado is a special drink made by many Mexican families, similar to hot chocolate. My grandmother Lucy makes it, as well as her sweet tamales flavored with pineapples, strawberry, and apple. The pineapple, or piña, tamal is a special recipe passed down in her family through the generations. The recipe came from Sinaloa (the state in Mexico where I was born). It has a juicy, delicious pineapple taste. I always get a stomach ache from eating too many of my grandmother Lucy's tamales.

When I was thirteen, I got to spend some time with my loving grandparents on their farm in Mexico. They live far from Los Angeles, on a ranch in a small, beautiful pueblo in San Ignacio. It's peaceful for them to live there because there isn't much noise like in the city. When I went to visit them, I felt excited because there were so many farm animals, like horses, sheep, chickens, and the fattest pigs you would ever find in the world (because they ate too much corn). It was on their farm I got to ride my first horse. I was petrified because I thought the horse would get furious and drop me, which it did. But once I learned how to ride a horse better, I went off riding to the river, alone, like an adult. The

river was only a few minutes away from the ranch, and the view from there was really beautiful, especially when it rained.

We bring the traditions of Mexico to LA because they help us feel at home and remember the way things were before we left for more jobs and a better life in the States—traditions like the Virgin of Guadalupe celebration, family recipes, banda music and sports like ulama. I am reminded of the old world through these traditions. Even the ones we no longer celebrate create memories of my home here in Boyle Heights and my home far away from Los Angeles.¹

¹ Juan Chavez, "A Strength of My Neighborhood," in *We Are Alive When We Speak for Justice* (Los Angeles, CA: 826 Los Angeles, 2015), 185–186. Reproduced by permission of 826 Boston.