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Profile Story: Sarah Rafael Garcia

Sarah Rafael Garcia's father died when she was 13. Seventeen years later, Garcia published her first book capturing his remembrance through stories of her childhood called "Las Niñas: A Collection of Childhood Memories."

At 13, she was encouraged by her social worker to write in a journal after many attempts to get Garcia to open up about her father's death. She began to document all the memories she had with her family when her father was still alive.

"That's how I started writing," Garcia said. "My social worker said, 'You may never talk to me or anyone about this, but you can write in your journal your feelings and you don't have to hide what you feel.'"

Garcia developed a love for writing but did not share her journals.

Before returning back to school to receive her master's in English, Garcia worked as a marketing manager for a company in Downtown Los Angeles.

"At 30, I had already done what I thought I was supposed to do," Garcia said. "You finish college, get the American Dream, which is like an office job, make good money, but I was still unhappy, and I was still very stressed."

Garcia decided to quit her job and move to China, where she taught English for two years and wrote her first book.

"It was the first time I ever had to get a passport," Garcia said.

Although Garcia was successful with her first publication, she recalls receiving negative remarks about her newly found career goal.

“I had an uncle that said, ‘You need to give up on this dream; things like this don’t happen to us,’ us being Mexicans,” Garcia said. “And I just said, ‘Well isn’t this why you came to this country? So we can have a different way of living?’”

Garcia continued her goal of becoming a writer against the criticism of her family. She was self-driven and self-motivated to prove them wrong.

Twenty years after she had left Santa Ana, she applied for her artist in residency at the CSUF Grand Central Art Center and returned to share her writing and encourage other people of color, like her, to pursue their dreams.

“I came back thinking that my book would be good enough for people,” Garcia said, “but then I realized that they were dealing with the same problems I dealt with when I was growing up.”

Garcia was invited to present her book and her stories at a local middle school in Santa Ana. While presenting, she was exposed to the same gentrification that she had seen growing up.

This inspired her to start Barrio Writers, an organization made for the youth of Santa Ana to provide a safe space for them to express their emotions through writing.

“I realized that my voice didn’t matter because I’m an adult telling these kids what to do; and that didn’t matter to me when I was a teenager because I had too many adults telling me what to do,” Garcia said.

Garcia created Barrio Writers in 2009. Participants in the program range from age 13 to 19. Barrio Writers now has 10 chapters in California and Texas.

“I thought that if we had a community of youth and kids that could talk to each other and feel free to express their emotions without people thinking they’re depressed or suicidal or doing drugs, then maybe they would find some empowerment within each other to do good rather than bad,” Garcia said.

Her sessions include guest writers and local mentors like Yuri Morales Lara, an English teacher at Godinez Fundamental High School in Santa Ana.

Lara volunteered as a writing mentor at the start of the Barrio Writers program and says that the organization and the outlet for youth expression is something that should be encouraged.

“I started writing poetry at around 14 and it helped me overcome a lot of challenging situations and it also helped me articulate in words my experience growing up in Santa Ana,” Lara said. “And so, I wanted to be an advisor or a mentor to any young person that was interested in creative writing.”

Luis Chavez, a kinesiology major at Santa Ana College and high school football coach, also said that he sees the organization and Garcia’s work as positive for children coping with their own struggles.

“They’re not just writing essays, they’re writing creative stories and poetry and drawing what they feel in a safe space,” Chavez added.

Garcia has since been speaking at multiple Santa Ana schools promoting her Barrio Writers organization.

“You have to be relevant, you have to be alive, and you have to be in front of their faces,” Garcia said, “because if not how are they going to find you and know that they can be like you.”