

# Community

## *Fostering Growth in the*

By Sandra Enders, MS, SYC

**My** eyes were still teary when my son called out for me from his bedroom. It was late in January and I had just gone through my early morning email and online news.

"Mornin' sweetheart, did you sleep well?" I said as I entered his bedroom.

"Do I have school today?" he asked while a grimace filled his face, "Mom why you crynin?" Adam was almost 8 but still struggling with his speech due to fluid in his ears earlier in life. We were lucky to get him home from Guatemala at seven months, but he suffered with ear infections for a year before we had tubes placed in both ears, and he was almost 4 before he began to talk.

"Mommy had a bad dream?" he asked as my husband entered the room.

"No, I'm alright, honey." I motioned to my husband quietly. "Wait till you hear the sound bite running on the early news," I shook my head, "not good."

Back in September 2009, prompted by complaints, the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice had opened an investigation concerning civil practices and patterns of misconduct by our town's police department toward the Latino community. The New York office of the FBI had also led a criminal investigation looking at certain individuals. Deficiencies were uncovered through the investigation, and two days prior, four police officers were indicted and arrested with 10 counts between them — conspiracy against rights, excessive force, false arrest and obstruction. Racial profiling, harassment and discriminatory policing was said to be deeply rooted in the department's culture.

To say the least, the community was stunned and the media swarmed the town hall the next day in hopes of drawing the mayor's blood. And that they did, because by the end of the day, exhausted from all the scrutiny and questions, he unintentionally made a comment about having tacos that evening as a first gesture to mend the fences. Although it was a six second cut out of a 16-minute interview, by morning it went viral nationally.

To make matters worse, in an effort to organize an outreach program, the mayor placed only one Latino on a commission of eight members, who was Puerto Rican, rather than Ecuadorian, which is the dominant culture effected. And he again was bashed for his cultural insensitivity. There was also arguing about whether the police chief should retire or get fired, and some even called for the mayor's resignation. In short, what was once a sleepy little shoreline town in Connecticut, in a matter of days, became the center of a civil rights conflict with nationwide attention.

I was in tears that morning, and wondered if it could get any worse. Here I am, one of few white moms in a town of 30,000, just trying to raise my Latino son in my own hometown.

"Don't worry about it. It'll all blow over soon," my husband tried to pacify me.

"Yeah right, you know it is only going to get worse with the national elections this year, this immigration controversy is not going away, and now it's right in our back yard."

Adam had always been well accepted into the community and he got along with all races and ethnic cultures in school. The town had quickly increased Latino population, mostly Ecuadorian, during the last few

years to almost 12 percent, and I welcomed the diversity. I often wondered what kids he would eventually identify himself with. Other minorities, Asian, black and Indian were still a small percentage. We encouraged him to mix with everyone and we made it a point to have various groups of people to socialize with. We were always upfront about his adoption, but so far he had never questioned differences such as race, color or ethnicity.

We stay involved at the local Catholic parish, but I was somewhat discouraged that the Latino participation there was negligible. Most of them traveled to the next city to two parishes which maintained a heavy Latino clientele and held masses in Spanish. I knew we needed some outreach, but I had enough volunteerism on my plate.

"But what happens if this conflict begins to trickle down into the school system, I don't want to see a West Side Story unfold in this town," I said while trying to keep my emotions in check.

"You mean you don't want your son having to choose between the Sharks and the Jets?" said Mike, who often read my mind, and tried to make light of the situation.

During the adoption process I had thought about transcultural issues arising and I remember reading books on the topic. But then Adam arrived home and mingled in with all the other kids and I forgot about all the "what if" scenarios along with my commitment to the agency that we would continue to expose him to his birth culture. That promise quickly fell by the wayside as he became enmeshed in the White American suburban culture, which was ours. It was ironic that I was happy to see Latinos moving in, but I

# Involvement Adopted Child

never bothered to initiate any friendships with any of them.

Trying to make sense of, and put a positive spin on the situation, I turned as I often do to find current research on the topic. I came across an interesting article titled, "Transcultural Adoptive Parents: Passing the Ethnic Litmus Test and Engaging Diversity" by Pamela Quiroz, a professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago, concerning a qualitative study of adoption online forums. Her writing in *Race, Gender and Class*, looked at how adoptive parents of transracial/transcultural children address the issue of ethnic and cultural competency. Some actively pursued cultural socialization, but many focused more on encouraging positive self-esteem, relatively unrelated to ethno-racial awareness. The study concluded that most white adopting parents look to their agency or current books on transcultural adoption to direct them to enculturation practices. However, the people who usually write the books are the same as those who run the agencies, most of whom are often white adopting parents of transracial or transcultural children themselves. In other words, most of the available information had a white privileged class perspective. Quiroz found that few adopting parents ever maintained cross cultural contacts or actively engaged members of similar racial/ethnic groups as their children belonged to. Most often they attempted to create transcendent racial and cultural spaces, using books, symbols and artifacts, as if to convince themselves of their cultural literacy. I clearly saw myself in that group.

A few days later the religious leaders in town held a press conference in an attempt to encourage open dialogue and bring peace to the community. I attended.

"It was a beautifully written statement, spoken in both English and Spanish," I relayed to Mike later, "maybe some healing will come from it." Then I heard him mutter under his breath, "whatever happened to 'Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free'... what was the rest... something about a lamp and a golden door?"

And I thought to myself, "maybe it's time I kept that promise!"

UPDATE: The community has since made attempts to heal. The legal battle continues for the four officers, and the town extended a hand to the Latino community by hosting the Latino Expo this past May. The two-day event went nicely and the town will again host the expo for 2013, which is stated to be the largest annual festival in the Northeast honoring the Latino culture. Mike and Sandy Enders keep Adam active in the community, at church, and in local scouting. He recently won first prize for raising funds for the Shoreline Trolley Museum which was devastated by Hurricane Irene last September. Adam is seen in the photos with Mom, Dad and Mayor Joe Maturo prior to a ribbon cutting event honoring June 9 as an official "Trolley Day" in town; he is also seen standing with Wayne Sandford, the museum's general manager, and past town fire chief, and deputy commissioner for the Connecticut State Homeland Security.

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