

Why I Teach



This is my mom – Rosalie. She was born in Tangancicuaro, Michoacán Mexico in 1946. Her mother died while giving birth to her sixth child, a girl who also died soon afterwards. My grandfather, perhaps overcome by grief, perhaps by the enormous weight of responsibility, left Tangancicuaro the day of my grandmother's funeral, leaving his five children in the care of his mother Josefa. My mother was three years old at the time, and her youngest brother Ramon a little over one. My childhood memories are filled with stories of my great grandmother Josefa and her boundless love despite extreme poverty and need. When my mom was five her grandmother died, and all the younger kids went to live with oldest sister my Tía Josefa and her new husband my

Tío Serafin.

This picture was taken at my mom's first communion right before she left for Chicago. When my mom was eight, my Tío Ramon six, and my Tío Manuel ten, they immigrated to South Chicago to live with an aunt and uncle and their children.

In the Chicago public school my mom was given an IQ test – in English. She failed miserably and was placed in Special Education. My Tío Manuel, as an older immigrant child, found adjusting to his new home – so different than Tangancicuaro – very difficult and confusing. Sometimes my mom would take him to the roof of their south Chicago home and point out the skyscrapers to him. ?No se parcel como nuestras montañas, Manuel? Don't they look like our mountains, Manuel? My Tío Ramon was by all accounts a kind and gentle child. Due to neglect, he did not receive the medical treatment he needed for kidney failure and died at the age of eight after spending months – often alone – in the hospital.

This is my father – Howard. He was born in Chicago in 1939. He is pictured with his mom, dad, and older brother in Chicago shortly before his father sent them to live in Japan while my grandmother finished her Masters in Social Work at the University of Chicago. My dad was a little over one and my uncle just three when they left Chicago. Soon after they arrived in Japan, WWII broke out and all communication was lost between them and their parents for over seven years. My dad and uncle lived with two different families – my dad was raised as the baby of his aunt's family; my uncle Marshall was sent to live with another uncle who treated him very harshly. Both my dad and uncle suffered hunger and bomb raids in war torn Japan.



When the war ended, my grandfather came to take them home to a mother they barely remembered and a younger brother had never met. My father was eight, my uncle eleven. The younger brother waiting in Chicago was five. My dad remembers clearly when his aunt – who he knew as his mother – put him on the boat in Japan that would take him across the Pacific. She gave him an apple and told him to rest – that she would be back after he slept a little. When he woke up, he was miles out to sea and never saw her again. I didn't grow up hearing stories of my father's childhood – perhaps they were too painful to tell.

My father and uncle immigrated back to West Side Chicago after WWII, and within a year both had completely lost their Japanese language. As a young adult I went back to Japan and visited his my dad's cousins, the children of the aunt who raised him. Atsuko carried my dad on her back during the bomb raids, and like everyone in the family spoiled him as the baby of the family. When I stayed in her home, we called my dad. She could speak no English; he could speak no Japanese. All they could do was repeat each other's names and cry together.

My own children are now 6, 9, and 11 – almost the exact ages my mom, dad, and uncles were when they immigrated as children to the United States. I cannot imagine my children going through what they did and what hundreds of children in San Francisco still do. My parents' stories of immigrating as children to a big urban city – coming from poverty, war, and torn apart families – deeply impacted me. It is their stories, and the stories of my uncles, that compelled me to become a teacher. I hoped to bring dignity and hope into the lives of children like my parents and uncles, and into the lives of their families. They are why I teach.