

TEACHING TOLERANCE



MIDDLE & UPPER GRADES ACTIVITY

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HANDOUT 3

Diego – 2004

You are seventeen years old and the oldest of five children. Until very recently you were the oldest of six children. Your mother just delivered a baby who died soon after a long and difficult birth in your house. There wasn't enough money for a doctor but worse than that there was no car, no mode of transportation anywhere nearby that didn't cost money that you didn't have. Your mother, the strongest person you've ever known, cries alone, in an inconsolable state at night when she thinks that no one but your father can hear her. You hear her as do the rest of the children. You and your brothers and sisters try to console her but she shrugs you off denying that she is upset and that her daughter is now with "the angels".

As you sit on your porch outside your one room rented house that holds your entire family you look at the dry sparse land and your head is filled with the voice of your grandfather. Though he is long since passed on, the hours you spent listening to him on this very spot still fill you with wonder. He would sit in the shade and talk about when he was a child and the land was rich. He told you that seeds could be scattered on the ground, not even planted, and they would take root and grow within days. He spoke of a time when there was plenty for everyone to eat and plenty to sell. He spoke of the days before the small stores that now line the streets of your small *ranchero* (town), most of which are empty and closed, but of a time when street vendors ruled and when there was a roaring *Mercado* or open air market where excess crops, meats, and cheeses could be sold or traded. Though you go to church you have to admit you don't quite get it. Heaven surely must be what your grandfather describes as the how the town used to be...not where you go when you pass on.

You've felt it before, but never more than now. Since you were 12 years old your father has been telling you it is time to be a man. That was the last time you were in school. Being a man meant doing what you could to help your family. Since then you've been doing what you can for the family but that hasn't been much. You've been working hard, some planting here, some harvesting there, some animal caretaking, some short construction jobs, and many, many other hand to mouth jobs. Nothing seems to help. It seems the more you scramble to find work the less of it there is, or the more they want you to work for less and less money. It seems the same for your parents. For all their hours of labor they have very little to show for it. They and you seem to be always working, looking for work, or trying to figure out why you can't get more money or make your money stretch further.

For generations the people in your town have always "walked the square" or go to the *camino*, or the walk. In short, on Saturday nights the entire town comes out to walk around the town square. There's a gazebo there that you are told used to house bands playing music when the town hosted festivals celebrating their plenty. There's also a fountain where you are told that when you were young had flowing water that you and your friends could play in, but you can't remember and find it hard to believe. It seems as if it's been dry as a bone forever. For all the Saturday nights you've spent running around with your brothers and sisters or friends, while your parents talk to their friends, listening to street musicians all the adult conversations have always been about the same thing: "*Del Norte*"—the North. By "the North" everyone meant the same thing, the United States. A few years ago the conversations that you and your friends eavesdropped on or heard only in passing were about plans for a car building plant. That talk went on for months then it was an alcohol distillery plant that was coming to your town, then a food processing plant, then a WalMart warehouse, and then something else, and then something else, and then something else. The list went on longer than you can remember or care to.

Along with what's moving to town to provide jobs there was another conversation, one that was more whispered of and hushed often when you came to close or asked too many questions. This conversation was about the journey north. Almost everyone had a relative or knew someone who had made the journey. Almost everyone knew at least one person who they had never heard from again after they started the journey to the North. Almost everyone knew someone who had died somewhere on the journey and everyone knew someone who had turned back either out of the harshness of climate, lack of food and water, abandoned by guides, or forced back by American immigration enforcement ("la Migra"). But everyone had heard of someone (and many knew someone) who had made it...not only made to "Del Norte" but made it financially enough to support themselves and send money home. From the conversations it sounded like America was a dreamland where wealth was everywhere for anyone who was willing to risk the trip and work hard. Over the years, as you grew older the boys just a few years older began to leave, heading north, and as the years progressed a little more boys your own age began to "make the jump" as the boys your own age call the move north.

You've tried talking to your parents about it before but every time you try your father or mother says that we will either all go or none of us will. As you've gotten older though, the weight of responsibility has begun hang on your shoulders. You work hard but gain nothing, and your options are shrinking. What else is there to do but go north? One time, not so long ago you and your father had an argument about the journey. In a whispered raised voice he said, "Don't you know what you're saying? You have to jump a train, multiple times without falling under and being crushed, oh, and not being caught by the police or worse, the thugs the trains hire to keep us out. If you do happen to hop enough trains to get you there then you have to get across the border. Did you think they would just let you ride across? There are fences for miles. The only places where there aren't fences is where there's nothing but desert, nothing but desert. Do you have \$2,000 to pay a *coyote* (guide) to get you across? No, you don't and won't. Let's say you make it, let's say you get across without dying, then what? Do you have a map to a job? Do you know someone who is hiring? Who would you stay with, where would you stay, how would you eat? We don't know anyone there, do you? Do you want to crush your mother?" You had no answers to any of his questions. As you and your family headed towards home after the "camino" the weight was unbearable. You began to think about where you were going to work tomorrow and had no idea. As this sunk in, you began to make your decision.

SOURCES

Enrique's Journey by Sonia Nazario

Give Me Liberty! An American History by Dr. Eric Foner

Answer the following Questions:

1. What are the difficulties facing Diego's life?

2. What are the causes of these difficulties?
