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I did not know that I grew up in poverty until I was well into my 20s. At this point in time, I was four years into my “career”: I had graduated from college with two Bachelor degrees, I had worked in law enforcement as a police officer, and I was working as a Family Support Specialist, advocating for low-income families. I was twenty-five years old!

As part of my training, I was required to do a poverty simulation. My group’s scenario asked us to wear the shoes of a parent with young children. This parent could not afford a vehicle, so he/she/they had to rely on public transportation to access all their resources. The goal was to, without instruction, learn to navigate public transportation, go to the grocery store with a very limited budget, and make it back home before the day’s end with as many groceries as possible. The task had to be completed while carrying a toddler size doll and a baby doll with a car seat. My team was immediately anxious about having to ride on public transportation and did not even know where to start figuring out the bus system. On the other hand, it was so easy and natural for me. I led our team to completing the scenario with few hiccups and within the shortest time frame. It was not until I was at home, in my own privacy, reflecting on my day, that I realized the reason the scenario was so easy for me was because I was asked to wear my mother’s shoes. I was the toddler size doll we dragged along all day. My brothers were the baby in the car seat. The poverty simulation was almost effortless because it was not a simulation, it was a recreation of my childhood.

In my reflection, I remembered standing in sweltering Texas heat, on North Loop Drive (one of the busiest streets in El Paso) across the street from the bus stop – the only spot with shade. My mother and I would run across the street, my mom pulling on my little arm, when we saw a bus coming in the distance. She would sigh in exhaustion and walk us back to the shade

when it was not the bus we were waiting on. If it was the correct bus, I would spend the time waiting by climbing up the paved hill just behind the hot bus bench and rolling down the hot cement hill. I would roll down and run back up, unaffected by the heat or by my mother yelling at me to stop each time I ran back up. I remembered that it was my mother who taught me how to navigate public transportation. She taught me how to board a bus, how to pay, how to look up the bus schedule, what a transfer was and how to ask for one. My mother taught me what bags to bring along so that we did not have to carry plastic bags full of groceries back in the heat. By the time I was in high school and college, I was riding the bus back and forth with ease. It was after this reflection that I really started to dig into my childhood experience.

I recall my father was often gone for months on end. He worked in manual labor, picking up the highest paying jobs he could find, but they were very often out of state jobs that other laborers were not willing to take. He would leave for work in the only vehicle we owned and come back only when the job site was done, and he was laid off. I have a very specific memory of my dad calling me one night to check in. He shared that he was going to spend the rest of his time at the current job site in the police station parking lot. My father would work all day and sleep in his car at night. He had a gym membership that he would use to access gym showers and would eat all his meals at work. Nearly every night he would pick well-lit parking lots to camp out, and soon after he would have an officer come knock on his window and tell him he needed to leave. Until one night, when the same police officer woke him up for the third night in a row and asked him why he was sleeping in a car. My father explained that he needed to save money to send to my mother and me in El Paso and he did not want to waste money on a hotel. He showed the officer a picture that he carried in his car visor as he explained why. The officer kindly offered him a spot in the police station parking lot where he worked and ensured that my

father would not be woken up by other officers again. My dad was thrilled to have somewhere safe to sleep, where he would not have to worry about being harassed again and excitedly shared that with me. I was happy for him and, in my youth-induced naiveness, did not realize the sacrifice my father made every night to keep a roof over my head and food in my stomach.

I also have memories of going to the WIC office with my mom to pick up groceries. We also often went to the nearby church parking lot for bread, fruits, and vegetables that were handed out for free. We never ate out at restaurants; my parents would always say “hay comida en la casa” (“there’s food at home”) and it was a non-negotiable matter in my home.

I remember growing up my parents sent me to school in faded clothes that did not fit. I attended schools with uniform dress codes, except for a few special topic days. In elementary school, one picture day, one of my classmates asked me why I always wore the same dress on non-uniform days. She demanded to know if I had other clothing. Before I could answer, my teacher jumped in to defend me. It had not bothered me to wear the same clothes because all I knew was that I did not have very many options and I never paid attention to why. It was not until my adult years that I realized why my teacher defended me so fiercely. She saw that my family was too poor to afford clothing but would not allow anyone to ridicule me for it.

As a child, these moments slid off my back because I thought it was normal. My family never went on vacation. We would cross the border into Mexico for medical care because we could not afford the American healthcare system. I never had a computer or internet in my home. I never participated in school sports or extracurricular activities that required money because we could not afford it. I was only in the school band because I was able to loan an instrument from the school. I received all my immunizations from free health fairs or, what I can now identify as, low-income clinics. My family of five lived in a very small two-bedroom home. I shared my

room with my two younger brothers (seven and ten year age gap between us) until I moved out for college. My neighborhood was riddled with crime and sat between a train station and a refinery. Every school I attended was severely underfunded. I lived in a food desert. However, I thought that was just how families lived and never gave it a second thought. I did not realize those were all symptoms of poverty.

My mother, an immigrant from Mexico, crossed the Rio Grande at the age of eight years old, navigated America on her own, and never took a day off. She taught me the art of living a happy and peaceful life and to be thankful for everything we have. My father, who grew up in the barrios of El Paso and barely graduated high school, poured his soul into his family and his community. He taught me the importance of taking care of other people and completing my education. Neither one ever taught me that I was poor in any way, and I am forever grateful for that bliss. If I had not received a formal education on poverty, I may have never realized that I carry generational poverty in my blood and on my skin.

As an adult, I now fully realize that: I am a woman of color. I am a first generation American. I am a first-generation college graduate. But most importantly, I am the product of my parents' and my ancestors' sacrifices and prayers. As a First-Gen., I am responsible for combating my family's generational poverty, abuse, and oppression. It is a responsibility I do not take lightly. I may not have the privilege of holding a map or having an example to work from. Honestly, most times I do not know the appropriate steps to take, and oftentimes I find out about resources available to me too late to take advantage of them. But I am resilient. I am determined. I am confident. I have already come so far! My pursuit of higher education has allowed me to overcome poverty. Despite my families' inability to financially support me in my pursuit of higher education, I have prevailed.

Now I am in law school, and I dream of being an attorney who advocates for the most disenfranchised and exploited. And I dream of serving as a positive example for my younger brothers and for other first-generation Americans/college students as they too embark on the road to ending their own generational poverty without a map.