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Keeping Our Heritage Alive Through Our Storytellers

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Whether you were born in the United States or another country, stories are the binding glue that hold traditions in place. Gathering and listening build community, enhance human connection, preserve culture, teach values, and remind us of important events, lessons and mysteries. One such storyteller is Alicia Pagan – a mother, daughter, sister, wife, teacher and friend – who through words and art, shares her love to remind us where we came from and gives us hope and faith for where we will be tomorrow. We recently had the opportunity to meet with Alicia and learn about her story, and we are honored to share our conversation with you today.



“If we do right by the people of the past and respect our history, we can move forward in a productive manner as human beings, capable of making the right decisions and do the right things.”

We are so honored to meet you, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and how you made Ohio home?

I was born in Puerto Rico, but my family moved to the United States when I was one year old. First, we lived in Florida then moved to Georgia and another state every three years, because my step-father was in the Air Force. I am the oldest of nine children and often played the role of “first” mom with my siblings, because my mother was in and out of the hospital. How we came to Dayton is my journey.

What is your earliest memory of your family?

It would be when I was nine years old, the passing of my step-father of a coronary occlusion. He was twenty-nine years old and we lived in Chicago. I remember the story vividly because, it was also one of my early exposures to racism. My step-father, I should explain... I was lucky to have two “step-fathers” in my life as I was growing up. Each was a real “Father” in my life and I will refer to them as “Step-dad”, “Father” or “Dad”. So, my first father, had recently transitioned to civilian life after serving in the Air Force. He and his brother were starting a new career as a long distant truck drivers. He brought the huge moving truck home that night. He wanted to show it off to the family after dinner. That evening, while taking furniture pads out of the truck and placing them on the grass easement, our neighbor an immigrant elder with a heavy accent (perhaps Slovic), came outside visibly very upset and started to yell. At one point, the man looked at my mother and said, “You lousy Puerto Rican, why don’t you go back to where you came from!” My father, a 6’4 anglo man from Tennessee wanted to confront the man; but my 5’4, Mom stepped in front to calm down the situation. My father wobbled and then went inside the house with Mom, who suddenly ran outside and asked for someone to call an ambulance. Meanwhile, the upset immigrant neighbor, who stated the argument had called the police.

Once the ambulance arrived, they quickly took my parents to the hospital. My siblings and I went to stay at a neighbor’s house. That night, I could not sleep, I was up worrying about my mother and father. Once my mother returned later that night, she took me back home while, my siblings slept back at our neighbors. We sat on our steps and she looked me with a blank stare and told me of my father’s passing. In that moment, our whole life changed; we were no longer this nuclear family. We were now a collection of children and a single mother who had no high school diploma, could barely speak English, and did not even know how to write a check. She was also pregnant with their sixth child. My Mom decided to return to Puerto Rico to be closer to family to help raise us. We

lived in Puerto Rico for four years and in that time, my mother remarried an American G.I. in the Air Force. Eventually, my family moved back to the United States. I have lived in Dayton for over 40 years.

What is the one quality you feel best describes you?

I am a forever hope-filled resilient person. That, I know comes from the lessons of resiliency passed on from mi mama y abuelitos! This year, on Memorial Day, 2019 and a week after my 64th birthday, multiple tornadoes ransacked Dayton and hit our home. The fear, devastation and uncertainty of this disaster is fresh in our minds, as we still see the path of destruction every day. I think the resiliency the Latino community shows comes from stories like mine and many other immigrant stories of how families have overcome the adversities of cultural misunderstandings and social economic inequities with the support of their communities.



Did you think a teaching career path was an option for you?

Growing up the oldest out of nine siblings, I missed a lot of school because, I had to stay home to take care of my younger siblings. I completed my GED after I was married. My first husband helped me fill out the paperwork. I attended the Green County Career Center and participated in a program for displaced homemakers, where I decided to take a secretarial course. By the end of the course, the instructor encouraged me to consider becoming a teacher because, I was always helping others in the class learn; as much as the idea sounded attractive, I knew you would need a college degree, which I thought I could never attain. Again, my ex-husband took me by the hand to Wright State University to fill out the paperwork because, I was too afraid to do it. Eventually, I obtained a teaching degree at Wright State University, and I will always be thankful to the GCC Center instructor who saw my potential, and my ex-husband who supported me on this journey. Through the struggle and challenges to obtain a degree, I learned I was not only capable but, that there will be people along the way to help you; if you are willing to persevere.

“I think the resilience that the Latino community shows comes from stories like mine, where families have overcome the adversities of cultural and social misunderstandings and inequities.”

You are an involved leader in the community, what motivates you to play this role?

I have always believed in empowering each other through service and in helping others see their own potential or take action. In addition to being, a classroom teacher, I am currently working very closely with the League of United Latin American Citizens [LULAC], our Calls to Action is ‘All for one and one for all’. I believe this statement should be the creed for this country, and I try to live by that. If we do right by the people of the past and respect our history, we can move forward in a productive manner as human beings, capable of making the right decisions and doing the right things for All. A concept that requires a diversity

of thought and perspectives. As an educator, data (the numbers story) suggests that diverse environments produce the richest growing and learning environments from mono-cropping of the potato in the Americas to the evolution of the Arts in STEM learning. Human beings are complex diverse and in communal by nature. The more we know and understand that “We are All Related” the easier it is to make the hard decisions for the Good of All our Community relatives. The time, I have left on this earth inspires me to be professionally, the person who I know and hope others know me to be: first a teacher, second a storyteller, and third a singer – these three aspects of my skill sets and personality are at the foundation of everything I do. Each requires wisdom, good listening skills and the ability to communicate. This is how I teach Spanish, civic engagement and service learning each year in my classroom. And it is relationships with LULAC and OCHLA that provide resources and opportunities to dynamically connect my classroom with the larger community.

What are you most excited or passionate about currently?

What I am most excited about is the possibilities in young people “waking up” sooner. What I mean by that is, witness the current generation take action for their beliefs and values while still in high school and making national news for their collective Call to Action, like Parkland and other student led social actions. These young people are demonstrating powerful social change actions. My generation, “woke up” when it did and answered its social just call. I see another wave on the horizon of this generation realizing their voices matter. They too are being called upon to make a difference. But, this generation also needs guidance from us older folks and we need the strength, the stamina and the vision, of this new wave of young voices of leadership.



Tell us a bit about your story telling and how this impacts you and others.

I thoroughly enjoy being able to connect people through stories. For me, stories provide the freedom to travel through time and space to share compelling life lessons that otherwise may not be as easily expressed or understood. Story telling connects you to your ancestors, to your history and it creates connections to your present. It provides hope for the future from the lessons shared and learned. Through engaging others, we can participate in a collective journey, we can reflect and bring about what is balanced and helpful in human beings. I have seen stories move people beyond their unknown cultural boundaries and biases to see the once “other”, transformed into “new family members”, they just hadn’t known before.” This was shared by an anglo-school superintendent in northern Ohio, after he had participated in our workshop with a newly emerging Latino population in his community. It was music and story that allowed him to make his own cross-cultural journey to building Community. It was a palpable and moving connection. Storytelling is my way of making sense of the world and it allows me to interact in it more fully. There is a lot of uncertainty in the world right now, and I believe it will be through us the old and new storytellers that we will find ways to make some sense of the ever- evolving world we build one value or belief system at time. I want to make sure I ‘m helping to make a difference in the new chapters in the Story of our Comunidad.

Tell me about a project or accomplishment that you consider the most significant in your career.

Working with students has been my great passion and having the opportunity to teach about cultural diversity has been a long-life project. As Ga-li, my current husband and creative partner, and I have worked with numerous liberal arts colleges developing artistic and cultural programs for students and faculty. We have presented at college student diversity orientations and use various forms of art including music, storytelling and poetry to discuss topics on diversity. Ga-li programs opened the door for me to work with many diverse learning communities. This life project has been an amazing experience because, we have been able to plant seeds of change and years later, we still hear about those students and the changes they are helping to make happen in their communities and careers.

Can you share with us examples of what makes you proud?

Well, I am most proud of my children and family for their amazing capacity to Survive, to Stand up for what they believe and are not be afraid to share Love and Compassion despite the struggles. My daughter serves as The League of United Latin American Citizens—Dayton Vice Pres. and my husband and son are active council members as well. This is true for many LULAC members we teach our families to give back as well! A small description, it was founded in 1929, and is the largest and oldest Hispanic organization in the United States. LULAC advances the economic condition, educational attainment, political influence, housing, health and civil rights of Hispanic Americans through community-based programs operating at more than 1,000 LULAC councils nationwide. The organization involves and serves all Hispanic nationality groups.

My proudest moments, as a professional are when I hear back from students that I have worked with in the past. Re-connecting with students and learning about their careers and accomplishments is a source of great joy. When they come up to me and say, “I remember learning that song from you” or “I continued to take Cultural Studies and now work for social change as an educator or public servant, because of you. Knowing that I/We had the opportunity to shed light or perspectives that had a positive effect in students’ lives makes me feel a sense of purpose and pride. I am also proud of the fact that my work has always kept me involved in the community; whether its teaching in my classroom, storytelling or mural projects, I have always linked the learning to real world application with community. Having my work supported is necessary and humbling. I could not provide the kind of authentic service-learning experiences for my students without community resources such as LULAC, Welcome Dayton, the many Non-Profit organizations, colleges and universities, Trotwood Schools and of course, OCHLA. My students have shared their voices as workshop presenters in professional settings and held counsel with legislators, because of awesome community partners engaged in my classrooms...and what’s not to be proud of that!



What are you looking forward to now?

Like I mentioned before, I look forward to this new generation of activists and storytellers to take their place. I believe in the possibility of people from many different backgrounds having the opportunity to grow together and learn from each other. I honestly think we can contribute greatly to that understanding by taking the time to share our histories, to remind others of our ancestors' stories, although a bit different still carry the same unwavering desire to raise stronger families and sustain stronger communities.

As LULAC State Director, I also look forward to the work we will do to support our Hispanic/ LatinX communities around the State with programs such as the upcoming Latino Health Summit October 8th.

Engaging focus in the upcoming election process and the 2020 Census. I am excited to work with LULAC National to help share information and resources to support strong community advocacy. I am currently helping develop a collaboration between the Dolores Huerta Foundation in California and LULAC National. An alliance between these two legacy organizations will provide resources in leadership and civic engagement training for our members.

We hope to be a resource and inspire our Hispanic/LatinX families in community self-empowerment. Again, the LULAC motto is All for one and One for all. No one group can do this work alone, we all must work together. I look forward to continued work with groups like Welcome Dayton's, Rapid Response group, Latinos Unidos, the Hispanic Chamber, Del Pueblo Inc. Dayton international Festival, Paco and Los Mariachis who help to support our students and annual LULAC Scholarship Program.

We need all our community organizations to work together and empower one another. That is why I am humbly grateful to be in this role to help advocate for my community. Especially in this time of the Woman. We are fortunate as women to serve in a leadership capacity. There are so many amazing women we can look to for mentorship/leadership. As, I continue to learn and grow as an engaged citizen, I will always strive to reach forward while, extending my other hand to help the next. We help each other, that's what familia does... "All for One and One for All" !

I am just one person, a complex human being, very grateful to have a voice to speak on behalf of my big beautiful diverse community. Gracias OCHLA y mi comunidad!

