

Maria Tells Her Story

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As evidenced by the Latino Health Task Force Report, Latinos living in North Carolina face numerous challenges when seeking healthcare services. Those of us who have had the privilege to serve Latinos in clinics and hospitals have been witnesses to the drama that unfolds every day for these families. Navigating through our healthcare system can be a very taxing process for Latino immigrants. In order to fully understand these difficulties, sometimes it's best to let the people tell their story. It is with this thought in mind that we bring you this commentary piece. María and Jesús live in North Carolina. María tells her story to a nurse who speaks Spanish. Although these characters are entirely fictional, the events described here—and many others like them—have taken place all across the state and the country. Any similarities to actual people living or deceased is purely coincidental.

Introduction

I CAME TO LIVE HERE about ten months ago with my husband, Jesús. I really didn't want to come, but a wife must follow her husband everywhere he goes. We are from the state of Michoacán, in Mexico. His brother, Jacinto, called many times telling us there was a lot of work here. It was hard work, but it was worth the pay. We barely had anything back home, so we came hoping to find a better life here. The three of us live in a trailer in the outskirts of town. It's a very small town, similar to our town back home. But life is very different here. I don't know many people, and I don't speak English. I can understand a little bit, but I really can't speak anything. I'm nineteen, and I only went to school until the sixth grade. My husband and his brother work all day, and I stay at home cleaning the house and cooking for them. I don't go anywhere until they come home because I can't drive, and we need Jacinto's old car if we want to go anywhere. We know a few Mexican families from church, but we don't see them during the week since they live on the other side of town. I was hoping to find a job, but our baby is due to arrive in three months. Jesús felt it would be best for me to stay home. However, since Jesús had his accident, I don't know what we are going to do to support the family.

The Accident

It happened a couple of weeks ago. I was in the kitchen cooking tamales when I heard someone banging on the trailer door. It was Jacinto. Jesús had been hurt. His hand got caught in a machine while he was working in the fields. I could hear his screams of pain coming from the car as I got closer to the trailer door. Their boss was not in town that day, so we were left on our own to figure out what to do. We knew we had to take him to a hospital, but we weren't sure where it was. We decided to find the priest from our church. He was from South America, and he had helped a lot of the new people who spoke Spanish. I was riding in the back of the car with Jesús. He was in so much pain. He had tears coming down his face, and he said to me, "It hurts too much. I can't stand it!" His hand was wrapped with a dirty tee-shirt, covered with bright red blood. When we got to the church the priest wasn't there, but we found Carlos, the church's grounds-keeper. He told us how to get to the hospital, and he said he would let Father Juan know what happened. After circling around for twenty minutes, we found the hospital.

At first we didn't know where to go. All of the signs were written in English. We found the door that read "Emer-

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gency.” Of course, it means “emergencia.” Jacinto almost had to carry Jesús inside. We walked up to a desk where a lady with white hair and glasses was reading. Jesús was still moaning with pain. She said something in English, but we could not understand her words. We all looked at each other, puzzled. She repeated the same words but much louder this time. She said, “Do you speak English?” Fortunately, Jacinto knew a few words. But Jacinto didn’t understand all of her questions, so he kept saying, “His hand. His hand is hurt. Is hurt! We need doctor.” The lady called for someone. A very pretty young woman came out. She said in very broken Spanish, “Come, come inside. You see the doctor.” They placed Jesús on a stretcher and they whisked him to a room. I was very scared for my husband, and I began to cry. He was still screaming with pain, and the shirt around his hand was now filled with blood. I wanted to go with him, but the lady with the glasses would not let me get past her. “¡Pero es mi esposo, él me necesita! (But he is my husband, and he needs me!)” I begged her, but the pretty lady came back and told me in Spanish to wait for a minute.

While I was in the waiting room, I could hear Jesús shouting. We waited for an eternity until they finally let Jacinto and me come back to see him. The doctor had removed the dirty shirt, and Jesús’ hand was on a table with a bright light shining on it. It was covered with blood and I couldn’t see it very well. The doctor was trying to ask us questions in English, but Jacinto could only say a few words back to him. He kept talking in English. We stared at his face intently, hoping to find some meaning in what he was saying. After many unsuccessful attempts to communicate with us, the doctor took a deep breath and began to talk to the nurse. Although we could not understand his words, we could see his face was red, and his voice was stern. We could sense his frustration; we were frustrated, too! He turned away and left the room without saying another word to us. I felt very bad, as if we were a problem. Finally the nurse injected something into Jesús. She said, “Medicina para dolor (*pain medication*).”

After they left, we all looked at each other in silence. I still had tears coming down my face. I had never seen so much blood. Jesús was worried. He said, “How are we going to pay for this? We don’t have dinero (*money*) or aseguranza (*insurance*).” He knows his patrón (*boss*) would not pay for anything that the workers did to themselves at work. But just in our darkest moment, we saw the light. Father Juan walked through the door of the room with the doctor.

The doctor explained to us that Jesús had a very serious injury to his hand. He needed to have surgery, but he had to go to another hospital. They couldn’t help him here. I wondered why they couldn’t do anything for him here. Was it because they knew we didn’t have money or insurance? Was it because we didn’t speak English? Were they sending us off to a worse place? But I didn’t want to say anything to contradict the doctor; I had to trust that he knew what was best for Jesús. I found out much later that we were moved

because they didn’t have a doctor that had the skills to fix his hand. It took a long time to sign all kinds of papers with the help of Father Juan. The nurses loaded Jesús in an ambulance and sent him to Big City hospital. We couldn’t ride with him, so we had to go in Jacinto’s car in order to get there. Jacinto was nervous. He had heard of Big City, but he had never been to the hospital there. With directions from Father Juan we started toward the hospital. It was ninety miles away from our town. After first getting lost in Big City, we finally got to the hospital three and a half hours later.

The Hospital

The hospital in Big City was the biggest place I have ever seen. Again, all of the signs were in English, and we had no clue where to begin looking in such a big place. Fortunately, we ran into a Peruvian man who worked in housekeeping. He helped us find out where Jesús was and told us how to get to him. I spent the night with Jesús while doctors came in and out of the room with interpreters. Many doctors didn’t look at us when they spoke; they kept talking to the interpreter. I felt as if we were not part of the conversation. One of the doctors who came was laughing as he spoke to the interpreter, but I didn’t understand why. We weren’t laughing. Jesús was very sick.

It was almost two in the morning when I began to feel faint. I had not eaten anything for twelve hours. To be honest, I was starving; but we hadn’t brought any money. Even if we had money, I wouldn’t have known where to go, or how to ask for directions if I got lost in this big place. Jesús was asleep and Jacinto had gone back home. When the nurse came in, she looked at me closely. She said something in English. I shook my head; I didn’t want to be a bother to her. But then, I thought about my baby. If I starved, he would starve, too. So I gathered all of my courage, placed my hand on my belly, and said, “Tengo hambre (*I’m hungry*).” The nurse gave me a puzzled look and said, “Uno momento.” Half an hour later an interpreter came, and they were able to get me something to eat. Three hours later, they took Jesús to surgery. The doctors were able to fix his hand, but they told us he wouldn’t be able to use it like he did before. Several days later, we prepared to take him home.

A doctor came to see us on the day we were going home. He didn’t have an interpreter with him. He walked in with a big smile and said, “¡A la casa hoy! ¡Muy bueno!” He started to say something in English, but he gestured for us to wait. He said, “Interpreter.” We had a lot of questions. What about his hand? What was going to happen now? Would we be able to leave the hospital? In our country you can’t leave the hospital until you pay your bill. The doctor acted as if he was in a hurry, so I kept quiet. When he came back with the interpreter he told us that Jesús could have the stitches taken out by his doctor at home. I wondered how we would do that, since we didn’t know any doctors back home. Again,

we kept quiet listening to the doctor. It would be rude to interrupt him. He gave us the prescriptions, and told us how Jesús should take them. He told us to call if Jesús had more pain, or his wound got infected. But how would we call him? We can't speak English. I was so overwhelmed with all that was going on, I forgot the instructions the doctor gave us for the medications.

After the Hospital

When we got back home, Jacinto had to go by three pharmacies in order to find the medicines. They cost \$115, all of one week's savings. And what was our surprise when we saw the bottles? The instructions were in English! We had to find Father Juan so he could explain the instructions and write them down on a piece of paper for us. I was exhausted; this had all been very difficult for me.

The days passed, and the bills started coming; we didn't know what to do. The bills were thousands of dollars, more than what Jesús would make in a year. Three days before Jesús needed to have his stitches taken off, his hand began to look redder and puss was oozing from the wound. We tried calling the phone number the doctor gave us, but we got a recorded message in English that we couldn't understand. We tried going to see a doctor in town, but the first time we went he couldn't see us because we didn't bring an interpreter. The second time we got our 16-year-old friend

from church to come with us. But this time they told us we would have to pay in order for Jesús to see the doctor. \$75 dollars! We only had \$40, so we didn't have a choice. We turned around and went home. Jesús had not worked in many days; we were barely making ends meet with what little money Jacinto earned from his job. Just when we thought we had no way out, our Lady of Guadalupe gave us the answer. Carlos, the church's grounds-keeper, found out there was a free clinic for people who have no money. We got an appointment the next day. We traveled two hours in Jacinto's car and found the free clinic. That's how we got here.

The doctor here is very nice. Although he is American, he speaks Spanish. Immediately he gave us so much *confianza* (*trust*). He looked at us when he spoke, he treated us with *respeto* (*respect*), and he listened to all our questions. He made us feel welcome, like we mattered to him. He was going to call the doctor in Big City Hospital to let him know about the infection. He also gave Jesús more medicine for the infection, but we didn't have to pay for it. Thank goodness, because we don't have much money left.

We still don't know what will happen in the future. Solo Dios sabe... (*Only God knows*). We will have to wait and see if Jesús will be allowed back to work. Jacinto will keep supporting us. Perhaps I can find a job until we have the baby. But we will keep going. We'll do the best we can. I hope we can stay here in the United States. Our baby can have a better life here than he will ever have back home in Mexico.

Original Research: A Call for Papers

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