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Narrating Social Change

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### Oral History with My Dad

*My dad was a skinny, small boy, built much like my sister when she was 14. He was raised by his grandma in a house of 15 other kids. My grandpa, who I remember as an ancient and wrinkly, dark brown man, with a landing strip between his gray curls, said my dad had a "good demon" in him. This good demon is why my grandpa was never scared for my dad, the demon knew how to fight. At 14, my dad would see older guys come to his complex and throw up signs with their hands--not knowing what this meant. These men were mean, they came to bully the kids he grew up with, and after they called him a bitch--my dad was ready to fight.*

When I was 14 I lived in Bonhill, across from this forest area where I would ride my bike with my brothers. I first got involved in the Latin Kings when some older guys would visit their cousin who lived here. They threw up signs, which at that point I didn't really understand the meaning of. They would be rude, kinda like a "bully" and would say stuff to the other kids. The second or third time they came back to visit I got tired and confronted them. It was over petty shit, I think the official thing might have been that one of the guys called me a bitch. We decided to fight one v one. I was a real good fighter so I beat him, he must have been 18-19 at the time, but we shook hands after like men. I think the older guy who was with him liked how I fought, so he asked if I wanted to join them. He said I could have my own chapter of the Latin Kings and that I could become an Inca, I didn't really know what all that meant but it sounded cool--I was kinda just a kid.

It was just three of us at first, me and two buddies of mine. The older guys would come back a few times over the next two or so months. They taught us about kingism and we slowly started recruiting more kids. Eventually they stopped coming but we kept going. My mom and us moved around a lot and we left Bonhill and moved to Rosewood but the other guys kept it up back there. I recruited some of the guys in the Rosewood, and we'd move around like that recruiting people. When I was about 16, yeah I think it was about two years later, we started living in Rand Grove. By then between the guys in Rangrove, Rosewood, Bonhill--and I wasn't the only one who moved too, some of the other guys moved to Streamwood and Rolling Meadows and started recruiting guys there--we ended up at that point with 179 Kings in our chapter. I think the city guys got a little nervous because the guy who initiated me didn't tell the other guys about us. He had the power to do what he did, but I guess he wasn't supposed to make me an Inca right away. That's when they decided to officially recognize us as a chapter called the Palatine Latin Kings and made me an official Inca. We started having to go to state and national meetings, I met all the older guys from the city. Their names were, well I guess we didn't know their real names, it was more like everyone had their King name.

By then everyone knew me, I'd have to go everywhere solving the other guys stuff. I made a rule where only a few of us could fight, pretty much just our best fighters, and we'd go around and keep the peace--it was called the golden crush.

*Listening to my dad, I remember how till this day anywhere we go he seems to know somebody. I also think of the stories my mom told me about guys apologizing for hitting on her after figuring out she was dating my dad, or how when someone bullied my uncle my mom could walk up to the bully, tell him to leave him alone, and there'd never be a problem again. It's weird to think that I'm somewhat a product of this, after all my parents only met because my dad knew*

*people from Rolling Meadows, because he was a King, and stopped to ask my mom if she knew where Stacy's locker was. It's weirder to feel the process of remembering this period in my dad's life, I sit and talk to him about it and he's not uncomfortable but it is more like a printer getting a bit jammed but still printing. There's some pauses, some consideration, a bit of tension and then the next sentence. Eventually my dad wouldn't be gangbanging anymore, but to get there it got worse first. Palatine was--and in some ways still is--a very racist town. My dad doesn't like to talk about it that way, he doesn't like to feel like he's thinking like a victim, he always finds a way to make a joke instead. But that doesn't take away from my tia's experience having bars of soap thrown at them for being so called dirty beaners. For better or worse, there is a saying in our family that translates to "the Balderas got inside of him/her," which just means we get mad, might turn into someone else, and translate some putasos for a racist. It was a moment like this that led my dad to get kicked out of highschool.*

I was in my last year of highschool, your tio Luis was kind of quiet, he was a very nice kid. There was this Skinhead--nazi follower guy--who was also the star football player, one day he attacked Luis for wearing a bandana. He busted Luis's head into the vending machine in the middle of lunch, by the time I ran over the staff and everyone had taken him away. Luis ended up getting suspended for three days and the skinhead guy didn't get in trouble. The next time we saw each other was after gym class a few weeks later, he said we could fight as soon as the bell rang. I ended up breaking his jaw and his nose, then I went to class. I saw your tia on the way there and high fived her, I told her I got him. I got called down to the principal's office shortly after and he told me I was automatically expelled, then he started antagonizing me and told the school officer I was threatening to shoot him. The officer, Mr. Pass, liked me so he calmed me

down and walked me outside to the school fence. I started crying because I was only two months away from graduating.

Later on I started working laying Carpets. My boss, he was this white guy, and he told me, “why are you laying carpets”, that I was too smart for that. I told him my story and he goes “man, I’ll pay you a dollar more if you get your GED”. Time had already passed, I was 20 at that point, I told him hell yeah I’ll go get my GED. I had to take this test to see what level you're at before starting. Well I ended up getting almost a perfect score, because I was actually pretty good at school when I was in highschool. So anyways, I ended up not having to go to any of the classes, except one of the maths. So I went to the GED program at Harper college, and when I was going to get my GED test, this lady named Juanita Bassler--she was Puerto Rican--came in the class and picked a few people. I guess there was this grant, they called it the “Latino Grant” and they wanted poor people like Latino kids from the poor community like you know, low income they call it. Obviously I was low income. She talked to me and goes, “hey how are you? I know you’re going to do pretty good at this test, they recommended you, that you should be able to pass” she said that if I did pass she’d reach out to me about the program. I ended up passing and she kept to her word and called me, came to Rand Grove to get my address and stuff, we talked and she told me if I was interested in college. I said not really, that I was working and since I got my GED they’d pay me a dollar more. She explained to me what the program was and that they’d pay for the college and give me two thousand dollars per semester to spend on books, food or whatever I needed. And I was like, wait so your saying that if I go to college--and it was a community college--you’ll pay my tuition and pay me to go? She said yeah so I ended up going to college. That changed my life because at that point I was super involved in the Latin kings and that life was the only mindset I had, but she instilled this opportunity in me and that changed my

mindset. I graduated two years later and then what happened was because I graduated with a 3.9/4.0, she made me interview in the Daily Herald, because they wanted success stories to build out the program. I ended up then transferring to Loyola and they gave me a full ride, but that really changed my life.

After 8 years as an Inca I had done enough service and had an opportunity to better my life, so I became the “new king,” which is kinda the “highest” position a king can have where you technically still are part of it but you don’t really stay involved anymore. I passed the chapter on to the next inline, and made him the new Inca. He wasn’t a charismatic kind of guy, and people would be upset at him because he would give people violations over petty shit. One of my friends made a renegade chapter and called it the P-Town Latin Kings instead of the Palatine Latin Kings. That's when things started getting out of hand, the guys would get involved with drugs and stupid shit we hadn’t really done before and now there was a renegade chapter of the Latin Kings. Anyway they would still get along mainly, but eventually there was a murder committed between the renegade ones. The cousin of one of them was part of the original gang, and they were looking for him because they were afraid he was going to snitch, so they ended up tricking two of the ones from the regular Latin Kings. I had come home from college that day and I had seen them, the other guys invited them to a party and they told me about it, and said “hey do you want to go to this party,” and I had just come home from Loyola and every weekend I would hangout with them but this time it felt different. I told them I’d just stick around instead. The next day we found out that they had been murdered and that there was no party, they had just tricked them.

The story goes they just wanted to get some information to find out where this other cousin was, but nobody knew because he was in hiding, and that they had tied them up and

started beating them. Someone accidentally took it too far and broke one of the kids' trachea, and then they panicked and killed the other guy to try to stop him from snitching. They had just killed their friends, because as weird as it sounds, we were a really close knit community. Most of them were just kids too, the youngest one involved was about 16. After that no one trusted it anymore and the different sections of the chapters dissolved, which to be honest with you ended up changing the community for the better. It stopped that mindset, of what I would consider a street label, where you're supposed to behave based on the street label, and we fall under the facade of living under something that's of importance, but not when you really look at it, and it took their betrayal to open a lot of these kids eyes. We were all young. After that the tone in the community changed, nobody trusted anybody and the connectedness we used to share was gone, and there was so much pain. Before that there were really no tragic events, we wouldn't allow stuff like that to happen, there were fights here and there--but that day when our own killed our own, that's it, it made everyone see it's not worth it. Even your good friends under a label, thought they had to protect their Kingism and their new leader had commanded them to find out where the "snitch" was and it was his cousin anyways. Instead of ever getting to their cousin, they killed two of our friends. That woke us up, we were young teenage kids, and that woke us up and made us realise it's not all fun and games, that life has to be taken serious. From that point forward I just stayed in Loyola, and never came back.