

Jose Vallejo

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Alumni Senior Writing Contest - 2016

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"Okay, ya llegamos¹," my mom said as she parked her Honda Odyssey in front of the ~~gray~~ metallic gates of Saint Augustine High School. With a backpack full of books, my right hand firmly holding my lunchbox, and my left hand gripping my schedule, I got off the car and shakingly took my first steps into Saints. As I nervously made my way up to Mr. Sipper's classroom, I constantly kept repeating to myself, "Tu puedes²," as a way of seeking solace and motivation. But little did I know that these two words would become my slogan throughout my high school career. Anyway, as soon as the clock hit 7:45 followed by the horrible bell and everyone standing up for prayer, my rigorous, evocative, and sleep-deprived journey began, but as a fourteen-year-old boy, I was only hopeful as I pumped myself up with my self-proclaimed mantra, "Tu puedes."

If you couldn't tell by now, I am one of the few Mexicans that attends Saints. I am also one of the few that wakes up at 5:00 a.m. every morning to cross the border so I can get to school on time. For many of my peers, the Mexican community at Saints was their first introduction to latinos. As something completely foreign to them, my peers wanted to learn about us, about Mexico, and about crossing the border. But no matter how hard we tried to relate with one another, there is one underlying factor that separates us: language. Of course we speak English, but it's not natural to us. So, as the saying goes, birds of a feather flock together, and that is exactly what we did. In a place where it was "fascinating, weird, and different" to speak in Spanish, the few Mexicans created a space where all of us could be "Tijuanenses³" in 32nd and Nutmeg Street. This group bonded us together, but at the same time, separated us from the majority of Saints. This did not really matter during my first two years at Saints. As freshmen, we are all nervous, anxious, and at the bottom of the high school pyramid. As sophomores, we

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are, as Mr. Hecht described it, in our "awkward stage of high school." This unintentional separation between Mexicans and Americans, however, affected me the most during my last two years at Saints. As I finished up my sophomore year of high school, I knew that I had to step my game up during junior year. I enrolled in as many AP classes as I could and prepared myself for the most important year at Saints, but I was not only challenged academically, I was also challenged racially.

Excited to hear that I would be able to take AP United States History, I attended the mandatory meeting held by Mr. da Luz where he explained to us what was expected if we took this class. Reading the syllabus on my way out, I was stopped by another sophomore who attended the meeting. "Hey," he said in an abrupt manner. Before I could even look at who it was, the boy said, "You shouldn't be taking APUSH. Stop trying to learn about my country and focus on your own." I laughed, looked at him and said, "You're kidding, right?" The look he had on his face told me he wasn't. Thinking I was overreacting I asked him again, "You ARE kidding, are you?" With the same stern expression, he answered, "Stop trying to be American and go back to Mexico." That was it. The first time my race determined what I could/should be doing. As I walked towards my locker, I repeated the words that started it all, "Tu puedes." Unfortunately, comments concerning my race did not stop. After pulling an all-nighter studying for my Honors Pre-Calculus midterm, I was taking a nap during homeroom. I woke up after one of my peers asked me why I was so tired. After explaining to him why I did not sleep at all, he laughed in a condescending manner. "YOU are taking Pre-Calculus? Yeah right!" Tired and unwilling to deal with white supremacist ignorance, I opened my backpack, took out my Pre-Calc book, and put it in front of him. From laughter to complete and utter shock, the guy mocking me

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suddenly saw me in a different light, but still not a good one. "Oh my God," He exclaimed, "you are my hero! You are actually a smart Mexican! I thought all Mexicans were lazy and unwilling to work." On the bright side, I was able to destroy his stereotype that Mexicans are not smart, but his comment told me that he may not be the only one who feels this way. However, the comment that motivated me to work the way I work to this day was said to me at the end of my first semester of my junior year. As I stated earlier, I took as many AP's possible. This was my first time dabbling into the Advanced Placement world and I managed to finish my first semester with a 4.15. Not necessarily happy about my grades, one of my classmates tried to cheer me up by saying, "Hey, for a Mexican, this is a great achievement." By that time, I heard almost everything that could be said about my race. Motivated to prove these stereotypes and people wrong, I reduced my sleep time to two-three hours and replaced hours of sleep with studying. Coffee became my new best friend as I worked my way towards a 4.5. Racist comments at Saints, as bad and ignorant as they are, pushed me to work in a way I never knew I could. In a way, I am happy that I heard those comments because, unconsciously, they tested me to see if I could, and during those times, all I could say was, "Tu puedes."

College application season, or as I like to call it, the most stressful time of my life thus far, tested my abilities on a whole new level. Bombarded with essays, counselors telling me my SAT score is not good enough, sleep deprived in order to keep my grades up, and looking for scholarships all at the same time drove me insane. From November to the end of December, I was a different person. The stress that came with the first semester of my senior year forced me to turn all of my attention to school. My Thanksgiving "break" consisted of stay up all night for

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two straight days so I could study for my SAT and my SAT Subjects Tests. Academics alone made my last year at Saints difficult, but some of my peers made it worse.

As I said before, the months of November and December were not good times. One of the only reasons I was able to focus in school was due to my caffeine addiction that started the previous year. Fortunately, I did not endure this stress alone. One of my very good friends went through a very similar kind of stress during those two months. We would constantly share our stress levels, how late we stayed up, and discuss what colleges we were going to apply to. One day before block one began, my friend and I were discussing our dream schools. As he explained to me why Stanford was his first choice, another classmate interrupted our conversation and said, "The only reason you'll get into any top ranked school is because you're Mexican and because you have cheated your way to success." As someone who has had to work ten times harder than a white student in order to debunk stereotypes and demonstrate that being Mexican does not impair my ability to learn and succeed, I was more than offended. How dare he say that all my merits, awards, and successes were not earned through hard work. As a minority striving to succeed in a racially structuralized society, I will always have to fight an uphill battle, and comments like these are like bullets trying to stop me from defeating my enemy. Enraged by what he said, I was about to fight back, defending what I have done. Yet, I realized that responding to what he said will only worsen the situation for me. There was no scenario in which I came out victorious since responding to what he said will only prompt him to say more. Instead, I closed my eyes, and repeated to myself, "Tu puedes." I will always encounter people who will attack me for being Mexican, but being proud of who I am and embracing my heritage makes me invulnerable to

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what they say to me. If the only way to "hurt" me is by perpetuating fictitious stereotypes, I do not fear them at all.

Looking back at my Saints experience, I could not have asked for a better four years. During my first two years I made friends that I now consider family and will always remember. Though my race was attacked and questioned for the last two years, pushing through those comments made me a stronger student, a stronger man, a stronger latino, and a stronger Saintsman. My academically challenging curriculum prepared me for what college will throw at me and combined with a new-found pride in who I am, I know that I am prepared to face what lies outside the gates of Saint Augustine High School. So, if there is one thing that Saints taught me, was that I will always be thankful for the end result-yo sí pude.

Translations:

- 1: Okay, ya llegamos= Okay, we're here
- 2: Tu puedes= You can do it
- 3: Tijuanaenses= A citizen of Tijuana, Mexico
- 4: Yo sí pude= I was able to do it