



Video Story Transcript

My Brother's Keeper: A Teenager Works to Free Manuel Salazar from Death Row

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Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OiOmWXDH-k8>

Note : The following is a transcription of a spoken story performance and may not reflect textbook perfect English. It will guide you as you listen (or read) along.

Hello, my name is Jasmin Cardenas.

"He shot a cop!"

"No, he didn't. It says the gun was in the officer's hands when it went off. Some forensics test shows that."

"Then why did he run, Jazz?"

This was my friend Mari and me going back and forth about this young Mexican-American guy. His name was Manuel Salazar and it was 1993. He was on death row and we were sophomores in high school. We were trying to decide if we should tell his story at this young Latino leadership event. Mari wanted to do a merengue dance.

"Come on, Jazz! I think we have enough guys to do a bomb-diggety-sexy merengue!"

“I know, but this guy’s innocent and he’s on death row! We should tell his story. Besides, this would be totally different from anything everybody else is gonna do.”

Our friend and fellow club member, Ali, had met Manuel’s lawyer. She told Ali, that he had international support for his freedom. That there was people from all the world behind him. And that, and that he had been represented by a shady lawyer. This guy who had totally rigged his first trial.

“C’mon, you guys, we should do this. We could, we could tell his story and, and people would be amazed. He was just driving in a car with other Latino and black kids, minding his own business. The cops stopped him for no reason. And then they beat him. And, and now he’s on death row! I mean, we should interview the lawyer. Tell his story.”

“That’s such a downer, Jazz. Why don’t we tell the story of the Taino Indians and we could dance and get costumes! That’s awesome!”

“You guys, this could have been any one of us in the car with our friends.”

Just that summer before, my brother, Favian, and I had been driving down the street and I saw a friend of mine walking down the road. And I laid on the horn to get her attention. When we got through intersection, this car in front of us, a white Caddy, stopped, all crazy about it. And his older white guy, in slacks and a white shirt, came out and was yelling at us, raging mad. He was F this, and F that. You stupid Mexicans, (we’re actually Colombian), Favian started opening the window to explain. And the guy was having none of it. He punched my brother in the nose. Broke his nose. I couldn’t believe it. We, we, we put out a police report. And my parents took him to the Chicago Children’s Hospital and they did nothing. He got away with it.

“This could have been ANY one of US!” I told my girlfriends.

I got them to agree that at least, at least we’d go talk to the lawyer and learn a little more. So, we went to her office.

It was in the Pilsen neighborhood, in Chicago, 18th Street and, uh, Blue Island. There was a big sign, this banner that said, “For the defense of Manuel Salazar,” hanging outside. We got inside and the room was full of people working the phones, doing paperwork. The lawyer, Marlene Kamish, told us all about the case. She told us about how the official police report had stated that the car was suspicious because there were Negroes and Hispanics in the car together. How the, the, the, Manuel had a, a, a gun in his gym bag and, and he was nervous because it was unregistered but he had been target practicing that day. So, he ran from the car with the gym

bag. And how the officer chased him. And when he realized he had nowhere to go, he threw the gym bag, with a gun still inside, over the fence so that the cop wouldn't get the wrong idea. And turned around and surrendered. But then the cops started to beat him. Even as Manuel was saying, "I give, I give!"

And how Manuel had acted in self-defense. The autopsy report shows that there was gunpowder in the officer's hands, proving that the gun was in his hands when it went off. It was starting to feel like a movie. My friends and I were sitting on the edge of our seats, listening silently. Then, Manuel ran after the gun went off. He ended up at his friend's house. He was unrecognizable from the beating. They said he looked like Frankenstein. Then the police department, put a "shoot to kill" order out on his life. Manuel was just 18 years old and scared. He ran to Mexico. And in Mexico, he was sleeping one night, when these masked men came and kidnapped him. They dragged him back to Illinois and couldn't, put him on trial. This violated an extradition treaty between the United States and Mexico. But still, he was put on trial. Meanwhile, he had no idea that his lawyer had been working for the same police department of the officer who had died.

That lawyer failed to represent him and bring in witnesses and even, he didn't even show that critical evidence of the toxicologist report that showed that the officer had a high blood alcohol level, proving that he was drunk. Manuel was convicted and sentenced to death. And while on death row, he found out that that shady lawyer had been disbarred. No longer allowed to practice. Marlene said that the British parliament, Amnesty International, even the Pope, was behind the support to free Manuel Salazar.

She showed us paintings. He had started painting while in prison. He had been doing all of this self-taught. And he painted this beautiful piece called, "My Brother's Keeper." My friends and I all were teary eyed. We were convinced we would tell his story.

We decided to use the facts of his case and we created a play. That and his paintings and his poetry. And we used our bodies as, as characters like the police officers and, and, and the narrator, and, like, the prison bars. And we created a dream sequence where we would show how he ended up on death row. The final line in the play, the last line, was from his poetry his paintings. "Let us stop blinding ourselves to the suffering from others and take the time to care. For I ask you, to ask yourself; Acabo no soy yo el guardian de mi hermano?..Am I or am I not the keeper of my brother?"

The Latino youth leadership organization loved it. We got a standing ovation. Better yet, Marlene Kamish, the lawyer, loved it. She organized new performances for us and we went everywhere with his paintings. We toured public events, private events, Latino events, youth events. We even marched in the Mexican Independence Day Parade with Manuel's mom.

I got more involved. I started volunteering for his case, making phone calls, stuffing fliers. I became pen pals with Manuel. And over the course of a year and a half, we toured his, his production, "Reflections: the story of Manuel Salazar," everywhere his paintings went. And I even got to know him. I visited him in the Pontiac Correctional Center with Marlene. But as things go, senior year hit, and with school, homework, after school clubs, practice for basketball and soccer, and then college applications, I just kind of lost track with Marleen and with Manuel's case.

But then, my junior year in college, Cristo Rey Jesuit High School, a high school predominantly Mexican-American, on the southwest side of the city, in Pilsen, contacted my university. They were looking to add an afterschool drama program. And my professor said that I should take it on as a project. The kids were

fantastic. We had so much fun together and when we were nearing the end of the afterschool program, they wanted to perform. So, I suggested "Reflections" and they loved what it was about. It got me thinking, what had happened to Manuel?

My mom helped me locate Marlene, the lawyer. She was so surprised to hear from me. She said that Manuel had gotten his second trial and he had won and he was, in fact, free. She gave me his phone number. I called him right away. His voice was so soft spoken. He was so calm. He was so happy to hear from me. He told me that he was still living with his mom in Joliet but that the police department was harassing him and his family. They were angry that he'd been released. They, uh, they were harassing so much, that he was thinking of moving out of state. He also told me that his paintings were, were being looked at by people from the Art Institute. I told him about the play. I invited him to come see the show he had never gotten to see. He didn't hesitate. My insides were exploding!

The day of the performance, I sat in the audience - super anxious, feeling like a teenager again. But afterwards, Manuel's eyes were so warm and inviting. He was telling me about how much it meant to him, all that we had done. I couldn't believe it. He was sitting there in the seats of my university with a buttoned-up collar shirt and a big sweater, hiding his muscular body from working out in prison all those years. And yet, his presence was so quiet. "Gracias, Jasmin. I can't believe you did all this. This is something else. Something else."

I might not be the British Parliament and I might not be the Pope but I know that what we did mattered. And to Manuel, while he was standing behind prison bars, what we all did to support him made all the difference. So, yeah, I am my brother's keeper.