



Video Story Transcript

To Live or Not to Live in La Villita, Chicago: A Latina Struggles with Civic Responsibility

By: Storyteller Jasmin Cardenas
www.JasminCardenas.com

Link to YouTube Video:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5NfEXkp68Y>

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.

Hi, my name is Jasmin Cardenas. And this life struggle is part of a larger story.

I am Latina, first generation Columbian-American, and my husband is a first-generation Mexican-American. He was born and raised in La Villita, a vibrant Mexican community on the southwest side of Chicago. He'd still live there if it wasn't for me. His family is there and all his friends are there. I, on the other hand, was born on the north side of the city in a very mixed community of Asians, Latinos, whites. And I wasn't allowed to go to La Villita. When we were younger and we drive into La Villita to visit a mon... one of my mom's friends, she would reach over to us, over our bodies, to manually lock the car doors of our station wagon, when we drove into that community. So, when Jesus insisted that we live there for our first year of marriage, I was very resistant. We lived there for six years and for most of that time, I didn't want to live there. I wanted to move. But then, the charm of the community started to grow on me. And then I started to relax into it. But then I got pregnant. And so, we moved two months before Mateo was born.

But still, as an artist, an educator, and an activist, I still do meaningful work there in La Villita. So, the discussion has come up several times. Should we move back? I don't know. I'm not sure what to do. So, I make two columns. Plus: We move back. Minus: No way, we stay put.

Minus: My familia doesn't want me to move there. "Eso esta muy peligroso por alla!" My mom and dad thinks it's too dangerous.

Plus: Years ago, I used to work with these teen girls and they'd say to me, "Hmm, must be nice to drive in your SUV and then go home while we got to deal with your ideas of peaceful conflict resolution on the streets. What a joke!" They were right. It was totally unfair to the girls. Commitment means being in it for the long haul.

Another plus: My neighbors. My first summer there, I met David. Baggy pants, big white T-shirt, gold chain, beer can in one hand. "You plantin' plants?"

I was on all fours, weeding my front garden. "Yeah. Do you go to school?"

"Nah. Not since I got shot. School's stupid." Major minus, right? But then, Snowmagedon happened. And what happened, I was out there shoveling, and David showed up with his gangbanger, tattooed brother, or no, cousin. They pulled out shovels and shoveled right alongside me. I had assumed the worst, but when I got to know my neighbors, who they really were, I realized, they were amazing. They were a great reason to stay in the neighborhood.

But minus: Pow, pow, pow. Gunshots. A car speeds by, shouts, silence, the air conditioners buzzing. "Jesus, did you hear that?"

"What?" my husband yells from the living room.

"The gunshots. Did you hear that?"

"No, Babe. Those are just fireworks."

"No, I know what I heard." I can't go back to that.

But then another minus: I'm on all hands and knees, all fours, and this big, hairy rat darts across my fingers. Rats the size of cats! And they're everywhere. You can't go outside and hang out in a relaxed summer night without seeing them. I knew that city services weren't the same but was this is an example, they just don't bait the same in La Villita as other parts of the city? I don't know. I wanna fight for equality in city services but I could, could I move back to living with rats? Funny thing is, I left the rats on the south side but on the north side we have snakes. Another plus: My neighbor, my neighbor kids, they couldn't believe that I was 28 years old and still didn't have kids. It hits me. I can be an example that you don't have to be 18 with kids. I mean, when I was growing up, didn't I have examples of, of people that helped me make it? When I was in high school, I had a 4.0 GPA. But when I went to my African-American counselor to tell her that I wanted to apply to colleges, she suggested that I apply to one city college.

"Set realistic expectations," she told me.

This Latina, from a youth leadership organization, she told me to apply to as many colleges as I could. And she even gave me vouchers to, to, so that I didn't have to deal with the application fees. My neighbor kids, they're just like me. I should live there. I should stand up for them.

But the minus: I have this friend who lives a block over from our old house in La Villita. Her brother was sitting on the front porch. He's, he was college bound, college, a college student and now he was in rehab. He got shot while sitting on his front porch. It scares me to think that I could be walking down the block with Mateo in a stroller and bullets might fly. I mean, that's not safe for him but it's also not safe for my neighbor kids. But what's safe?

Growing up in a nice, safe, middle-class neighborhood, my friend Socarri got shot. He was college bound and he lit up the hallways of Lane Tech with his smile. And now he's gone, mistaken for a gangbanger. So, what's safe? Is there just safer? What if Old Irving Park, where I live now, is safer but it's not safe enough?

But Plus: I want Mateo to speak Spanish. I want him to be surrounded by our cultura, Español, in the smells and sounds of Latino life. La Villita, you can buy tamales on the street for a buck. Kids grow up with their cousins, surrounded by familia. I want him to be just one of the brown kids on the block. Not the only brown kid on the block.

Minus: No, no. Plus: I don't know. You decide. One of my neighbors in La Villita, a friend of ours, Rob. He almost had his house firebombed. These gangbangers threw a firebomb on his front porch and instinctively, he went outside to confront them. He told them that this was his house and his block and he wasn't going anywhere and they couldn't scare him. And him and his wife, they didn't run away. Instead they started a mentorship sports program that reclaimed city parks and gave it, and returned it back to the neighborhood. I should do that. I should be like him.

The thing is, I tried. One summer, while I was living in La Villita. I ran a summer theatre arts camp. But the minus is that nobody showed up. Well, not nobody. None of the kids that I ran the camp for, my neighbor kids, not a single family showed up. But the plus is that all the kids who did show up loved it and they loved learning about being green and performing. With the minuses is that I ran the camp two blocks over from my house. And I didn't know that when you pass Central Park, you pass gang territory. But the plus is that now I lived there, so I know that. If I hadn't lived there, I wouldn't have that. And now I could plan around that. So, I don't know.

I tried dividing my decision into two columns. But it's, it's, it's mind boggling. And my mind, it's spinning. Both neighborhoods have pluses and minuses and maybe I should move back to the old neighborhood. We have great friends, doing hard work towards change. But I've gotten to know some of my new neighbors and they're really nice. And it's so peaceful here. But...I should be a person that works towards the betterment of our community. How do I make choices so that I'm doing what is best for my family and keeping us safe but also living up to my expectations for life, my values? How do I change the world without being a sellout? Ultimately, I'm left with questions. Bigger and better questions.