



Interview at Long Beach Public Library

"If it weren't for that book, what would it be like for me? Where would I be?"

Hutx Colunga, a middle school teacher at Long Beach Unified, Tracy Colunga, Chief Innovation Officer with the City of Long Beach, and their 10-year-old son, Quetzal talk about the books that have impacted their lives. They advocate the importance of books and share how the well-placed words in stories can be very influential.

Hutx: I truly would not even be in my profession, if it were not for a book that I read and like completely altered my life. I had really really difficult times in school until I was challenged by, you know, some adults in my life, after graduating at almost 20 years old. Once I learned to read, the first real book that I read was *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and I remembered, just distinctly, how he talked about copying the dictionary word for word, while he was incarcerated, and how he never really understood when people read something, could see pictures and images, until he really increased his vocabulary. He began to read and was challenged by people that were locked up with him. And so, while reading that, I was like, "man, like, finally!" in my head, it kind of clicked, and I began visualizing and seeing things that I never saw before in reading a book. It was like a turning point for me. Almost like, I want to be that one person to stir the mind of somebody and be a facilitator of learning and share my story and share, you know, the struggles that I had as a student. If it weren't for that book, like what would it be for me, you know? Really, where would I be? It's just amazing to me now that I have a degree. To think that Mrs. Diaz, my 12th-grade year, said that there would be a cold day in hell before I'd ever graduate from a college.

Tracy: [laughter]

Hutx: But thanks to Malcolm X, like, that's amazing to me that a book can have that much impact on someone's, you know, education. Is there any book that you have that—

Tracy: Well, I was going to ask you a question. How old were you when you actually learned how to read? Like, for real, learned how to read?

Hutx: 20, 22.

Quetzal: How did you get through with not reading when you were in elementary school?

Hutx: So, I basically just cheated off of everyone and then I got caught. So, after 6th grade, being caught, you know, that's basically when everything went downhill from there. I never would ask for help. Any time I was called on to read, I would act a fool in class and get kicked out. So, to answer your question, I would just cheat, unfortunately. It's kind of embarrassing to tell your son that. You better not cheat. So, Quetzal, is there any book that's impactful?

Quetzal: There are a few books, Actually. There's *Treasure Hunters*. That's what I'm reading right now.

Hutx: Mhm.

Quetzal: And then there's *Nerds*.

Hutx: Oh, yeah.

Quetzal: I really like that book.

Hutx: Like, what's so great about that book?

Quetzal: It's teenage kids that are spies and then they save people. And, yeah, I just, I just really like it.

Hutx: That's cool. Any book that's ...

Tracy: That's crazy. That's cool.

Hutx: ...impactful to you?

Tracy: Probably—I'm going to cry. Okay. I just got sentimental.

Hutx: [laughter]

Tracy: *House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros. It was the first time that I felt like the author understood me and that there was somebody who spoke the same language. So, Sandra Cisneros grew up in the south side of Chicago, which was, you know, not too far. I grew up in South Bend, Indiana. You know, being Chicana Latina, growing up in the Midwest and just talking about things like the food and the cold winters and her sister that had this crazy hair;

there were so many things about her story that resonated with me. You know, it was cool how she uses words to describe her family, how she grew up, her environment and it never made things sound bad. Like, she has a poem about tamales and tacos. It was so cool because none of it was ever demeaning or being embarrassed about her culture but like really celebrating it. I just remembered, like, reading it and feeling validated as a woman, as a Chicana, as a Latina, as an educated woman. It validated me as a person. So, it definitely had a huge impact on me.