



AN ENCOUNTER BETWEEN TWO YOUNG MEN

I DIDN'T KNOW

I held my breath as I watched Mynor and Jason take their seats across the table from each other. They had just filled their plates with homemade tamales, rice, beans, mole, and cactus salad. They sat together because I told them to. Jason was in a class I teach at an agricultural university. This dinner was part of their final. Mynor was a recently arrived unaccompanied minor from Guatemala. Both have given me permission to share their story.



Prior to this dinner in class, we discussed everything we learned about the Spanish language and the culture of Hispanic workers in US agriculture. My students are the children of the owners of greenhouses, dairy farms, orchards, etc. that employ Spanish-speaking workers. Immediately, Jason and his friends were negative about the dinner. Public comments included: "Why do we have to have to eat with them?" "I don't want to talk to illegals." "I'll just come with ICE." "I won't go at all."

So, watching Mynor and Jason sit together made me question what I was doing. The 20 students and 23 agricultural workers from Mexico, Guatemala, and Honduras all with varying abilities in English and Spanish began to eat together and try to make conversation. The Mexican woman who made the tamales laughed as a couple of students tried to bite the corn husks and told them in Spanish how to eat the tamales while she showed them. They quickly got it and enjoyed their food.

Mynor and Jason had their phones on the table and their food half-eaten pushed aside. They used their translation apps to communicate and were also watching a music video. Both finished their food, cleared their places, and excused themselves because they were both going to different dairy farms to milk cows for the next eight hours.

When I opened the students' written finals I again held my breath. Jason's first line was very clear, "I am sorry. I didn't know." With permission, I share the rest.

I didn't know that this experience would impact me so much. I was wrong and I apologize. Everyone at the dinner was so kind and helpful. No one laughed at us or our Spanish. Everyone really appreciated that we tried the food and tried Spanish. How many times have I laughed at workers who didn't speak English?

But, I am shocked about Mynor. Thank you for putting us together. I didn't know a 15-year-old could come here alone. He worked more hours than I did that night. Did you know he went to his high school in the morning after he got off work? He went home, showered, ate, took a 40-minute nap, and went to class. I slept until noon. All night we sent messages to each other in bad Spanish and bad English. We sent links to the music we liked. I sent pictures of my farm and he sent pictures of his home and family in Guatemala. I didn't know people could be so poor, work so hard and still be so positive and have goals. He came here with nothing. He told me you gave him food and clothes because he had nothing. Now he goes to school and wants to help his family.

Mynor told me about coming here. I didn't know people walked for hours and then hopped on a train, which is really dangerous. He held on in the pouring rain. He laughed about it and put smiley emojis!! He tried to cross the border three times and couldn't make it. On the fourth time, they were captured by ICE after walking 30 hours in the desert. ICE yelled at him, pushed him, and made him stay in a freezing room for days with really no bathroom and old food. I didn't know they could do that. Then, his uncle paid for his plane ticket here and you registered him for school. I couldn't do that. He said he didn't go to school for a couple of years because his parents needed him to work. Now he is milking cows at night, going to school and learning English. I don't know how he can do it.

Mynor is 15. He supports himself. He pays rent and buys and cooks food. I thought people came here to take jobs and get benefits. But, Mynor is working. He shouldn't. He should be a kid. Now he is always working, taking care of himself and sending money home. **I didn't know any of this.**

Why didn't I know?

~ Jenny Fisher

