

Rim of the New World Dreaming Against the Odds 'Today I Feel Like I Want to Do Something With My Life'

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Nallely Ortiz and her son, Sebastian.
(Photo credit: Sarah L. Voison /The Washington Post)

ATLANTA -- Nallely Ortiz watches her mother in a cloud of steam at the stove. Her mother knows only a few words of English. She sweeps the carpet with a broom, as if they still lived in a dusty *colonia* in Mexico instead of an apartment across from a Waffle House in suburban Atlanta.

Her mother offers vague advice -- school will give you a good future -- but she doesn't really understand what it takes.

"She's all back in the day," says Nallely, who is 16 and knows exactly what it takes. You wear bent glasses to a high school populated by creamy Abercrombie & Fitchies who blow right past you in the hallways. They think your destiny is a maid's uniform at the Red Roof Inn. *Bienvenido*, announces a sign hanging in the school hallway, in a gesture to the thousands of Nallely Ortizes who suddenly fill classrooms across the South.

Nallely has pierced America in ways her mother can't imagine, been subjected more closely to its cruelties and its glittering temptations. Pigs feet boil on the stove. Nallely pines for Bed Bath & Beyond. "This place is getting on my nerves," she says.

In the South, someone new is trying to move up from the bottom. She has long brown hair, all nutmeg and hazel, born in Mexico but raised on Chick-fil-A and hopes of reaching the American middle class.

Bienvenido.

Nallely arrived in Atlanta in 1991. The city had its Deep South delicacies and its waxy magnolias, but if you were a new arrival from Mexico, the idea of Dixie meant nothing. This was the place for jobs, in one blinding low-wage landscape: Olive Garden, Nail

Xpress, Vacuum World, Superhair, Two Minute Car Wash, Big K, Mattress Plus, jobs that went on forever, or at least as far as your mother's car could drive without breaking down.

Nallely's parents came to Georgia with 326,000 other Latinos, more than half from Mexico. California and Texas were already settled out. The South was an open frontier. Atlanta had the 1996 Olympics and a construction boom.

Half the Latinos who start high school in Georgia do not graduate with their classmates.

There was Sheetrock to be hung, restaurant dishes that needed washing -- and suddenly some public schools were 30 percent Latino, with low-income parents who spoke no English and teachers who spoke no Spanish.

One of the consequences, in miniature: At an eighth grade awards assembly last year at Sequoyah Middle School in the Atlanta suburb of Doraville, the gymnasium rocked with Destiny's Child's "Survivor" as a procession of black, Asian and white students strode to the podium, parents applauding from the bleachers. The school was 48 percent Latino, but few were in the gym that morning. Across campus, seven of the eight students in the suspension trailer were Latinos.

The ascent to the middle class does not come easily. Half the Latinos who start high school in Georgia do not graduate with their classmates. In the 1990s, the teen birth rate for Latinas in the state jumped 50 percent, according to the state's public health department; it dropped 30 percent for black girls and 1 percent for white girls.

Against this scenery, Nallely Ortiz makes her moves. Her name is pronounced *Na-YEL-ee*. Slouchy and henna-streaked, she has a calculated air of indifference. When she smiles, she catches herself, and her face reverts to a sort of beautiful blankness. She is really a shy person, burdened by an awareness that she's a dweller on the lowest economic rung.

She has long brown hair, all nutmeg and hazel, born in Mexico but raised on Chick-fil-A and hopes of reaching the American middle class.

She speaks English with an easy southern drawl and guzzles sweet tea like a Georgia native. One of her favorite books is "To Kill a Mockingbird." Home is an \$800-a-month, two-bedroom apartment north of Atlanta in a limbo land called unincorporated Sandy Springs.

She crowds in with five siblings, Pampers, monster toy trucks and a little sister watching "Selena" for the 100th time. Nallely prefers the Deftones and Radiohead.

She doesn't like going with her mother to the Buford Highway Flea Market, a 70,000-

square-foot immigrant colossus thumping with *norteñas* and knock-off consumer goods. "That place is for people who like Nike with two k's," Nallely says. "It's for the new-arrives." But here is her American life, nine years after arriving: Her parents are divorced, and her mother sells Mexican snacks off the porch of their apartment. The family breadwinner is Nallely's oldest brother, Ruben, a full-time cook at Houston's. Brawny and red-cheeked, Ruben is the one who advises Nallely and her siblings on which classes to take or what forms to fill out. Ruben is in the 11th grade.

Their apartment gives almost no clues that four of its inhabitants attend high school: no plaques, no trophies, no books; just a painting Nallely did for art class. The primal fixation of the house is money, counted and recounted, stuffed in envelopes and bras. On a good day, the snack stand can bring in \$75. Nallely's mother also caters dinner for a neighbor who comes over after work in his muddy boots, exchanging a \$10 bill for a pan covered in foil.

Like an estimated half of the Mexican population in the South, Nallely is undocumented.

Like an estimated half of the Mexican population in the South, Nallely is undocumented. Papers or no papers -- her family's legal status is pending with INS -- she is as woven into life here as any other 16-year-old citizen. On the Fourth of July, she can be found eating hot wings under the Confederate faces carved into Stone Mountain.

Even with a large family helping her, her future is under no one's particular watch. Her mother is more preoccupied with survival than with pushing homework. Nallely's father lives out of state. Her brother Ruben is stretched too thin. "I can't help her as much as I'd like," Ruben frets. "I have my schedule, and keeping the house going."

Nallely's guiding star is her friend Saul Avina. With red-dyed sideburns and a Lucifer chin tuft, Saul looks like a Zapatista snowboarder. He works for a domestic violence program for Latinos. His mother earns \$8 an hour as a banquet server at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel. He would often say to Nallely, "It's time for a revolution."

Midway through her 10th-grade year, Nallely writes in an essay, *Today I feel like I want to do something with my life.*

One Saturday afternoon, Nallely is working at her mother's concession stand, peeling mangos and plunking them on sticks to sell for \$1.50. She arranges the wobbly display tower of Mexican-packaged cookies and lime-dusted corn chips. The snacks of her past.

"This place is so lame," she says.

Liberation comes when the phone rings and it's Saul. Can I go? Nallely asks her mom in Spanish. Soon she is riding the Number 3 bus with a beaten-up \$10 bill in her jeans

pocket. The bus heaves down Buford Highway, the largest immigrant landing strip in the Southeast: Koreatown, Chinatown, Vietnamtown and Mexicotown, all rolled into one 15-mile stretch. The Baskin-Robbins is owned by a Sikh who renamed it Basket Rabbit.

From the bus window, Nallely can see the fresh graffiti along Buford Highway. Scrawled on the apartment complexes and sidewalks are names like Flaco, Frosty and Little Shaggy. Police study them like cave drawings, trying to decipher the latest clues in the violence between Sur 13 and Brownside Locos. A week earlier, a 16-year-old was found shot to death on the banks of the Chattahoochee River in the north Atlanta suburb of Roswell. His name was Daniel Cortez and he lived in a Buford Highway apartment complex. His father detailed cars at a Jaguar dealership.

"Doesn't anybody get that the gangsters are just trying to be known?" Nallely says.

The bus passes one apartment complex after another until Nallely pulls the cord in front of one called Plaza Station. She climbs to a second-floor unit. From the stairwell she can hear the music. Saul opens the door and takes one look at Nallely's furry platforms.

"Dude, how many Muppets you kill to make them shoes?"

Nallely smirks. "Dude, they're leopard, not Muppet."

The main piece of furniture in Saul's apartment is an entertainment center that glows over worn carpet. Four remote controls and last year's Sega Dreamcast may not qualify as success, but they count for something. As Saul and Nallely talk about which Starbucks puts the perfectly milky head on a caramel macchiato, a roach walks across the back of the couch.

They end up at Lenox Square mall that night, pacing the polished mezzanine, past Restoration Hardware, Neiman Marcus and Brookstone, where they stand outside the window and stare at a Shiatsu Massage Lounger for \$3,000. Saul's T-shirt reads, "It's Better to Die on Your Feet Than To Live On Your Knees."

They take the escalator down into the greasy belly of the mall. The food court is what they can afford, and they sample everything before settling on mahogany chicken and Philly cheese steaks. Saul's red Nokia phone rings to the theme of "The Good, the Bad and the Ugly."

"You never heard of that movie?" Saul says. "It's a classic." To Nallely, Saul knew everything important.

The next afternoon, Nallely is back on her porch at the concession stand, sprinkling chili powder on corn. Her eyes keep drifting to an apartment across the dirt courtyard, occupied by a lanky 17-year-old named Eduardo Valesquez.

Eduardo had recently taken Nallely to the Waffle House across the highway for dinner. He has long eyelashes and a burr haircut. Nallely comes up to his chin. His English is terrible, so they talk in Spanish. Nallely asks him what he wants to do with his life. "Work," he says. Eduardo has already quit school and is doing something with gravel.

The Waffle House, Nallely later thinks. "It's tacky, man." Eduardo is not Lenox Square. He is not Radiohead. He is not Bed Bath & Beyond. What Nallely remembers about the Mexican state of Michoacan is her grandmother's house, white and red, with a patio.

When she was 6, her father and mother loaded the kids into a VW bus and crossed the U.S. border on tourist visas. The plan was never vacation; it was work. In Atlanta, Nallely's father got a job in a restaurant kitchen. Her mom cleaned houses. Nallely became a first-grader.

The early '90s were the front edge of the Latino boom, when schools were beginning to get overwhelmed by newly enrolled Spanish-speaking students. Nallely was placed in a curriculum for English Speakers of Other Languages; she remembers spending most of her time in the library, coloring. Her real English tutors were Ren and Stimpy on Nickelodeon.

In the fifth grade, Nallely was diagnosed as learning-disabled. Around the same time, her parents' marriage was souring: domestic violence, clothes strewn on the lawn, an eviction. Nallely's mother took the children to Mexico. They returned a month later through the parched brushland of south Texas. "In Texas, there was this big field and we laid under a tree," Nallely remembers. Her grandmother's friend picked them up.

Back in sixth grade in Atlanta, the tools recommended by the school psychologist to help Nallely with learning -- a tape recorder, computer and flash cards -- never materialized. Her teachers met periodically over the years, recommending that Nallely be kept in classes for the learning-disabled, which is where she remains as a 10th-grader.

When Patricia Arrieta, Nallely's mother, sees Riverwood High School, set among tall pines and houses with tennis courts, it seems impossible that failure could occur in such a setting. She faithfully attends progress conferences, surrounded by a team of teachers and specialists. An interpreter explains that her daughter Nallely is failing two of six courses. *Parent had little to say*, a teacher notes in a report.

Patricia does not know what to say. So she wakes Nallely for school, makes sure she has clean clothes and stresses the importance of an education.

Nallely needs more. "My mind just blanks out and I doodle," she says. The letters spell EDUARDO.

The common argument used to be that pregnancy leads girls to drop out, but newer studies show just the opposite: Girls who are discouraged at school often escape by getting pregnant. The Georgia Department of Education's teen pregnancy curriculum -- "Abstinence Focused Sex Education THAT WORKS!!" -- is no match for Eduardo's attentiveness. He is tall and lean and tender. When it rains, the construction site where Eduardo works shuts down. He stays home, and Nallely does, too.

The bus stop is just a curb next to the rush hour traffic of Roswell Road. For 35 minutes one morning, Nallely stares into the blinding glare, searching for the familiar yellow shape. Finally, another kid calls it. "*No escuela hoy*," he says. No school today. One student goes inside a darkened apartment and wakes his groggy night-shift father, emerging with a set of car keys. Nallely hops in. They drive through lush, hilly estates in a Ford Taurus, paper license tag flapping in the wind.

Ditching what's left of first period, Nallely and a girlfriend duck into the auditorium, where a group of high achievers is settling in for a guest lecture. The speaker is Johnetta Cole, the former president of Spelman College, and her topic is "The Necessity for Thinking Globally and Acting Locally." Cole beats the drums of multiculturalism: Learning about Zapata's Mexico and Rosa Parks's American South is as important as Aristotle's Greece and Churchill's Britain.

"The world's people are here," Cole tells the students, to applause. "You are the world's people." Two years ago, the epithet SPIC was published under the photo of a student in a high school yearbook in the Atlanta suburb of Gwinnett County. The principal offered the student a free yearbook; after parents complained, the school agreed to reprint the offending page without the epithet.

Out in the hallway, Nallely reaches into a piñata and takes a fistful of candy. "You're so ghetto," her friend Ellen chides, as Nallely unwraps a root beer barrel. Nallely leans against the wall, letting the rush pass by. "What lunch are you doing today?" she asks Ellen.

"All of 'em," Ellen announces, disappearing into the cafeteria with her DiscMan.

Nallely goes to world history. The teacher passes out review sheets for the upcoming final exam. "The Age of Reformation," she announces. "Remember Henry VIII and all his wives?"

"What a pimp," a student cracks.

The teacher is steely sunshine. "We have two choices for today," she says. "We can study the questions on imperialism and nationalism. Or, I've brought a movie, 'Swing Kids.' It talks about World War II."

Nallely is doodling and says to no one in particular, "the zoot suit riot," hinting at all the knowledge in her head. When the classroom darkens, the movie begins, and Nallely goes to sleep.

She's at a Tool concert with Saul when she gets sick. They leave after the fourth song.

In the shower, the smell of shampoo makes her nauseated.

One menstrual period missed, then two. "Why do you throw up all the time?" Eduardo asks. Standing in the courtyard between their apartments, she tells him. She had lied about birth control. She had thought so often about going on birth control that it took on a phantom reality. Eduardo isn't mad. They walk to the gas station for sodas.

Nallely waits until she is at church to tell her mother. Patricia had not allowed herself to think that Nallely could be sexually active. Her mind goes to logistics. Nallely shares a bed with her mother and a younger brother. Where will a baby go? What about school? "I'm not quitting school," Nallely says.

She is still a girl.

She still swings her younger brothers over her head and leaps in her apartment complex pool with her friend Ellen and runs home in wet clothes across the asphalt, barefoot and laughing.

As the summer lengthens, Nallely can no longer fit into her hiphuggers. She wants to go to Ozzfest with Saul but he tells her that cigarette smoke and the mosh pit would be bad for the baby.

Saul submerges himself deeper in his crusade. He's trying to raise money for Caminar Latino, the domestic violence program he works for. He's also traveling to the onion fields of south Georgia to help migrant workers.

A corporation in downtown Atlanta is sponsoring "Hispanic Day" for its employees and Saul lands a spot on the program to make a pitch for donations.

The auditorium of the BellSouth skyscraper is decorated with travel posters of Acapulco. Rented mariachis stroll around with guitars. Four of Saul's colleagues from Caminar Latino have agreed to perform a traditional dance. The young women duck into a bathroom to change out of their jeans and emerge as señoritas with flowing skirts. The trumpets begin.

This version of Mexico is nothing like the one on Buford Highway or Roswell Road where Nallely lives.

The folk-fair happiness is too much for Saul. He cups his hands and yells, "Shake that money maker!" Saul lets another one fly, this time louder. "*Si se puede.*" Yes you can.

And again. "*Si se puede.*" So loud people turn to look.

As the music ends, the emcee calls for a big hand and turns to the dancers. "Thank you very much," he says, his voice deacon-smooth. "A little bit of Latino, right here at BellSouth."

Nallely's water breaks a month early. Her mom isn't home, so a neighbor loads Nallely into the back of a car. Eduardo follows. The U.S. citizen named Sebastian Ortiz is born weighing 5.6 pounds. Already the 11th-grade mother and her infant son have something in common: Both were born preterm with low birth weights.

Sebastian has a thicket of black hair and long pink fingers. A nurse is bathing him when she notices Eduardo watching through the glass. "This is your baby," she says, and Eduardo begins to cry. Visitors crowd around Nallely's bed. Saul is there, and Ellen from school, and two teachers, including Mrs. Anderson, who finds Nallely so astoundingly calm "that maybe that's the way she expected her life to go."

Life with Sebastian: Apartment K2 drifts off to sleep each night to the hospital-issued Beethoven-for-babies CD.

Nallely's mother is worried about money. She cooks more catered pots of tripe and *chicharones* to sell around the apartment complex. The neighborhood Mary Kay lady, who is Mexican and wears black leather instead of pink, enlists Patricia to sell cosmetics.

The days are counted out in sticky coins and crinkled bills.

As a citizen, Sebastian is eligible for all of the things Nallely never was: nine cans of government-subsidized milk a month, with cereal, cheese, eggs and juice when he's older.

She also applies for PeachCare for Kids, Georgia's insurance program for low-income children. She imagines that she'll return to school and send Sebastian to a nearby day care called Creme de la Creme, not knowing that Creme de la Creme charges \$1,115 a month.

When she takes Sebastian out in public, people lean over to see him and Nallely feels special. Another girlfriend of hers also has a baby, and the four of them go to Wal-Mart for studio portraits.

Mrs. Anderson sends homework packets from school so Nallely won't fall behind. The plan is to return for the second semester. Eduardo is now working 3 to 11 p.m. as a prep cook, so he'll be able to watch Sebastian during the day. "I don't want my baby to have a dumb mom," Nallely says. "I don't want to be working at a restaurant."

But Sebastian puts her in a state of sleep-deprivation. At dawn one winter morning, Nallely is lying in bed. She has an hour to make it to the bus stop. Sebastian blinks beside her in a powder-blue crocheted suit, so sweet-smelling and warm that opting for the cold fluorescence of first-period biology seems cruel.

"*Que pasa, calabaza?*" Nallely whispers to her son. What's up, pumpkin?

She slips on a shirt printed with the words LUCKY GIRL and pulls up the blinds. Biology will begin without her. Downstairs in the living room, the television gets tuned to PBS. "Dragon Tales" slides into "Reading Rainbow."

An ice storm moves in on Atlanta, frosting over the Microtels and Petsmarts, Nailtiques and Star Cuts. It's too cold to take Sebastian out. Saul Avina calls with reports from the outside world. Nallely says she's staying home "24-7." Sebastian hardly cries, but the tension between Nallely and her mother plays out in silence and denial. Her brother Ruben has a new, \$9-an-hour job in the kitchen of a restaurant that serves nouvelle Southern cuisine. "Fried chicken is our signature dish," he says.

On his night off, Ruben sits at the kitchen table, yawning with fatigue from juggling work and school. His sister, Neiva, in ninth grade, brings him her schedule for next semester. "I'm on the college prep," she says, letting a comic beat pass. "I'm just kidding."

Ruben looks over the form. His sister says she may take French. "I know French," Ruben says. "Hollandaise. Bearnaise. Crème brûlée. Sauté."

Nallely is sitting in a chair against the kitchen wall, jiggling Sebastian on her knee and holding a baby bottle. "I'm going crazy," she says. That Friday night, her friend Fritzzy Beltran comes over.

Fritzzy has butterscotch-dyed hair and recently dropped out of 10th grade. "Too much drama in that school for me," she says. Nallely and Fritzzy walk up to the Chevron station in their platform shoes, teetering as if on the brink of their lives, which they are. Back at the apartment, Nallely puts on some music, and the living room vibrates, with the girls dancing on the carpet and Sebastian giggling as the bass lines thump his crib.

Nallely goes back to Riverwood High only a few times her 11th-grade year. Sebastian develops asthma, and Nallely and Eduardo pull a few all-nighters in the hospital. Nallely takes a job in a submarine sandwich shop.

She catches the Number 5 bus to work. Sometimes she walks in the weeds along Roswell Road, the footpaths beaten into the red clay by all the others before her. She tries to stay positive but her boss is worried about the smallest details. "He's, like, pepper on the right, salt on the left," Nallely says. "It's like, nobody cares." After a month she quits.

But this is a family that knows how to keep going. Their legal papers come through. Ruben graduates from Riverwood High with a technical degree in culinary arts. His aunt weeps with joy and his mother wonders if she will lose her son to adulthood. After the ceremony, the owner of the restaurant where Ruben works treats the entire Ortiz family to dinner

The apartment complexes along Roswell Road hang banners that advertise "free rent" in Spanish. In the atmosphere after 9/11, employers aren't as quick to hire workers without documents, and overtime has dried up. There is a hint of desperation to the move-in specials. Nallely, Eduardo, Fritzzy and another girlfriend with a baby decide to rent a two-bedroom unit for \$800 a month. Eduardo is a busboy. Fritzzy does hair. Their other friend works at Target. The apartment is an experiment in survival: everyone under 20, two babies, old couches and Ramen noodle dinners.

Summer brings rain and arguments with Eduardo over who's going to cook. Nallely hates being a cliché. She had avoided the Buford Highway Flea Market because she didn't want to be marked as dusty and naive. She flaunted her connoisseurship of American culture. And now she fears that she's becoming what she swore she never would -- a statistic.

Eduardo loves the three of them going to the park on Sundays. He hovers over Sebastian, checking his diaper or rocking him to sleep in his long bony arms. Eduardo wants to be an official family and get married. Nallely is not ready. She clings to her independence. "No," she tells Eduardo.

Her mother encourages her to go back to school, offering to watch the baby during the day. Surprise people, she says.

Nallely does. "People can't really tell you you can't do anything if you have raised a kid," she says. She returns to 11th grade. Saul calls to tell her the latest. He has a new tattoo, an intricate Mexican totem pole on his left forearm, with narrative panels. "Nobody knows how I got to Atlanta," he says. "I'm trying to tell a story, who I am as a person."

A few weeks later, Nallely applies for an after-school job at Publix. It's cold and misting the day she goes to the supermarket to see about the job. By the time she emerges a half-hour later, a full rain is coming down. The cashier's uniform is teal, and she starts in five days.