

Meet Grecia, an everyday hero



BARB GUY

We're smack in the middle of Hispanic Heritage Month (Sept. 15 - Oct. 15). I've written previously about my admiration for the great César Chávez and local artist Ruby Chacón, also mentioning Salt Lake's legendary activist Archie Archuleta and the late, irreplaceable Utah State Sen. Pete Suazo.

It's natural to venerate well-known figures when celebrating Hispanic heritage, but what's in my heart today is to honor someone you've never heard of. Like the others, she's inspirational. Meet Grecia.

In 2004, I began tutoring one of Grecia's younger brothers. Now, my husband, Chris, and I are lucky enough to be good friends with the whole family. We get together with the kids about once a week and we read, we do homework, we visit art exhibits, we dine out, we talk.

But at barely 14 years old, Grecia was working four or more days a week. Chris and I would pick up her brothers and head to the library, later stopping at Grecia's fast-food shop. Sometimes we would just buy a soda, other times we'd stay for dinner and homework.

While we tried to help the boys, Grecia could only watch from the other side of the counter, unable to partake because of the grown-up demands on her time.

Then one day she wasn't there. When prodded, her youngest brother divulged that Grecia had missed her *quinceañera*, instead spending her 15th birthday in youth detention and that, in fact, she was still there. We told her brother to ask her to call us.

Happily, she called. It was the first of many courageous acts we have seen from her. We were nearly strangers to her, but she phoned and said, "My brother says you can help me."

With only five days left of the period when she could turn in homework packets to make up for all the school she had missed, Grecia had much of a semester's work before her and the clock was screaming.

The determination she demonstrated was phenomenal. She had caught a glimpse of how

her life might turn out and it lit a fire under her that burns brightly to this day. Impressed by her intelligence, humbled by her desire to succeed, and aware there was virtually no one else to help her, Chris and I spent more than 50 hours with Grecia during those five days, routinely getting kicked out of coffee shops that close at 1 a.m.

Over Rudyard Kipling's *Rikki Tikki Tavi*, over Edgar Allan Poe's *The Cask of Amontillado*, over African countries and capitals, a fierce friendship was forged between us and Grecia. And she never gave up.

The girl is self-propelled. She works full time while going to school, she has lived in five different places since we met her, and there have been other changes at home, yet she remains sunny and sweet.

In those first moments she had a 0.6 grade-point average. Now, she is a junior in high school, and it's something like 3.6. Last year she invited us to her school's end-of-year awards program. She had found her way onto the Honor Roll and the Dean's List and was the only student invited to give a speech.

Now she talks about college, about visiting Greece - the country she's named for - and about her dream to become a lawyer.

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Grecia is learning how skin color and geography and chance can impact our lives. She is noticing a great deal about injustice lately and that makes my heart ache, but she is also forming herself into a grown-up who will be one of the people our community can count on to mitigate it.

Hispanic, Latina/Latino, Chicana/Chicano. The verbiage is a matter of interpretation or personal politics, but the heroes are everywhere. Today, for me, it's Grecia - and the thousands like her.

BARB GUY is a regular contributor to these pages. © Salt Lake Tribune.