

## **Identity and Positionality**

As a Worcester native, I grew up immersed in a vibrant Puerto Rican community where cultural practices and traditions were integral to my daily life. Being Puerto Rican was not just an aspect of my identity but something celebrated and entirely normal. Attending every Latin Festival in downtown Worcester since birth was a cherished annual tradition, with the Puerto Rican flag adorning cars, light posts, trees, buildings, and virtually every visible space. My family proudly displayed the flag in our home, hanging it inside our window to share our heritage with the outside world. My brother and I shared a room where the flag was an essential part of our wall décor.

My parents were determined to ensure that my brothers and I maintained our linguistic heritage. They insisted that we speak Spanish at home, fearing that growing up in the U.S. might cause us to lose our native language. To support this, my brothers and I were enrolled in Chandler Magnet School, a bilingual institution that primarily taught in Spanish. This early education played a crucial role in preserving our language and cultural identity.

By the time I reached high school, Latin music, particularly reggaeton, became a vital part of my identity as a Puerto Rican. My parents would play reggaeton at full volume in the car with the windows down, a common practice among our community. Family events and social gatherings were always filled with loud music, signaling to everyone around that we were proud of our heritage and our music.

As an adult, the importance of the Puerto Rican flag remains deeply ingrained in me. I have three Puerto Rican flags tattooed on my body, each representing my enduring connection to my roots. Two of these flags are on the inside of my arm, hidden when I wear a shirt, so I got a third one inked on my hand for everyone to see. This visible display of my heritage serves as a constant reminder of where I come from and who I am.

In 2018, I traveled to Chicago for a work trip with a few coworkers. The weeklong training concluded early each day, allowing us time to explore the city. Most of my coworkers were also Puerto Rican, and we decided to visit Humboldt Park, a historically Puerto Rican neighborhood on the west side of Chicago. Humboldt Park is rich in Puerto Rican culture, with murals, monuments, sculptures, and restaurants celebrating our heritage. Our main objective was to take a picture in front of a massive steel Puerto Rican flag that spans a four-lane street. Growing up surrounded by flags, I felt a deep obligation to visit this iconic landmark.

During our visit, I encountered an information sign about the "Gag Law of 1948." Unfamiliar with this term, I began reading. The first line stated, "This is OUR flag," and further explained how the Puerto Rican nationalist party's flag had been banned to suppress the independence movement. The Gag Law made it a crime to own or display a Puerto Rican flag, lasting nine years. Reading this was overwhelming and deeply upsetting. I couldn't fathom how a symbol of our pride and identity could be criminalized. I discussed this law extensively with friends and family and conducted further research to understand its implications.

Reflecting on my childhood, I realized that my love for the flag was deeply rooted in my parents' efforts to instill its importance in me. The Gag Law of 1948 made me appreciate even more the freedom we now have to display our flag. Understanding this historical context, I believe that the suppression of the flag during those nine years heightened its significance for future generations. The love and pride for our flag have been passed down, reinforcing its importance in our cultural identity.

### **Theory of Social Inequality**

Like many youths living in urban environments, my memories of high school are marked by gangs, guns, conflict, blood, and anger. These harsh realities became indelibly etched in my heart during my first and only year in high school. My experience was fraught with violence, almost costing me my life on several occasions. The first time, I was attacked with brass knuckles and stabbed. Several weeks later, another attacker brandished a gun in the school hallways, forcing me to run for my life. These episodes of gang violence ultimately led to my decision to drop out of school.

Following my decision to drop out, my mother expelled me from our home, leaving me homeless at the age of 16. A few months later, while temporarily living in an apartment in the east side of Worcester- a party took a tragic turn when a fight broke out between rival gangs. The altercation, involving over 10 people, resulted in the death of my friend. I vividly remember the frantic 20 minutes passing by waiting for EMS to arrive, each second feeling like an eternity as I watched

my friend slip away. The violence I experienced during high school became a catalyst for further violence in my life.

Despite these harrowing experiences, I eventually found a way to overcome the violence and homelessness that plagued my youth. In 2016, I joined the Worcester Youth Center as a Case Manager for gang-involved youth. The center serves Black and Brown youth through the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative (SSYI), a program funded by the Department of Public Health (DPH). This initiative focuses on addressing issues such as homelessness, employment, and education for gang-involved youth. The city identified approximately 120 gang-involved youths in each program, most of whom were primarily Black and Brown.

The funding for the SSYI program was channeled through the Worcester Police Department (WPD), which then allocated the funds to three community agencies, including the Worcester Youth Center, where I worked. The subsidized employment funds allowed youth to work for 10 weeks, 20 hours a week at minimum wage. During my tenure with the program, I was successful in assisting many youths in finding employment and re-enrolling in school. However, I encountered significant barriers in accessing funds for education and long-term employment. The WPD restricted the funds, preventing agencies from using them for youth training, extended employment periods, or emergency housing. Despite discovering that over \$60,000 remained unused each year, my inquiries to the WPD and the Department of Public Health about reallocating these funds went unanswered. The restrictions on these funds persist to this day.

In contrast, my current position with Open Sky Community Services, where the youth population is predominantly white, has provided a starkly different experience. Open Sky received a grant directly from the Department of Mental Health, omitting the WPD. This grant supports similar services for youth in Worcester, but with a crucial difference: the funds are unrestricted. At Open Sky, I have the autonomy to allocate funds as needed, whether for extended employment periods, training programs, or any other supportive measures I can imagine.

The disparity between these two experiences highlights a fundamental issue of social inequality. The restrictions placed on funds for predominantly Black and Brown youth at the Worcester Youth Center stand in stark contrast to the flexibility afforded to predominantly white youth at Open Sky. This inequity underscores systemic issues that perpetuate social disparities and hinder the progress of marginalized communities. My journey from a high school dropout facing gang violence to a community advocate highlights the urgent need to address these inequalities and ensure that all youth, regardless of their background, have access to the resources and opportunities they need to thrive.

### **Theory of Understanding**

Promoting systemic change to better support underserved communities has been a consistent theme in my work. Creating safe spaces for youth to express themselves freely, even in opposition, fosters a better understanding and overall healing.

Drawing from my identity as a Puerto Rican who grew up surrounded by my cultural heritage in Worcester, I understand the deep-seated importance of cultural identity and community support. This understanding fuels my commitment to social change, as I have personally experienced the impact of both positive and negative community influences. My cultural background and experiences with gang violence and homelessness inform my empathetic approach to youth work, driving me to create safe, inclusive spaces where youth can thrive.

In my work with the Safe and Successful Youth Initiative and Open Sky Community Services, I have dedicated myself to creating change at the community level by working with at-risk youth and connecting them with opportunities in Worcester. However, my experiences with these programs have also revealed their limitations. At SSYI, the funding restrictions imposed by the Worcester Police Department highlighted systemic barriers that prevent comprehensive support for youth. Despite significant funds remaining unused each year, there was no flexibility to allocate them towards critical needs such as extended employment, training, or emergency housing.

In contrast, my work with Open Sky demonstrated the potential of unrestricted funding to drive meaningful change. With the freedom to use funds as needed, I could provide extended support for youth, including long-term employment, training, and emergency housing. This stark difference underscores the importance of systemic change to ensure that all youth programs have the flexibility to address the specific needs of their communities effectively.

My theory of social change emphasizes the need to address systemic inequalities while promoting equity and opportunity. My personal and professional experiences have shown me the importance of pushing for change and the challenges that arise when working within existing systems. By advocating for unrestricted funding and systemic reforms, we can create a more equitable environment for all youth.

Furthermore, my approach to youth work highlights the importance of discourse, empathy, and community building. By providing youth with spaces to freely express their ideas and concerns, we can cultivate a culture of understanding and respect within their communities. This inclusive approach can help prevent conflict and promote impactful social change.

Overall, my theory of social change centers on addressing systemic inequalities and promoting equity and opportunity. Building strong, inclusive communities is essential to preventing violence and fostering positive change. By combining personal experience, professional insights, and a commitment to systemic reform, we can create a more just and supportive environment for all youth.