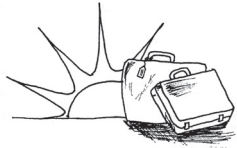


“GOING FROM NOWHERE, COMING TO SOMEWHERE”

Carmen's Story



October 1996: Greyhound bus #5061 moved slowly up the on-ramp to merge with the morning commuter traffic on Eastbound Interstate 80. The bus was a mere annoyance to the commuters, something to get around, lest it slow up their time schedule. They cared little about the bus or its passengers. Slowly the bus moved through Berkeley, Richmond, across the Carquinez Bridge and struggled up the hills east of Vallejo. As the bus crested the hill it picked up speed as it approached Cordilla Junction and the flatlands beyond. The gray overcast gave way to the morning sun, as if gripping the last vestiges of summer.

Carmen noticed the road sign “Sacramento 47 miles”. She glanced once again to her son and daughter sitting in front, glad they were sleeping. She hugged her youngest, the five-year-old daughter sitting next to her. She asked herself again for what must have been the hundredth time, “*Did I do the right thing, getting away?*.” And, again she thought “*Yes, I did it for my children. I’m going from nowhere, coming to somewhere.*”

Carmen related that she had been in a homeless shelter after she arrived in Sacramento. She said she “*spent a lot of time trying to find employment and housing*”. The shelter coordinator helped her get her children into school. “*When the youngest got into school, she was inattentive, defensive and easily upset. The classroom teacher noticed it and she talked to me. She asked me if I could tell her something about my young daughter. I said you did not get the records because she (the teacher) had not talked to the homeless coordinator..., who could explain everything... (the homeless coordinator) adjusted us from the shelter... to the school*”.

One of the first persons Carmen met in school was the Family and Schools Together (FAST) worker who told her about the program. “*The worker talked to me about the program*” related Carmen. “*She said I would like the program because I would spend time with my youngest... that was important because she (her daughter) felt a little bit strange and needed reassurance. The worker called me several times about the meeting and even picked me up even though I lived across the street from the school.*” So Carmen started going to the meetings with all three of her children. In the FAST program she spent time with her youngest while the older children were in another

“I got to be more involved with my children when I got into that [FAST] program. I felt more comfortable. When I would come to a meeting I felt like I was a little more part of the school. I got to be more comfortable...because when I would come to a meeting and part of the staff showed up...a couple of times the principal showed up...she was kinda friendly...so that made it easier to feel comfortable in the school...I felt strange at first. I didn’t want to be there at, you know a strange meeting.”

Carmen

segment of the program. According to Carmen the program was “*basically...just for me and this one child. I had special time...15-20 minutes ...with the youngest... but the family could come also and we would have meals together as a family. And then we went into a little program that they each had time. They got to relax more... and [there] hasn't been problems any more in school*”.

Making a Difference

It wasn't long after that Carmen found herself in a group of women who provided something she'd had little experience with -support. “*Even thinking about it now I get teary-eyed because normally I don't ask anybody for anything and these women supported me.*”

I also.... “*felt relieved. They (the children) had a difficult time in school. The [other] kids now didn't like the environment. There are lots of kids with lots of problems and issues going on in the schools itself. So it makes it difficult to attend school... I think they have a difficult time being there.*”

When asked why she thought it was so, Carmen indicated that “*In some schools the programs are not being offered to all the children. Some programs are only offered to certain children. If you get into trouble ... you're only exposed to the program if you have a problem. You know, you're never exposed to those programs if you're not in trouble*”.

Three Years Later: Carmen is a striking woman. She is self-assured and confident. She speaks deliberately, carefully considering her choice of words. Her eyes are bright, and when she smiles, they sparkle. She is now an AmeriCorps worker doing community outreach for the Alliance. She has taken several classes to improve her job skills. Her children are doing well in class. This is a marked contrast to October 1996 when, with little more than several battered suit cases, she arrived in Sacramento. “*I came here,*” she said “*to get my children out of the area because of a (drug) crisis situation ...I can't go into details*”. No need, for her silence spoke legends of personal pain.