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No Me Di Cuenta

by Cathy Chávez

Fall arrived early in 2017—at least it felt that way. The delicious smell of green chile reached every corner in New Mexico and weaved its way through the breezy cool weather at the Annual SWOP Chile Harvest Fiesta. The event, held near Washington Middle School at the Albuquerque SWOP, brought together joyful crowds consisting of different generations of local community members and visitors from throughout New Mexico.

Joaquín, an experienced farmer, arrived early and came equipped with *chicharrones* and *tortillas* from García's Restaurant. He believed the way to the volunteers' hearts was to fill their *panzas* with good food.

“These *chicharrones* are the best, *carnal!* I left home hungry, but not anymore. *Gracias* Joaquín, how can I help?” said an enthusiastic volunteer.

Joaquín replied, “Help me unload these tables and then we are set.” He continued with a sense of urgency, “People are already arriving with their crock pots and they need to set up.”

Once everything was organized, it was close to noon, and everyone gathered for the main event, the Green Chile Stew Cook Off. Anyone could enter the contest as long as their stew was prepared and ready for tasting when they arrived. Excitement was in the air, but something was missing. Someone was missing. Eric, a long-time community activist and SWOPista was not attending this year. He had lost his battle with cancer a year ago, but his aura was strong in the hearts of his close friends. His son, Karlos, was one of the first people to show up that day. His presence silently reminded his father's close friends, including Joaquín, of the pain that never subsided from missing the recently departed. Since Eric had won first place the previous four years his close friends felt a little strange and sad participating in the contest without him and his famous green chile stew. But I suppose, once again, life goes on...

On August 12th, a year before the event, Joaquín and many other friends and acquaintances attended Eric's memorial service. Those who were not too weakened by his loss shared a favorite story or memory of Eric. For many, including Joaquín, it was too painful.

A year later, at the Chile Cook Off, one story still lingered in Joaquín's heart. This particular memory always brought a smile to his face. He had been too overwhelmed to share before but Joaquín felt ready now. Oral tradition and passing on stories is commonplace and powerful in New Mexico. Remembering those we have lost and sharing our memories about them is part of that tradition. The following true story is the memory Joaquín shared...

Thirty miles east of Wagon Mound, New Mexico stood “*La Casita de los Martínez.*” It sat at the edge of the mesa and overlooked the Mora, Canadian, and Cimarron rivers. Lupe and Rocky Martínez were happy to share their *casita* with family and friends looking to get away from city life.

It was late May, in approximately 1986. Sofia, Richard, Jeanne, Eric, Joaquín and Gail (and all of their kids) were enjoying fun times together at the *casita*. It was not uncommon for the Martínez family to spend time in Wagon Mound with friends and *familia*. Of course, Rocky had to keep a close eye on the city folk. They always made messes in and around the residence. Their sloppiness often included burying fish guts on the property, making it easier to attract the bears!

It was early in the morning that Saturday and Joaquín, Eric, and Sofia had already participated in the ritual of smoking one of Joaquín’s “deluxe cigarettes.” Coffee was brewing and the cook stove was warming up the cozy home. The other adults and children were still sound asleep. Early bird Eric was preparing breakfast. He had taken it upon himself to search for a pot to boil the *papas* for the morning meal. Joaquín walked into the kitchen, paying little attention to the details of his friend’s cooking; Eric was a good cook and never disappointed. The only thing on Joaquín’s mind was the sense of warmth and love everyone would feel once they all gathered around the table to enjoy their meal. Without realizing it, however, Joaquín was observing the making of a great memory that included the pot Eric was cooking with. Joaquín would forever reply when answering questions about the infamous pot, “*no me di cuenta!*”

It wasn’t until Sofia entered the kitchen and poured herself a cup of coffee that the mistake was discovered. Sofia’s dark brown eyes nearly popped out of her head! She was in shock! Eric had naively chosen a “basin” to boil the potatoes in. He had no idea that the pot he chose was actually a toilet basin used years ago by Sofia’s mother, Lupe, when she stayed there. The toilet basin was necessary because indoor toilets were not installed yet when Lupe visited. Needless to say, Sofia immediately ran and tossed out the potatoes, basin and all!

Everyone laughed at the gaffe. *Pobre* Eric—he was really embarrassed and never heard the end of it. The story traveled quickly throughout all of Wagon Mound within a matter of hours. All of the *viejitos* in the town waited impatiently to see Eric so they could give him a hard time. People would ask Joaquín why he didn’t say anything to prevent Eric from using the toilet basin and his response was always the same, “*no me di cuenta!*”

Eric told Joaquín the alleged “toilet basin” did not look at all like a toilet basin, describing it as fancy, blue in color, and equipped with a lid. Eric always became very defensive when the tale came up.

Joaquín and other friends fondly remember this story as a reminder of the great times they enjoyed together with their friend Eric. After telling the story at the cook off, Joaquín no longer held back his tears. He felt proud and happy to release the emotions he felt towards his friend. Life really does go on.

Every year the visitors, participants in the competition, itinerary, and details of the Chile Harvest Fiesta change. However, the event and the smell of green chile stew reminds us of Eric. We will never forget our friend, Eric Schmieder, and his talents in the kitchen, despite the basin incident!

Cathy Chávez was born and raised in Albuquerque, New Mexico. She earned her Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of New Mexico in 1980, and worked for thirty-seven years as a Pediatric Oncology R.N. at UNM Hospital. She is the author of, *Hold Every Moment Sacred*, published in May 2019. By documenting characteristics in true stories that capture the essence of Chicano culture, she shares with others the working and evolving definition of Chicano people. This work serves as an example to future generations. She believes her ancestors and culture have helped guide her through life and especially throughout her nursing career. Responding to a “calling,” Chávez has been taking photos of landscapes and flowers since 1982 and shares her work in the form of homemade cards. She credits her mother with teaching her, at a young age, how to capture moments in life through photography. For years, while her parents raised eight children in Albuquerque, her mother captured precious family and cultural moments. These childhood photos inspired Chávez to do the same and expand those moments to include the beauty of the New Mexico landscape.