By **CONTRIBUTOR** on May 29, 2013

Lessons My Father Taught Me

-- By Alvaro Huerta

WHEN I HEAR ABOUT AMERICAN LEADERS SCAPEGOATING Latino immigrants, I can't help but think about my late father, Salomón Chavez Huerta. Like millions of other immigrants in this country, my father endured a harsh life in his home country and sacrificed greatly to settle and raise a family in this country. While he was a stoic man, before succumbing to cancer at sixty-seven he occasionally talked to me about his life in Mexico and here, toiling as a farmworker, factory janitor, and day laborer.

Born on March 9, 1930, in a small rancho, Sajo Grande, in the beautiful state of Michoacán, my father and his ten siblings grew up in a place with no indoor plumbing, hot water, electricity, telephones, or paved roads. Only obtaining a couple of years of a so-called primary education, at a very young age he joined his brothers and father farming the land to grow corn and raise livestock from sun-up to sun-down.

In his late teens, he migrated to the United States as a farmworker during the Bracero Program—a guest worker program between the United States and Mexico, in which more than 4.5 million immigrants represented cheap, exploitable labor for agricultural employers and consumers to benefit from.

While my father appreciated the opportunity to work as a bracero to support his family in his hometown, he was like someone sent to war, reluctantly talking about the abuse he experienced at the recruiting centers in Mexico and the inhumane working and living conditions he endured in the United States. I will never forget the time when he first told me about being forced to strip naked and being sprayed with DDT in a large warehouse full of other young men, while being inspected by American labor recruiting officials. That was one of the few times I saw my father express anguish.

There are many reasons why Mexicans migrate to el norte. In my father's case, it wasn't simply to pursue higher wages, but also to escape the violence that plagued his hometown. Just like the famous Hatfield-McCoy blood feud of the late nineteenth century in the United States, my father and uncles became embroiled in a deadly feud with a local family.

In his attempt to flee a violent environment, my father, along with my mother, Carmen, eventually migrated to the United States—by way of Tijuana—only to eventually relocate in the notorious Ramona Gardens housing project of East L.A., better known as the Big Hazard projects, after the local gang. Constantly worried about protecting his eight children and providing for them, he never left home without his .38 Special revolver.

Lacking formal education and basic English skills, my father worked as a janitor in a factory where chrome rims for tires were produced. Making a measly $3.25 per hour for more than a decade, one day he had enough and quit. His supervisor, twenty years his junior, had ordered him to work in the furnace. He refused. After doing the math, he realized that he could bring in more money by collecting public assistance instead of resorting to another underpaid, dead-end job. While he tried to rationalize his limited choices with me, the truth can't be denied: The system broke him.

Instead of going to work, he spent most of his time visiting family in Tijuana, running errands, and watching television. He loved to watch Westerns, like reruns of *Bonanza*, *The Rifleman*, and old Clint Eastwood classics, like *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*. Since my father rarely engaged in small talk, if I wanted to bond with him, I knew I had to join him on our old, red sofa covered in plastic, sitting in front of the tube. These television programs took him back to a more simple time in his past, one that, albeit violent, he could relate to.

One day, without warning, my mother, who always encouraged my siblings and me to pursue higher education, told my father to turn off the television and take me to the west side to seek work as a day laborer. While I had always excelled in mathematics and done well in school, as a thirteen-year-old, like most American teens, I was too lazy to do any physical housework or yardwork. Concerned about my future, my mother convinced my father to teach me how difficult it is to work manual labor and to appreciate my educational opportunities so I would go to college.

Not wasting time, the following Saturday morning, my father woke me up at five in the morning to get ready for work. I'd never been up so early, and for a moment, I thought that the world was going to end. After we got ready and took a two-hour bus ride, we reached a busy street corner in Malibu.

Surrounded by Mexican immigrant men jostling to get a good position and the attention of the privileged individuals in their Mercedes, BMWs, and Jaguars, my father quickly joined the fray for a day job. As I watched from the sidelines, I noticed my father running to get the attention of a man in a black Porsche. For the first time in my life, I was embarrassed and ashamed of my father.

I was not used to seeing a grown man, especially my father, "begging for work." Now I realize I was wrong to be embarrassed and ashamed. Instead, I should have been appreciative and thankful of my father.

Now I've obtained my doctorate from U.C. Berkeley, exceeding my mother's dream (thanks also to my wife, Antonia). But I will never forget that Saturday morning when my father—a poor Mexican immigrant from the rancho with no formal education—taught me a valuable lesson you won't learn in the Ivory Tower: It's noble to sacrifice for others. That's what millions of his compatriots do on a daily basis in America.

If only I could see him again for one moment, I'd tell him a few words I never said years ago on his deathbed: "I'm so proud to be your son."

***Alvaro Huerta**, a UCLA visiting scholar at the Chicano Studies Research Center, is the author of the forthcoming book "How the Other Half Gets Scapegoated: Immigrants and the Working Poor in the U.S.," by San Diego State University Press.*

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Posted by Irfan Nooruddin (not verified) on Thu, 06/12/2014 - 11:45am

Thank you for sharing this story. Your father would be proud of you.

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