

ADMISSION ESSAY

MEMO 1972

Editor's note: In the *Prologue* and in a few other chapters, Jesus's friend Memo is mentioned. On occasion they seem to share a room, although as Jesus made clear to Lady Love in *Turning the Tapes*, Memo slept on the floor. You might recall Jesus bringing Memo along with him to see Nick in a school play at Whitney Young in 2003 (*My Greek Family*). When Jesus introduced Memo to me, I commented later to George that he looked vaguely familiar. But with Jesus's antics that night, I soon stopped wondering about Memo's identity. Recently, however, while doing a bit of spring cleaning, I found a box filled with student essays I collected while teaching English at *Casa de Westtown* in the early '70s. Taking a break from my clutter reduction tasks, I started paging through the essays, trying to remember the faces that went with the names, occasionally reading a poem or short topic assignment. As soon as I saw the name Mamerto Rodriguez, it hit me—Memo. I hadn't recognized him a year ago because, like me, he had aged. More so, life on the streets had taken its toll. Perhaps he recognized me, but if he did he didn't say anything.

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Mamerto had been a promising GED student with a way with words. I encouraged him to apply to the University of Illinois Circle campus, where I also taught. If Mamerto could pass the GED he would be accepted under UIC's open admission program still in effect at the time. I told him I would work on his application with him and review and type his admission essay. A week later he handed me the essay, telling me it wasn't done and asking me to tell him if he was on the right track. On the way home from school that day I read it on the bus. Its honesty and detail took me by surprise. I wasn't fazed by his writing style, but I knew it needed substantial editing. The material was too open and frank for a 1972 college admissions essay. That very night I typed it up, only correcting misspelled words. I wanted the decisions on what to cut and how to revise to be Mamerto's, not mine.

Two days later, a Wednesday, Mamerto did not show up to class. Neither did he attend on Friday or again the next Monday. In fact, I didn't see Mamerto again, until Jesus introduced us more than twenty years later at Whitney Young. Mamerto's unfinished, unedited essay follows. Perhaps now that our lives have crossed again, he can tell me the rest of his story.

Alexia Demas
May 2004

My name is Memo Rodriguez. Memo is short for Mamerto. I was named for my grandfather but no one ever called me that. My people are originally from Texas but I was born here in Chicago in 1953. My father came here a few years before that and got a job at one of the tanneries along the Chicago River. Then he sent for my mother and my older sister and brother. I was the first of six more children born in Chicago.

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For many years we moved from one too small apartment to another in the area near Pulaski Park. Some people think that all of the Mexicans living in that neighborhood are illegal. But we were Chicanos, not only legal, but US citizens. In fact, my people were US citizens before the Polish came to this country and that neighborhood from the late 1800s up till the depression. A lot of big names in Chicago politics like Rostenkowski, Gabinski, and Jorzak came for the same reason my father did, to work in the tanneries and foundries along the river.

They built up the neighborhood and the Catholic churches and schools. They got into politics and trades and businesses and started moving up and out along Milwaukee Avenue all the way out to the far part of the city and the suburbs. After World War II there were jobs. At the worst places, like the tanneries, people like my father came up from southern Texas to take those jobs.

I think because our fathers and mothers were Catholic and worked in the same factories that the Polish families had started out in we were tolerated. Not accepted, tolerated. We could attend the Church, but when the mass changed from Latin it went to Polish and English, not Spanish. Same with the Catholic school where English and Polish were taught. The Polish continued to move out but hung on to their buildings and rented them to second generation Mexicans and more and more to hillbillies and illegals.

But as I got older I never felt accepted. Perhaps it was because I was scrawny and not much good in sports and not good at all in a fight. And in that neighborhood there were always fights. Because of this they called me sissy. Sometimes even my brother Eddie would say, "What are you some kind of a sissy?" At that age 9, 10, 11 in the early '60s we weren't thinking sexually. Sissy was a boy who acted like a girl.

And the more they teased me, the more I did act like a girl. I

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was shy and I liked to dance. At the class parties, I was just about the only boy who danced. I'd sneak peeks at my sister's teenage magazines. I'd read about the movie stars and the men like Frankie Avalon, Bobby Daren, and of course Elvis the most. Unlike most of the boys, I was a good student at the Catholic school, some called me Sister Jadwiga's class pet.

When I became a teenager I got pimples and body hair, especially around my privates and because my grades were good for 9th grade I got into Lane Tech. Eddie had graduated the year before. He was a star on the baseball team. I made friends, sort of, with a couple of guys in my homeroom and my biology class. Johnny Jessup was from Uptown and his family was from Kentucky. Aaron Stein was Jewish and lived in Albany Park. His hair was really curly and his nose a little hooked and his green eyes really sparkled. I didn't know then that I was attracted to him.

My main problem in school was PE. They pushed hygiene in health class and they expected us to take showers after gym. I wasn't worried about someone seeing my hairy privates but about getting hard. One day two guys from the football team started laughing and pointing at me. "Look he's getting a hard-on." That was the first time I heard the words faggot and *maricón*. A couple of days later I was jumped after school by the same guys. I didn't dare tell anyone. I told my parents my black eye was from an elbow I got playing basketball. But they seemed to see the changes in me.

Mama would ask me, "*¿Es todo bien, mi hijo?*" My father just said less and less to me. Eddie stopped letting me tag along with his friends to movies, ballgames and especially the pool hall. He'd say, "You're too young to hang around with us." Maria my sister must have felt sorry for me, so she invited me to a couple of her friends' parties.

I started acting sick a lot so I wouldn't have to go to school but Mama stopped believing that I was sick. Then I played hooky. That's

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how I met Gabe at a Vienna hot dog place a couple of blocks from school. I was trying not to draw any attention in there sitting at the counter along the wall with my back to everyone else. Maybe he had seen me in the stands at the school baseball games or waiting outside the locker door for Eddie after the games. He sat at the stool next to mine as I tried to look the other way.

“You’re Eddie Rodriguez’s brother, right?”

Was he really talking to me? The guy who when he came to the plate I was always anxious and wanting him to get a big hit.

He didn’t wait for me to answer. “Eddie was the best shortstop our team ever had. Hard to fill his shoes.”

“You’re telling me?” I managed to say.

“One motion: field the ball, fire to first. Smooth. You ever play ball?”

“Do I look like I ever played anything but seven to nine playground league?”

He laughed, not at me like Eddie might, but in a way inviting me to laugh too.

I did a Marlon Brando imitation. “I could have been an All-Star. The coach, he just didn’t believe in me.”

Now Gabe was busting a gut and soon I was too.

From then on we’d look for each other at that hot dog joint. After awhile we’d make dates like, “When should we cut school next?” Since it was winter and Gabe didn’t have practice we’d meet almost every day after school.

But I wondered, Why does Gabe have anything to do with me? Everything Gabe was, I was not. Gabe was tall, athletic looking with wavy, reddish-brown hair, unusual for a Puerto Rican. His complexion was smooth, his voice deep, with only a slight accent. The previous spring he was the leading hitter on the varsity team as a freshman.

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I had a lot of firsts with Gabe. My first beer, my first marijuana, my first blow jobs, both ways, my first kiss, my first love, my first heartbreak. Whatever it was we had was over by spring. The start of his ball season, the end of mine. When we had been seeing each other I never minded his displays down the hall with girls on each arm. Now it hurt, so I played hooky more and more and almost flunked ninth grade. The school gave me one semester probation. Get back on track or I'd be out of Lane and into Wells.

It was the summer of 1968. What a crazy year. Scenes from Vietnam were on the news every night. Around the time Gabe was giving me the cold shoulder the West Side was on fire after Martin Luther King was killed. Students in France rioted. Then Bobby Kennedy got killed. One day in August Aaron called me up. Said he and Johnny were going down to Grant Park. Did I want to protest the war? I didn't know anything about protesting but I was afraid Eddie might get drafted and I wanted to see Aaron.

We agreed to meet at the Armitage "L" stop. It was early afternoon when we made our way into the park east of Michigan and Adams and headed south through the park toward Balbo Avenue where the largest group of protestors gathered. Even though there were a lot of police down there it seemed like a big hippie party. Aaron saw some girls he knew in a group of about eight, so we walked over. Everyone was wearing red bandanas and smoking Panama Red. They didn't seem to care that there were pigs all around. A few hits later neither did I.

I don't know how much time went by then the mood suddenly changed. People with armbands started coming through alerting the crowd, now three times more packed than when we first arrived.

"Get ready, the pigs are coming."

"Stay with your affinity groups."

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“Put damp cloths over your nose and mouth, they’ll be tear gassing us.”

I was really getting into the chants, “1,2,3,4 we don’t want your fucking war. Hey, hey LBJ, how many kids you kill today?”

Between the chants I heard a few words here and there from dueling bull horns.

“... unlawful assembly ...”

“The whole world is watching.”

“... last chance ...”

“The whole world is watching.”

“... you will be arrested ...”

“The whole world is watching.”

I couldn’t see what was happening unless I jumped straight up and caught a glimpse of a line of light blue riot helmets. The next moments are a jumble of memories. *Pop. Pop.* Clouds of grey smoke. The crowd moving at first back toward the lake, then people running every which way. I could see night sticks coming down on heads and backs. A pig pushed Johnny down and raised his club. Not thinking, I grabbed the cop from behind, twisting him enough for Johnny to get up. The pig tripped and we ran and ran. My eyes were burning from the pungent gas so we kept running toward the lake and toward the Art Institute. Aaron was yelling to us from an entrance to the parking garage below the park. We ducked down the stairs not thinking it was probably a dumb thing to do. But there were no police near the stairway we went down.

We crouched behind cars and scooted from one to the next heading as far south as we could go and changed levels more than a few times. Sometimes we just sat to let the time go by. It was dark when we went upstairs near Jackson. Flashing lights broke the constant sodium-vapor light. Sirens and chants seemed to be coming from a few blocks south of where we were. We looked at each other.

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We didn't need to speak to know we all had enough. We made it to the Ravenswood "L" and then sat apart from each other in case the police might think we were a group of protesters. Before Armitage, Aaron came by and said he knew a hippie house near the Belmont stop we could go and watch the news on TV. We all wanted to know whether they would show the police cracking heads.