Keep Ya Head Up!

By: Leilani Diaz

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CALIFORNIA COUNCIL FOR THE HUMANITIES

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One night around 8 pm, Mom told me, my older sister Angelica, and my little brother Joshua that she and her boyfriend Fernando were driving to FoodMax on Durant Avenue. They needed to buy food for tomorrow Also Mom said that she was going to pick up my graduation dress.

Then around 10 pm we got a call from Mom. She said, "I'm not going to home tonight. Me and Fernando got arrested."

So the next morning I got up and went to school. As I was taking the AC Transit bus to school, all I was thinking was, "It's not the first time my mom got arrested. But is she going to be out today? Because every time before, she came back the next day "

When I got home, Angelica told me, "Mom hasn't called and she isn't home."

I said, "Okay " Then I went in the other room to watch TV with Joshua.

Later that night we got a call from Mom. She said, "I don't know when I'm getting out because of the charges."

So Angelica asked, "What were the charges?"

Mom replied, "I didn't have my driver's license and Fernando had a weapon on him."

Then I got on the phone. With a sigh, I asked, "When are you going to be out?"

All she said was, "Baby, I'm not sure."

My mind was spinning. I thought, "What does she mean she's not sure? My graduation was in like two days! And she doesn't know if she's going to be out? ARE YOU SERIOUS?!"

Then I remembered when she left she was going to pick up my dress. So I said, "Mom, where is my dress?" There was a long pause. "Mom?"

I could hear her breath coming out in a frustrated sigh. "Sweetie," she said, "There's more bad news. I got your dress, but they impounded the car and everything is in there and I'm not sure you could get it."

I basically threw the phone at Angelica, went to our bedroom and slammed the door. Nana called to see how we were doing. We didn't tell her about mom. Nana said, "I'll come to your graduation." Well, that's great like Frosted Flakes. At least someone was going to be there. Right.

When I woke up the next day, I took the bus and went to school. When I saw my friends I told them everything, including that I might not get to go to our graduation. They told me they were sorry but insisted I still go. That would be fine by me, just show up to the graduation in jeans and a tee. But our principal, aka "Light-skin Obama", said, "People who are graduating and walking across the stage have to look and act professional." And I didn't have a dress.

All my friends had sad faces and said, "That's too bad." They got that right, really bad.

After a minute or two of processing this, my friend Alexis said, "I have lots of dresses. You can borrow mine." I looked at her to see if she was serious, and she was. That would be a great solution, but the problem was she was like 6 feet tall and a little on the skinny side. Me, on the other hand, I'm 5 foot 1, so yeah, great idea down the drain.

I told her, "Thanks for the thought."

When school ended I really didn't want to talk to anyone, so I left as quickly as possible. On the bus back to the house, I glared at anyone who looked at me 'til they dropped their eyes. My mom always told me when I do that it looks like I'm throwing daggers.

When I walked in the door, I told Angelica, "I'm not going to graduation."

It took her a minute to respond. "No, you're going!"

"Angelica," I said, "I don't have a dress or have my hair done. No one's going to do my nails, and we don't have a ride to there in the first place!"

So then Angelica called Auntie Sherri and told her what was happening. Auntie said, "I have a dress Leilani could wear, but you have to come over here and get it because I let someone use my car."

When Angelica got off the phone she said, "Okay, now you have a dress, so we're going to the graduation."

"And what about my hair and everything else?" I replied.

Angelica looked at me, rolled her eyes and said, "TJ's mom, duh."

I looked at her and said, "What do you mean, TJ's mom?"

"I thought she was going to braid your hair," Angelica said, looking confused.

I sighed and said, "Yeah, she was, but I don't know how I'm going to get there and you and Josh are going to have to come with me."

"Hello," she said. "We can take the bus, but you're going to have to give me money so I can get on."

I couldn't think of anymore excuses. "Before we go to Mama Quita's house we have to stop at the beauty supply store so I can get nail polish," I said.

I knocked on the front door of TJ's mom's house. Mama Quita said, "Ay Baby Ya here'da get ya hair?"

I smiled and said, " Hey, Mama Quita, yeah, I'm here to get my hair done."

Mama Quita let us in and said, "How ya doin?"

I never lie to Mama Quita 'cause she's just like family, so I told her everything.

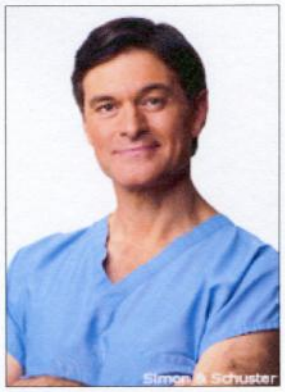
"That's a shame," she said. I was like, I know She was watching Doctor Oz and making candy necklaces for the graduation.

"What are ya gonna do?"Mama Quita asked.

I said, "I'm going to my auntie's house after this and get a dress."

Mama Quita nodded, then changed the subject by saying, "I would *so* do that docta." Angelica and I started to laugh.

When Mama Quita finished doing my hair, it was six o'clock and the sun was going down. "By the time we get to Sherri's, it's going to be dark," I told my sister. So we hopped on the 1R bus.



As we walked in the door of Auntie Sheri's house, she told us how sorry she was about what happened and that she already started to look for dresses I can wear. As she pulled them out, the first one I saw was a pretty summer dress, so I told her that the dress has to look professional and has to be black, white or both and there can't be any colors in it. She looked at me like I was crazy because really none of her clothes are plain. I knew this was going to be hard.

About an hour later we found two black and white dresses. The first one looked okay but it really wasn't my style, it was short with skinny straps; to tell you the truth, dresses aren't really my style. The second one was, I guess you can say, sort of to my knees with black and white spirals and the straps go around your neck. I had to tell Sheri that I couldn't wear the dresses because they both showed too much cleavage and the principal wouldn't let anyone walk the stage if he thinks that there's too much skin showing. Auntie Sheri said, "Everything's going to be okay, we'll just put a black shirt under it."

"Great idea," I said, although what I was actually thinking was, "That's going to look stupid."

The next day was graduation day While I was getting ready, there was a knock on the door Angelica went to the window to see who it was. She turned back to me and said, "Nana's here, and we're going to have to tell her about what happened to Mom."

"Well, then open the door and let her in, so we can. We need a ride anyway "

"Okay, but I don't want to be the one who tells her what happened. You know how mad she's going to get because we didn't tell her sooner," Angelica said.

"Yeah, I know," I said. "Well maybe you should have told her when she called the other day "

"Mom said not to tell her because she thought she was going to be out."

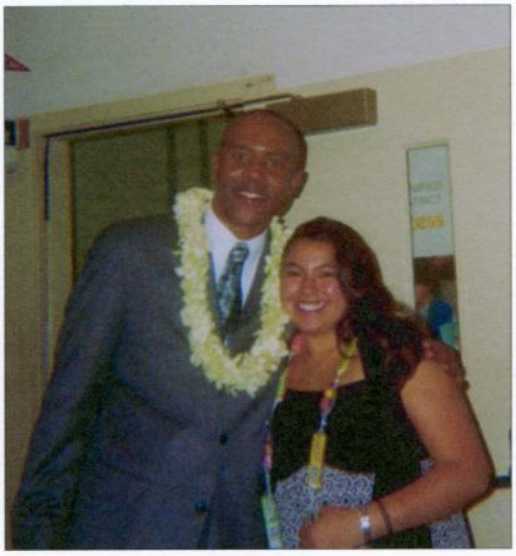
I sighed. "I guess you never know about Mom and what's going to happen next with her, either. Now open the door and we'll tell Nana about Mom together "

When Angelica opened the door, the first thing Nana asked was "Where is your mom at?"

Angelica and I looked at her and said, "There's something we need to tell you."

After we explained everything, we both knew Nana was mad because we could see the temperature rising in her face even though she was trying to keep cool.

"If you guys are ready, we can go to Leilani's graduation," she said with a plastered smile that reminded me of that movie, *The Stepford Wives*.



We got to the school early, so I took pictures with my friends.

"Everybody, it's time to get into your lines so we can start!" yelled the secretary, making it sound like we were a bunch of little kids.

As the music started to play we all got in our spots and starting walking down the aisles to our seats. A kid right behind the girl I was sitting next to started kicking her chair. While that was happening, our principal said, "This is a promotion not a graduation, you are leaving someplace small to go to even bigger places. You are not kids anymore." Then he started calling names. When I heard my name, I cheesed. While walking on stage to hug our teachers, my bracelet got caught on my math teachers scarf and I almost ripped it. I looked at everybody with a smile while my face was burning red. I shook the principal's hand and tried to get to my seat as fast as I could without falling and making a fool of myself. When I sat down my friend Maurice smiled at me and said, "Now, that's how I'm going to remember you. Always doing something wrong and smiling about it."

After the "Promotion" ended I said goodbye to my friends and went to go talk to Amelia and her mom, Lisa. "Hey, babygirl. Amelia told me what happened with your mom," said Lisa. "I'm so sorry "

"Oh, it's alright I made it to the graduation and my Nana's here." I replied

"Well, I'm happy that you came, because I haven't seen you in awhile."

"Yeah, I know I missed you. So how's everything going at your house?"

"It's going great," she said with a smile. "Did you know that Amelia's coming to my house in Santa Cruz?" Amelia usually stayed at her dad's in Oakland.

"No I didn't, but I hope you guys have a good time together. I have to go, my Nana's waiting for me." Then I gave her a hug and said goodbye.

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When we all got back to the house, our Nana told us to pack your stuff because we weren't staying at a house with no adults. While I was packing and the phone rang.

"Hey, Amelia, what's up?" I answered.

"Nothing. My mom wanted to know if you wanted to go with us to Santa Cruz because of what's going on," she said.

"That would be great, but I'm not sure if my Nana would let me," I replied with a sigh.

"Well, ask her now 'cause I don't want to go by myself!" she said with a high-pitched voice.

I laughed and said, "Okay, I'll go check." I put the phone to my shoulder and asked my Nana if I could go to Santa Cruz.

It took a minute, but she said, "Yes, you can go. Think of it as a graduation present."

Two days later, I was in the middle of a game of *Grand Theft Auto* at Lisa's house when Amelia's cell phone rang.

"It's your mama," she said and handed me the phone.

"Hi, sweetie," Mom said.

"Hi," I said flatly

"I'm out of jail."

"I see that," I replied.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

"Great."

"Are you still mad at me?"

"No, mother, I was perfectly fine with you not being at graduation."

"I don't like your attitude!" I imagined her pointing her finger like she always does when she's mad.

"I don't like your boyfriend!" I replied. You know that laugh that you get when something is serious? I laughed like that.

"You're making me mad," she said.

"You already made me mad," I said. "So, bye-bye." She started yelling so I hung up. Her voice is annoying. I went back to playing *Grand Theft Auto*, running over everything.