

Valentina Olivieri

Bob Bednar

Journalism

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### Time of loss

Asunción is the capital of Paraguay, a small country in the middle of South American continent. Just like any other capital city in South America, there are the overcrowded streets with unbearable traffic, pollution, indigenous natives selling their handmade artifacts, selling fruit and even cleaning windshields in order to just gain some money to feed themselves and their families. Dangers, like street robbers and kidnappers, loom in the corner of every street. The only existing social classes in Paraguay are the high and lower ones.

My school would take me on trips to the lower class communities to interact with the people living there. I was a part of Operation Smile, and I worked at the hospital where they gave all patients that couldn't afford the treatment, free checkups and surgery. I always felt really happy when I could help these people and see them happy, and upset when I had to leave them. What I admired most about these people in the lower class was how they made the most of what they had and they were never ungrateful.

On my way back home, my family and I would have to go down a road that was inhabited by poor people. They live in houses made of wood and scrap material with dirt floors. Most used a hole in the ground as their bathroom and families would sleep in the same area, even if that meant sharing a small mattress on the

ground. A few minutes later, I would finally reach my home: the building L'Excellence in the Paraguayan Yacht and Golf Club. This brick 18-stored building is located in a country club that contains a 5 star hotel, 5 restaurants, sports facilities, a park and a 18-hole golf course alongside the Paraguayan river. This place for me was a sanctuary, a place that where I could escape the reality I lived in and enjoy the peaceful environment surrounding me.

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Nowadays, my family and I live in a nice neighborhood in Texas. This large neighborhood contains one of the golf courses where my university's golf team comes to practice at, as well a few community pools, dog park, and 4 different schools ranging from Day Care/Pre K till high school. My house has a back view to the 10<sup>th</sup> hole of the course, and despite the fact that golf balls land in our backyard all the time, looking out the window brings me the same serenity as my apartment in Paraguay did. 6 years ago, however, there was an incident in our building in Paraguay that deeply impacted my life and made me start appreciating what I know have even more.

On Wednesday, March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2010, my parents and I went to Argentina to visit my family for the Holy week. It had been a long time since I have seen my niece and nephews plus their children. I should mention, my niece and nephews were in their thirties, and my half brother, father of the three of them was in his mid 50s. Now you might be asking yourselves how old is my dad. Lets just say that he is older than most regular fathers and the mother of my half brother, was my father's first wife.

It was 9:00 am and we were getting ready to meet up with my niece to go to sightsee in Puerto Madero. My mom was sitting at the table waiting for me to be done getting ready and suddenly, her phone starts buzzing like crazy. All of my mom's friends on her group chat were eagerly texting her asking if we are okay. My mom tells them we are in Argentina and asks them what is going on. There was a fire in my building at 5 am. I immediately got on the laptop and saw how my building, my home, was the main cover story in every newspaper. As I started scrolling down the article, it said:

*At 5 am today, a fire erupted from the building L'Excellence in the Paraguayan Yacht and Golf Club. The firefighters have successfully evacuated everyone from the building and nobody was injured. There were no flames and only black smoke was emitted. The police and firefighters have yet to determine the cause of this incident.*

After I finished reading the news out loud, my mom called our maid who usually comes to work at 6:00 am everyday to check up on her. They were talking on the phone for a while and my parents immediately decide that we had to return to Paraguay immediately. So we called my relatives, briefly told them what happened, packed our bags and took the first flight back to Paraguay.

I remember how shocked and upset I felt at the time. It felt like the one time my family and I chose to switch our plans from what we usually did in the Holy Week, we got everything that mattered to us taken away in a matter of minutes. As much as I was worried about my home, my two dogs were the top priority on my mind. I am an only child and when I was 5, my parents bought me my first dog, Dani,

a shih tzu, which reminds me of my dog Bobby now since he is also a shih tzu. Dani was like having a little sister for me growing up, despite the fact that she lacked talking and was really lazy whereas I was a really hyper child. My second dog Cati was rescued from a golf course. She was the daughter of a stray dog and a fox terrier, and they all lived in the golf course where they were abused and barely had any food to eat. When I rescued Cati, her bones were showing, her fur was falling of a lot, yet her eyes filled with happiness because I was going to give her a second chance at life. She reminded me of when the lower class kids I visited got really excited to see me and my classmates since we would bring them toys and food which would hopefully make them happier and improve their lives a little bit. I believe that dogs feel the same emotions humans do, and seeing Cati wag her tail with joy, made me feel like I made an impactful difference in someone's life. When my two dogs met at first, it was like the two social classes were colliding, but with time they became best friends.

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We took the first flight back to Paraguay and stayed at the hotel in the country club. It felt weird to be staying there while I could see my building from my window and it was two minutes walking distance. None of us slept well that night.

As soon as my mom finished reading the news, she turned around to me and said, "Valentina, I know you are a young girl and this is a lot to be processing right now, but I want you to try your best to be strong because there is a lot of changes that will be happening in our lives. We will try to find a new apartment to live at

temporarily for the next few months till we are all able to move back in again.” I then proceeded to ask her about my dogs. She continued, “ This is another reason why I want you to be strong. Our two dogs, Dani and Cati, are currently at the animal hospital being taken cared of and treated. They are unfortunately not doing too well.”

I remember that when my mom finished speaking that day, my heart felt like it was slowly being shredded apart. I could not stop thinking that something horrible would happen to them. There were a few moments where I tried picturing my life without them, and it just felt like a huge chunk of my life and my family was gone. I couldn't bear with the pain, but I decided to follow my mom's advice to be strong and just pray for my dogs to get better.

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On Friday, the news channels broadcasted that the fire had been caused in the malfunction in an Internet antenna, which lead the wires in the building's general electrical system to overheat and begin to melt. The fire began on the 18<sup>th</sup> floor and worked its way down. The manager of our building had contacted us earlier this morning to let us know that it was safe to come into the building to see if we could retrieve any of our personal objects since nothing was burned down. My mom left by herself to check the apartment.

I always knew my mom was a tough gal, but this was just surprising to me. She always likes being accompanied by someone whether it is into the supermarket or for a walk in the park. She decided to confront the problem head on and accept

whatever waited for her in our apartment. I admired how brave she was, even if it was just for show, and I tried my best to be as strong as her during our time of loss. Losing my home was like a stray dog on the street. No matter how many times I tried finding my way back, I would get even further away from where I started. I missed seeing my room; my toys, the view and the fresh smell of clean. Also like a stray dog, as more time passed by, the fainter the smells and the memories became of what was once your home. In a way, I could relate to the lower class people because they had a lost something, whether it was their home in a storm or family relative in an accident. However, they continued to treat everyday as a fresh start and I would always see them smile. These people and my mom were my inspiration for staying strong and for accepting whatever fate was headed our way.

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On Sunday morning, I went with my friends to Church to pray for my dogs, my family and my home. I chose to believe that despite all the horrible things that happened to us in the last few days, something great would come out of it, and I thought this “something great” would be my dogs. When I returned to the hotel, my mom and I had a serious talk. She told me, “ I went to the apartment yesterday and it was pitch black. It was so heartbreaking to see in that state, however, there are a few items of clothing that could get salvaged so I am currently getting them washed here in the hotel. About our dogs, I am sorry Valentina, but they had to put them down. They were in too much pain and suffering.” I was astonished and didn’t know what to say. My mom then continued and told me the real story of what happened with my dogs. The firefighters evacuated the building in 30-40 mins successfully,

and 20 mins later, my maid arrived and saw what was happening to the building. She tried to get past the police lines to talk to the firefighters. She told them that there were two dogs in our apartment that were still up there and since the firefighters' main priority was to save all the human lives, they hadn't even wondered about the dogs. They finally went back up there and as they broke down the door, they found my two dogs lying right next to each other close to the kitchen door, dead.

As my mom was told me this story, my eyes filled up with water and my heart with anger. I was furious that she hadn't told me about my dogs before instead of leading me on to believing they still had a chance of living. I thought I would have never forgiven her for what she did. As time went by, however, I started understanding my mom did what she did. She was trying to protect me from so much suffering, since she knew how much my dogs meant to me and how much it would have destroyed me if I found out at the same time as the fire. I then realize how selfish I had been to not even consider what my parents lost as well and how they felt. They were being strong for me while I was just there mourning and feeling sorry for myself. There are so many worse things that could have happened that day of that fire. We could have been there ourselves and my dad might not have made it down the stairs because of his age and bad knee. Turns out that the "something great" I was waiting for to happen, had already happened. Nobody, aside my dogs, died that day, we were able to move back home 9 months later and salvage some of the things we owned. Ever since that time, I never took anything I had for granted and I lived everyday to the fullest.

### **Author's note:**

Writing this piece definitely brought a few tears and memories back. Details were easy to recall, but what was hard was knowing which were the most important ones that I wanted to highlight and which ones I had to leave out.

When I wrote the first draft of this paper, it was titled *The fire that ignited my soul*. I wanted the reader to imagine that there would be a dramatic event that changed my life and also foreshadow the actual “fire” incident. One of the corrections I got for my paper was that I was missing the main idea. What did aspect/message did I want to focus throughout this paper? What was the most important thing I learned during my experience? I figured out it was loss. When I was younger, I had low self-esteem and I struggled finding my true identity, not just copy my friends. This experience shattered my reality and made me create a greater one. I did lose my home for 9 months, some material items and my dogs, all of which made me want to confront life head on just like my mom did during that experience and just how the lower class people do everyday of their lives. So the new title became *Time of loss*. I also wrote a lot about Paraguay in the first page in order to set the story, however some of the descriptors were unnecessary, and hence, cut out. Another thing was that I wrote my story in a journal entry format so the reader would feel like they were me in the paper and could then identify more with what I went through. I went 6 years in the past, wrote it in present tense so it would feel like everything was just happening and my conclusion was written in 2016 which just tried to wrap up all that happened the following months and what I learned. I

decided to change the format and just write the story in past tense. In order for it to have a more personal feel, I wrote down my thoughts and feelings from then and now thinking back to the event.