

## **Elizabeth Hinojosa, Who Fell from Heaven and Broke Her Body** **by Demi Tomasides**

Another bead of sweat rolled into Elizabeth's eye. She reached up and wiped it through. The bus was pushing 90 degrees and she and the other kids were still only forty-five minutes into their route. Since Elizabeth's bus picked up each student with a disability at their doorstep, the group spent an-hour-and-a-half each morning and each afternoon weaving in and out of the neighborhoods of Mercedes, a 12-square-mile town on the border of Texas and Mexico.

"I was born fine," Elizabeth told me, "But within 24 hours of my birth, I had a series of seizures and got misdiagnosed with meningitis."

By the time the bus pulled into the school, each student was sweating. Yet, even sweltering, the bus held a comfort that could not be replicated in the classroom. The bus friends dispersed to their separate classes, alone. Elizabeth sat down, feeling excited by her love of education, but isolated by her physicality.

"When I was about six months old, my mom realized that I was not reaching my normal milestones. She took me back to the doctor and that's when they diagnosed me with Cerebral Palsy."

In class, Elizabeth concentrated on her pencil. Because the Cerebral Palsy affected her right side, it made the physical act of putting her thoughts on paper difficult. But Elizabeth's independence was a defining quality, and she was nothing if not determined. She knew her homework tonight would take three times longer than any of her classmates, but, with the help of her mother, it was always something she did herself.

“My mom would not accept the first diagnosis. They told her, ‘Your daughter will never walk or talk or learn.’ But she refused to accept that. And look at me. I can walk, I can talk, I can learn.”

After school, Elizabeth boarded the bus with her friends. And, because her house was at the very edge of the route (first stop in the mornings, last stop in the evenings), by the time Elizabeth got home that night, she was sweating again.

“Mom,” she said, “We need to do something about this.”

So, the next morning, her mom called the superintendent of Mercedes ISD. Of course, the district was lacking funds, especially at that time, and so they pushed back.

“It can’t possibly get that hot,” the superintendent retorted.

“Fine,” Yolanda contested, “I challenge you to ride a whole bus ride. An hour and a half with these kids.”

The next afternoon, suit, tie, and all, Mr. Superintendent himself sat down next to Elizabeth. Half an hour into the bus ride, he unbuttoned his top button; fifteen minutes later, his next; after that, he loosened his tie. By the time they reached Elizabeth’s house, his sleeves were rolled up, tie abandoned, and jacket slung over the seatback.

He walked Elizabeth up to the porch, and, as her mom opened the door, said, “Ms. Yolanda, I understand now.”

Now, every bus in the Valley has air conditioning.

“He needed to experience that bus ride to have empathy towards us, and he needed to have empathy towards us to make change,” Elizabeth explained. At twelve years old, she had found her calling in advocacy.

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“My best friends became the people on the bus,” Elizabeth noted.

On top of spending an hour and a half sweating together, the group developed a level of understanding.

“Back then, I did not have great self-esteem. I would just like to hang out with other people with disabilities because I didn’t think I belonged to regular groups. Even though I was mainstreamed, in a regular classroom, I never would hang out with other people.”

Sitting on the same, sweltering bus was Christopher Rodriguez. They met when Elizabeth was thirteen, and Christopher was eleven.

“My best friend, Christopher Rodriguez, and I are still boyfriend and girlfriend. He has muscular dystrophy, and is not doing great right now, but I’m still his best friend. With Muscular Dystrophy you get worse over time. He had a normal childhood; he ran and everything. Then, he needed to be on the walker and, slowly but surely, a wheelchair. And yeah, that’s when I met him. When he was getting sick. I’ve known him forever.”

They were in high school when Christopher asked Elizabeth out, so shy that he did it over email. They made plans for the movies. Elizabeth got all ready, looked really nice, and had her mom drop her off at the theatre. He was supposed to meet her there. He didn’t show up.

“Back then, there were no cell phones,” Elizabeth explained, “So I had to go find a pay phone. I was crying to my mom, ‘*Mom! He stood me up.*’”

Of course, as any super-mom would, Yolanda swooped in and picked her daughter up. The first thing Elizabeth did upon entering the house was call Christopher’s mom.

“Hi Mrs. Rodriguez. Where is Christopher?”

“He’s not with you?” She reacts through the receiver, “But I left him at the theatre!”

At this point, Elizabeth’s mind was racing, “Which theatre did you leave him at?”

Not, apparently, the correct one.

“We set the time and the date,” Elizabeth told me, “but we didn’t set the location!” She laughed, “So my first date wasn’t my first date; my first date was the second date.”

She took another heaving laugh, “And the funniest part is this: when I asked, ‘Chris what did you do during all that time?’ He shrugged and said, ‘I watched the movie.’”

Both Chris and Elizabeth got over the hurt they felt about *thinking* they were stood up and have dated ever since. Although, dating today looks different than it did in high school.

“His condition is so much worse that he’s bedridden. He got an Associate’s in architecture, but he cannot use it because of his disability condition. Every day he is a strong warrior. He keeps on going and going. He has multiple nurses, but the good thing is he’s still at home. He doesn’t eat regular food because he has to have a trache. He hasn’t eaten in 4 to 6 years. He misses that. It’s difficult, really difficult.”

She pauses and says, “He is my best friend forever.”

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In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the teachers introduced Elizabeth to Alpha Smart, a word processor with a keyboard attached. No longer was Elizabeth forced to combat with the pencil every time she wanted to embrace her education. Now, she could type her homework and simply print it in the morning.

“I was so happy! Ever since then, I’ve loved computers. Technology is a blessing from the heavens above. That’s why I enjoyed college... because everything in college is typed!”

Elizabeth entered the University of Texas Pan-American having just graduated at the top 13% of her high school class and, as she entered campus, she determined her plan: “I wanted to experience everything.”

She moved into her freshman dorm on the second floor and immediately excelled in her studies. She completed internships and practicums and focused her mind on continuing to help others with disabilities. While obtaining her Rehabilitation Services degree, it didn’t take long for Elizabeth to become more than just a student. She co-founded the Student Accessibility Council, an organization *by* students with disabilities *for* students with disabilities, that would convene and discuss accessibility issues on campus. Elizabeth shared what she discovered about self-advocacy in grade school and subsequently empowered her classmates.

Many places on campus were difficult to access and, more often than not, elevators were out of service. The Council brought these issues to the administration who “always welcomed us,” and would fix the problem for the next semester. Elizabeth’s reach extended beyond her university years; today, the Student Accessibility Council is still advocating for accessibility at UTPA.

While Elizabeth has always used her voice for others, it took a while to learn to speak for herself. As a child, out in public with her mom, especially at grocery stores, people would *look* and *ask*. They would ask Yolanda. Not Elizabeth.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“What does she have?”

“Is she okay?”

As time went on, it became clear to Yolanda how the comments affected her daughter. Finally, Elizabeth said, “Mom, why don’t they ask me? I can talk.”

And, without missing a beat, the next person to ask, “*What is wrong with her?*” was met with a swift, “Why don’t you ask her yourself?”

Elizabeth learned to use her voice with adults, but she mastered it with children. Kids, with feet in the dirt and minds in the clouds, don’t typically respond to detailed descriptions of spasticity and dystonia.

So, Elizabeth came up with a perfectly concocted response. Something that “would make them smile and understand.”

“What happened to you?” they would ask.

“Well,” she’d respond, “when I was born, I fell down from Heaven and I broke my body.”

“Oh. Okay,” and they’d run away, completely satisfied, dirtying their shoes as they went.

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It was college that Elizabeth decided, “Enough is enough. I am who I am,” the sentiment that propelled her *inclination* towards advocacy into a *career* of advocacy. However, while Elizabeth was confident in what she wanted to pursue and secure in her ability to pursue it, the job search was not favorable.

“It took me years to get a job.”

She applied to many places, including her Mercedes school district—the one with the air conditioned buses—but never made it past the interview.

“But that’s what we teach at ASI: that it takes time for people with disabilities to get a job. We just try and try and try.” Advocates Searching for Independence (ASI) is a company whose mission is to “empower individuals with disabilities to find or create meaningful opportunities for full community inclusion.” Elizabeth was recommended for ASI by a friend, and it was clear from the interview that she was who they were looking for: a positive and driven changemaker. After years of searching, Elizabeth had once again found her “bus people.” For the last three years, she has led classes designed to teach others with disabilities self-advocacy in the job search and fight for what is known as “competitive integrated employment.”

Competitive integrated employment is a term that references full or part-time work in an integrated setting for at least minimum wage. Integrated settings are businesses where people with disabilities work alongside those without disabilities, interacting with members of the public and receiving the same eligibility for advancement opportunities as their non-disabled counterparts. While the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Texas’ Employment-First policy both prohibit employment discrimination, very few Texans with intellectual and

developmental disabilities (IDD) work in settings where they are fully integrated with people without disabilities.

During the 87<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session, however, a bill was passed by State Senator Judith Zaffirini that would improve competitive integrated employment opportunities for Texans receiving services under certain state waiver programs. The Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities (TCDD), a federally-funded state agency that works to promote change, often legislative, within the disability community. On their website, TCDD describes the benefits of this practice as “a means by which people with IDD gain an important entry into their communities, develop a sense of being valued, earn wages and job benefits, and have the opportunity to make meaningful contributions.”

Elizabeth’s work at ASI progresses competitive integrated employment and her enthusiasm is reflected even through the confines of Zoom. The moment her window appears, you are met with the large banner, prominently displayed on her bright green wall: “Believe that you can, and you will.”

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Elizabeth’s advocacy work did not stop at ASI. Her natural intellect was engaged by a new challenge, a program to push her advocacy and introduce her to the legislative world: Texas Partners in Policymaking, a year-long advanced advocacy training program for self-advocates and parents of children with developmental disabilities, organized by TCDD. Elizabeth applied and soon, she once again found herself in class, this time on Zoom, learning how to make systematic change for the disability community within Texas.



After a year, Elizabeth found a new level of confidence—in her work, in her voice, and in herself. This development culminated in a Capstone presentation that reflected her goal of seeing more people with disabilities secure jobs throughout the entire community. The Partners website describes her project:

Hinojosa is creating an advocacy support program for adults with disabilities who are determined to enter the employment world but have concerns of losing their Social Security income and Medicaid benefits. The Partners will develop a curriculum designed to inform participants about being an employee with a disability. The Partners will serve and educate groups of six participants at a time with the goal of providing participants with guidance and support as they transition into the workforce. This project is collaborative with Stephanie Picazo and Katy McBeth.

To commence their success, Elizabeth was asked to give the graduation speech. She expressed her love for the group that had worked so hard and so closely together for the last year. She conveyed her excitement for seeing the incredible work they would accomplish throughout the entire state. And she pulled her mom in the frame to say that nothing would have been possible without this woman right here.

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As an advocate, it is not uncommon for people to ask Elizabeth about the one thing she would like to tell the world. She uses her voice, and she has her answer:

“Don’t make assumptions. Just because someone has a physical disability, it doesn’t mean they have a mental disability. Even if they did, anything is still possible. They have their shot. Don’t rule them out.”

## Author's Note

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For as many pages as this article is, it feels like a mere abridgement of Elizabeth's life. As a writer, I struggled with what to cut—every story, every quote, every inflection felt worthy of inclusion. As an interviewer, I thrived—how fortunate I was to have gotten to know someone so monumental! Even now, I am sad to think my time with Elizabeth is over. There is so much more I want to talk about, focusing on her journey through her relationships. I want to dive deeper into the influence of the people in her life, further developing the notion that advocates are not just born, they're made. Nevertheless, it was Elizabeth's openness and vulnerability that allows me the benefit of even having this internal debate at all.

This article challenged my writing through the editing process. Growing up, I have had the benefit of being engulfed in the disability community both personally and now, professionally. Elizabeth's story contained so many significant moments for me, that I did not know how to handle the information as a journalist. It caused several drafts of detours, rants, and unconnected information, charged with my own feelings as opposed to Elizabeth's forward-thinking depth and positivity. I give thanks to my editor, Bob Bednar, and colleagues for their objective minds that helped me invest in the through-lines best for this article.

Thank you, Elizabeth, for sharing your joy, determination, and humor with me. Not only did I learn enough to fill more than these eleven pages, in talking with you, I simply had a blast. Next step, meet in person! DCPT

## Resources:

*ASI - Facebook*. Facebook. (n.d.). <https://www.facebook.com/asiopendoors/>.

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