



Figure 1 Kataryna Piña at her grandmother's home in Weslaco, Tex. She will attend Colgate. Credit Bryan Schutmaat for The New York Times

Elsa, Tex.

“At the age of 11, I started working for the very first time as a cleaning lady with my grandparents.”

Kataryna Linn Piña

The way the light shined on her skin as she sewed the quilt emphasized the details of every wrinkle, burn and cut. While she completed the overcast stitch, the thimble on her index finger protected her from the needle pokes. She wore rings on every finger of her right hand, but on her left she only wore her wedding ring. The rings drew the attention away from her age and scars to her cherished possessions.

My grandmother's rings had not only been stolen by her son, my father, but she was constantly in the state of fear that he would steal from her once again. When my father was incarcerated, she wore her rings every day of the week; however, when he was home, her hands were bare. As it became increasingly common over time, she learned to hide her treasures in a jewelry box under her bed.

As a small child, I watched my grandmother's hands move in an inward and outward motion, noticing her rhythm. This rhythm was like the cha-cha music I heard every Sunday when I went with her to the pulga, the flea market. Every week, she bargained on the vendor's products and brought home “unnecessary necessities”; luckily, some weeks it just happened to be thread and new sewing outlines. As my grandma sewed my outfits for school, I was always trying to complete the outline of La Rosa de Guadalupe just so I could impress her. I would sing along to her favorite Prince Royce songs, use the same color of thread as her and try to go at the same cha-cha.

With my father incarcerated, the women in my family went to work. At the age of 11, I started working for the very first time as a cleaning lady with my grandparents. Even though I wanted to help my family, I was ashamed to be a cleaning lady. I argued with my mother against living a life like that, a life in which I gave up my childhood for my family's stability. After being called “malagradecida” — ungrateful — several times, my grandmother reacquainted me with the idea that “todas las cosas buenas vienen a los que esperan” — all good things come to those who wait. Sewing was no longer a hobby, but a necessity, when it came to making my own apron, seaming together rags and pushing for a better future for my family. My grandmother, too, had to put down her quilt and go to work, but she never complained.

In recent years, my grandmother has become increasingly ill, so I took her unfinished quilt to my home, planning to complete it. My grandmother did not choose to leave this project unfinished; her age and constant contribution to her family through work did not allow her to. Often, obstacles have not only redesigned my course, but have changed my perspective and allowed for me to see greater and better things present within my life. The progression of each patch depicts the instability present within my family. However, when you put all these patches together as one, you have a quilt with several seams and reinforcements keeping it together to depict the obstacles we have faced and have overcome to show resilience.

Now, when she visits our home, as she reaches for her glasses and pushes her walker away from the table, my grandmother asks me to bring her the quilt. The jeweled hands that were once accustomed to constant stitching are now bare, and the scars are hidden under every wrinkle. With a strong grip on the quilt, my grandmother signals me to get her sewing basket that sits in the corner collecting dust. She runs her hands over the patches one last time and finds an unfinished seam. She smiles and says, “Cerrar la costura y hacer una colcha de su propio” — close the seam and make a quilt of your own.