

Lightning, weed and, hopefully, grace

By STEVE SABATKA
For the TODAY

This story starts with a neon bullwhip of lightning, knocking a pregnant woman off her feet and sending her into labor right then and there at the edge of a Guatemala sugarcane field. I guess it was time.

Thankfully mom survived unharmed, with a long Bride of Frankenstein streak of white hair to show for the experience — and a squalling, rain-shivering son that she named Chano. (It would be cool to say that “Chano” is the Mayan word for “lightning” or the Ixil word for “storm” but far as I know, that isn’t true.)

I knew Chano many years later when he was a junior at Tillamook High, home of the Cheesemakers. He was a stocky lad, nut-brown, with a huge toothy smile, and could heave alfalfa bales like nobody’s business. I don’t know if lightning had anything to do with it, but Chano spoke in short, almost pidgin sentences, like a B-movie caveman. More than anything else Chano had a childlike innocence, an infectious belly-laugh and a positive outlook. You’d like him.

But Chano didn’t always make the wisest choices. (He had a job — heaving those alfalfa bales — and spent his first paycheck on a forearm tattoo of a Confederate flag, of all things.) And one foggy Friday night, Chano got busted with a bulging baggie of stank, Tillamook homegrown.

He came to school early on Monday with tears in his eyes. “Dad so mad at me.” Chano pulled the crumpled yellow citation out of the back pocket of his Carhartts and showed it to me. Sure enough, MIP. Minor in Possession.

I tried to talk Chano down, reassure him. This was his first offense after all and it didn’t seem likely that he would do any jail time or be fined a huge chunk. But Chano was convinced that he and his parents would be deported.



OWEN ZAMMIT

A few weeks later, Chano went off to court with a file folder that contained letters from me and the principal, a new shirt, and his first ever barbershop haircut — courtesy of the Tillamook School District.

When Chano returned, I was glad to see a relieved smile on his big round face. And I noticed that his folder was thicker than before. “How’d it go?”

“When the judge call my name, I cried.” Chano looked down. “Couldn’t help it.”

I pictured the judge as a cadaverous, Boris Karloff type with a guillotine tie clip and no heart in his cobwebbed chest.

“The judge took me his office,” Chano said. “He gave me Diet Coke. We talked. He wrote me a letter.”

Chano showed me that letter. To this day I wish I’d made a copy of it, framed it maybe. The letter said that laws weren’t made to crush good people or ruin lives because of a youthful mistake and that all of us deserve mercy, a second chance. Grace. The judge seemed to be a nicer person all of a sudden.

“Grace.” Chano’s head tilted to one side. “What is grace?”

I had to think. How would you define the word? And how would you explain grace to someone thunder-born into a world where forgiveness is all too often the exception, not the rule — and who

still believed in Santa Claus? I gave it a shot. “Grace is when you treat people with understanding and not anger.”

Chano’s head tilted to the other side. “Like Obi Wan in Star Wars?”

“Kinda.”

“Like Jesus?” Chano held up his right arm so I could see his WWJD wristband — and that rebel flag.

“Yes, him, too. But if you get busted again . . .”

“Don’t worry.” Chano reached back into that folder and handed me an article that the judge had pulled off WebMD or some such site, all about the “undeniable statistical link” between marijuana use and testicular cancer. That article reminded me of those bloody 16mm drivers ed films, and the even more horrifying “hygiene” movies they showed us in Korea:

“Men, don’t let this happen to you!”

Scare tactics. Was that grace?

“I want kids,” Chano said, “So no more weed for me.”

Chano was sentenced to six months of pee-in-a-cup, weed-free probation and court ordered to go fishing with his dad and repair their relationship. No fine. No slammer time. And a good shot at a clean record when he turned 18.

I left Tillamook a few months later and moved to Newport. Months, then years

went by. I wondered about Chano every once in a while but didn’t check on him because I wasn’t at all sure he’d make it. I didn’t have faith.

This story with a picture sent to me by Richard, my former aide at Tillamook High. (Richard has also been, at different times in his very long life, a coast watcher during World War II, a bat-wielding union organizer and an oyster pirate — whatever that is.) The picture showed a stocky little boy with nut-brown skin and a huge toothy smile.

Turns out Chano has a wife, a son, a daughter — and a janitor job at the junior high, which would have required a clean (or expunged) criminal record. Not to mention a clean UA.

Maybe that scary WebMD article did the trick and kept Chano on the straight and narrow. But I want to believe that the judge saw something in Chano, some glint of promise that was worth a leap of faith, a leap of mercy, of charity. I want to believe that in turn Chano felt a sincere duty to do the right thing, and that he will pass grace along to someone else. And I will do my best to have faith.

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Steve Sabatka’s young adult novel, *Mister Fishback’s Monster*, is available from Black Bed Sheet Books.