

My mother – *la mera mera* – our family's head honcha

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"How did your parents put five kids through college considering they have a second grade education and have earned an average of \$18,000 a year over their working lives?"

That's the question I was asked by a legislator this past session while advocating for paid sick leave that didn't exclude farmworkers. The answer was simple. My mother, "*la mera mera*" (head honcha).

While calling my mother *la mera mera* may seem confusing because of the machismo influence that's plagued our Mexican people – including my family – it's the truth.

Yes, my dad has been the decision maker in most important cases, but it's my mother's will, love and vision that's led us this far. The oldest of 11, my mother learned to care and lead a family early on. When there was little food in her household she would make sure everybody ate before she did, even though she knew she wouldn't get her piece. If someone needed to go retrieve drinking water from the algae-covered pond outside of town, she would do it. She was only 10.

When we came into the picture, my mother was more than ready to lead. With my father gone most of the year to the *norte* (north) she carried the load. I remember a lot of her sacrifices early on. But the one that sticks out the most is her giving us her would-be breakfast (eggs) to exchange for school supplies. With things getting tighter by the day she couldn't stand seeing us go hungry, so she pressed and pressed my dad until we

all headed north.

It was here (Oregon) where my mother became a *campesina* (farmworker). She was pregnant at the time with my little brother Ramon. Not knowing about the poisons in the fields she worked late into her pregnancy. Consequently, Ramon turned out to have the weakest immune system out of all of us.

When she was not working, she was out in the community finding resources. Food boxes, clothing, rent and utility bill discounts, English classes, bus passes, Christmas presents, etc. You name it, my mom knew where to find it. At school, despite not understanding the system and being unable to interact because of language barriers, she would always come along with us for conferences and events.

During the summers she would work two shifts. She picked berries in the morning from 5 a.m. to 1 p.m., then went off to the cannery to work on the beltline from 3 p.m. to 11 p.m. My dad did the same, but mom still carried most of the load at home. As we got older we were able to help out more, but also gave her a few headaches here and there. I'll never forget seeing her image in the window of my car as she stood inside our

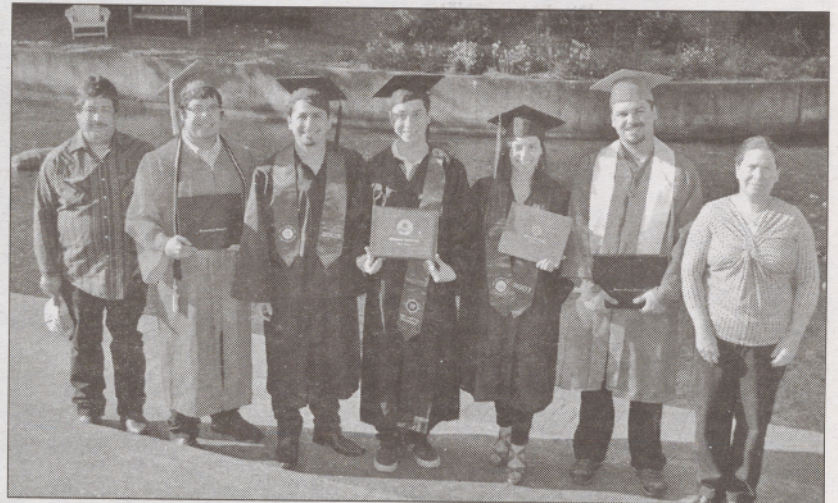


PHOTO COURTESY OF JAIME ARRENDONDO

The author, third from left, stands with his siblings – all college graduates – and his parents on either end.

house giving me her blessing while I rushed out of the house to go out with friends. She still does it today though I'm rushing the other way now to see her.

This year will be my mother's 26th year as a *campesina*. That's about half of her life. Twenty of those have been at a food-processing plant where she currently makes \$9.50 an hour. That should tell you plenty about where I stand in the debate to raise wages.

My mother's labor has produced many fruits. But if you ask her the fruit of her labor she's most proud of, it is her family. Gracias mamá.

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