

Nicole Tufts

Profile: Rosa Peralta

The sun is close to setting when I walk through the door to Rosa's salon. I find her back facing the entrance, her face is reflected in the mirror as she holds a hair dryer in one hand and a brush in the other. There is a little girl barely two feet tall, running around in her pink coat. Rosa converses with her client until she turns to me, and in Spanish, asks if I can wait a couple of minutes. I nod and glance around for an empty chair, the little girl who was running comes to sit next to me. Five minutes turns into fifteen and I begin to play with the small girl who had been trying to grab my Iphone from me.

I hear the hair dryer stop, Rosa and her client exchange a few words and then she comes to sit next to me. The little girl remains, which makes me think she is one of Rosa's. I ask her name, and Rosa replies with, "Bella".

This is our third session together in the familiar space. Rosa asks me what I want to talk about today and I tell her I want to look into her time in New York, when she was fresh to America.

Her face is calm, but her large dark eyes focus themselves on a spot on the wall behind me. It's as if she is looking back and bringing forth her memories.

"The first day I arrived I went looking for my boyfriend. He had paid to bring me over. I called him and he never answered. So I persisted and I called again and again, and nothing. I began to panic. I was in such a strange and foreign place, I didn't understand the language. I was lost. I vaguely remembered where he told me he would be but he wasn't there. So I walked up and down the Broadway to 149 street for a long time until I finally reached out to a friend who I knew from back home and she let me stay the night with her. The next day my boyfriend came to get me. I was so upset. I told him how lost I was. I had cried and called my mother as I was waking up and down every block. She had told me to stop crying and be strong, she said "Don't be afraid and keep walking, you're going to find him". But I was still very mad at him. He kept telling me to relax. It turned out he had changed pager numbers and had forgotten to tell me. That's why he never showed up that first day."

Fear was something that categorized Rosa's first experiences in America. Language was at the stem of her problems.

Rosa Peralta grew up in the small and impoverished town of Castanuela in the Dominican Republic. She lived with her grandmother and her father. In her little town, she was happy. There was always music playing, she danced and went to church, and her brother helped her through school.

Though, it was Rosa's close relation to her grandmother that led to her dropping out of school, to stay at home and care for her. It was because of her lack of education that Rosa faced communication problems once she reached New York City. This led to a strong dependency on her boyfriend.

"I worked in a factory that packaged cereal. I had to wake at 5 every morning to catch the bus to work. It wasn't great, but it was a job. Then one day my boyfriend asked me to deliver a package for him. He said I would receive three thousand dollars in return. I thought I was delivering food."

Later that day Rosa would learn that she was delivering drugs. This episode would then be the first of many to throw Rosa's life into a catastrophic spiral. Initially scared to continue delivering packages, Rosa's boyfriend promised to protect her, and she found that making money was easy when she was dealing.

The prospect of fast money is alluring for anyone trying to achieve the American Dream, and that's just what Rosa thought as she had always dreamt to make it and provide for her family back in Santo Domingo and buy her mother a new house. However, a life of drugs quickly began to lose its appeal for Rosa.

"The first year in New York was nice, my boyfriend showed me around town, we took trains to Brooklyn and the Bronx, he took me shopping. Then I finally got my papers and I could travel back home to visit my family and my son who I had left behind for eight months. It was great superficially, because behind it all, I was doing things that weren't right and they began to catch up with me. The second year there, my boyfriend started heavily using drugs and he turned violent. He would get paranoid when he was high, forget who I was, and become abusive. Most of the time, when he could not remember me, he would panic and shove me into a closet, lock the door, and leave me there for hours. I would look out through a hole in the closet and pretend I was outside, I would breathe and move all the clothes to one side so I could have room, and try to relax."

It was then that Rosa associated New York with loneliness because her boyfriend had changed so much, she barely recognized him. The isolation and tribulations grew worse.

"One day I went to make an exchange and it went terribly wrong. The men I was supposed to sell to became aggressive. They thought I had the drugs on me, but they were somewhere else hidden. They wouldn't let me explain. Before I knew it one of them punched my boyfriend and other pulled me by my hair and threw me to the ground. I almost thought they would hit us with their car while they were leaving and we were still on the ground. I got home and checked myself for bruises. After that I could never walk down the street without thinking someone would attack me. It was haunting."

Because a life of using and dealing drugs posed many dangers, a friend turned Rosa into the police, and she spent six years in jail. The experience was terrifying, with language once again working as an obstacle.

"They would treat you like a bug if in prison, and if you didn't know English it was worse because no one bothered to explain what was going on. I was always frightened and angry."

Rosa then befriended another inmate from Colombia, they shared a connection through their common language and together they helped each other through their time in prison. Once Rosa's family discovered she was behind bars, an unexpected visit from her brother sparked hope. The day of her release, Rosa worried she would be deported. There was a van waiting for her and she feared it would be immigration. Though, hope was on her side, and instead it was a van taking her to a drug rehabilitation program. That day Rosa swore she would work as hard as it took to turn her life around and make it meaningful.

Rosa joined the program a Hour Children, and shortly after was offered a position to help nanny children during the day. This opportunity she holds dear to her heart as she shares it helped her learn how to be a mother again.

"It was me and another girl caring for ten kids during the day. We would have to watch them, cook them lunch, and play games, change diapers. It was hard worked, but it was work I enjoyed. I remember I would cook a large meal and fill a very big container with the food. Then I would line the kids up and give them each a spoon. I would start from the beginning and go down the line, giving each kid a spoonful, then continue the same process until the container was empty. I would do the same when it came to clean the smaller children and change their diapers. I also taught them songs, and told them stories, sometimes we made songs for them to march to as they went to take a nap or eat their food. We danced. I loved it. It was so funny, one day a mother calls me and she tells me her child is asking her for something but she has no idea what it is. It turned out her child was asking for milk but he was asking in Spanish and saying 'leche' instead of milk. I thought it was hilarious that they were picking up the Spanish from me."

Rosa's experience proved valuable as it taught her the importance of hard work. Through Hour Children, Rosa was given the opportunity to go to beauty school, and then open her very own salon. She also began to care for children whose mothers had abandoned them or were imprisoned. Rosa now cares for her own kids, and those she adopted, treating each one like her own. Her kids, and her salon are her life, living images of the progress and transformation she has made since her time delivering packages of cocaine. Rosa holds true to the fact that with hope and hard work anyone can achieve their goals and make a difference.

Today, Rosa is happy with a family she cares for, a husband who loves her, and a salon that is hers, something for her to give back to the community.