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Donde Come Uno, Comen Dos: Two Can Eat from The Same Dish

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Citation Details

Gómez, Cynthia Carmina. "Donde Come Uno, Comen Dos: Two Can Eat from The Same Dish." *Rough and Rede Voices* of August 7.0. August 2017

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Donde Come Uno, Comen Dos

Two Can Eat From the Same Dish

“You know what this means, right?” The oldest kid sat with his arms crossed on the edge of the bed.

“What?” said the other boy.

The third kid sat quietly.

“It means we won’t have enough food to eat. There will be less *food*.” The oldest uncrossed his arms and got up, leaving the other two behind.

It was early afternoon. The boys, just back from school, were transitioning into their evening routine. Andrea and I were in the adjoining room, getting the space ready for after-school tutoring. We stopped for a moment to listen. The doorway at the base of the stairs had no door so we would often hear the young men’s conversations. We were used to it. Adjudicated kids have little privacy. Andrea and I pretended not to listen and went back to setting up the rickety plastic tables and chairs, making more noise than usual.

Andrea and I were slowly converting a room into a little school. We called it *La Escuelita*. Its location, in the basement of the Latino-centric foster care home, was next to their sleeping quarters; a large square room with five tidy beds, a few dressers, and one window. It was military-style neat with few personal effects. During my time as an Educational Advocate, more children were deported, incarcerated, or killed in gang violence than graduated from high school. I know of only one who made it to college.

La Escuelita, to the left, was less furnished. Its cement floors were clean and painted beige. The rooms always a little damp and only sometimes warm. When they had time, the men who ran the center would turn on the space heater in anticipation of our arrival. If they forgot, it would not warm up until it was time for us to leave. The small space heater's fan made an incessant low humming noise. A hand-me-down bookcase held an old paperback of *An Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* and *Migra Mouse: Political Cartoons on Immigration* by Lalo Alcaraz. The graphic novel, a favorite with the youth, featured a Mickey Mouse character dressed up in border agent gear standing over an arrow-shaped sign that reads "Mexico." The room was absent of any technology. A small amount of daylight came in through a little window above the dry erase board leaning on the wall, not yet mounted. The outline an American flag and a lowrider covered one wall; a mural-in-progress. Behind this wall was a hallway to a bathroom with a broken toilet behind one door and two more locked doors. In one of these, Andrea and I stored school supplies.

While only some of the residents in the home were on our caseload, we would try to sit with everyone who needed help. *Too many youth, not enough time.* The work was slow and difficult. The Algebra textbook's torn cover and tagged pages did little to inspire. Math made their eyes glaze over. Rarely did they know their timetables or basic order of operations. The worksheets we copied on our home computers sat uncompleted or wadded up in the wastebasket.

We had almost no resources for the majority of the youth who were English Language Learners. We struggled in vain to teach them basic reading. Schoolwork, in

general, made backs slump and slowly pulled foreheads down toward the floor. The surfaces of the cheap plastic tables were coarse and our thin paper would easily be punctured by the pencil lead. Of all things, this grated on my nerves the most. A smooth writing surface represented to me a basic student right. To avoid bumpy illegible writing, Andrea and I would make them do their assignments on folders.

We facilitated Latino cultural identity and heritage workshops after tutoring and it was during these lessons our young students were more likely to sit up, listen, ask questions. We had a map of the United States and show them the U.S. Mexico border before the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. “No way, man! All of that was ours? Dang.” They shook their heads in disbelief. We studied identity politics, internalized racism, and institutional oppression. We watched the film *Walk Out* and learned about brown student activism. “Just think if we were to rise up like that at school! They would throw us in jail if we organized a walkout. Call us thugs.” We started a summer camp called *Summer Academia*, during the summer. Sometimes, during our school site visits, Andrea and I were able to convince staff to award social studies credit for these lessons. These youth rarely enrolled in school long enough, often did not receive the credit hours they earned.



A T-shirt bearing a Summer Academia image.

It was time for us to go. As we cleared the room and collected our things, one of the staff came down with a mattress and prepared a bed in the middle of the bedroom. “Just like I said,” the oldest spat. Done with folding the chairs and tables, we went upstairs where dinner was being prepared. Andrea and I were reporting on our progress and making small talk when the doorbell rang. There, standing on the front porch, was a probation officer with a young man. I scanned the room and noted, next to the dining table, a plastic card table set up with an extra place setting. The home would have one more mouth to feed. The oldest youth pointed toward the new kid with his chin and asked, “Have you eaten dinner yet?” The kid looked at his feet and shook his head.