

Design by Bailey Strickland.
Photo by Brandon Brooks.

**Camila Parra (10) searches
for answers regarding father,
childhood in Colombia**

FORGOTTEN FACES

EIGHT-year-old Camila Parra (10) sat inside her Miami, Florida home. An array of crayons laid dispersed across the table. Parra's intentions of drawing a simple picture for her father reminded her of why she was drawing the picture in the first place. She wanted him back in her life, but it was not as simple as just drawing him back into place.

"When I moved to Miami, I was really curious about my dad. My mom told me I could send him a picture or drawing," Parra said. "I drew him a picture of him, me, our cat, and just one flower. It feels surreal. I don't think that's my dad, but that is my dad. I don't even know how old he is, all that stuff, I just don't know."

Parra effortlessly drew herself, her cat, and one flower, but paused before drawing her father. She slowly managed to draw his legs, his arms, his body, yet the face remained unclear. She sat in silence as she realized that she did not even remember his face.

One incident. An incident in Colombia ending with hazy images of her father's silhouette lying in a hospital bed. One girl. A girl now living in America with feelings of curiosity, uncertainty, and confusion about her past. One drawing. A drawing that served as a replacement for the father she used to know.

Years earlier, Parra listened from her living room floor as the television glowed from the

local Bogotá, Colombia news channel. The reporter spoke of the latest sighting of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, otherwise known as The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia. This impoverished guerrilla group trained adolescents to fight back against the government. Small riots soon led to violent attacks, leading to a civil war in her home country of Colombia.

"On TV, you would see the aftermath, like all the mourning and crying because of the attacks," Parra said. "[The government] found some of their stations in the mountains, and you would see all the people that were kept and how skinny they were. They didn't feed them, they were hurt and abused. But [the government] tries to hide it as much as they can. The government is just a really big mess, and nothing in Colombia ever goes right. There's a lot of people that fight, and families that have stuff against each other because of [the civil war]."

The civil war was divided between the higher and lower classes. Like the civil war, Parra's family was torn down the middle. Her mom grew up in a wealthy family, but her dad lived the stereotypical life of a third world country. His ability to write as a news journalist regarding the civil war put his life, and the life of his family, in danger.

"Most of the people are actually really smart, like my dad. He's one of the people who's a journalist," Parra said. "He helps with giving information to the news channel that he worked for in Colombia."

Parra's parents split after her father's life was put in danger after giving information about the rebel group to the news channel where he worked. Parra's father still had visitation rights every other 15 days. Her relationship with her father was close until the incident.

"I had a really close relationship with him, but I don't really remember his face. I remember his nice little apartment where we would watch the movie 'Shark Tale,'" Parra said. "We were really close and we had a cat, but after the incident, my mom told me that I couldn't see him anymore."

The incident occurred when Parra was five-years-old. After eating at a Colombian restaurant with her father, some strangers asked for a ride. While these people sat in the backseat of the car, they began to choke Parra's father. They burned him with a lighter and put a knife to Parra. They forced him out of the car, tied him to a tree, and stabbed him multiple times in the chest and lower neck. He passed out, they threw him in a river, and drove away in the car.

Parra thought she witnessed her father's



"IT WAS" was my first hip hop recital in 2012. [It was] the first time I ever performed in front of people [and] in a big theater. Those two girls were my best friends at the time. They were the first people I met in Miami." *Photo provided by Camila Parra.*



"I WAS" Colombia, we used to have weekly trips to a mountain and we used to horseback ride and climb. It was one of my first times doing [something like that]." *Photo provided by Camila Parra.*



"I WAS" [at] Disney World. We had just moved [to the U.S.]. My parents took me to Disney because I had no friends. This was the Jaws ride where the shark jumped at me and scared me." *Photo provided by Camila Parra.*



death. She walked several miles to a police station. The search party found Parra's father walking in the river and sent him to a hospital.

"When my mom came to get me at the police station, she filed a police report and took me to the hospital," Parra said. "She told him that he had to choose between staying with [the rebel group] or raising his daughter. He looked at me and said, 'I know when she grows up, she'll understand my decision.' That was the last time I saw him."

After the incident, Parra's father lost all parental rights over her. All visitations ended, but they still talked over the phone.

"I would always ask about him, and he would call me after school," Parra said. "I knew that he was apart of that group, but I didn't know specifics. When I would ask him about the incident, he would always say, 'Oh, I gotta go,' or something. So after that, one day I just came home and he stopped calling."

Even though her father stopped calling, he kept in touch with her grandmother. The phone calls they shared were filled with warnings for Parra's safety. These calls led Parra's family to take trips to Miami and Venezuela, and to move houses in Colombia.

"I found out that the reason they took me on trips was because my dad would call and say that they found my address [in Colombia] and they were going to try to go after me again to

get back at him and make him feel remorse and get him to pay for what he did," Parra said.

Parra's family moved to Miami, Florida when she was eight-years-old because anyone associated with the rebel group is prohibited from entering the United States. Although America provided Parra with a sense of safety, it also reminded her of the unanswered questions about her father whom she left behind. The sudden move to a new continent ignited a wave of curiosity about her father's whereabouts.

"When I moved to Miami, I was really curious about my dad. [After drawing him my picture], I looked up his name online and found our incident," Parra said. "I found him on Twitter, and I read a lot about him. I'm curious about his personality, and I ask my mom about him a lot to this day. I'm just really curious about how he is, or how he carries himself, or what he likes and doesn't like."

Like so many children estranged from a parent, more and more pieces of Parra's past began to reveal themselves. She could not escape the curiosity she felt when she thought of her father, even to the point where he appeared in her dreams.

"I started having dreams about the incident, and my dreams were weird. My dreams started putting in a lot for me, so when I was 13, I asked my mom about it," Parra said. "I told her

what I remembered from the incident and asked if that was the whole story. She told me I was missing a couple parts, and she cleared up the whole story. Now my memories are more specific, and I feel like I remember more."

Nearly 12 years after she last saw her father, many of Parra's questions had been answered. Yet, she still felt a sense of curiosity and a longing to encounter her father face to face. Parra looked to the future to finally fill the gaps in her story.

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Camila Parra (10)

"My mom says it's my story, so I get to do whatever I want with it, but I obviously still talk to her because I don't know what to do with it," Parra said. "She always tried to make sure I didn't avoid it because it's inevitable and it's a part of my life that I can't forget. She told me I could meet him when I'm 18. He's a part of my family. I can't stop seeing my family."

Her father's absence from her life left a hole unable to be filled by anything other than her father. Parra looked forward to reuniting with her father where she would finally be able to give a face to her drawing.

On that day, he would no longer be just a forgotten face. *Story by Nicole Crowley.*