

Joseph Kay

## The Angry Kid, the Apologist and I

Colfax Avenue is the major street that runs west to east through Denver, Colorado. Denver is divided through the middle by Interstate 25, which runs north to south and intersects Colfax. This intersection is considered the belly of Denver, and Denver is a very different city depending where along Colfax you find yourself. To the far west, Denver begins to turn into the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. The suburbs of the Denver foothills are the types of towns where a person can very reasonably expect to purchase a comfortable home on a middle income salary, and live their life in bland, safe, American comfort. From the I-25 and west along Colfax for several miles is the area simply known as West Colfax. This is a vibrant area dominated by Mexican families. As a recent college graduate from California who speaks Spanish, this was my Denver. My wife and I had a cute bungalow across the street from a low-income housing project. I befriended my neighbors, and, despite the fact that crime and gang activity was common, I had been assured by the local elders that they had “put a shield over “ my house. Nothing bad ever did happen to us. I loved my little community. I could choose from five delicious and cheap Mexican food stands within a two block radius, I drank Coronas on the porch with my neighbors and we spoke in Spanglish, and I charged football fans \$15.00 a piece to park in my yard during Broncos games. The whole proposition seemed thrillingly downscale to me.

For now, lets skip over the few miles of Colfax east of the I-25. Next up came the Science Center area of Denver, which starts at Colorado Boulevard and heads east. This community is on the eastern edge of Denver, and the area boasts some of the most historic and stately homes in the city. During the agricultural era, the wealthy people lived on this eastern edge of Denver because it was in the city but also convenient to the fields and farms that stretched into Nebraska. This is where I worked in a gentrified elementary school as a paraprofessional.

Now, let’s go back to the area just east of the I-25 along Colfax up to Colorado Boulevard. A time ago, this was Jack Kerouac’s Denver- full of roustabouts and transients. Today, this area is simply known as Colfax, and it was my students’ Denver. During the day, many people from around Denver descend on this area because of the professional buildings and mall. By night, a party crowd hops from bar to bar, steps into various art galleries, and blows off Friday evening steam before going back to their homes in some suburb. But, my students and their families are the ones that actually lived in Colfax. The area was distinctly “inner city”. On one level, the area was fantastically diverse and busy. But, given the choice, most of my parents would raise their children elsewhere.

Due to overcrowding at the local Middle School my students were supposed to attend, the district offered parents a seemingly good option. My students were bussed from their inner-city homes to my high performing elementary school. The school took an unused wing and made two classrooms. They hired five staff specifically for the purpose: two teachers, two paraprofessionals, and a Hispanic vice principal known for her experience with minority, urban, and poor teens. So,

here we were, five staff and seventy students, physically and culturally separate from the rest of the school. In essence, the school district had brought a little bit of Colfax into this quiet neighborhood. I do not think my students' education would have been different at their community school save for the fact that they would have felt like they belonged.

"Dario" was the most interesting student in our little wing of the school. His real name was magnificently African American, complete with a middle name, the surname of a dead white guy, and a suffix. He was handsome. In eighth grade, he stood five foot ten and had the muscular build of a grown man. He is the only person I've ever seen do a standing, double backflip off a picnic table. Many of the little kid teachers, after getting over the terror of seeing a large black teen kinetically flipping across the schoolyard full of children, told him to play football so that he could get into college.

Dario was not interested in athletics, however. He wore his hair in a subdued Afro with a part, which, along with a pair of thick-rimmed glasses and high cheekbones, gave him an air of scholarly thoughtfulness from the neck up. From the neck down, he wore the dress affiliated with local gangs. Dario would read, and rap, and dance, and "clown" with his friends. On a good day, he confronted me in the hallway and said, "Mr. Kay, you want to fight?" Recognizing the jest, I stepped right up in his face and said, "let's take this outside." He fell to the ground cackling, snapped back to his feet without using his arms, and said "you al'ight." All this is how I remember Dario and why I like him. He was articulate without being academic, emotionally open, and astute. The other students sometimes called him 2Pac, in reference to the slain rapper and poet who, despite fame and talent, could never shake the negative side of his life. I felt that this was a fitting nickname.

I've never been able to decide if Dario had a dark side or if darkness surrounded him from all sides. Hunger and violence were a bigger presence in his life than opportunity. After one major blowup incident in class, Dario broke down crying and said, "I'm just hungry." Hunger was a common thread amongst our teens, and we had a "snack drawer" in the classrooms. Dario ate from it each morning. Dario came from an intact home in that his father lived with the family when he wasn't incarcerated. His brother got shot twice, at two separate times. The shooters were never caught in large part because the brother would not cooperate with the police. His mother was concerned and cared for Dario deeply. She was quick to respond when we contacted her and she tracked his academics. But she had a certain wistfulness about her that made me think she had accepted his destiny.

Despite my affection for Dario, his behavior was frequently nothing short of patently unacceptable. He was often fighting with other students. Several times a week he would have some outburst. On multiple occasions, he caused significant property damage to the classrooms. Once, when asked to leave the class for language, he beat a steel cabinet and ripped the doors off the hinges. Another time, he left no furniture right side up before storming off campus.

All of the staff received Dario's anger on a regular basis. He verbally assailed me on countless occasions. I was called every vile, hateful word imaginable. He is the first and only person to ever call me a "nigger." The only thing keeping Dario from being physically threatening to staff was a fear of incarceration that came from

experience. This type of behavior resulted in him getting sent to the vice-principal's office. The vice-principal had an excellently calming demeanor. She would talk to Dario, he would profess an understanding of his errors, and she would send him back to class with some encouragement to make amends. This cycle of conflict repeated itself several times a week without change over time.

At some point in the spring, I came to the conclusion that the vice-principal was enabling Dario's outbursts. I believe that she felt sorry for Dario, saw his behavior as outside his control due to his circumstance, and did not make any demand of him to transcend his negative behavior. In short, she was an apologist. Dario is very intelligent, and he quickly learned that the vice-principal sympathized with him. He would get in trouble, explain to her why he was upset, she would ask him if he understood the problem, and he would come back to class with some insincere apology. It was a scripted interaction that Dario had crafted to get himself out of trouble as quickly as possible without any true intention of overcoming the behavior.

After one particular tantrum where Dario had called me multiple hate words and epithets, he came back to class with the vice-principal and offered a trite apology. To this I responded, "Thank you, Dario, for your apology. But, at some point, words become cheap. You need to change the way you speak to me."

The vice-principal was shocked and furious. She called me into her office and assailed me for "not understanding what he is going through" and "stepping all over an apology that was hard for him to give." I have never been so physically affected with anger at work. I managed to stay calm, but my voiced quivered as I responded. I told her that she needed to stop apologizing for his behavior because it was simply enabling him. I told her that she did not understand that he was playing her for a fool. He knew how to skate through her office without consequence or duty to work on his behavior. I accused her of undermining my ability to work with Dario because she had conspicuously sided with him. Finally, I accused her of failing her duty as my direct supervisor to provide me a safe, non-prejudicial, and harassment free workplace because of her failure to address his verbal assaults. I told her that if she could not provide me with a work environment free of hate language and assault, I would go above her. This criticism flowed eloquently from my mouth only because I had imagined the opportunity many times before. She and I spent a tense few moments of silence across the desk from each other. Finally, she conceded that she understood my point of view.

I would love to offer some satisfying resolution to this situation, but it is a true story. There was no grand epiphany on anyone's part. I feel righteous in my position that Dario could control himself better than he was doing, but I do not know that I am right. I do not know how much power Dario has to change his behavior, and I do not know that he had time to change before he got too deep in the same gangs that got his brother. I am sure that the vice-principal never considered my feelings about the lack of expectations for Dario before I told her. She is a committed and caring professional who will go to bat for her staff and students. I respect her to this day for the sum of her work. But, I think her apologist nature is rooted in her general worldview. And, I don't know if that is good or bad.

For Dario's part, I will say that I believe he toned down his behavior towards me after the incident. But, he is just an angry kid without a lot of control over himself or the world he inhabits. Today, several years after the fact, I suspect that he has solidified his life down one path or the other. Either he has gone down the road of negativity or he has committed to struggle above the fray. Either way, it is a monkey on his back. This is the trajectory of kids like Dario.

I often think back about my year at this school, and it strikes me how many issues of class and personal circumstance were at play. One idea that keeps rolling around in my head is the concept of free will. I struggle with finding the line between free will and societally ascribed destiny. I have not made peace with this incident and don't expect to find it. I took the position at this school wanting to improve these students' outlook. I felt that I had the power to do this. But, so many things conspired to get in the way. Forces outside my control stymied my intentions. This is reality. This is not my reality. This is the reality for my students. An exceptional few will rise above, but most will not. And, this is why I think America's views towards poverty, class, and self-betterment are flawed. There is a myth that every American has the same opportunity. This idea leads society to view problems like Dario's as personal and fixable through gumption. Although I refuse to absolve people like Dario of the responsibility to tirelessly work for their own personal good, I concurrently accept that the problem is societal as well. We all have work to do.