

## **My Story**

by Zulma Muñoz

Growing up in East Oakland was a barrier that impeded me from stepping outside the boundaries of my house, because of the dangers in my neighborhood. My brothers and I faced the strict rules my parents had over us, but for me, it was always different. I am the only girl in my family and I was never allowed to play outside. When my parents worked I was responsible for the cleaning, cooking, and caring for my younger brother. Even though I was conscious of helping my family, I yearned for my older brother's freedom.

My mother and father came to America, "the land of opportunity," as my mother says, to provide a better life for their children. My father died in a car accident when I was two, my older brother was five at that time. My mother worked incredibly hard to care for my brother and me on her own. During middle school, my brother grew angry because of our father's death and turned to drugs and gangs as his way to alleviate his pain. Unlike my brother, my outlet was soccer.

My participation in soccer began at the age of seven. My mother wanted my older brother and me to stay away from the streets and spend our extra time dedicated in a positive activity. Soccer was a needed distraction from my schoolwork, my family responsibilities, and my family issues. I was motivated to keep my grades up in school because of high school sports policies, but my mother enforced a rule on me in order to continue playing soccer; I had to finish all of my chores and homework before going to soccer practices and games.

My passion for soccer grew stronger during my freshmen year in Berkeley High. Positive communication, discipline, confidence and becoming a leader are a few of the skills I gained from playing soccer. One of the biggest accomplishments of my life so far was being voted captain of both my high school and club soccer teams. Soccer has also helped me make new friends. I connected with my teammates because we shared a common goal of attaining acceptance into prestigious colleges. As a first generation college student, I turned to my teammates and coach for guidance throughout my college process because my parents had no experience in this area.

Outside of soccer, I spent my time with my Latina friends. As we have grown up our paths have gone in different directions. I have seen many of them turn to drugs and get pregnant. I've turned to school and soccer because I want a better life than my parents. Soccer has kept me going and because of my hard work and persistence, I became a leader not only on the field, but also in the rest of my life.

The first words my coach said to me during my first high school soccer practice were "Okay, you've made varsity, now play like it." I was terrified. Attendance was required in every practice in order to play in games. Tardiness diminished playing time. I was intimidated by Suz's strict ways and focus on fitness. However, without her presence and constant motivation I wouldn't be where I am and who I am today. Suz is someone I come to for advice and guidance. She knows my life. Suz is a strong, approachable and honest woman whom I admire and love with all my heart.

Coaching youth soccer has become one of my major passions in life. I began coaching my freshmen year of high school because I needed money. However, because of my coach, Suz, I was inspired to do more than just train kids. I want to inspire and engage girls like me through the power of soccer. I coached kids soccer clinics and was the only female coach. Out of 35 kids in the clinic, there were only three girls. I remember a four-year-old player telling me that she wanted to hold my hand because I was a girl like her. I want to have the kind of impact Suz had on me with all the girls I coach. Because of soccer and my coach, Suz, I got into UC Berkeley. I want to guide younger girls onto a similar path. My Latina friends don't have a Suz in their life and have not reached the goals I know they are capable of achieving. I have a duty to give back to girls from my community, not because I feel obliged to do so, but because I can be that coach. I can be the coach who makes a difference for a girl in Oakland who turns to soccer for the hope of a different life.