

Tacos al Pastor with a side of Collards

by Alex McAnarney

The day I heard that we were moving to North Carolina, my stomach twisted into a knot so tightly constricted it felt like only a swift sword-stroke would be able to disentangle it.

Considering that I wasn't unfamiliar with North Carolina, it's pretty weird verging on the hyperbolic that my stomach ended up collapsing into a mess of Gordian proportions on that snowy Wednesday evening. But after escaping Florida for the Chicago tundra, it felt like I was making one big loop into a Southern past that would once again dig its humid little fingers into my scalp and curl every strand of my thick, unmanageable, Salvadoran hair.

There was that, too. I wouldn't just be the next door Carpetbagger, I would also be "that pale Mexican who talks to her mother on the phone way too often and way too loud in Spanish." My plaintive "But I'm Salvadoran!" cries would mean nothing to anyone — everything south of the border is Mexico to these people, right?

The fact we were moving to Chapel Hill — not exactly Klan territory — meant little, too. Terrible stereotypes ran through my Chicago wind-whipped yet finally fabulous mane: bible-thumpin', tobacco spittin', banjo playin', gay and minority bashin', gun-lovin' bubba's all around. I won't fit in. No way. No how. Oh god, why?!

Unfortunately, the first few months I lived tightly cocooned in these perceptions, both figuratively and literally. I didn't get out much and worked hard to plan my escape. Things were just too different from the snappy, fast-paced, enlightened northern atmosphere that I was so used to. Why bother getting to know anything else? Why prove myself wrong about anything I thought was true about the South? I'll tolerate it as long as I have to. They don't want my kind around here anyway.

Then I stumbled upon Siler City, or as I call it, the little pueblo of the Piedmont.

Siler City is a town where perceptions and stereotypes took their toll. Latino residents that now account for 50 percent of the town's population arrived in the mid-90s to

work at the poultry processing plants. Many long-term residents didn't really jibe with the demographic change.

Things are better than they were in, say, 2000 when the KKK held a rally outside the City Council Building. Maybe it's because the apple of discord — jobs considered "stolen" by new arrivals — rolled out of Chatham County or disappeared altogether, afflicting everyone equally. Maybe it's because everyone got used to each other — over time, the new residents became old residents and everyone figured coexisting in an uneasy tolerance of each other was easier. Maybe it's because Tacos al Pastor with a side of Collard Greens makes for a good (great!) combination.

The more I hung around, the more Siler City spoke to me. I'd been here about a month when my co-worker, an 18-year old bundle of kindness originally from Hidalgo, Mexico told me point blank in the middle of the CCCC parking lot "You're so used to the fast life, you don't know what it's like to really know people, to slow down and say hi to your neighbors."

It struck me right then and there that I wasn't as cool as I thought I was. What was the point of being an "enlightened" northerner if you can muster only 30 seconds out of your day to put on a good show of tolerance for your neighbor.

I'm not a fan of Tolerance. Defined as sympathy or indulgence for beliefs or practices differing from or conflicting with one's own, the word has a patronizing ring to it. Most of the time, we throw that word around to say that we're putting up with each other because we have to, legally or otherwise; the implication being that we'll go back to hating each other once legal and social expectations of putting up with each other are removed.

Drinking Joan's pomegranate Italian soda as I munched down on tostadas de pollo sealed the deal: I would probably hang around Siler City for a while.

Whether it likes it or not, Siler City is at the forefront of a demographic shift happening across the nation, where Hispanics will be the majority minority by 2050. With a population of fully bilingual youth coming of age within

the city limits, its biggest strength will one day be these kids who can speak to both the Latino and the White experience (or Latino and African American), and tailor businesses and services to all parts of the Chatham community. And just think of the culinary possibilities.

For the sake of getting things done and for the sake of food (ok, there were other reasons), I decided I didn't want to keep fitting a pretty wide swath of people into a tight little box cluttered by negativity, false media propaganda, and my own aversions to change. I accepted the Cheerwine, the Carolina style BBQ, the Southern hospitality in the hope that the same courtesy would be expended on myself as the outsider.

Naturally, it's different when you're in a small group of folks confronted by an overwhelming, powerful majority that doesn't want you there. Quite literally, you could be run out of town at any moment with only the clothes on your back (or worse). However, I'm not trying to slap together an analysis of power relations in rural North Carolina quite yet. I'm trying to conjure up a specific sentiment that often gets in the way of progress: the vested effort in keeping each other at bay that cuts across all groups.

Tolerance simply isn't enough. Acceptance, giving up that sense of wrongness in the "other", is a lot more definite. It will make the pulled pork con mole sandwiches all the more enjoyable.

Alex McAnarney works at an immigrant services organization in Siler City. Before showing up on Chatham County, she lived in Chicago, Miami, San Salvador and Mexico City. She is passionate about social justice topics, including migration, youth, gangs, health. You can find her word doodles at perishmotherland.tumblr.com.

To read the Spanish version of this article, turn to the back page of the paper.

My Grandmother

By Gary Phillips

Knew the sacred nature of her place
A scrap of mountain above
Cane River, on Big Creek,
the blue ridge a bowl above the barns
I remember holding a handful
of her skirt to keep up,
hunting creasy on a
February morning
our breath like the smoke of campfires
air uncurling in the tiny
valley, snaking
its slow way up the hills
almost visible

Much of my grandmother's life
was like that, almost visible
We walked together
I was proud to be with her,
knowing her importance
She pointed out the sacred places
Among the rocks and pathways,
under stone and by water
The trees of worth
The shy creatures of air
and earth and sky
She let me see they
Meant no harm
Had their own ways
And business to perform

We sat at the top of things
Before the biscuit bag was opened
Together, looking down at her valley
My hand in her lap
Mist rising in prayer-tatters
Above the silver shining river



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