

# The Suburb

by Alejandro Gac-Artigas

*"The Suburb" is a chapter from Yo, Alejandro: The Story of a Young Latino Boy Struggling through Life, by the twelve-year-old author Alejandro Gac-Artigas. The book is Alejandro's memoir of his experiences and understanding of the pain caused by discrimination and racism, the courage to fight against them, the island of self-esteem he creates buoyed by academic success, and the strength to be himself. This selection shares his experience as he moved to Fair Haven, New Jersey, from Carrollton, Georgia, to begin third grade in a new school. He was two years younger than his classmates. As his story unfolds we see the title: "The Suburbs" becomes a metaphor for a white enclave whose inhabitants exclude those different from themselves—often even without intending to. As Alejandro reminds us: "When you have been discriminated against, you try to forget the situation so not to be more hurt, but the problem is that if you keep silent discrimination will continue to happen. I wrote the book so these things never happen again."*

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*2001 ISBN 1930879210), available from Ediciones Nuevo Espacio, has been included in the suggested reading lists of the Johns Hopkins University Center for Talented Youth 5th-6th, 7th-8th grades and recommended by the American Library Association, Booklist Magazine, March 1, 2001.*

The university in which mami would now work assisted us in finding a house we could rent for a small price. We came upon a light blue house alongside a large road, Hope Road. The house was situated near the school which had been said to be excellent. The university where my mother now taught lay but minutes from where we had moved to, Sycamore Hills. Sycamore Hills is a minuscule town, a borough, in fact, located extremely near the ocean, and on summer days one can hear the winds of the ocean, and smell the salinity of the air.

The first task we performed, after going to the beach, of course, was to register me in the school I was now to attend: Sycamore Elementary School. The principal of the school was much like my old principal, middle-aged and ever so caring. Upon meeting the principal, we handed her a folder from my old school. It contained not only my report card, but a detailed list of all I had studied and which books I had used. I was then placed in a third-grade class taught by a woman named Mrs. Keller.

September commenced, as did my schooling in Sycamore. I was immobile with fear, petrified, both anxious and yet afraid to set foot in my new school, in which I knew no one. For brief moments, while walking upon the sidewalk, hand in hand with mami, my fear became so tremendous I lost sight, viewing only small dots waltzing about a pale white background.

Mrs. Keller, very much like one of my old teachers, did not pay any attention to me in the classroom. She pelted my feelings, and attempted to make me feel as if I did not belong within her classroom's walls. Throughout the first days in

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*"The Suburb," from: Yo, Alejandro  
Ediciones Nuevo Espacio  
English Language - Second Edition - March 2001  
Available at: [editorial-ene.com](http://editorial-ene.com)  
[amazon.com](http://amazon.com)  
[bn.com](http://bn.com)*

her class I reminisced of Mrs. Forester, for in Mrs. Keller I saw the same hatred in her glasslike and barren green eyes. Each day, after school concluded, mami asked, "Hijo, cómo te fue en la escuela hoy?" I responded with, "Bien," saying that school had gone well, although it had not been true. I lied for I wished to *pelear* [fight] this battle on my own, and I was not going to allow Mrs. Keller to send me back to second grade, for I had won with great effort my position in third grade, and nobody could take that away.

### Driven

Driven by  
A tiny urge  
In the back of my mind

I seek to learn  
Experience  
And create

School  
Books  
And life  
Are my instruments

I seek to know  
Because if I possess  
Knowledge  
I have  
Power

—Jeffrey S.  
Grade 11  
California

Each night my eyes filled with tears of disbelief, for I had done nothing wrong. I had been respectful, and had studied until I memorized definitions word for word, but still yet Mrs. Keller threw upon me the most dreadful feeling of being insignificant. She would neither speak nor even glance at me. Each day she would greet each child as they entered the classroom, yet as I walked by, in the hope that perhaps Mrs. Keller would speak to me as well, she simply looked towards the next child and welcomed him. And each morning I woke, knowing that Mrs. Keller would care for

me as much as she had the day before, yet still wishing she might have changed.

I believed in order to win the respect and care of a teacher should take nothing more than to be a good student. I began to study until I fell asleep, for endless hours I studied upon my wooden desk, which now had the forms of letters I wrote imprinted within, and I slept there with my pencil, now worn to a stub, in my small, red, aching fingers. My head lay on the papers covered in the lead of my pencil, and when I woke, I was able to read what I had written, for the ink had been marked upon my face. I washed my face until the soap diminished significantly in size, and it now wore the lead. In my eyes one could see I had not slept, yet also there was a shield of determination.

When Mrs. Keller asked me to use our vocabulary words in sentences I would write sentences of two or three lines, describing both whimsical and sophisticated issues which I believed would be approved by Mrs. Keller. They were not. They were erased and replaced by "Sam ran home." My sleeves were draped in chalk, yet the blackboard was now bare. Mrs. Keller did not even speak a word of approval, yet neither did she criticize. I saw that as an indication that perhaps she may have been changing her ways. She was not. I received "one-hundreds" on my vocabulary tests and still yet she said nothing.

Once I had studied until midnight for an exam. The exam was on social studies, and I was more than prepared to take it. I felt as if this might be the day in which Mrs. Keller would care for me as I expected. I entered the classroom and though she did not greet me, I still felt assured once she saw my paper all would change.

Being extremely nervous, I had forgotten to remove a sheet of paper from my backpack before placing it in the closet. As I stood to fetch it, Mrs. Keller asked what I was doing. I told her that I had left the sheet of paper in my backpack, and inquired in a polite manner if I could go and get it. She responded telling me to sit down and that I would receive a "zero" on the test. I sat, not knowing, irresolute, unsure of whether to cry or complain, while the other children took the exam. In front of all my classmates she sat me down and denied my wish. At that moment I realized she had not changed.

As I returned from school I wept until I had no tears to weep, and bearing my tears no longer, mami and papi told me they were going to speak

### Why I Enjoy Learning

It is true that many students today hate learning and think of many rather ingenious ways to avoid doing so. However, i, as a middle schooler, am proud to say that i enjoy learning. I especially enjoy learning languages. I believe that this hunger for knowledge of other languages began when my older brother came home from school and told me phrases that he had learned in his french class. When i started taking French, i was very excited because i knew some words and phrases before the rest of my class. This enthusiasm has stayed with me and caused me to want to learn about other countries' history and culture. I am very anxious to get to high school and take other language courses. In fact, when i grow up, i would like to be an ambassador.

Books also make me want to learn. . . . i am not, however, limited to book learning. I also enjoy playing the piano and get interested in the lives of composers. Learning is a constant mission for me and i won't stop learning until the day i die.

—Erin O.  
Grade 7  
Kentucky

with either Mrs. Keller or the principal. I did not want them to go, for I, being my obstinate self, stated it was my battle and mine alone. I desired to fight alone and win alone. But that night, Julianne's mom, a French girl that was in my class, called my parents and asked them if they were aware of what was happening in the classroom. She told them Julianne wept every night and had asked her, "How can she be so mean to Alejandro who is so sweet?"

The next day I woke just as any other day, and expected what I had expected just as any other day. Mrs. Keller taught just as any other day, and she neglected me just as any other day. I felt ter-

### Untitled

Nobody should have to walk through life feeling that no one wants them, or likes them. It's bad enough to feel like that, but if you're going through the halls of school, hearing the snickers and everyone laughing at you. There are many people that feel this way every day for reasons that aren't their fault. . . . I give them a lot of credit for going through all of that. I think that everyone should just accept them for who they are. Education should teach more tolerance and acceptance...

—Gina Hinman  
Grade 10  
New Jersey

rible just as any other day, and my efforts were slain, just as any other day. As the day concluded, unlike any other day, I was called to the office. I felt a bit nervous although I knew I had done nothing wrong.

As I walked down the hallway everything seemed to become quiet, the yells of the children faint and far off. My breathing and footsteps were the most prominent sounds. Soon I reached the passageway leading the office. Engraved upon the door was "Mrs. Bloomfield," and beneath it, "Principal." I unwillingly yet instinctively opened the door. Inside sat a secretary behind large-rimmed glasses typing. She said hello. The word seemed as if a foreign concept, and it had been so long that I did not hear it that for a moment I forgot what the response should be. Overcome by joy I said hello with a great gap-toothed smile.

The secretary told me in a high-pitched tone to go into the next room. I followed her pointed finger and reached the partially rusted door knob. I was unwilling the open the door, fearing what awaited me on the other side. In seconds I brought up courage, and as I inhaled, opened the door. I saw mami and papi, Mrs. Bloomfield, and Mrs. Keller.

I expected to be spoken to by only the principal or my parents, yet then came a voice directed towards me. Though it was neither the tone of my parents or the principal, I glanced at them, for I thought it to be impossible for Mrs. Keller to

speak to me—yet as I turned my head I saw Mrs. Keller with her mouth ajar speaking to me in an unstable but soft tone.

It was the first time she had spoken to me, and though I had heard the voice many of times in the past, it seemed completely different. She sat me on her lap, so I could feel her breath, which was extremely warm compared to her heart, and began to speak to me. Her make-up was a bit smeared and so I reasoned she had been crying, and her green eyes were full with an ocean of tears.

Mrs. Keller pleaded for me to pardon her because of all she had caused. Though a trifle doubtful whether I should or not, I forgave her, and gave her a hug. It was as if her tears washed away her coldness and bitterness, for she seemed truly sorry. In a firm but soft voice, while still embracing her I asked her why? Why had she pretended as if I did not exist? Why did she not commend me for my great efforts? Why did she never greet me? and so forth.

The explanation Mrs. Keller presented was that she thought that by ignoring me in the classroom she was doing me a favor, believing that being young, I did not want much attention. Mrs. Keller told me between breaths and tears, that we would begin over. I did not believe the explanation was truly genuine, just like her saying “Tomorrow’s a brand new day,” yet I sprang at the opportunity to begin once again, correctly. Leaving the office, mami and papi told me that she would no longer be unjust. I responded, “You didn’t see her eyes”; it was her eyes that told me she had not changed as much as I had wished. It was her deep green eyes that told me that part of her coldness had not been washed away by their tears.

Bit by bit Mrs. Keller began to change her ways. Her eyes no longer showed traces of bitterness. Her smile no longer seemed as if it had been forced to appear. She greeted me warmly with both words and expressions as I entered the classroom, and it seemed as if she appreciated my work. Not only was she more amiable with me, but with all the children. She was no longer the “witch” she had come to be known as, although some children did not realize.

I had won the battle, not alone as I had wished, yet it was won and nothing could be greater than that. She was more lenient yet taught very well. Once, being still not yet assured that Mrs. Keller had in fact altered the manner in which she behaved, I was under the impression that Mrs. Keller was attempting to trick me.



The directions of an exam I took stated to circle the letter before the correct answer. I smiled, for I was certain it was a trick, and so I marked the letter before the letter of the correct answer. For instance, if the correct response was “D,” I marked “C,” and if the correct response was “C,” I simply marked “B.” The tricky thing, I

### Standardized Tests

When spring rolls around, standardized tests are starting to be given. At least two weeks prior to this, all other learning stops and prepping for the test begins. Students are grilled on tips for better test-taking methods. This time spent preparing for the tests is a waste because once you get the test, the tips don’t help anyway. The tests are made difficult and made to trick students that no amount of prepping can prepare them for, and because of this, many students fail. Even after taking the test several times, some students still fail. If the state wants fewer people to fail, the tests should be remade, without the tricks.

—Lisa Beirn  
Grade 10  
New Jersey

thought, was when the correct answer was “A”; I promptly marked “D.”

Having thoroughly studied for the exam, assured that I would receive an A+, I left Sycamore Elementary feeling both wise and victorious. The next day, after school had concluded, Mrs. Keller asked to speak with me. My small ears awaited praise and commendation, yet heard something quite different. She told me I had received a “zero,” she emphasized and articulated

### My School

Smoke fills the bathroom  
Mud covers the floor  
Furry creatures scatter the building  
Garbage everywhere  
Teasing others for security  
Teachers who just don't care  
Only a minority of who do  
Feeling like you just don't belong  
Work pressure rising  
Dirt, smirks, jealousy  
Does anyone really mind,  
I would like to learn something.  
Other than the latest fashions  
Welcome to my school . . .  
Pure hell!!

—*Kristen Chelston*  
Grade 7  
New Jersey

### Untitled

To me knowledge is power. If I apply myself and work hard in school I can grow up to be anything I want to be. . . . If I believe in myself and learn all that I can I will be successful in life. . . . If I believe myself and push myself over the limit I'll succeed.

—*Mark Hanscom*  
Grade 5  
Massachusetts

the number, on the exam, and stated that I was not the type of student to receive such a grade.

I explained to Mrs. Keller how I believed it was a trick, and how I marked the response before the correct one, as I interpreted the directions. My smile was now of humiliation. Mrs. Keller laughed and laughed, then the laughs were accompanied by tears, and finally she kissed my forehead and brushed my hair aside, telling me that it was no trick. As she corrected my paper once more, Mrs. Keller found that I had answered each question correctly, and gave me the A+ I knew and she knew I deserved.

This incident was the commencement of a long-lasting bond of both care and fidelity. As the school year concluded, Mrs. Keller recommended me for the most advanced classes of fourth grade. Each summer I see her at the library, say hello, and we converse as if we had known each other for ages, for I will never forget her, and hope she will never forget me.