

PABLO, THE DREAMER

Pablo, the Dreamer

A Story

H U M B E R T O B O C A N E G R A

Copyright © 2026 Humberto Bocanegra

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced without permission.

humbertob76@yahoo.com

Pablo, the Dreamer



THE first time I saw Pablo was when he walked into my 2nd grade classroom in my first year of teaching. I was standing in front of my desk taking roll call. As I called out the students' names most would raise their little hands and answer, "Here!" But when I got to Pablo Vasquez he stood up beside his desk and answered, "Presente! I mean, here!"

The class giggled and laughed lightly in reaction to his unique way of responding. I first thought he was trying to be funny, but his facial expression indicated a serious demeanor. Our eyes met and he lowered his gaze as if to stare at his shoes. I sensed the profound sense of respect that he displayed for me and I responded in kind.

"Está bien, Pablo. Sientate (sit down)."

"Si, gracias," he replied and I continued with my roll call. However, his initial reaction had piqued my interest, and I monitored his actions more closely throughout the day. I went so far as to inquire about, both, his educational and social backgrounds. The counselor provided crucial information about his educational background which showed him to be an average student in first grade even though he had enrolled well after the school year had begun. As far as his home life was concerned, he came from a single parent home. He and his mother were living with relatives in a small house in the South Fork colonia that was located just south of the Pharr city limits. The counselor did not have much more information about him and so I resolved to slowly get to know him better as the school year went by.

The word "colonia" was a red flag that almost always was an indicator of poverty. These were the run-down neighborhoods that sprang up on the outskirts of many South Texas towns. They were often located in low lying areas of land prone to flooding during the rainy season. It was not uncommon to have colonias spring up in areas that were formerly citrus orchards and other types of farmlands. The owners of these lands often sold smaller plots of land to recent immigrants at bargain prices (or so it seemed) where they could start their lives anew in this country full of promise. With no city ordinances or restrictions to hold them back these new owners could and would construct flimsy shelters made of everything from aluminum sheets to a few pieces of lumber and cardboard nailed together just to have a place to call home. Few, if any, homes within the colonias had running water and paved roads were just as scarce. Nevertheless, this is where Pablo was living and I was moved to get to know him better.

As a recent college graduate, I had studied Bloom's Taxonomy and read up on Sigmund Freud and was impressed with Pavlov's dogs and their conditioned responses. I thought I was as prepared as any educator out there could possibly be for the challenges that my students would pose but nothing out there could have prepared me for the year this second-grade group would bring. I was nervously confident and yet this little boy named Pablo had already posed an interesting challenge where I had not even thought there would be a challenge. Would I be able to reach and teach him?

As the weeks and months went by, I found my fears to be unwarranted because all my students did very well and Pablo was no exception. He kept steady pace with the class and never asked for any help from me. Because of his mastery of Spanish, I had expected him to struggle with my English presentations but this assumption, too, was wrong. Nothing seemed to rattle him, and I would observe him furrowing his brows and read the assigned material as best he could. He did not ace many exams, but he did earn every point he got.

Because of his first day's reaction to roll call I asked him if he had ever attended school in Mexico and he told me that he had indeed attended school in Reynosa just across the border from Hidalgo. He told me his mother had enrolled him in school over there because she wanted him to speak Spanish well and she did not want him to fall behind in his studies - but that was before they had moved to the United States. In the Mexican schools the students were required to stand up sharply and answer any questions with dignity and respect toward "el profesor" or "la profesora". It was a lesson that little Pablo had obviously learned very well.

By the time November came around the hot Texas heat had given way to an early northern cold front that caused the temperature to plunge from the high 80s one day to the very cold upper 30s the next. Pablo had never been absent from school so when he had not shown up when the tardy bell rang, I guessed that he would miss school that day due to the cold weather. But Pablo did not miss school that day after all. About an hour after school had begun Pablo walked into class. I was surprised to see him in class wearing only a worn blue tee shirt. His old worn mountain boots had begun to come apart, and his dirty white sock showed from within his right boot. Despite his cold state he looked at me and gave me a bright smile as he walked to his desk and sat down. Seeking to divert attention from him I instructed the class to copy the new vocabulary words in chapter ten and write down their definitions. The class did as instructed and soon the class was quiet.

I looked at Pablo and saw his little body shaking from the cold. Without giving it much thought I removed my black leather jacket and covered him

with it. I told him that since he had been doing very well in class, he could be the teacher for the next hour. This seemed to please him immensely as he slipped the jacket proudly. However, it took the class most of the hour to finish the assignment and when the hour was up Pablo returned the jacket and thus my position as teacher as well. The room temperature was comfortable at 72 degrees and Pablo had warmed up nicely by then.

At the end of the school day, I attended a brief faculty meeting and then it was time to go home for the day. The temperature remained in the low forties and as I drove off, I turned on the heater and my car soon warmed up to a very comfortable level. About a half mile from school, I saw a little boy walking home from school who resembled Pablo. He was wearing a worn tee shirt like Pablo had worn to school that day. As I got closer, I realized that he indeed was Pablo. I pulled up next to him and offered him a ride. A warm smile spread across his face and he quickly jumped into the car for a ride home. His little body shivered from the cold, but he said nothing about the weather.

As we drove off toward his house, he told me that the bus had left him behind because he had to go to the library to pay a 25-cent fine for a book that he had turned in late. The delay had caused him to miss the bus, so he had to walk the 4 ½ mile trek to his house. He said that he thought it was funny because he had already walked to school in the morning due to the fact he had missed the bus because he had run home to get the 25cents from his mother and when he returned the bus had already left and he had to walk to school. I couldn't help but smile and admire his positive outlook on everything despite the hardships that often seemed to befall him.

I was more concerned about the worry his mother would have upon finding that Pablo was not on the bus. I asked if it was okay to take him all the way to his house instead of just leaving him at the bus stop and he responded that it would be great because he could show me his new house. I was pleased to hear that he and his mother now had a house of their own.

Pablo explained that he no longer had to share a bed with his cousins and that he could now watch television without having to worry about someone coming and changing the channels. The new home was only for him and his mom, of course. He went so far as to tell me that she had saved much of her money from work and had paid for his new home in cash. This was an incredible achievement.

When we arrived at South Fork colonia I was taken aback by the poor road conditions leading to the interior of the neighborhood. The recent steady drizzle had turned the dusty roads into mud puddles and slush. Even though Pablo informed me that the bus always dropped the students off at entrance to the colonia I just couldn't leave him there and drive away. I knew my car

would take a beating and would also need a good wash afterward, but I resolved to take him all the way to his house. It was the least I could do for my cheerful young student.

As we drove through the neighborhood, I was shocked to see the conditions many of the inhabitants were living in. There was a small wooden shack with open windows and a worn bed sheet serving as the door. Outside on the open dirt yard a little boy of about eight pushed a smaller girl sitting in an old pink Barbie Corvette around the yard. They laughed heartily as they played and I noticed that neither seemed to pay much attention to the cold even though the little girl wore an old dress and some well-worn sandals. The little boy wore a dark oversized coat and some shorts and old sneakers to help ward off the cold. A few houses down a mangy dog slept at the entrance of an open outhouse oblivious to the cluttered yard it was supposed to be guarding. The house next door, however, was a small brick house with a small picket fence around it. It even had a well-kept lawn. The contrasts in income were noticeable, as well as the contrasts in house-keeping pride.

A few empty lots followed the house with the nice yard, and it was here that Pablo told me he liked to play soccer with his friends from the neighborhood. I saw some old truck tires that had been set up as goal markers on both ends of the bigger lot. From the look of things, it appeared as if the boys must have played lots of soccer games because the ground was totally void of any plant life. And it was probably because the yard had several mud puddles throughout the lot that kept the boys from playing soccer as we passed by. Pablo said that he played soccer as much as he could and that his dream was to play soccer for some championship team someday. I smiled when he told me that and encouraged him to hold on to his dream because dreams really can come true. He smiled back at me when I told him that as if to indicate he agreed with my view.

We arrived at the end of the long muddy road and Pablo instructed me to turn left into a narrow caliche covered entrance heading to his home. My small car hit a water filled hole and we were both jarred back and forth as if we were on some carnival ride. This caused me to wince, but Pablo just laughed. Almost immediately we hit another large muddy pothole and again, Pablo laughed. I tried to pay better attention to the road as I scanned the large yard for a house or even a little shack. I saw nothing but an abandoned school bus. I was expecting Pablo to tell me to drive around the school bus toward a house that was perhaps hidden from view but instead he told me to stop in front of the old bus.

The sound of my car's engine caught the attention of someone inside the bus and a pretty woman of about thirty emerged from within and watched us

as we came to a stop in front of the old bus. Pablo opened the door excitedly to let her know he was home.

"Mama, ya llegue!" he announced happily and confidently as he walked toward her. He stepped on several large sheets of plywood that had been placed on the ground leading up to the bus' entrance. These sheets of wood served as a makeshift sidewalk and made for safer footing for anyone walking on them. Pablo hugged his mother and then turned to introduce me.

"El señor es mi maestro," he said as he smiled at me. I was standing in front of my car, and I walked toward her to shake her hand. She said her name was Dahlia and she asked if I would like to come inside her "house". I followed her as she walked onto the bus and was immediately impressed with what she had done with the old vehicle.

Dahlia had set up a small stove and table near the entrance where the driver would have been. And at the far back of the bus where the emergency exit would have been she had placed two small beds where she and Pablo slept. A small black and white television set had been placed on a table near the center of the bus where it could be turned to the front of the bus or to the back where it could be viewed without any obstruction from either angle. I sat down on a folding chair that Pablo had brought me, and I spoke with his mother for a good hour or so and was saddened to hear that Pablo's father had drowned while they were trying to cross the Rio Grande. Even though her husband had died in the attempt to cross, Dahlia continued on and made it to an uncle's house that was in South Fork. He took Dahlia and Pablo in while she struggled to get on her feet. She had been working in the fields picking crops since her arrival and hoped to eventually get a job in a bodega soon. It had been over a year and the prospect of working in a packing shed was getting closer to becoming a reality. Her uncle said that the bodega foreman had her in mind for a position as a crop packer when the onion crop would be in full swing in the summer.

After seeing how Pablo lived my admiration for the little boy grew even further. He did well in school and never complained about anything. He got along well with other students, and he took nothing for granted – not even the school lunch. Pablo was that rare student who ate his entire school lunch – every day. It did not matter what the cafeteria ladies prepared for lunch; Pablo was sure to finish all of his food. He was not like so many of the other kids who very often threw their entire lunch into the trash cans. It was sad to see so much waste of good food.

The year seemed to go by so fast and before I knew it Christmas had arrived. I tried to give all my 23 students little presents as rewards for their accomplishments. Some got baskets of fruit, and some got baskets of cookies.

Pablo got a basket of cookies as well as a soccer ball because I knew how much he loved the game. It was a small token to show my appreciation for all the hard work my kids had done in class. Plus, in Pablo's case, I knew he and his friends would definitely put the soccer ball to good use. After all, he needed to practice to become a soccer champion. It was the one goal he told me he really wanted to achieve. I gave him some simple advice - "Believe in yourself and your teammates. Think like champions, practice like champions and you will be champions!"

He liked my advice and so he repeated it several times - "Believe in yourself and"

When the cold weather finally shifted to the ever-refreshing spring time my students all continued doing well and as luck would have it they all did very well in the state-mandated tests. I wish I could take credit for how well they did but it would not be fair to them. They were a self-motivated group of kids who only needed to be told what to do and they did it. I just happened to be the lucky teacher they had all been assigned to be with.

My first year of teaching was by far my most memorable one. I was young and idealistic about my teaching goals, and my students did not let me down as they passed exam after exam and were soon rated the top class in the second grade. They were all very proficient in reading and writing. Math was a breeze as well and I knew they were as prepared for third grade as any class could ever hope to be.

A couple of weeks before the end of the school year the class rehearsed the graduation ceremonies for the 2nd graders. The school provided caps and gowns for them and all the children looked great in them. Pablo, however, wanted to be sure he looked nice and he asked me to be sure his cap was fitted perfectly because he wanted to look very nice for his mom. I assured him that he not only looked nice but that the gown and cap made him look extra handsome. His happiness glowed brightly from his tender and innocent face. It was obvious that he was on cloud nine.

The rest of the school year was a blur, and it was not long before the kids took their caps and gowns home so they could wear them the following morning for their graduation ceremony. It would be the last day of the school year. I waved at my kids as they exited my classroom holding their caps and gowns carefully in their little hands. Pablo stopped by my doorway and asked me if I was sure his little cap fit him correctly and I again repeated that the cap made him look extra handsome. He smiled the warmest smile any child can ever smile, and he walked proudly and confidently out of my class and on to the bus. I was so proud of all my kids. But I was especially proud of Pablo. He was the one that had worried me from the first day of school and he was the

one that had made me the proudest. It was Pablo, above all my other students, who convinced me that I had made the right decision to become a teacher. By the end of that first year, I knew I would be a teacher for the rest of my life.

On the last day of school everything went as planned with one major exception – little Pablo did not show up to school. This surprised me very much for I knew how much he had looked forward to this day – his graduation day. A gnawing feeling of apprehension gripped me throughout the entire day. Worrisome thoughts bounced in my head about whatever could have kept Pablo away from school on such an important day. Was he ill? Did he have an accident? What could have happened? What?

I tried to remain as calm as possible when I went to visit his home immediately after school. I was afraid to find him gravely ill at home. I was also afraid to hear he had been in some terrible accident. I had these thoughts because I knew how much he had looked forward to his graduation ceremony. I was very much afraid of the many possible things that could have happened to him, but I was not prepared for the actual thing that happened to him.

His house was empty, and the entrance was left open. I peeked inside and called out to him and to his mother.

“Pablo! Dahlia!...Hello, Pablo! Dahlia!”

I got no response, but my calls were heard by a young neighbor who came and told me they had been taken away before Pablo went to school early in the morning. When I asked the young teenager who had come and taken Pablo away, he told me what he saw.

“La Migra! They came and took them away. The lady was crying, and Pablo was crying too but the Migra people didn’t care, and they took them away anyway. The little boy kept saying that he needed to get to school but a uniformed agent just grabbed him and put him in the border patrol van. The lady begged the agents to please let them stay for the day only, but they just didn’t listen. They were both crying when they took them away.”

My heart sank and I immediately felt nausea, anger, and sadness all at once. How could this have happened to such nice people? I felt so bad for little Pablo.

I looked inside the abandoned bus that had served as Pablo’s home and was soon overcome by its gloomy emptiness. The graduation gown he was to wear early in the morning was hung neatly beside the television. The graduation cap was placed neatly on top of the television. Everything appeared to be undisturbed. In the corner of the small dwelling under a small table was the soccer ball I had given him for Christmas. It was so well worn that it was obvious he had used it often. On the small table was Pablo’s class

folder. I picked it up and scoured it through. Among the many papers he kept in his folder was an old assignment he had written for my class.

I had asked the students to write something, along with their parents, about what living in America meant to them. I was looking for responses pertaining to patriotism. Pablo and his mother had written a response that expressed not only their hopes but their outlook toward life in America.

"In America, there is hope.

In my homeland there is despair.

In America, I can dream

And believe my dreams are attainable

In my homeland dreams are fantasies

Thank you, America, for being so just and fair

The assignment was written in Spanish by Pablo, but it was obviously dictated to him by his mother. I knew she liked to write because Pablo told me his mother was always writing. He said she wrote something just about every day. He also said he wanted to be a good writer just like his mother was.

I never saw Pablo again after that school year. I continued going to the South Fork colonia for years after he attended school with me. I had other students who lived in that poor neighborhood, and I always made it a point to get to know them better. And it was on these trips to the neighborhood that I was able to see the effects of time on Pablo's old property. The bus remained on the premises until the county repossessed the property for nonpayment of taxes. They took the bus to a local junkyard and from there I don't know what happened to it. After several years there was no sign that Pablo had ever lived in the South Fork colonia.

The idea of never seeing Pablo again bothered me until one day when I picked up a Spanish newspaper from Monterrey, Mexico and saw a picture of a championship youth soccer team. A boy of approximately fourteen that resembled a slightly older Pablo was in the picture and the story did mention that a player named Pablo Vasquez was the team captain. It also mentioned that Pablo always said he wanted to play for a championship team and he never let his team forget his goal. The article also mentioned that Pablo's teammates credited him with keeping them focused on their championship goal as well. I was quite sure this Pablo Vasquez was my Pablo. I had hoped and prayed that he be granted his wish to be a champion someday. I had to believe that both our hopes and dreams had come true. My mind immediately took me back to the quiet handsome little boy repeating over and over again, "Believe in yourself and your teammates. Think like champions, practice like champions and you will be champions!"

Some students make teaching the best job in the world. Pablo was one of those students. Thanks for the memories, son. You taught me much more than you will ever know.

— *the end* —