

HOME IS WHERE THE HEART IS

by Noah Moss

The heart often knows that the eyes cannot see, what the tongue cannot taste, the hands cannot touch. For a flavor of the man's story, to grasp the meaning of his work, we must look to his origins. Only then can we begin to see what so many already know about Daniel Rodriguez—Home is here the heart is.

Daniel Rodriguez has called Bakersfield home for close to forty years. He has helped shape the community as a trial lawyer, businessman, philanthropist, husband, and father. His roots run deep. And the surprising thing about a man who has been such a pillar of stability to this town is that his childhood was anything but stable.

Born to migrant workers, he spent his childhood on the move. His sense of time ebbed and flowed with the seasons—the November cotton harvest in Texas and back to California in late winter for crop preparation. There were others in between, countless fruits and vegetables toiled over and tilled by hand. Countless miles on the road.

Daniel's father was an orphan, found along the side of a South Texas county road at the age of five. Daniel's father never knew his parents and could neither read nor write. He had, however, the gift of great storytelling, which allowed him to communicate in a land and among a people that, in those days, pushed him to the margins. This ability also allowed him to impress upon his six children the importance of education, the options that it would create for a better future.

If a growing season fell during a school year, Daniel heeded his father's advice. Even in the middle of a semester, Daniel would corral his five siblings and march them to the front door of whatever schoolhouse was within shouting distance of the fields where his parents worked. Daniel emerged as the ringleader of his brothers and sisters. He would knock on the school's front door, fill out the necessary paperwork in English and ensure that they were all enrolled. Daniel recalls these early years:

"Typically, we would be enrolled towards the bottom of the class. By that I mean they put us in classes with the students who were struggling or behind on the fundamentals. Within a week, we'd be moved out of the bottom and put in the advanced classes with the best students in school."

When asked if this process ever shook his confidence, he said, "No, I got used to being underestimated from an early age. It just motivated me to prove them wrong."



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Into adolescence, Daniel's education gave him a leg up, allowing him to adapt quickly to an ever-changing environment. It wasn't enough, for example, for Daniel to work on a piece of equipment. Be it a forklift, a gin stand, or a work-over rig out in the oil fields, Daniel had to know every nuance of construction and operation, down to the last bolt.

It was little surprise to his family when Daniel enrolled as an electronic engineering student at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo in the early 1970s. To say the same for his classmates and professors would be to understate the fact that Daniel was the first Latino to graduate from this university's engineering program. Being underestimated was not unusual for Daniel. He recalls one professor in particular:

"He was French. He couldn't roll his r's and instead left them in the back of his throat like he was choking on a frog. During roll call, he went down the list and didn't call my name.

When the professor asked the class, 'Did I call everyone's name?' I raised my hand. I said, 'You missed me sir, Daniel Rodriguez.'



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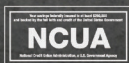
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The professor looked at his roll call sheet and explained, 'Daniel Martinez, yes, I called you.'

'No, my name is Daniel *Rodriguez*,' I said as politely as possible.

He shrugged then replied, 'Martinez, Rodriguez... What's the difference?'

The class got a good laugh. I knew where I stood."

Daniel knew that he wanted to make a living as an attorney from such an early age that he barely remembers a time when he questioned it. To that end, he enrolled as a first-year law student at the University of California, Los Angeles in 1977. As he tells it, that first year was a rude awakening.

"In engineering, there's a formula and there's always a right answer. It's black and white. It took me a whole year to understand that law is different. You have to be able to see both sides of the coin, both viewpoints at stake in a dispute."



Joel Andreesen

It was a critical turning point when Daniel learned that resolving disputes requires taking the time to walk in another's shoes to understand where they are coming from. It was also the time when he started to understand that practicing law can be messy and is often carried out, not in black and white, but in shades of grey.

A new world opened up and academic success quickly followed. Daniel was a quick learner and he's open about cutting class to work at a law firm instead.

"I would go to the first class of the semester to get the syllabus. Then I would go to the last class to take the test. In between, I would work sixty hours a week at an insurance defense firm in L.A. It felt good to finally make decent money. Then I would cram before the final exam and ask around to see how the professor tested. I don't recommend this to anyone else but that's how I did it."

By the time Daniel graduated, his education was, in some ways, complete. In others, it was only beginning.

Out of law school, Daniel had job offers from every law firm he applied to in Los Angeles. These folks were eager to hire him. When asked why he returned to the Central Valley instead, he says, "My family was living in Arvin. I knew the area, felt comfortable here. This is where I wanted to be."

The irony is that Daniel had trouble finding a job back home. He applied to a local insurance defense firm only to be turned away. "I didn't understand. I was hungry and knew defense work because I'd practiced it my entire time in law school."

Underestimated but never discouraged, Daniel recalled a bitter experience doing defense work that drove him to adapt and try a different approach.

"It was one of the first assignments I was given at the defense firm I worked at during law school. It was an out-of-state case in Arizona where my assignment was to figure out what law applied to our case. The partner said to me, 'Figure out the state where the law would award the plaintiff the least amount of money. Then write a brief arguing that's the law that should apply.' It was discouraging and was the first time I knew that I wanted to represent individuals, not work for insurance companies."

Daniel, a creature of habit, sought out opportunity like he had as a kid. He knocked on a door, this time of a prominent law firm in Bakersfield that represented criminal defendants and civil plaintiffs in personal injury cases. He was interviewed that day and hired on the spot. This firm was at 1128 Truxtun Avenue in Bakersfield.

Once hired, he got to work and never looked back. Things took off when Daniel knocked on the door of the local, Spanish-speaking radio station and talked them into a primetime spot about the law. The calls poured in.

His cases and clients took him far and wide, deeper and deeper into the community that he had always known. Daniel was at an advantage representing people who'd been injured in the same orange groves he grew up working in or on the same cotton gins he and his father had worked on all those years before.

This was his home turf.

About ten years in, Daniel met a young law clerk from Iowa, who also worked at 1128 Truxtun Avenue. The young man, Joel Andreesen, had a nose for the practice of law. The two found kinship in their competitive spirits and reverence for the law.

It wasn't long before Daniel approached Joel about working together. A partnership was inevitable and the lasting image of these early moments has now come full circle. After a long tenure at 2020 Eye Street, Rodriguez & Associates has recently opened its doors for business at 1128 Truxtun Avenue, the same building where Daniel and Joel started their careers in the 1980s.

I read somewhere that ambition comes in two forms. The first kind is driven by the urge to step over others on the path to personal achievement. The second is driven by a desire to invest in work that will raise everyone up around you.

Daniel and Joel have built their firm around the second type and Bakersfield is undoubtedly better for it. Both attorneys have emerged as a voice for those unable to speak for themselves. They take pride in what they do and the fact that people who come to work for them find a challenging and fulfilling environment where they are welcome to stay. They take care of their own.

And now Daniel and Joel are back under the same roof where it all began. A fresh start with renewed energy for their lasting mission. Their practice grows and shows no signs of slowing down.

Too much work to do.

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