Carmen Perez

By: Carmen Perez
Adapted by Fishtank Staff

64 **Carmen Perez** is the executive director of The Gathering for Justice and has dedicated twenty years to advocating for many of today's important civil rights issues, including gender equity, violence prevention, racial healing, community policing, and ending mass incarceration.

65 IT HAPPENED ON MY seventeenth birthday—that was the day I decided I was going to change the world. I walked into the church in front of all my family and friends. There was a cake with candles and a dozen bright balloons. HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CARMEN AND PATRICIA, read the colorful cake that was placed right beside my sister's open casket.

Patricia and I had experienced everything in life together. We weren't twins—just sisters with exactly 366 days between us. But our whole lives, we lived like twins and best friends, sharing a bedroom, birthday parties, friends, and all the hardships of our childhood. When she died in a car accident, I had to start a new life without her. And that's when it happened—when I decided I was going to fight to make the world a better place. I'd had it in me for a long time, but Patricia's loss made it real—and urgent.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" I remember my other sis-ter, Leti, asking me several years earlier, when I was still very little. Leti was twelve years older than me, and she probably didn't expect my answer to be: "I am going to change the world!"

66 "Oh, okay, Carmen!" She laughed skeptically as she dressed me for ballet practice.

Patricia and I were always listening to music, thinking we could dance and sing our lives away. As kids, we took ballet and as I got older, I did modern jazz and hip-hop. In my mind, I was a professional hip-hop dancer, but I also loved Selena. Although we didn't speak Spanish or understand it, Patricia and I would both sing along to Selena, pretending to be her. Because she looked like us, with her black hair, high cheekbones, and slanted dark brown eyes, it was a lot easier to imagine we really *were* her when we sang passionately to our reflections in the mirror.

As we got older, our big brothers (who were older than us by six and fourteen years) introduced us to NWA. I didn't understand the lyrics any better than Selena's Spanish, but I knew right off the bat, this music was for me. I was beginning to form my own identity and loved Snoop, Dr. Dre, and DJ Quik. I joined a dance crew called Something Too Sweet that performed at our junior high school and at the local Boys & Girls Club. As a crew, we were about as sweet as Eazy-E himself. Which means we were *not* sweet. We were hard. At least that's how we liked to act. I was always the tomboy, with Eazy's Jheri curl, and I dressed, acted, and walked around like I was in a rap group. I remember being in junior high school when our dance crew performed "We're All in the Same Gang" by West Coast All-Stars. I wore a black Sacramento Kings hat, a black bomber jacket with Nike Cortez shoes and black Dickies. I rapped the lyrics of the various artists in the song, trying to convey the message to all the other kids in the audience—we were all impacted by gang violence.

Thank God for hip-hop and music in general. Nothing else besides basketball made me so happy at that age. Nothing saved me from the difficult day-to-day in my hood like rapping,
67 playing ball, dancing, and putting on a front of hardness. Hardness with so much joy underneath because I was with my girls.

My dance crew in those days was as diverse as the neighborhood we lived in—made up of the same girls on my basketball team: Mexicans, Chicanas, African-Americans, Samoans, Koreans, and Filipinas. My neighborhood in Oxnard, California, was home to gang violence, drugs, alcohol, poverty, and a whole lot of racial and cultural diversity. There were three naval bases and a lot of migrant workers living side by side—most people surviving on small incomes. Ironically, I look back on it as a wonderful little bubble where I could be whoever I wanted to be. I am the youngest of five kids, the daughter of an American-born Chicano father and a Mexican immigrant mother. My favorite food growing up was the *lumpias* and *pancit* made by the Filipina moms in my neighborhood, and one of my nicknames was "Little Samoan." This was not a dig but a celebration of my kinky hair and facial features. Somehow I resembled my Samoan friends as much as my own parents. I could say "I love you" in several different languages—would yell it to my girlfriends when saying goodbye—but I didn't speak Spanish—my mother's only language.

I used a lot of slang with my friends, saying things like "Whazzz sup?"

"*¿Por qué hablas así?*" ("Why do you talk like that?") my mom used to ask me, her eyes wide with concern, love, and confusion.

She was a Mexican immigrant who was mostly monolingual and extremely monolithic in her love for the Catholic Church. She left her family in Mexico to marry my father in California, after they fell in love on a dance floor in Jerez, Zacatecas, when he was on a road trip with his cousin. Once in California, my young, strong parents worked the fields, but by the time I was born—their fifth child over the span of fourteen years—my father was working as a forklift driver
68 and my mom packed frozen food at a plant. She worked very long hours but still made time for her side gig: praying hard for the community. There was not one incarcerated family member, drug-addicted friend, or gang member on the streets who didn't receive her prayers. On the daily. Even though she married a Chicano man from California with a good twenty years on her, she was a proper, God-fearing woman who never *dreamed* her own daughter would dress like a rapper and play ball like the boys. She did her best to raise her five children, but the long hours she and my father worked meant leaving Patricia and me to be raised by our older siblings.

Unlike our mother, Patricia and I were not monolithically anything, especially not monolithically Mexican. Our three older siblings were bilingual—the bridge between my Spanish-speaking parents and me—and they brought me and Patricia up to speak English—and only English. I was not part of the protective Mexican family you hear about who lights candles and goes to church. Our older siblings made sure we played sports and were out in the community. On holidays, we'd exchange food with the Wilsons, a black family across the street. They gave us pecan pies and we provided them with ta-males. We loved growing up in a neighborhood with so many different cultures. I was never uncomfortable speaking with someone else about their background or their home life. I gladly tasted their foods, listened to their music, and drank in all our differences. I was culturally fluid and happy and not tightly connected to just being Mexican.

If anything was first and foremost about my identity, it was that I danced hip-hop and played basketball.

Since Patricia was older than me, we usually played on different basketball teams, but we shared the same coach, who was often like a dad to many of us. Pat Bell was a brave black man stepping into a diverse community that was very much not his own. Our parents relied on
69 Pat to keep us safe and off the streets. He was hope for them. They knew that if we were with Pat, we were going to be okay. Pat was a man who demanded respect. He was dark-brown-skinned, five feet eleven inches tall, and had a nineties flattop. He spoke assertively, and he himself could do anything he asked of us on the court. Thinking back now, Pat only spoke English, but somehow he knew how to communicate with our parents. Pat's family came from the South, and he was rooted in Southern traditions, raised playing the guitar in his Baptist church. He would often make us attend church with him to keep an eye on us, and, believe me, there was no dispute coming from our parents, even though they were devout Catholics. As long as we were praising God and off the streets, they were content.

Coach Pat had so much confidence in us, and he was the first adult in my life who told me through his actions that *I had power in me* and *he would help me find it*. On his court, I sometimes felt that I really would change the world. He was not concerned with what language you spoke at home, how little you saw your parents at home, or what kind of hardships you dealt with behind closed doors. He just knew you needed a home away from home to clean the slate and keep you safe.

"Run it off, Perez!" he used to say when I would arrive at practice visibly shaken, tired, or angry about one of the many hardships of my life. I was the best at suicide drills, running off the pain so fast on the court that he got me into track and softball too, which he also coached. He offered me a place to be, where the best part of myself was awakened, relevant, *necessary*. Sports were my salvation, and Coach Bell was our home base throughout our entire childhood-even when my sister Patricia and I would fight. He would show up to pick me up from my home and take me to his house for dinner or to the court to shoot around.

70 There was comfort on the court, in the drills and regimens, in getting so sweaty and loud with your best friends every day. At every single practice and game, Coach made us repeat his five values:

1) Never give up
2) Dedication
3) Determination
4) Confidence
5) Family

Every girl on the team could repeat these backward and forward. The team looked something like this: Vanessa (who we called Vern) was Mexican. Charleen was a light-skinned Mexican girl whose family was super Chicano—her brothers would all drive nice old cars. Then there was Korina, who we called Popcorn because she used to pop up to get the rebound and then pop up to put the ball right back in. She was from a household with monolingual Spanish-speaking parents and was very culturally Mexican, but she knew how to navigate both

worlds. Trish was Korean but adopted and raised by a white mom. We rubbed our skinned knees together to become blood sisters in fifth grade, and we are still best friends to this day. Shawanda, who was black, was the Michael Jordan of our basketball team. She had hops! And Louisa was Samoan. As kids, we were curious and loved listening to Louisa's parents speak. In fact, we learned how to address all our teammates' parents with respect, calling them *mom* or *dad* in their native languages.

Our lineup may sound more diverse than your typical girls basketball team, but in Oxnard, it wasn't that unusual for Latinas to hang with black girls, or Korean girls to hang with Samoan girls. Our overlapping struggles both on and off the court made us more alike than different. But when we left our neighborhood for traveling games we encountered racism right
71 and left. People couldn't believe that Samoan and Chicana girls could play ball. It was outside their expectations and just plain threatening. Especially given how confident and spirited we were rolling into a gym together. The best possible reaction to the sight of us was usually a raised eyebrow, and the worst was a crowbar to our taillights and windshield.

There were many times when we were underestimated, and that just made us more determined to show the other teams where we came from. We would dust them up by thirty, forty, and sometimes fifty points, which didn't make them too happy. We caught a lot of aggressive shoves in the lineup after the game when you're supposed to slap hands and say "good game." One time, the shoves led to an actual fight, so we were kept inside, handed a box full of all our trophies, and finally excused only to find that our van had been vandalized.

Getting our car smashed in by rival teams was nothing. As we got older, we were waking up to the world outside our bubble of sisterhood, and that world included all kinds of violence and racism. We watched on TV while Rodney King was beaten by the police and saw Los Angeles go up in flames less than an hour away. One time on the drive home from one of my games, my brother got pulled over. Patricia and I were in the back seat, and my teammates were in the bed of the truck—all of us still in our uniforms, sweaty and ready to go home and shower. I'll never forget the police officers making my brother get out of the car with his hands up and then throwing him to the ground, hog-tying him at gunpoint right in front of me and all my team-mates. Then the police made all of us put up our hands, and we were escorted to sit on the curb at gunpoint. As I watched my brother's face being pushed into the pavement, I wished the police could see my brother the way I saw him. The way my Samoan, Korean, Filipina, Chicana, black, and white sisters all saw each other: as family.

72 Coach always taught us that you can't get the ball in the basket if you have drama with your teammates. You won't communicate well *on* the court if you don't legit hang out with each other *off* the court. And unless you truly see each other as sisters, you cannot protect each other and you cannot win games.

I think Coach knew we would need each other well beyond the basketball court. And he was right—we would need each other our whole lives. When each and every one of us went through personal hardships, we always had each other's backs. It was a blessing that I was never on the same team as Patricia, because it allowed me to form a sisterhood with other girls, who I would need after Patricia passed. We were all there for each other. Throw anything at us, and the friendship of our crazy little circle would get us through.

And when Patricia died, I survived because of them. It was through their prayers and visits that I felt Patricia near. Having this sisterhood helped me understand it was one of the greatest strengths in my life. There was so much violence and hardship around us, and if anything was ever going to change, we would have to stick together. After losing Patricia, I wanted to fight all the wrongs I saw in the world. My sister wasn't going to be able to speak any-more, so I would have to speak for the both of us.

After the funeral, my mother took me to Mexico to visit her family for the first time. It was a part of how she mourned her daughter. To go home—the place of her birth, where she hadn't been for so many years. It was strange to grieve for Patricia in a place she herself had never even been. I felt her absence strongly in that new place. I was lonely, sad, and for the first time in my life, I felt very foreign. I felt out of place—among people who were my family. I was shocked to find that my cousins there all spoke English, which they had learned at school—no big deal. They wondered why I hadn't learned to speak Spanish at school—or at home with my own parents. I recognized an internal hidden sadness that I was not connected to this Mexican part
73 of myself. I wondered if I had grown up too disconnected from what I was supposed to be. Was I missing something by not knowing more about my roots? Was it wrong to feel more urban, more basketball, more hip-hop than Mexican?

"Why didn't you teach me to speak Spanish? Why didn't you ever bring me to this place?" I asked my mother.

"You have always been so American and had sports, Carmen. I didn't want to confuse you or take you away from your responsibilities," was her reply.

But the confusion only grew when I became the only kid in my family to attend college. At the time, I felt applying to college was my only way to start fresh. But this didn't come easy. My parents had just finished paying for a funeral and couldn't afford to pay my tuition. I had to work while in college to cover the cost—all while feeling homesick and grieving my sister. And the confusion didn't stop when the school kept pushing papers in my face asking me to check the box every single time: *Hispanic*—a term I have never identified with.

College was supposed to be where you open your heart and mind to new experiences. But in some ways, that first semester, I felt my world becoming shrunken and confined. Someone in the leadership of MEChA* on campus informed me I *wasn't* really Mexican after all, because I couldn't speak Span-ish. And I kept learning new terms and labels that were applied to me and my experiences in a way that made me feel like an alien. Besides *Mexican*, I was a *person of color* who had grown up a *latchkey kid*. And I even learned there was a term for what used to happen with my brothers getting hog-tied at gunpoint by the cops: *racial profiling*.

There was also a word to describe me and my girls back home. Apparently, our overlap of cultures, races, and "social disadvantages" had an academic title: *intersectionality*. It's a big
74 word that sounds as made up as it does heavy. But I didn't want to run from it. I wanted to embrace it, because it felt like a word for something I'd lived my whole life. It sparked a new feeling of pride in me for myself, Patricia, and the relationship we had with our extended neighborhood family. Far beyond a textbook word used by academics, my friends and I were a living, breathing collective of people who experienced a magical level of togetherness in our multicultural neighborhood. We were unified for life. We weren't just a bunch of separate ethnic

groups that correspond to boxes you check on an admissions form. We weren't just Mexican, Korean, Pacific Islander, or African-American. We were intersectional. We were the kids who didn't know we were supposed to be labeled and divided, who instead *collided*—and generated our own power.

And even though people always tell you that collaborating with people from other walks of life is complicated—a pipe-dream even—for us, in Oxnard, California, coming together was easy, natural, and real.

This, I realized, was my gift. To take my pain, my knowledge, and my unique experience of intersectionality and to figure out a way to help people with it. *This was how I could change the world.* I was one of the lucky ones who made it to college and had encouraging mentors. I had the self-motivation and inspiration to live for my sister when she couldn't, to speak for my mother when she couldn't, to bring what I knew to the movement and make it stronger.

So even though I had considered going back to Southern California after college and coaching with Pat Bell, I decided to take my place in the movement for social justice. And because I grew up side by side with people from so many backgrounds, races, and religions, my heart was already in it. I already spoke the language. My first meaningful cultural exchanges had happened long ago, when I was a little kid and didn't know any different. So I fit right in with the community of people working intersectionally to fight for social justice. I'd been organizing my
75 entire life. I already feel so connected and parallel to marginalized communities. I don't need to be black to care about Black Lives Matter. I don't have to be locked up to care about incarcerated people. My intersectionality and empathy became my power, and Coach Par's five values are still my secret weapon.

He always taught us that having heart wins games. Grit, determination, and family will get us through. He was right. My diverse family of basketball teammates has always gotten me through. I am still close with most of those girls. They mourned with me a few years ago when Coach Bell died on the basketball court at the age of forty-four. And because of them, I have never forgotten where I came from. They continue to remember Patricia with me. They continue to remind me that out of tragedy and hardship can come blessings and change. They remind me of our shared humanity, no matter our backgrounds or differences. They help me understand that our liberation is bound together.

They were my strength on my seventeenth birthday at Patricia's funeral, and they were my strength exactly twenty-three years later—to the day—on my fortieth birthday in Washington, DC, when I took the stage at the Women's March and asked five million people to help me change the world.

* Movimiento Estudiantil Chicanx de Aztlán