

WORKER PROFILES

Wooden Brush Strokes

Elizabeth Banda

With silence his eyes wander,
Wondering how to make his dwelling fonder.
Surely, no one could question that what this man does is
art.

Well, at least, not someone very smart.
In his eyes, there is always something to be fixed or
something that needs improvement. You can tell by his
eyes that pace the room, tracing where there should be
crown molding or a rain spot on the ceiling that needs a
retouch. I've always wondered why this man, my father
Pedro Banda, always stared into the air, but now I know
that it wasn't air that he was looking at. It was his work
that he continuously kept his mind on. He always has to
be busy, either physically or mentally. He's a carpenter,
who does more than what his title tells you.

It began while he was still going to school,
studying to get his degree. He was an over achiever and
surprised everyone when his "fat fingers" moved so swiftly
across the typewriter. His diploma is posted on his

parents' wall stating that he graduated from a school in Mexico located in Piedras Negras, Coahuila, right across the border of Eagle Pass, Texas. I have seen him in pictures dressed in suits, in an office committed to his duty, which would translate into a business-associated field of organizing. However, with his family about to bloom and his new wife, my mother, he was searching for the best way to earn a living. In addition, he would work for his father doing whatever needed to be done on the family ranch, from feeding the horses hay, to fixing up the little barn roof. All of this was expected from him without hardly any pay. In fact, it was expected from all the Banda brothers. When they got jobs like my father did, they were additionally expected to give their parents a reasonable half of the paycheck. Does this remind you of the strict environment in *Like Water for Chocolate*, since rules were followed based on tradition? Never would anyone dare to question his or her parents' authority.

When Yolanda and Pedro first married they were living in my grandparents' house. She was his small stepping stone to push him to dream and accomplish what he has today. When they first wed, they were living in his parent's house but Yolanda didn't agree. She wanted

something more, something to call her own. I know my father and I know he argued and complained but he did it anyway. He was given land by his father Francisco and built their dream house with a pear tree in the back yard, because he wanted to make her happy. The Banda brothers who all received a degree built this dream house with their combined craft and knowledge. Every one of them knew how to use a hammer because they needed it to work on the ranch; it was their side profession.

The birth of my brother Pedro Jr. brought joy and the realization of the need for the better way of life. The United States was said to be the “land of opportunity” with the best education, better wages and a stable economy. However, this new land would surely not accept his degree from Mexico when he couldn’t speak English fluently. He learned English in school and knew it fairly well but this wasn’t enough to make his degree valid in the United States.

Luckily he was blessed with the ability and skill of using a hammer. He began to work as a carpenter, constantly going in and out of the country visiting his wife in Mexico and going to work in the United States. It was difficult to be away with his family at home, his wife and

son, but it was for the best. It looks like he picked the right job since a study shows that employment jobs are “expected to grow about as fast as average for all occupations through 2012” (Carpenter).

I don’t think my father has one suit hung in his closet, he traded it all for a T-shirt and blue jeans. In fact, all the Banda brothers did as they all slowly began to migrate up to the one city of San Antonio, Texas. None of them even tried to claim their professional position in the United States. They were too comfortable working in their T-shirt and jeans. My dad told me that it was like doing something they had always done except now, they were getting properly paid for it. On the ranch, they were paid a meal, but now they were getting paid a living.

Don’t be fooled by this job classification of manual work. This job requires mathematical skills an array of knowledge about power tools and how to use each one. “They cut, fit, and assemble wood and other materials for the construction of building, highways, bridges, docks, industrial plants, boats, and many other structures” (Carpenters). So one may ask, where is the art in following a blueprint? I say it is in the way that he builds each wall and puts up each sheet of paneling. Every

contribution is like a brush stroke. Every one does it differently and we may not notice, but the carpenter elite do. They notice everything from the quality of the material their using to the way someone didn't do the job correctly. In each of his brush strokes lies the purpose and motivation to raise his family. I would say he has succeeded when he owns his home that remains the best house on the block due to his remodeling skills and has a car in the drive way for every member in the family who is of the legal age to drive. That's four cars of all reasonable condition, all paid for with his income combined with my mother, who is a machine operator at Coca-Cola. In addition, there's tuition that needs to be paid, clothes and school supplies that needs to be bought and family vacations that need to be taken.

Even when on family vacation, Pedro wants to work. The summer vacation of 2003, the family was visiting relatives in Charlotte, North Carolina. For my brother Pedro, my sister Vanessa, my mom, and me, it was a trip for pleasure. For my father, it was an opportunity for pleasure and work. He can't have pleasure without work. Knowing this, my Chef Uncle Sam arranged my father a job with one of his friends that was setting up his

own restaurant. Working is of no burden to him when he is offered no vacation pay to begin with. He is what you would call a “workaholic” who still realizes what his main priorities are in life.

A more visible form of art is seen when he remodels his own home. Remodeling, by the way, involves all-around skills and techniques. At the company he works for, The Keller Martin Organization, he must follow specific instructions. “The advantage about being a carpenter,” he says, “is that you don’t have to pay anyone to come fix your own house because everything you need fixed, you could do it yourself.” He is proud of his craftsmanship and you could tell by the way he talks, frequently mentioning that there are flaws over in that back wall and how he would fix it. Several times, out of nowhere, I remember him just commenting how that desk is made out of cheap wood or how that house is faulty because it’s made on a bad foundation.

The thing I liked about my dad being a carpenter was that I always had someone to help me with my projects, and I always had materials handy in the backyard, my papi’s (daddy’s) workshop. He was always willing to help and I always handed in the best art projects. It is

almost an insult when someone refers to this line of work as purely manual labor. It takes time to learn all these skills; it takes nearly as long as a four-year degree. “Most employers recommend an apprenticeship as the best way to learn carpentry... The length of the program, usually 3 to 4 years, varies with the apprentice’s skill” (Carpenters). Pedro, on the other hand, learned by watching and learning. Trial and error. He was an apprentice for most of his life with his father, so he was already ahead of the game when he began to work.

Several people have acknowledged this as they frequently ask for help or advice on this issue. If someone wants an additional room built in the neighborhood, they call him even if it’s just to put a shelf up. What ever the case is, his qualifications cannot be denied. What is most admirable is the way he does his job without hesitation or fear of the different risk factors his job involves. Why fear, when just living is a risk of injury? If it means making his family happy, risks are irrelevant. Besides, he’s been doing this for so long that risks just don’t faze him. I’ve seen him cut himself so badly that I would have cried. Working in the backyard alone he gets wood splinters and cuts with blood running down. I think I hurt more just

watching him get injured. All he does is wrap it up in something to stop the blood from running and continues. Oh how I admire my father's strength.

Once he got his fingers chopped off while trying to fix the lawn mower; although it was just the tips of the first three middle fingers it sent him straight to the hospital. He was home alone at the time and the pain wouldn't have let him drive. It was Tio Chuy to the rescue when he spontaneously arrived. His fingers are still mobile and healthy and just have a spec of nail at the top. You would think something so gruesome would hinder him from working on such a physical labor job, but not Pedro Banda. I remember visiting him at the hospital when I was still in grade school and he was just quiet. I could tell that he was reflecting on his life by the look of his eye. He had a canned lemonade and I was thirsty. My dad offered me a drink and I remember thinking that I shouldn't drink it because he was sick but I trusted my dad and took it. Because after all, how could my own father offer me something that made me ill? After my dad got back to his normal state he joked about the incident and said "now my fingers are really too fat to type on a typewriter." Luckily this skill isn't necessary in his line of work.

However the bad thing about his occupation is that you can't work while you're hurt or sometimes not even on a rainy day. In May of 2000, a car crash put him in a leg cast that prevented him from doing any physical labor and as a result he could not work for at least a month. This caused a great decrease in family income. Other times he has had to come back home without pay because it had been raining on the work site and work was impossible. Other than those occasions he is out and about for most of the day. He finishes his shift with Keller Martin and then begins his self-employed shift with whoever needs his assistance.

He lives in two worlds divided by language. If you understand his Spanish you could tell that he is an intellectual and skilled. He so often quotes Spanish intellectuals and relates them to life while giving everyone joy by making them smile and laugh. If you understand only his English you can tell he's skilled but you can tell that you're lacking something more. There's more he wants to tell you but not much he can say. You don't know him until you enter both his worlds.

So intellectual and so well spoken

Yet a deep hearted carpenter who wouldn't mind
working if he were broken.

His language may confuse you,
But don't let him fool you.

In the English world he may be misunderstood,
But I assure that he could do more than what you
thought he could.

If it weren't for daylight fading away, he would probably stay working forever. Luckily God made night and day so his family could appreciate him at home at the end of the strenuous day. He claims that it's such a relief to come home at the end of the day to find relaxation and a meal on the table. He loves his family and that's why he doesn't mind the risk and the hard work he needs to get done. Not to mention that he truly enjoys doing what he does. After all, how could you ever get tired of human art?

"Carpenters." U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. 2004. 04 May. 2004.

<<http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos202.htm>>.