

# Can I Still Be Somebody?

*Zenaida Garcia*

I came from Puerto Rico with my three kids in 1996. I was running away from a ten-year marriage filled with domestic violence and abuse. I did not speak proper English, so I signed up for an English class at Genesis Center in Providence, Rhode Island. For about two years, I studied English and computer skills, and I also entered a teacher assistant program and volunteered at Alfred Lima Elementary School.

## Retail Work Was Stressful

I applied to the School Department to work as a teacher's assistant, but I did not get the job. I wanted to keep studying English, but the state wanted me to work. So I got a job in retail. I was super scared and stressed out. I didn't feel ready for that kind of job. My hair started falling out. But I stayed six and a half years.

My English improved, but not enough to please the customers who insulted me for not understanding them. People would say, "If you don't speak English, go back to your country!" or "What are you doing working here, if you don't understand English?" I would just smile and say, "Have

a nice day!" I met other employees who were also struggling with the language and cruel situations with people. We supported each other, trying to live the American Dream. Employees can get fired, but customers – you can't fire customers.

Many times I would drive home crying after work. But I never gave up! Some customers would lift me up by saying things like, "You are a good cashier," or "You are doing a good job." They told me not to listen to those mean customers.

## Cancer, Debt, Depression

In April 2008, my mom, who was living with us, got cancer. She had less than a year to live. I had three kids and no family to help me take care of my mom. My oldest daughter had to help me with my other two kids. One January morning, in a snow storm, my mom passed away. I had never seen it snow like that. It was beautiful. We traveled to Puerto Rico to bury her.

Then my two sisters died of cancer eleven months apart. I took a genetic test, which revealed that I had a good chance of getting cancer too. I decided to have a hysterectomy. I went into severe

### ZENAIDA'S STORY IN PICTURES AND CAPTIONS...



I ran away from a ten-year marriage filled with domestic violence and abuse.



I got a job in retail. I was very scared and stressed out. My hair started falling out.



My mother and sisters died of cancer. I was depressed and in debt.

depression. With the loss of my job, the death of my mother and my sisters, being in debt, and having health issues, I found myself in an abyss.

### Starting Again

I was referred to The Providence Center, and I began to find myself again. Their dedication and compassion helped me get through my mental health issues. Groups like In Shape, Women’s Group, and Mental Wellness helped me come back to life. I was inspired to go back to school.

I chose Genesis Center again, because it was familiar and I felt welcomed. Now I’m in a College and Career Readiness class for ESOL learners. Mr. Buchalter, my teacher, helped me find my gift. He says I’m a natural writer.

I asked, “Do you think at my age I can still be somebody, after four years of unemployment, severe depression, anxiety, insomnia, co-dependency, fibromyalgia, and being a victim of domestic violence and sexual assault?” I wondered how a person like me, with all these problems, could go to college. I wanted to bring my self-esteem back. That’s what I missed the most.

I told him, “You opened my eyes and found something good in me that I didn’t know about. You made me think about what I really want. One day, I’m going to write about my life—about all my struggles and my path to success.”

### Still Struggling

Meanwhile, I am in a program called Medical Assistant Plus. In this program, I am learning office skills, clinical techniques, and software specific to the medical field. The program is designed for people who speak English as a second language. But I am frustrated. I am struggling. This is not what I really want to do with my life. I feel like I am doing it just because it is available. My mind is rushing. It is here; it is there. Right now, I have to choose a path going forward, and I don’t know what to choose.

**AFTER YOU READ:** Look at the Mental Health Career Pathway on p. 13. What experience does Zenaida have that might make her an excellent Community Health Worker? What advice do you have for Zenaida as she decides her path?

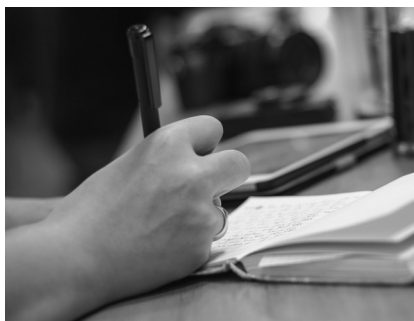
*From San Juan, Puerto Rico, Zenaida Garcia studies at Genesis Center in Providence, Rhode Island, where she lives. Through writing short stories about love, life struggles, and her path to success, she wants to help women survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse. She plans to go to college to become a peer specialist.*



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I went to the Genesis Center. I am doing better. I am studying to be a Medical Assistant.



But I want to be a writer and tell my story. I want to share my struggles and my success.



Right now, I have to choose a path going forward, and I don’t know what to choose.