

“Big swaths of our society and economy are bound up with the lives of Mexican immigrants and their children. Understanding their stories will matter for everyone.”

Getting It Right

A journalist writes about the children of Mexican immigrants

BY DANIEL CONNOLLY

When I began writing news stories about Mexican immigration a long time ago, I quickly learned that every word is a potential land mine.

In Memphis, where I live, some advocates for immigrants harshly criticized me for using the phrase *illegal immigrant* (which was standard at the time) rather than *undocumented*. The advocates quoted Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel, who said, “No human being is illegal.” The *AP Stylebook* changed, and I eventually switched to the term *unauthorized*.

Meanwhile, opponents of illegal immigration blasted me for telling the stories of unauthorized immigrants. Some said I was glorifying lawbreakers. One reader said I should call federal agents and get the immigrants deported. “Whose side are you on?” he asked.

I remembered these negative reactions as I sought permission to work as an embedded reporter at Kingsbury High School in Memphis, which enrolls hundreds of children of immigrants. A couple of young immigration advocates advised the principal not to let me in.

I understood their concerns. I was a white outsider; the Mexican-American experiences I was writing about were not

my own. Unauthorized-immigration status was just one of many serious social problems affecting the community I was writing about. Families were dealing with domestic violence, imprisoned loved ones, teenage runaways. But the principal said yes, the paperwork cleared, and I began my year inside.

I soon met 18-year-old Isaias Ramos, a brilliant high school student trying to decide whether to go to college or work as a housepainter alongside his parents, unauthorized immigrants from Mexico. He was so bright that he went on TV to represent the school in a quiz-bowl competition, and his unusual ability illustrated the bigger story I was trying to tell: the potential contained in this huge generation of children of immigrants coming of age in America today.

I followed Isaias through the corridors of his high school, on to painting jobs, and into smoky bars where he played gigs with a punk rock band called Los Psychosis. I interviewed his parents in Spanish (which I speak fluently) at their kitchen table. Then I traveled to Isaias’s hometown in Mexico, where I visited his old house and tracked down his friends and relatives, including his childhood best friend, Ponchito. I attended the burial of his mother’s sister. On my return, I kept up with Isaias and other students for more than two more years.

The Book of Isaias touches on sensitive subjects such as child abuse and drug trafficking, and before publication I took steps to check the accuracy of my text. I reviewed tricky parts of the Spanish-language interviews with a professional interpreter and shared the manuscript with many of the people I wrote about.



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Overwhelmingly, they supported the work.

The central person in the book, Isaias, agreed to speak at the book’s launch. Now 22, he told the audience: “I was a teenager at this point. I wasn’t the smartest person; you’re going to read about that. It’s nerve-racking, but it’s me. It’s honest. It’s really an honest story. So I

appreciate that Daniel did that.”

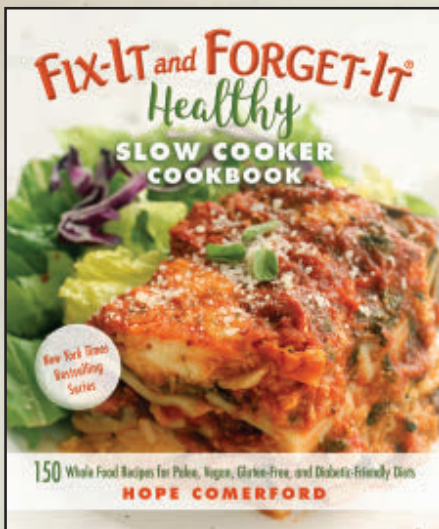
I received the same warm reception from Hispanic audience members at other talks. In Mississippi, at Off Square Books in Oxford, a Hispanic high school student bought a copy, and at the Southern Festival of Books in Nashville, a young man told me the book resonated with him, because he was born in Mexico.

The We Need Diverse Books movement has highlighted the fact that the publishing industry produces few works about people of color compared to their numbers in society. And today, according to the Pew Hispanic Center, the proportion of Hispanics among young people in America is roughly one in four, or well over 17 million.

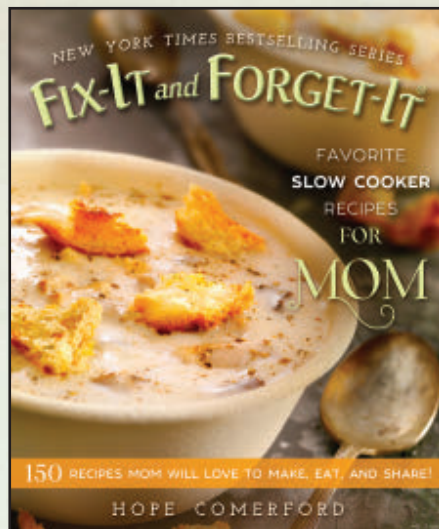
I’m grateful that many Hispanics respect the work I’ve done. But I didn’t write this book only for them. When Donald Trump takes office next year, large-scale deportations might become a very real prospect. Big swaths of our society and economy are bound up with the lives of Mexican immigrants and their children. Understanding their stories will matter for everyone. ■

Daniel Connolly is the author of The Book of Isaias: A Child of Hispanic Immigrants Seeks His Own America (St. Martin’s) and has reported on Mexican immigration for the AP.

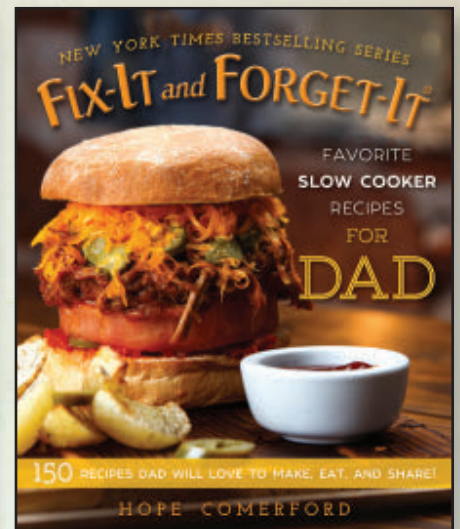
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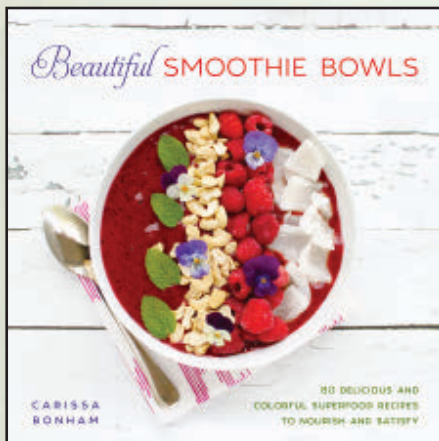
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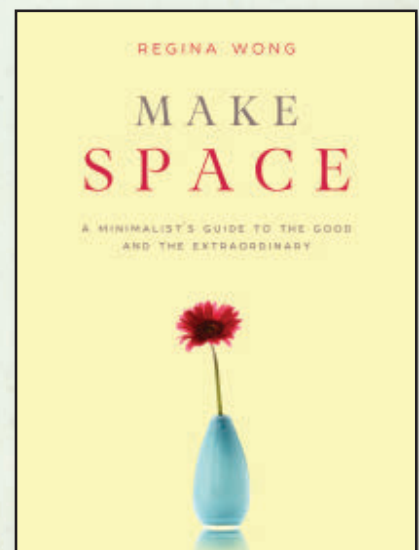
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