



Pura Belpré Illustrator Award Acceptance Speech

Remembering Grandma

Eric Velasquez



Eric Velasquez is the winner of the Pura Belpré Illustrator Award for Grandma's Gift, illustrated and written by Eric Velasquez, published by Walker Publishing, a division of Bloomsbury. His acceptance speech was delivered at the ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans on June 26, 2011.

This is truly a gift, and a reason to celebrate. First, I would like to thank the Pura Belpré Award Selection Committee for honoring me with this award.

I would also like to thank my editor, Emily Easton, for believing in this book as well as for her support and friendship over the years.

Thank you also to Nicole Gastonguay and Donna Mark for helping design *Grandma's Gift*, and a big hug and thanks to the staff at Walker/Bloomsbury who continue to make our working relationship a complete joy. Furthermore, I would like to thank the woman who is constantly by my side, Elizabeth, for her love, support, and willingness.

Grandma's Gift is part of a journey that started long ago in my Grandma's apartment in *El Barrio*—Spanish Harlem, New York City.

Although I did not realize it at the time, Grandma was preparing me to be an artist. With her passionate love of music, cooking, and sewing, Grandma instilled in me the notion of always doing your best, as well as the importance of finding love in everything you do.

The story of *Grandma's Gift* began ten years ago when I wrote and illustrated *Grandma's Records*. Since that time, I have received numerous letters from grandparents thanking me for helping them bridge the gap between grandparent and grandchild.

Grandparents who read my book began sharing their phonograph records and family history with their grandchildren. I would often read, "Thank you for the gift" in regards to the newfound connection to their grandchildren. This, of course, started me thinking about another story.

I had the perfect model for Grandma in *Grandma's Records*, my mother who posed for the photo reference as her own mom.

The experience of working with my mother brought us closer together, and I could not wait to repeat the experience with another story about Grandma.

I wrote *Grandma's Gift* in between illustration projects over a period of years, while dealing with a host of personal setbacks.

Soon after Walker/Bloomsbury agreed to publish *Grandma's Gift*, my mom suddenly passed away. For a moment, I thought the project had ended. How can I do another Grandma book without my star model? However, I thought of my mother and grandmother and decided to forge ahead.

It was always my intention for *Grandma's Gift* to be a prequel to *Grandma's Records*. In this book I wanted to show a different side of Grandma, and explain where the sketchbook came from. Nevertheless, since I work from photographs, I needed a model; I really needed a model fast. Therefore I began working on the book dummy while trying to solve this problem.

After completing the drawings in the book dummy, I realized that I knew someone that can pose as Grandma for my photo-reference. But how could I approach her with this request? So, I gathered up the courage, and I boldly asked my girlfriend, Elizabeth, to pose as my Grandmother and she agreed. Paging Dr. Freud!

Although considerably younger, I decided to cast Elizabeth as Grandma because she embodied a different aspect of my Grandma—a more outgoing spirit, one I would see in Grandma during the holidays. Elizabeth's family is from Santurce, Puerto Rico, where Grandma was from. Elizabeth's dad was my mom's childhood friend, and Elizabeth had known my mom for about two years. While helping her dad reunite with his childhood friend, Elizabeth became familiar with Grandma's philosophy through my mom.

Moreover, she perfectly understood the essence of Grandma that I was attempting to portray in this book.

I then hired a boy to pose as me in the story and set a date for the photo shoot. While attending Thanksgiving dinner with my family, Kayson walked into my life. Kayson's mom is my cousin, Selenia,

who I had not seen in over thirty years. I could not believe how much Kayson resembled a young version of me, so much so that I would refer to him as mini-me, a term he did not seem to mind. Aside from being handsome, the boy is smart and has a great sense of style. Unfortunately, I had to fire my original model, but I was completely delighted to see how well Kayson took direction during the photo shoot, a real natural.

In creating the images for *Grandma's Gift*, I wanted to show the special relationship my Grandma and I shared.

For the bus scene, for example, I illustrated the boy translating the teacher's note to Grandma while riding a New York City bus as various Latinos look on. The scene depicts how much we depended on each other. I was Grandma's official translator, and she was mine.

By illustrating images of Grandma making *pasteles*, our traditional Puerto Rican dish created by our African and Indian ancestors, I intended to convey a sense of having a grandmother that connects you to a world that came before you.

Our *pasteles* are secret recipes handed down from generation to generation. It was important for me to show how much Grandma loved making *pasteles*. Therefore I carefully depicted each step in the process of making this dish with the understanding that this dish is slowly disappearing from our culture because not enough people are sharing the recipe. I wanted to demystify the secret and share it.

All of the illustrations were painted in oil on watercolor paper. It is very important for me as an illustrator to portray the people and places in a realistic manner. Historically, images of people who look like me have been caricatured and distorted, something that I have always



Eric Velasquez (center) with Lucia Gonzalez (left), 2010-2011 REFORMA president, and Julie Corsaro (right), 2010-2011 ALSC president during the Belpré Award Celebration in New Orleans. Photo Credit: Alexandra and Michael Buxbaum.

been aware of and sensitive to for most of my life.

The second half of the book involves a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art to see the magnificent portrait of Juan de Pareja by Diego Velázquez. It was a special moment for me because I believe it was that moment, while staring at that painting, that I decided to become an artist—especially when Grandma told me that Juan de Pareja was also an artist. Curiously enough, I have never felt an ancestral connection to Diego Velázquez aside from that as a painter.

That day in the museum was the first time I saw a painting of someone who looked like me that was not a caricature or a distorted image. It was even the most expensive painting in the world at the time. Wow, this was a painting of a black man.

For twenty-seven years, I have been an illustrator, concentrating the last fifteen

years on illustrating picture books and telling stories. My greatest joy is painting images of my people—the creators of so much music, art, food, and history.

My Grandma was from Santurce, Puerto Rico—“*Somos Cortado de los primeros*,” she would always say, meaning that our ancestors were on the island before Columbus.

Grandma taught me to be proud of my African heritage as well. Since Africans are also considered to be among the first in Santurce (originally an Afro-Caribbean settlement), before the world changed, as jim crow [sic] was introduced to Puerto Rico.

Therefore I could think of no greater honor, to honor my grandmother and my mother's memory than to accept this award for illustrating *Grandma's Gift* than an award named after a woman from Santurce, Puerto Rico, known as Pura Belpré. *Gracias, Ache.* 🍷