



ELL Virtual Learning

9-12 LEP Emerging

Memoir: The Right Words at the Right Time

May 14, 2020



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Lesson: May 14, 2020

Objective/Learning Target:

I can identify a memoir: A writer's personal view of an event in his or her life.

John Leguizamo's Memoir

When you're a poor kid at a poor school, you worry a lot about how you look all the time, how much money you're spending on clothes and all that. I had problems, man. I wore **high waters**. And my shoes? Forget about it. I had fake sneakers—you know, the kind your mother finds in those big wire bins.

"Hey, John, here's one I like! Go find the one that matches!"

"I found it, Ma, but it's only a three and a half."

"Don't worry. We'll cut out the toes."

So there I am, pants too high, sneakers too tight, underwear without leg holes. I was the **Quasimodo of Jackson Heights**. Then it hits me: this is no way to get girls. So I had my mission then: become cool. ❶

I totally changed. I hung out with the gangsters. Cut class. By the time I got to high school, I was getting in trouble all the time.

What I loved most was **cracking** jokes in school. I liked keeping the kids laughing. Even the teachers laughed sometimes, which was the best part. See, I was still so **out of it** in a way—too cool to hang with



Leguizamo has become a successful comedian and actor. He has been nominated for two Tony Awards for work in theater. He won an Emmy Award in 1999 for work in television.

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John Leguizamo's Memoir

the nerds, not cool enough to be with the *real* cool guys—I figured my only value was to be funny. I enjoyed people enjoying me.

Anyway, one day during my junior year, I was walking down the hallway, making jokes as usual, when Mr. Zufa, my math teacher, pulled me aside. I got collared by the teachers all the time, so I didn't think much about it. Mr. Zufa looked at me and started talking.

"Listen," he says, "instead of being so **obnoxious** all the time—instead of wasting all that energy in class—why don't you rechannel your hostility and humor into something productive? **2** Have you ever thought about being a comedian?"

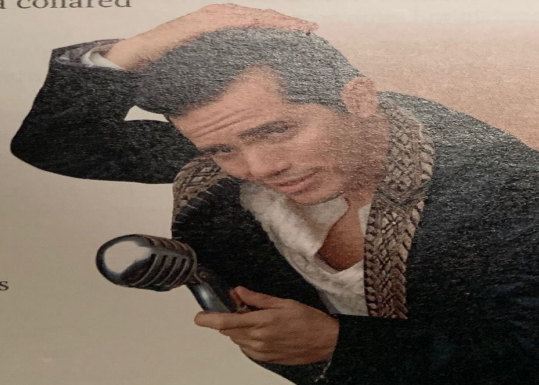
I didn't talk back to Mr. Zufa like I usually would have. I was quiet. I probably said something like, "Yeah, cool, man," but for the rest of the day, I couldn't get what he said out of my head.

It started to hit me, like, "Wow, I'm going to be a loser all my life." And I really didn't want to be a loser. I wanted to be somebody. **3**

But that one moment Mr. Zufa collared me was the turning point in my life. Everything kind of **converged**, you know? The planets aligned.

But the big change didn't happen overnight.

Eventually, I got into New York University, where I did student films. One of the movies won a **Spielberg Focus Award**, and suddenly my life changed.



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John Leguizamo's Memoir

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I got an agent and wound up as a guest villain on *Miami Vice*. That started my **career**.

I've run into Mr. Zufa a bunch of times since high school and told him how his advice turned my life around. And I'm not just saying that. Here's a guy who was able to look beneath all the stuff I pulled in class and find some kind of merit in it, something worth pursuing. How cool is that? ❖

Flipgrid Response

I would like students to go to the flipgrid link and record a response about
“The Right Words at the Right Time”



[Click Here to Record Response](#)

