

Cholla Junior High Memories

My parents couldn't afford our new house, so we moved back to the old neighborhood and, with it, my old school. There were some new kids, and some of the old kids were gone, but mostly, it was the same gang back together again. Returning wasn't exactly planned, but there was something comforting about familiar faces and the same cracked sidewalks we used to run across just a few years earlier.

We weren't quite children anymore as most of us began to mature and find new interests. Of course, my reputation preceded me, and I was once again called "The Star Wars Freak." That was fine—I've always worn that as a badge of honor! I was also a charming young man with a lot of charisma and became moderately popular with the "common man." I even started developing a reputation for dating all of the cutest girls in seventh grade (Gina, Kim, & Jennifer). This made a lot of my friends insanely jealous. I tried to share the secret of how to not be a jerk to girls, but they would just not listen or learn (Chris & Greg). It would be five or six more years before those guys ever went on a date.

Struggles and Creativity

Being a kid is hard, and moving around a lot didn't help. Money was always tight, and sometimes, that meant making do with what we had—or figuring out how to get by when we had nothing. One challenge for me was gym class. You needed sneakers to participate, but I didn't own any. My options were simple: sit out (and look like a loser), skip class (and get in trouble), or wear my "school shoes"—which were also my "church shoes."

If you've ever tried to run laps in stiff, uncomfortable "gopher-stompers", you know that wasn't really an option. The cool kids would flaunt their regular shoes while kids like me had to get creative. I saved my money to buy a pair of discount sneakers from the local "Yellow Front" store. They had a bin full of cheap, generic shoes—black or white. That was the extent of the options. I grabbed the white pair and, using a Sharpie, drew checkerboard patterns on them to make them look somewhat stylish. Of course, the cool kids dubbed them "Ghetto Vans," mocking those of us who couldn't afford real shoes.

But we didn't just take the ridicule—we owned it. We started adding color sketches to the shoes, making them our own. Nobody would dare mess-up their "real" Vans, but we had nothing to lose, so we turned our ghetto-vans into works of walking art. In a way, it was a rebellion—not against authority, but against being told we didn't belong because we lacked the right labels.

Clothing and Music Restrictions

As if wearing generic shoes wasn't bad enough, I also wasn't allowed to wear jeans, black shirts or listen to modern or heavy rock music. My mom thought it was evil or that it made me look like a thug. Looking back, I get where she was coming from, but at the time, it was torture. When you're at that age where you just want to fit in, parents forcing you to dress like a dork is a one-way ticket to social exile.

While other kids rocked band t-shirts, I was stuck in whatever "safe" clothing my mom approved of. Meanwhile, kids at school were listening to AC/DC, Van Halen, and Led Zeppelin, but I was stuck with whatever passed my mom's censorship. It was frustrating, especially when I was trying to make an impression on girls or just not stand out for the wrong reasons. It's funny how something as simple as a t-shirt could feel like a battle for independence.

This dress-and-music embargo only lasted until I graduated from eighth grade. By then, I was a full rebel, and I wasted no time making up for lost years. But at the time, it was just another hurdle in the ongoing struggle of growing up.

Summers in California

Despite the everyday challenges of school and family life, I had one saving grace—summers in California with my aunt and grandmother. While Arizona summers were unbearable, California offered cool ocean breezes, new adventures, and an escape from whatever problems school had thrown at me that year.

Those summers were a mix of freedom and creativity. I spent my time diving deeper into my special effects and miniatures hobbies, experimenting with whatever materials I could get my hands on. This was also a time when my love for filmmaking grew stronger. Being near Hollywood, even as an outsider, felt like I was closer to something bigger—something that might one day be a part of my future.

Graduation and Looking Back

I graduated from junior high school at barely thirteen and may have been the youngest kid to ever do so at Cholla. While other kids were focused on socializing, I had already been pushed ahead academically, skipping grades and testing far above my age group. The irony, of course, was that while I may have been intellectually ahead, I was still just a kid figuring everything else out.

Looking back, junior high was a mix of highs and lows—great friendships, awkward moments, struggles, and small victories. It was a time of firsts: first real friendships, first romances, first rebellions, and first tastes of independence. It wasn't always easy, but those years shaped who I became.

At the end of it all, I may not have had the coolest clothes or the best sneakers, but I had experiences that made up for it. I learned to make do, to stand out when necessary, and to own my identity—whether that was as "The Star Wars Freak," the kid with the hand-drawn shoes, or the youngest graduate of my class.

Junior high wasn't perfect, but it was real, and that's what makes the memories worth keeping.