

## **Growing Up in a Multiethnic Family during the 1950s and 1960s**

**By Wendy Quinn Parker**

Cowering in the dark closet with my mother, aunt & cousin, we not only heard but felt the overhead planes as they got closer and closer, their machine guns loosing a torrential rain of bullets. It was the 1950s in Guatemala and the planes were prop jobs with propellers that sliced through the air and machine guns that chopped people down. It was a civilian neighborhood with innocent children and adults but that didn't matter in a civil war. Heavily armed troops in jeeps rumbled through the narrow stone streets and machine gun wielding militia stomped through on foot. Their hate and taste for violence radiated from their eyes, a cold blast that made you almost freeze in your tracks. Bullets were indiscriminate in the targets they acquired – all that mattered was that you were alive and should be killed.

I was about five years old visiting my grandmother, my aunts and uncles in Guatemala. My mother was a native Guatemalan, my father first generation Irish American. Being born in Guatemala of American father, I had American and Guatemalan citizenship. I spent half my life in Guatemala and half in the United States. This visit started before the civil war broke out. When we first heard the distant roar of the planes, my aunt told us to run to a specific closet. The hope was that by crowding into the innermost closet, the concrete walls would deflect the assault. As young as I was, I still had a vague concept of death – it was not something I wanted for my family or me. Death was scary. It was horrible and permanent. That traumatic experience made me realize that there are things in this world that your parents cannot protect you from or prevent. This was a far scarier possibility than what was portrayed in horror films. This was no film or dream. It was reality. Reality as I learned throughout my life, rarely has a truly happy ending; life is so precarious – never knowing one second to the next if death is going to be there to greet you. For Latinos, civil wars, uprisings, riots were part of everyday life; the peaceful transition of government like the United States was not the norm.

We endured the strafing in the closet without any physical damage but the emotional damage was seared into me – like an open wound. In those days, there weren't any counselors or knowledge of PTS (Post Traumatic Stress). The incident was just a part of life in a third world country and you moved on. Moving on is not a one step process whereby you are healed with no scar. In those days, moving on was not to talk about it again and trying to erase it from your mind. At my tender age, I needed counseling or advice on how to cope but my relatives were not trained in coping mechanisms and in fact, there was no concept of coping mechanisms. As a consequence, I became absolutely terrified of fireworks or sudden loud bangs. Instinctively, I would dive for cover. Every year I would so dread the 4<sup>th</sup> of July when my father insisted on dragging me piteously screaming to see the fireworks at the Washington monument. To this day, I will not go to see a fireworks display and will leave an event before fireworks start.

Looking back at the 1950s and 1960s, life was so different that it is like recalling a life in another planet. For a multiethnic family, the daily struggle was compounded by dealing with the problems of disparate cultures, languages, ethnicity and countries. Those were the days when the

world was viewed as black or white, with little shading. You were either Caucasian or Negro; only two buckets existed which collected a diverse grouping of people. The first and most noticeable difference was where each family lived.

My aunt's house where we hid in the closet was located in Guatemala City, the capitol, which was the center of rebel activity. Her house was modern and up to date by Guatemalan standards which meant running drinkable hot and cold water, a washing machine, electric stove, oven and a paved street. I can still remember the smell of the concrete garage and closet where we all hid and the hibiscus plants in her courtyard. Every house from the poorest shack to gated mansions had inner courtyards and the majority of them were made of concrete. These courtyards would be an open area with no roof, generally in the middle of the house, and had tropical plants.

My Grandmother Maria's house was several miles from the city, with running water – of sorts, and on a dirt road. Often when walking down the street, we would run into buzzards feeding on carrion. Some of the houses were built from cinder blocks or concrete like Maria's and others were shacks. The shacks would be built from whatever scraps of wood that could be salvaged and if possible some tin. These homes did not have indoor plumbing and had dirt floors with no electricity. We didn't know these families or associate with them. Since our ancestors came from Spain, we were in a higher social level and didn't associate with the native Indians. There was a quasi-caste system; those who originated from Spain were in the higher echelon and the lowest tier were the native Indians, many with Mayan ancestry.

Much like what existed in the U.S., there were various social and economic strata. We did not socialize with the families living in the gated house next door since we were way poorer than them. There of course was a divide between those with wealth and those scraping by. Each level kept to itself and there was virtually no intermixing at the social level and in the capital, there were separate areas where the more affluent lived and the slums for the less fortunate. My grandmother lived in the suburbs where rich, poor and middle class lived side by side. Of course, those with the financial means would build a large concrete wall around their homes and have gates – some even had armed security along with vicious dogs. The local police did not patrol the suburbs and only came when called to do so or there was a civil war.

In contrast back in United States, I grew up living in various apartments with shared yards. Of course we had all the amenities of hot and cold running water, indoor plumbing, washing machine and steam heat, and were situated on a paved lighted street with daily police patrols. I lived in Anacostia, a suburb of Washington, D.C., which in those days was an all white refuge. We had to keep changing apartments because my foreign mother was not accepted by the neighbors. My mother, Julia, sometimes would get into confrontations with the neighbors, involving pounding on the walls, ceilings or floors. Neighbors would not talk to her or to me and my dad, George. Because of this, the neighborhood kids were told not to associate with me, so I learned to play by myself and did a lot of reading. My first love were fairytales and then mythology; it was great to have happy endings in fairytales and finding the secrets of why things were the way they were in life. We lived in cramped one bedroom apartments till I was fourteen years old and I finally got my own bedroom and at sixteen, I insisted on getting a phone because I was starting to date. These apartments were generally clustered together with a sprinkling of medium income single family dwellings. The role model that I chose for my life was the "I Love Lucy" show; it was a mixed family of a Latino and an American. The slight difference was that

the Latino was the father not the mother. What made it even more real for me was that they lived in an apartment, just like me. As a family, we were the strange foreign family that was avoided. Since my mother and I were not Mexican, we weren't called "wet backs" but we still were associated with them. While there were no store signs restricting Hispanics from entering or shopping and we didn't have to sit in the back of the bus, we still were discriminated against in subtle ways. People would give us a wide berth when walking by; people tended not to look us in the eye. When entering the Five and Dime store, clerks' eyes would follow us everywhere we went in the store. Mainly being isolated was the main form of discrimination. I grew up with the certainty that I did not belong and that I was a permanent outsider. As I grew up and matured, I started to relish being the "different" one, the odd one. This gave me a form of distinction.

Meanwhile in Guatemala, I got to live in a spacious house with my own yard and courtyard. So living in America did not automatically mean living in luxury, but my Guatemalan family thought I did live in luxury compared to them.

Physically, Maria owned a house that was built of concrete with a tin roof in the shape of a square. The middle of the square was an open courtyard with concrete tiles. The house had an indoor toilet but scraps of newspaper were used instead of toilet tissue. The soiled paper was placed in a wooden box, which was emptied out into a steel drum and burned. Only cold water in the sink and shower, there was no water heater. To take a shower you had to put several huge pots on the coal stove to heat up the water. You had to carry the pots to the shower where you used a small bowl to pour water over yourself. The water from sinks was not potable and had to be filtered before we could drink it. In the middle of the house was an open courtyard with a *pila* in the middle (This is a large hollow square concrete structure about 3-4 feet tall with a spigot in the middle from which you filled it like a small swimming pool.). There were tray like extensions from the outer wall into the center where all the washing took place: clothes, dishes and the freshly killed chicken for dinner. The dishes were washed with handmade soap. To scour the pots, old corn husks were tied together and used like a Brillo pad and a small bowl was used to scoop out the water to pour onto the pots or clothes. Of course, there were several clothes lines where the wash dried in the sun. Nothing can replace the aroma of those hand washed and sun dried clothes but washer and drier certainly are more than a convenience these days. The left wall abutted the house next door and this area was taken up by the herb garden which my grandmother used to brew herbal teas, poultices and spices for the meals. The back of the square was uncovered and was like a small farm area with grass, corn, chickens and goats. The middle was an open courtyard; the right wall had the kitchen, dining room and one bedroom. The kitchen had a coal stove which was lit all the time making it a black cave because there was hardly any ventilation for the smoke from the coals. The front part of the house had two bedrooms and a living room. Bedrooms were furnished with iron beds and mattresses that were filled with straw. I felt cozy smelling the straw and hearing it crackle and rustle as I moved in the bed. During the rainy season, it was soothing to go to sleep with the drumming of the rain on the tin roof. The floor was tile which is great in a tropical environment. The house also had electricity which was used mainly for lighting.

Back in America, my grandmother Rose lived in a house built just before she got married and moved in with my grandfather. It had a basement, main floor, second floor and attic. They were both Irish and the whole neighborhood was Irish. The basement was the domain of my grandfather who was the maintenance man for the elevators at the Macy store in downtown New

York. There seemed to be every tool imaginable from hammers and saws to vices and jigsaws. He was very inventive and created whimsical items such as a cane with wheels, a tiny whiskey barrel and horns to play tunes on another invention which was a collapsible toy dog. On the main floor was a sun room with outdoor furniture and lots of plants, next a living room with a large TV and piano, then a dining room with china cabinets full of delicate china and fragile cut glass. At the end was the kitchen with breakfast nook built by my grandfather, James, a large electric stove, refrigerator, sink and pantry. Out back was a small yard bordered with roses and sweet peas that my grandfather grew along with a shed and garage for the car. On the second floor were 3 bedrooms and the bathroom. Attic was full of items no longer needed but for various reasons could not be discarded. James also grew hydrangeas in small front yard and sculpted the two privet bushes in a large arch over the yard.

When I visited my grandparents in New York, we spent very little time at the house since Rose would fight with my mother, Julia, and George would then fight with Julia; James would generally not be around. One time the fighting got so bad that I threw myself down the stairs, so as to distract them. I was only bruised and the truce only lasted one day. The variety of things to see and do in New York City is almost endless so we would go out every single day. My visits to Guatemala were more home based.

It was around 1960s that one of my aunts saved enough to purchase a small black and white TV. Previously we would sit around and listen to the radio which ran Spanish soap operas (*telenovelas*) and the news. Now we could watch our favorite soap operas. The best part of Spanish *telenovelas* is that there is an end with a resolution; they don't go on indefinitely. Mostly though, we would talk about the world news and what had happened with each person that day. During Christmas, the floors would be covered with fresh pine leaves and on several tables a huge crèche that was so incredible. The crèche took up half the living room, on tables covered with moss to simulate grass and imbedded bowls of water for little ponds. Highly decorated statues would inhabit this miniature world. There were statues of goats, cows, chickens, horses, shepherds, farmers, magi, angels and the crowning statue was a 2 foot statue of the Virgin Mary with plush red robe trimmed in gold with a gold crown. Mary held the baby Jesus in her hands. Queen Mary was kept in her own glass enclosed cabinet. For other occasions and birthdays we would hang crepe paper from the ceilings, a radio turned up high for music and of course, special food. On sad occasions, such as a death in the family, the windows would be covered, no music was to be played and everyone dressed in black. On a lighter note, there would be festivals that lasted for days and covered acres of land. The indigenous Indians would wear their most colorful native clothing and create wooden or clay toys that were gaily colored. An enormous amount of different food would form a mosaic-like path down the middle. Of course, there were movie theaters and night clubs. There were few museums and no historical sites and the zoo was very small, so much of the time we would visit relatives.

Another noticeable distinction between living in Guatemala and the United States was the familial relationships. The makeup of my American family was very different from my Guatemalan family which was quite large. Since my father was adopted, there was no true family history but my Guatemalan family traced their roots to Spain. Family tradition was that my father was the son of his adopted father's sister, thus a second generation Irish. From pictures, my father looked exactly like his aunt, plus his aunt never married and would have lost her teaching job if she were to have a child out of wedlock. In keeping with their Irish heritage, Rose had

plans for my father, George, to marry a blonde, blue eyed Irish girl. So when my father brought home a dark skinned, black haired and brown eyed wife, she immediately told him to get the marriage annulled. Rose grew to hate to my mother, Julia. What saved me from her hatred was that I popped out blonde, blue eyed and with freckled fair skin – I could pass for Irish! Naturally, I took my mother's side and defended her and didn't like my grandmother, not that she went to any great trouble to win me over. But then I am probably prejudiced. In any case, I am the last of the line of their clan.

Maria, had one unmarried daughter and two unmarried sons living in the house with her and a third son lived next door in his own house with his wife and children. My grandfather died when my mother was a young girl. Grandma also had three daughters who were married and one single daughter living on her own. There was one son living with his wife and children in another part of town. To round it out, there was a maid who was the illegitimate daughter of one my uncles.

Maria loved me so much and would shower me with little presents. She had an old Singer sewing machine with a treadle – non-electric. She made me so many dresses and sometimes a matching one for my mother. She taught me to sew. She would have to lie in bed often because of a bad back but would adore having me come sit with her and talk. I in turn adored her. My memories of her are all happy; she made me feel loved and secure. She was the epitome of kindness and love. The one regret that I have is I never did record her words of wisdom, her recipes and which herbs were medicinal and how to use them. Especially now when I am trying to be more holistic and use organic food and medication, this lost knowledge would be so useful. She was a true matriarch of the family. All her children loved, respected her and sought her advice. She made herbal teas for different symptoms and for enjoyment. Unfortunately, when I contracted yellow jaundice there was no herbal remedy for that and I was quarantined for several weeks. I was lucky that the doctor recognized the symptoms and I was able to recover. At the time I didn't realize the seriousness of the disease but I was pretty much out of it during my isolation. After I was well, Maria took me to the zoo, holding my hand in her well-worn hand; we walked and looked at all the animals. She taught me to sew by hand and with a sewing machine, showed me how to strangle and pluck a chicken, how to cook the chicken and told me all kinds of stories. We grew so close that it tore my heart to shreds when my visit was over and I had to go back to America.

Since my Guatemalan family was much larger with aunts, uncles, nephews and nieces, the relationships and interactions between all of them was complex. There were sibling rivalry, prejudice against the darker skinned relatives, and jealousy of those who were more successful. Some of these differences led to some members not speaking to other members but they still were loyal to each other and could be very supportive, in other words a typical large family. My mother and I financially supported my uncle Miguel Angel because he never did latch on to a steady job. He was the dreamer and entrepreneur of the family. He started a book store, chicken farm, spa, studied to be a pilot and at the end he received recognition for his writings. Miguel actually won a literary prize and was published in Guatemala.

My Guatemalan family felt proud and some of them were jealous that my mother had landed a "gringo" and lived in the United States. Since I was born with my father's fair brown hair, grey eyes and pale freckled skin, I stood out like a sore thumb in Guatemala. I belonged but didn't belong all at the same time. Walking around in Guatemala I was always recognized as an

American – a stranger in my own country. My aunts and uncles were accepting of me but my nephews and nieces were a bit standoffish, couldn't get close to them. Since my grandmother didn't get to see me but once a year, she would devote more time to me than to my nieces and nephews who were there all the time. This led to my nephew and nieces saying to me that I was her favorite or pet, which I felt was unfair to such a loving and caring person. They in turn didn't want to introduce me to their friends because I looked so much like an outsider. No matter where I went I stood out and would be stared at, even in church. A wish of mine was to be able to somehow look Hispanic, so I could fit in, finally belong.

Back in the U.S., I didn't belong either because everyone would see my mother and think she was black or in any case an alien with her little alien child. At school in the U.S., I was shunned; no one would talk to me, play with me or line up with me when we paired up to go to class. Some students thought Guatemalan's would sharpened our teeth so we could eat tigers, leopards etc. The class bully, a girl, took great pleasure in doing wicked things to me. Being so shy, with no self respect, no friends, terrified of the nuns, I would just sit there and not cry or say anything as she would scratch my arm till it bled. I attended Catholic grade and high school and the teachers were nuns. The nuns were not the warm and fuzzy type rather they were intimidating. To avoid any trouble, I became the class "goody two shoes," which was easy since none of my classmates would talk or have anything to do with me. Additionally, I was blessed with a high IQ which alienated me from all the other students. My intelligence was not something that I could easily hide and even in Guatemala my cousins were not only jealous of my living in the U.S. but also that I was so smart.

Being alone and never belonging or fitting in has been a motif or subplot my entire life. Not enough Latina, not all American, being alien and being isolated even with my American grandmother. She grew to like me but her hatred of my mother caused tremendous fights between my parents and my grandmother and fights between my parents. My father was in the proverbial between a rock and a hard place with my mom and Rose. My grandfather was a loving man and never hated my mother and loved me. Somehow he managed to avoid being around when most fights occurred. I loved my grandfather, my grandmother not so much. Sadly, the good ones die young and when I was seven years old my grandfather died, it was also the same year my brother died at birth.

These days they call it domestic violence and dysfunctional families – all I knew growing up was that life was hell. My father often told me how his life was hell and that if it weren't for me, he would leave this hell hole which laid an incredible burden on me. I felt obligated to somehow bring some meaning and happiness to my father's life. At the time, I didn't realize what agonizing pain my mother was going through. I only saw and heard what my father said. There were no Latino groups or organization for my mother to go to and my father had no friends to talk with about the family problems. There were no bodegas in Washington D.C. much less an area of Hispanic families. No place of sanctuary for my mother where she could talk about the beatings. On my paternal side, there were no similar families for my father to develop friendships. A mixed family like mine was very rare and at best ignored. All three of us suffered together and alone. I tried to commit suicide a couple of times and my father did once as well. I took after my parents and had no friends at school or at home. The reason was simple. I had no family experience with how to gain friends and keep them. Social interactions were very hard and a mystery because I had Irish and Guatemalan traditions to try to incorporate. Plus since

both my parents did not have friends, neither one could give me advice on how to form or maintain a friendship.

Now that I am entering my senior years, I realize that I am a true survivor. The preceding tale does not cover some of the more horrific events plus the rest of my life up to my 40s was not the proverbial bed of roses. The quintessential question still remains; other than becoming a seasoned survivor, of what use or what goal can be achieved with this lifetime of experiences? Well, I have found that I can provide fairly good advice to those starting their life adventure. Often people I know feel overwhelmed and unable to continue, and in these cases I can give fact based solutions. I also provide living proof that these setbacks in life have been overcome and that they too can do the same. This provides some satisfaction and fulfillment.