

# **An Abbreviation of “Mi Vida”**

By Bethany M. Flores

I was born on August 24, 1971, which makes me 29, at least for a little while longer (smile). I was very premature. My estimated date of birth was for early October. As a result, I weighed in at 4lbs.2oz. I later made up for that in a huge way! My father was 39 years old, and had “crossed over” from Mexico into Texas years before. My mother was 17 years old, and had “come over” from Puerto Rico, the daughter of a hotel housekeeper.

Among the few things they had in common was self loathing. They, because of previous experiences, turned very sour against the fact that they were Hispanic. They had separately decided before ever meeting to stop speaking Spanish (the language they had primarily spoken). They wished to assimilate as fully and completely as possible. They adopted English, and decided that their children would speak English only. I had a defiant grandmother who would break the rules by speaking to me in Spanish whenever I was in her care. Anyway, the point here is that I feel cheated. I feel that the Spanish language was my right. Something I would’ve had, had they not decided against it. It is probably the biggest “hole” in my life, in my heart. A fantasy of mine is to take a year to go to Mexico and learn Spanish through an education program. We’ll see.

Off to preschool. That didn’t last very long. I was dismissed after a playground incident. A little girl who was wearing a frilly yellow dress squat down and urinated. I was enraged. I didn’t like it that she was overdressed for preschool, and didn’t like it that she decided to eliminate right there and then. Perhaps neither of these things were

the real underlying issue. At the time, there was a lot of marital strife going on at home. My parents hated each other. Maybe because they knew that the home environment couldn't have been good for me, they took every opportunity to get me out of the house. This preschool was one of those things. My mother never worked, so in my opinion, I could've been at home. It's really hard to admit (and pretty scary, too) that at four years old, I may have been dealing with anger issues. It's true that even very young children are much smarter than we give them credit. I think I knew a lot more than I should've.

I guess it wasn't all bad. I was the only girl in the house. I had a ton of toys, and a really nice bedroom all to myself. I didn't like being the eldest child, though. I still don't. I think every girl secretly wishes she had a big brother to protect her, and even boss her around. Just a theory. I was a very intellectual kid. I could figure things out, I was creative, and I spent a lot of time thinking. I still do.

Now I was going to "real" school. I remember the first day of kindergarten (mostly because of that geeky picture they took of me). What my hair was like, what I wore. I can't remember how I felt about it.

My classroom was a basement. I can't remember much more than that. The only real kindergarten memory I have is of Easter. At the time, schools could still celebrate religious holidays. Anyway, my teacher had hidden an Easter basket in the room for each of us. All of us had successfully found our baskets, except one boy. He didn't see it on top of the cabinets. The rest of us did, though. After a couple minutes, the boy got hysterical. He started screaming and crying, and I guess I was feeling sorry for him, but more than that I wondered why Mrs. Whoever didn't just show him where it was. She finally did, though...after he was traumatized.

Elementary school was next. I got good grades, but was still sent to summer school every year (for reasons previously discussed). I was “assessed” early. An I.Q. test. If memory serves, my teacher gave me this paper and told me to take it home, and make sure my parents knew that my score was 180. Nothing ever came of it.

My parent’s divorce came around this time. I really felt indifferent about it. We (my mother, my two younger brothers, and I) moved next door because my dad owned both houses. I shake my head every time I think of that one. Needless to say, things did not get any better between my parents. Yes, they were technically and legally divorced, but how can they be “rid of each other”, when there was only two feet between them? The fighting continued. Then one day, we really did move. We were still on the same side of town, but not within sight.

I know it is cliché, but it was truly the best of times and the worst of times. I was in a part of Youngstown’s East Side called “La-la land”. It is nicknamed so because a lot of Puerto Ricans live there. I felt finally at home. I fit right in, and for the first time, made friends. I heard people singing and speaking Spanish around me all day long. I never wanted to leave. However, with the good comes the bad.

With her new found freedom, my mother enjoyed many excesses of life. She would have “boyfriends” whom she would disappear with for weeks at a time, leaving us without food. Being the oldest, I automatically knew that I had to be responsible for my little brothers. I was clearly unprepared for this at twelve, but there was no other choice. I took my brothers around the neighborhood, making them climb trees for fruit. Frequently we would get yelled at and chased away. The fruit wasn’t even ripe, but it had to be better than nothing. Surprisingly, my grades held steady during this time-

probably because I still didn't need to put in much effort. My father, after dropping us off back home after a visitation, had given me a card. It was for Mahoning County Childrens Services. He wanted me to report my mom for neglect. I didn't. I knew if I did, I'd have to move. As it turned out, I had to move anyway.

Upon returning home from school one day in sixth grade, I thought it was odd that there were three garbage bags on our porch. As I drew nearer, I found that there was one bag for each of us. One with some of my clothes in it, one for Jimmy, and one for Jessie. There was a note attached to mine. All it said is "Your father will be to get you soon. Stay here and wait". I didn't see my mother after that. I remember being mad that she didn't even let us have any of our toys. I was heartbroken that I was leaving La-la land.

So now I was with my dad during the time when a girl really needs a mom. It was hell. I started junior high. I had gained a lot of weight (I was so happy to finally have food). I was placed in advanced classes because of my good performance in elementary school. That didn't last. I just didn't try anymore. I remember Mr. Tablack, my algebra teacher. He would publicly ridicule me in front of the class any and every chance he got. I hated him, and I hated math. I was removed from my advanced classes and placed into regular or "basic" courses.

My father, at this time, was a steelworker and worked shifts around the clock. Since I hated school and my life, I found it quite easy to just not show up. My dad would never know. I wound up with a whole month and a half under my belt before ever getting caught. My dad was mad, mainly because he had to escort me back to school.

Nothing really happened from it though. Surprisingly, they let me “graduate” junior high anyway.

The best thing that happened during this time period is that I made a friend. A true friend. Not just any friend. My best friend for about seventeen years now. The friend I can't live without. We later ended up (through a series of bad circumstances) living together...and we still do. We are sisters. We have been there for each other through some truly traumatic times.

Is it time to go to high school already? O.K., well it started out alright. I remember making the honor roll my first grade period. I was so happy and excited that I could get good grades in high school (especially after Tablack). My bubble was burst that very day. At the bus stop, I bragged to a so-called “friend” because I just couldn't keep the great news to myself. She shrugged. “So what? I did too. Everybody does the first time”. I don't think I ever made the honor roll again. I was in choir, and I also did flag line and drill team briefly. I was a really good baton twirler, so I went to auditions for majorettes. Although I was good, I was lectured by the upper-class girls for being overweight. They told me I'd have to diet. I guess they were only trying to save me embarrassment. Have you ever seen those costumes? Well, I didn't go back. I never became a cheerleader, either. I was nobody. Later, I would kill to be nobody, cause people just ignore you. That means they leave you alone.

I don't know when it started happening, or why, but this girl named Patricia chose me as her personal target. I never knew her, and certainly had never done anything to her. I now know that she was a very unhappy person in a miserable situation, and that in a way, I left myself open for her torment. I had low self-esteem, and a very weak

personality. I was afraid of my own shadow, as my dad would say. We had classes together all day, and she got a kick out of writing me threatening notes. She wanted to fight me after school. She made me fear 3:00. I'd just write back "But why? Why? I'm so sorry-blah, blah, blah". Thinking back on this makes me very angry. It's truly one of those "if I only knew then what I know now" situations. She could never get away with that crap today. I've never seen her since graduation, I always wonder what would happen if I ever do. Anyway, she made my life a living hell. She wasn't the only one, but the most consistent. The main one. I got "time off" when she left for a while to have her baby. It was the most free feeling month or so of high school I ever had. It was back to old tricks as soon as she returned, however. I finally couldn't take it anymore and told my dad. He went to school with me. Patricia was called in. We "talked", but nothing changed. Well, yes it did. It got worse. So much worse that I tried to get relatives in other school districts to take me in. They wouldn't. I did end up changing schools in my senior year, but that only helped a little, since we still spent half a day together at vocational school. I didn't think I'd make it to graduation, quite honestly. I had considered suicide. I felt it was the only way to be rid of her. Instead, I just went back to skipping an awful lot of school, not really caring if I graduated or not. Maybe she would graduate, and I could repeat senior year in peace. Miraculously, it happened. I graduated. I was more happy about not seeing Patricia every day than I was about accomplishing something.

At graduation, when you walk across that stage, they hand you an empty diploma holder (I'm not sure why). After the ceremony, there's a reception downstairs, where

they pass out the real thing. It's traditional and customary for your friends and family to gather there with you, take picture, the whole nine yards. Nobody was there for me.

I worked for a few years after high school. I thought that that was all my life had in store for me, and I was beginning to come to terms with it. Then, my sister got closer and closer to graduating high school, and it was looking pretty likely that she was going to college. But, she had always looked up to me! I was supposed to set the example!

Somehow I found out that because of my orphan/ward of court status, I would be considered an independent as far as financial aid was concerned. That was my in. I went to college. Right here at Y.S.U. I didn't take it as seriously as I should have. My grades were mediocre. I struggled for years and years, going from major to major to major. I will, if nothing else, come out of this "well rounded". Ever supportive, my sister always told me it was because I'm so talented in so many areas, that it was simply difficult for me to zero in on where I could be of optimal use. Anyway, this cycle went on and on. For two years, I was a peer assistant in the Center for Student Progress. Helping and leading "confused" freshmen in the way they should go. I guess that makes me a hypocrite. They all thought I had it together. Every couple of years, for one reason or another, I'd be out of school for a quarter or two (long live the quarter system). Sometimes I'd work, sometimes I'd do nothing, sometimes I'd return again to cosmetology school. That's where I was until last fall. I truly thought everything was finally clear for me. I thought the clouds had rolled away, that I'd found my destination at last. I was happy, excited even, besides, I'd sank an awful lot of money into that school. I fully intended to finish. I didn't. I know now that my decision was rash. I made it, not fully knowing the real motivations behind it. My sister had graduated

college ahead of me, and that was a blow to my ego. I felt that I was old and didn't want to waste more years in school. I was driving myself mad with calculations of age!!! So, when I realized that I really couldn't see myself being a stylist for too long (certainly not long enough to retire from), I knew I wanted to come back to Y.S.U. Because I had simply dropped out right in the middle of a quarter without going through the proper procedure, I failed that quarter and lost my financial aid. I really had to jump through a lot of hoops, but they agreed to reinstate my funds on a conditional basis, for one semester only, after which I would be reviewed. I received a list of things I'd better not do if I wanted to pass that review. No dropping classes, no failing grades, of course.

Well, I'd finally found a determination and resolve that I never knew existed within me. During my break between schools, I had become a part of my sister's classroom. At home, I'd help grade papers, and do whatever else I could to be useful. I wanted to be a teacher. She had been telling me to do that all along. Anyway...

I was a phenom! I tried harder than I ever have before. I put my heart and soul into everything I did, and if that wasn't good enough, I'd beg the professor to allow me to do it again. I worked sooo hard. I had to. I wanted to. I felt I had a lot to prove. Mostly to myself. I'd never made the Dean's List before (though I had come close a few times). I did it. Not only Dean's List, but straight A's. In college. For the first time in my life. I can't explain the feeling. I felt that for the rest of my life, everything would be alright, because no matter what, I did that. No one can take it away from me. Now I know that I can do anything. I've placed myself on a new level of achievement.

Today, I have a drive and a confidence that I never thought possible. I thank God for it. Although I would never go through it again, I know that my experiences

throughout life gave me internal strength. It's been a painful road, but hopefully the worst is behind me, and if not, hopefully now I have the "stuff" to deal with what's next.