



# Growing Up Latino Adventist

A father who came from Venezuela on an art scholarship. . .  
a mother who started New York's first Latino SDA church.

by Lourdes E. Morales Gudmundsson

WE LIVED AT 3031 1/2 FOLSOM STREET IN East Los Angeles. The "1/2" referred to the fact that our house was not on Folsom Street proper, but rather on an alley behind the large house occupied by Uncle Frank and his family. The building that was meant to be a garage had been converted into an apartment where my grandmother, "Mamita," and my cousin David lived. Behind the house and the apartment was our home, a wooden structure that leaned (or so it seemed to me) in various directions all at once. We, too, had a garage, a dilapidated shack that housed my father's art studio and served as a repository for everything we didn't have room for in the house.

Not a very inspiring environment for an artist of my father's caliber. He had arrived in New York from his native Venezuela back in the Twenties on an art scholarship. Because he

was fluent in Italian as well as his native Spanish, he soon made friends among the Italian artists, who helped him obtain work doing hand-painted lampshades. It was at this factory that he met my mother under the most oddly romantic circumstances. On a hot, humid summer afternoon she had fainted in an adjoining room, and he was called to carry her to the infirmary. Dad always said it was love at first sight.

My mother had come from Puerto Rico soon after her father, a dynamic and successful Adventist colporteur in Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, and Venezuela, was assassinated while selling Bibles and Adventist books. When she arrived in New York, the entire family, overwhelmed by the recent loss and their own struggles in a new country, had abandoned the church. But providence would have it that one of Mom's father's converts should be instrumental in bringing the entire family back to the Advent faith. At the time my parents married, Mom was a Bible worker among the Puerto Rican population of New York City. The first Spanish-speaking Advent-

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ist church was raised on Prospect Street largely due to her efforts. Dad was always supportive of Mom's religious activities and convictions, but preferred at that time not to commit himself to any religion. (In later years, Dad became an active member of the Adventist Church.) So when Sabbaths came, it was Mom, Tito, Ralph Junior, and I.

## Life's Center

As far back as I can remember, church—and more important, religion—was the center of our lives. Mom directed the choir and was active in Bible work and Sabbath school. We were taught that we were responsible to God for all our talents and that we must use them for the church and for evangelism.

I became conscious of our poverty only in retrospect, as we began to move up the socioeconomic ladder. Poverty was never talked about in my house—just study and improving oneself and attaining one's highest potential. Something else came with these lofty goals in our mother's occasional talks to her children—a sense of specialness, a sense of calling to be the most we could be for God's sake and for the sake of Rafael López Miranda, our grandfather who laid down his life for his faith. I can only speak for myself, but this heroic religious element in my past not only has seen me through some very dark moments, but has defined my way of being in the world.

Going to church in East Los Angeles on Sabbath was a chance to get out of Folsom Street and be with people of like faith and language. Our neighborhood was really quite diverse. My family constituted the Puerto Rican contingency on the block. Then there was the black family who lived right across the street, and the Japanese family up the street, the Irish-American woman next door, and several Mexican-American and Jewish fami-

lies scattered in between. We were all "minorities," but we were blissfully unaware of what that might mean. In fact, I don't remember becoming aware that I was different in a problematic way until I began to attend the local Adventist school.

## Beginning School

On the morning of my first day of school, Mom helped me dress in a new outfit she had bought for the occasion: a checkered dress with a white collar. Mom didn't give me any special instructions, nor did she play up the fact that no Spanish was spoken by the teachers in this school. When we arrived, I recognized the buildings where we had brought Tito and Junior for special programs a few times a year. It was nice to know that I would now be going to the school that my big brothers attended.

I remember walking into the hallway of the school building. The sound of children playing on the playground came through the door opposite the entrance. I stayed close to Mom as she approached a tall woman, who smiled at us and looked at me from time to time during the ensuing conversation. I smiled back, but I didn't understand anything she said. The implications of this state of affairs didn't fully dawn on me until we were in the classroom and Mom was suddenly gone. I wasn't alarmed at my mother's absence, however, because she had explained that she would be back for me later.

In the classroom, the woman (who was my teacher) was still talking, and it seemed as though I should understand her. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't make sense of anything that came out of her mouth. Soon she began to lead us in singing. I could relate to that, so I sang energetically, but soon I was aware that some of the children were looking at me, so I stopped singing. When we sat

down, I suddenly felt a wave of terror that began in my stomach and ended up pouring out through my eyes in a profusion of tears. My body heaved and I couldn't utter a word. I cried inconsolably, unaware of what my teacher was saying or doing. I wanted my mother and I wanted to get out of that place, but I felt trapped, and the more that thought assaulted my brain, the more the tears flowed. Suddenly, the teacher was standing next to my desk. Taking me by the arm, she firmly led me from the room and out into the hot morning sun. Somehow, I got my wits about me in the outdoors, and the tearful flow began to subside. But before I could pull myself together, I felt a pain cut across the backs of my legs. When I abruptly turned around to see what caused it, I saw my once-smiling teacher, looking very grim indeed, spanking me! Caught between terror and surprise, I couldn't cry one more tear—I could feel my eyes opening wider and my tongue drying in my mouth. I simply tried to pull away from the woman, eyeing her reactions to my resistance, so that I could determine what to do next.

Fortunately, she struck me only a few times, but it was enough to bring me, unceremoniously, to the conclusion that this was a matter of survival. If I was going to survive in this school, I must learn to understand those strange words the teacher spoke. I spent the rest of that day in silence, carefully watching every move of the teacher and the other children so that I could just blend in. From time to time, I would run my hands over the backs of my legs. I wanted to cry, but I dared

not. Something worse might befall me.

I went home that evening with my brothers, but I didn't tell them anything about what had happened on my first day at an Adventist school. I certainly didn't tell my mother, because I feared her inevitable objections to my treatment would make matters worse for me. In the following weeks and months, I was alert to every move and every gesture so that I could relate them to words. I don't know when or how it happened first, but suddenly I understood English.

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*Mine was a church-centered world, governed by miracles of God and tearful, emotional, and even hair-raising testimonies of divine intervention, along with spiritual interpretations of all that happened to us.*

About this time, Mom thought we should leave the city and settle somewhere in the country. That first venture out of the asphalt jungle took us straight into a God-forsaken desert town, ironically called Green Acres, some 20 miles outside of Hemet, California. There my parents purchased a three-acre plot of land and applied themselves to building a house and setting up

a chicken farm. My city-raised artist father knew nothing about chicken farming, but he and Mom were determined to make our "country experiment" work. We learned about incubators for the chicks and collecting eggs at five o'clock in the morning and feeding chickens and cleaning out the chicken pen. Dad turned out to be an imaginative and capable builder. I remember to this day helping Mom put the tin roofing on the chicken barn.

My youngest brother, Raúl, was born in Hemet. Eventually he was old enough to help with the chores, especially when Tito went off to academy. I remember becoming "one of the guys" with my brothers and our neighbors,

Carl and Kenny. We all built a tree house at Carl's place and climbed the mountain behind Kenny's. We often found ourselves sitting under the shelter of the tunnel that ran under the highway, enjoying the cool sand and pretending we were explorers. Or, on a blistering hot afternoon, we might race for the cool shelter of "the grove," a cluster of eucalyptus trees where we'd eat the sandwiches our mothers had made for us.

After a difficult year at the Adventist school in Hemet, our parents, no longer able to afford our school bill nor the expenses involved with the long trip to Hemet, sent us to the local public school. Most, if not all, the children were farm kids, a pretty tough lot who didn't take too kindly to "foreigners" moving in on their territory. Nevertheless, my brothers and I made a place for ourselves and served our time there. I deeply hoped that we wouldn't have to stay another year at that school. Fortunately (for us), our parents' chicken farm was beginning to run into trouble. Daddy was forced to go back to his old job in Los Angeles, leaving Mom and us children to run what was left of the farm. By this time, we were no longer selling eggs, just chickens, until all three hundred were sold. We began to pack for the move; this time to La Sierra. Mom kept hoping that she'd be able to have all her children in the Adventist school again.

La Sierra, then a sparsely populated town at the foot of Two Bit Mountain, was the home of La Sierra College. My uncle Manuel, after being miraculously healed of tuberculosis in New York City, had come to La Sierra to study several years before. The mere mention of "La Sierra" conjured up visions of Shangri-la. Indeed, for weather-worn desert dwellers such as we, the manicured green lawns on that campus seemed every bit like our imaginings of the New Earth.

We moved into the lower level of a two-story house, the upper half of which was home to

Aunt Esther and Uncle Ramón and their three children. My cousin Gabe, their oldest son, and I became very close during those years as we walked back and forth to La Sierra Demonstration School. We were both entering the fourth grade, a prospect that predisposed me positively to the whole experience.

## Church School

When we first drove up to it, the elementary school seemed so handsome with its neatly clipped bushes, expansive lawns, and sleek buildings. Everything about it exuded order and cleanliness. Our teacher was Mrs. Demazo, a lovely, soft-spoken woman who immediately took to Gaby and me and helped us make the adjustment to our new school. I was pleased to see that I wouldn't be obliged to wear jeans to school every day as I had at the public school. I despised anything that reminded me of that desert school. But with every passing day, I became increasingly uncomfortable about the meticulously outfitted girls who came to class in different dresses and shoes every single day, or so it seemed. I saw the closet of one of these girls, with her 20 pairs of shoes in every conceivable color, lined neatly side by side along the floor of a closet full of dresses and carefully matched sweater-and-skirt sets. That was probably an extreme case, but thereafter I was in even greater fear of never fitting in.

It was not even their relative wealth that made me feel the most strangely out of place with these new classmates, many of them children of professionals. It was a sense that they and I belonged, inexorably, to two different worlds that could never meet. It seemed all right for us to be different. Mine was a church-centered world, governed by miracles of God and tearful, emotional, and even hair-raising testimonies of divine intervention, along with spiritual interpretations of all that happened to

us. Theirs was a neatly laid out, rational existence of Cadillacs and carefully starched blouses and almost painfully quiet, predictable church services. It seemed all right to me that “they” should like things as they did them. What made me feel uncomfortable was that somehow I was beginning to feel that our differences were a matter of right and wrong, rather than just differences. I remember wondering a lot during those years if, in fact, there was something wrong with the way we worshiped at the Spanish church, if there was something inherently below standard in the sight of God about being who we were and thinking the way we thought and even singing the way we sang. Such lusty bravado in our singing, such spontaneous and disorganized and notably noisy meetings we had. Was God happy with us Hispanics?

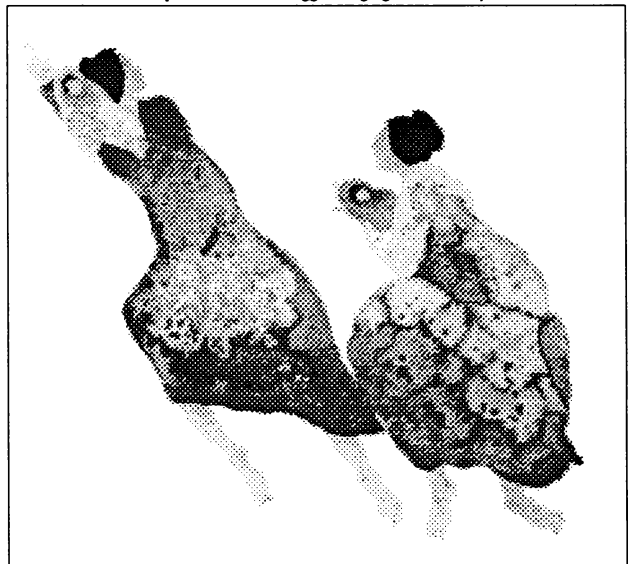
## Inner-City School

When I was due to enter the sixth grade, we left La Sierra and moved back to our old house on Folsom Street. My father was still eking out a living at the May Company downtown. The Adventist school had taken its toll on all of us, both emotionally and financially. So in a sense I was happy to return to public school. This time it was Malabar Street School, an “inner-city” school. My cousin Tilly, Uncle Frank’s eldest daughter, who had never moved away from the big house on Folsom Street, began to prepare me for the tough bunch that frequented our school. “Just try to stay out of their way and they won’t bother you,” she warned me one day about the Chicano girls who belonged to gangs. Not being one to look for trouble, I envisioned myself spending an uneventful year, but things were not to happen as I had planned.

On my first day of class, I walked into a classroom full of boisterous kids screaming at each other across the room and eyeing me

suspiciously as I made my way to an empty desk. Fortunately, I sat next to a pleasant Chicano girl named Marcela, and we struck up a friendship right then and there. She seemed relieved to meet another classmate willing to just sit and talk. “Have you heard about our new teacher?” she asked, looking for an answer in my puzzled expression. “No,” I replied. “They say she’s . . .” and before she could finish the sentence, the room fell into a sepulchral silence. A tall, very white-skinned woman with silver-blue hair entered the room and pulled some papers from the briefcase, set them on the desk, and then looked up. I’ll never forget her intense, but somehow cordial, grey eyes. “Please stand up!” she commanded. “When I enter the room, you will all stand up. I will always greet you when I enter the classroom, and you will answer, ‘Good morning, Miss Herries.’ Now will you repeat?” And the previously savage pack transformed into a meek little flock intoned in chorus, “Good morning, Miss Herries.” The silver-haired woman continued. “And when you answer me, you will say, ‘Yes, Miss Herries,’ or ‘No, Miss Herries.’ Is that clear?” The tamed flock again answered in chorus. Marcela and I found each other’s eyes and smiled. We knew we would love Miss Herries!

Adapted from Carol Griggs' "Singing Wind Lullaby"



As it turned out, Marcela and I became the top students in class, and as such, Miss Herries' favorites—not an enviable position to be in when one is trying to survive on the mean streets of the inner city. If Miss Herries needed anything, she would invariably ask Marcela or me. But some of my classmates were even more affronted when the music teacher, a beautiful blond with a light soprano voice, also took a liking to me. “You have a lovely voice, Lourdes. You must do something with it,” she said to me one day. And later, she invited me to play the autoharp while the rest of the children sang the all-American repertoire of “Oh! Susannah” and “I’ve Been Workin’ on the Railroad.”

The straw that broke the camel’s back was my being assigned to “hand out the pills.” I suppose someone had determined that I was among the well-fed because I never had to take any of those little vitamin pills that the others had to take. Once a week a table was set up in the corridor where the little pill packets were distributed. Again, Marcela and I were asked to distribute them, but María González (not her real name), whom I had noticed eyeing me with revenge written all over her face, was particularly unhappy that I was asked. “I’ll get you!” she seethed at me as I handed her a packet of pills one day. Marcela moved closer and whispered in my ear, “You better watch out for her. She’s in a gang.” Her words lingered menacingly in my ear: “She’s in a gang.”

## Showdown on the Playground

This was not my first encounter with María. Once when Tilly and I were playing handball on a Sunday, María showed up with her corpulent older sisters and challenged me to a fight. I said I was not interested. She began to descend the long flight of stairs from the top

of the embankment to the playground below where Tilly, quickly assessing the situation, ran for the playground director’s office. Meanwhile, I was left to face María by myself. She barreled down the last two steps toward me, but I was able to duck just as she lunged at me. When her sisters saw her sprawled on the other side of the bench, they laughed fiendishly. María, defeated this time and goaded by her sisters’ contempt, rose slowly to her feet and glared at me. “I’ll get you next time, just wait,” she said, her voice quivering with anger and her pride wounded every bit as much as her body.

Now María González was determined to have her revenge. I could picture my mother’s face as she knelt over the body of the one who in life had been her daughter! Cousin Tilly consoled me with a plan that both she and I knew wouldn’t work, but we laid it out anyway. We would take an alternate route home, and María would never find us. Meanwhile, the entire school had heard about María’s challenge to Lourdes Morales. When the day came and Tilly and I were on our “alternate route” home, we came around a corner to find the playground packed with hundreds of children. Seeing us, they shouted and hooted, prompting us for the kill. Somewhere in that vast throng of screaming spectators was María González, and I knew I must face her. But I had determined that I would not fight. I knew I wouldn’t have a ghost of a chance against her if her older sisters suddenly appeared or if she decided to use some instrument like a chain or knife. I had prayed the night before that God should spare my life. With that thought, I took a deep breath and started across the playground.

I could hear the kids jeering at me, but I didn’t dare look to either side. I just walked straight ahead. Suddenly I heard her voice behind me. Tilly was right next to me, holding my arm. “Turn around, you chicken!” María spat out the words and with them came a

painful jab to my right shoulder blade. I kept silent and kept walking. María was unnerved for a moment, not expecting me to ignore her. Next came a deluge of language that is not worth remembering, and another vengeful jab to the same shoulder. My head began to feel light, but with Tilly's help, I was able to keep walking. Then I heard myself say in a calm but firm voice, "María, I'm not going to fight you." I never stopped walking, heading straight for the gate that led to the street and home. The bloodthirsty crowd broke out in hollers and laughter. María, unable to get me to turn around, suddenly disappeared into the crowd. Tilly turned around to see the waves of children receding and the enemy gone. When the crowd was out of sight, we ran home for all we were worth.

I knew this wouldn't be the last I'd see of María, but God provided me with a guardian angel in the form of Deborah. Deborah was a tall, wiry black girl with a reputation for being the toughest kid at school. Some days after the "fight," to my horror, Deborah approached the tetherball pole where I was playing by myself. "Let's play," she said, dryly. When I beat her two out of three games, she turned and said, "You're pretty good!" and flashed an unforgettable smile. I countered with a grateful "Thanks." "Anybody bother you, you just tell 'em to see me," and she walked away. Never again during that entire school year did I have any trouble with anybody.

By this time, Mom knew about the "fight" with María, and she was now more determined than ever to go back to La Sierra and make a go of it. She was determined to move to a good neighborhood—the best—near the college where Tito was to begin his pre-medical studies (which he never finished, due to illness). My father told her she was crazy to dream that we could ever live in a nice house in a nice neighborhood. Furthermore, he had no intentions of leaving his job.

Despite the obvious obstacles, Mom hopped

into our old Pontiac one day and headed for La Sierra. When she returned that night, she gathered all of us in the living room and announced that we would be moving back to La Sierra—to a new house on the "good" side of the college. My father's mouth fell open and we all mouthed the words to each other: "New house." "But Carmen," my father started to object.

"Never mind," she said. "I already put a down payment of \$25 on it, and we are moving!" How my mother succeeded in persuading the real estate agent to accept a mere \$25 down payment is still a mystery, but with it the Morales family moved back to suburbia.

The "new" house we bought was quite run down, but we were determined to make something of it. It was one block from the college, across an empty field, in a very reputable section of town. My brothers and I dreaded the return to the grade school a little less because we were now living on the "right" side of the tracks. But our move really didn't change our school lives much, except that we were relieved to be away from the city and pleased to have many wonderful teachers.

## A Place to Survive

My church life at this juncture became critical to my psychological survival. Mom became choir director at the Corona Spanish Church, and my brothers and I were her lead tenor, bass, and soprano. Eventually Raúl began attending the English-speaking church in La Sierra with most of his school friends.

How I loved my church! We were always among the first to arrive, because Mom also taught a Sabbath school class, and my brother and I played piano and organ for everything from Sabbath school song service to the postlude. There were so many activities for us. Around Ingathering season, the youth group would hop on the back of a pickup and go

from house to house singing and collecting noisy coins in tin-bottomed cans. Then there'd be the occasional socials and visits to the local A&W root beer stand. Our choir became one of the best among the Spanish-speaking churches, so we had many opportunities to travel and perform. I came to dearly love those Spanish folk at the Corona Spanish Church.

There was Sister Serra, whose lusty singing dominated the congregation. Her daughter, Esther, a coloratura soprano, had one of the most beautiful voices I've heard before or since. I always assumed Mrs. Serra would have been an opera singer had she been given the chance. Then there was Brother Martínez. He sang in our bass section for a while, but I remember him most for his intense religious life. He came from a large Mexican-American family who had become Adventists in New Mexico. I was always amazed at how deeply Brother Martinez's faith had seeped into his life. His eldest son, Eloy, another of our choir members, eventually became a pastor and a General Conference officer.

There were Wednesday night prayer meetings, a time of testimonies and heartfelt prayers. Lydia and Ovidio Rivera, Mother's friends since her New York City days, would often accompany us to these meetings. Though I was just a teenager, I loved these times with the older church members. They seemed to have something that I began to desire, somewhere deep in the inner recesses of my soul—a simple, untrammled, and implicit faith in God that saw them through their daily struggles. I knew most of them lived with a lot less than we had, and we were struggling. Yet they came to church and testified of their gratitude to God for all their blessings! A lot of tears accompanied those testimonies, in which the heart was often poured out in a mixture of pain and thankfulness.

Around this time, Mom started going to Hemet to continue the work she'd started among the Spanish-speakers there. She visited the Cortez family, and Ralph and I would go along to listen to the study and sing for Sister Cortez. I never learned her first name; she was always "Hermana Cortez" to me, a saintly woman who, despite her husband's opposition, embraced the Adventist faith and became a pillar in the fledgling desert church. When she was baptized, more people joined the small group. They were all women: Columbia Ortiz, our neighbor in Green Acres and an incomparable storyteller; Hilda Razo, Hermana Cortez's niece; Emma González, who was later killed when her drunken husband drove head-on into an oncoming truck; the beautiful María Maduenas and her six children; the sisters Elvira and Romelia, who later brought their husbands; the energetic Severa Lopéz, who became an active Bible worker in Hemet; and the courageous Guillermina Cossío, who succeeded—no one knows how, with her limited income—in financing two of her children through Adventist academy.

My struggles in La Sierra seemed paltry compared to those of these women. To this day, I believe the Lord led us to them for a reason, beyond their salvation. Our Sabbath excursions into the barren lives of these women somehow worked to place my whole life into perspective. If there was anything my mother gave me that mattered, it was the opportunity to see how a Christian can tenderly but firmly break into the routine of people's daily lives and call them to higher ground and to a higher dignity.

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