

Guadalupe Quintanilla: Defying the Odds

By Adriana Castro

At twelve years old, Guadalupe Quintanilla moved from Mexico to Brownsville, Texas. When her grandmother took her to enroll in school, she was required to take an aptitude test and scored very poorly, so the school classified her as “retarded” or a “slow learner.” The reason she received such a low score had nothing to do with her intelligence; rather it was because the test was administered in English, and she only knew Spanish. Quintanilla was placed in the first grade but soon dropped out. Perhaps surprising to some, many years later, this seemingly “slow learner” went on to obtain a doctorate degree, become an administrator and professor at the University of Houston, develop and implement the Cross Cultural Communication Program with the Houston Police Department, receive presidential appointments to the United Nations, and be elected to the Hispanic National Hall of Fame. This is the story of how a first grade drop-out became an outstanding and influential figure in Houston and the United States.

Guadalupe Quintanilla was born Maria Guadalupe Campos on October 25, 1937, in the small town of Ojinaga,

Chihuahua, Mexico. She does not remember Ojinaga because, when she was eighteen months old, her parents divorced and she went to live with her grandparents in Nogales, Sonora, Mexico. She recalls, “Living with my grandparents was very nice. Grandma sewed me beautiful clothes and made me dolls from scraps of cloth.” After a few years they moved to San Luis Pedro, Guerrero, to be with her grandparents’ eldest son, Quintanilla’s Uncle Chalio, who had just become a doctor and told his parents that he would take care of them. In Mexico it is customary for doctors to pay back the cost of their training by working for the government for one year, so Chalio was sent to San Luis Pedro, where, Quintanilla says, “There was no school, there was no water...we had to get it from the river, there was no electricity, there were no roads.”¹ Since she could not go to school there, her grandfather taught her how to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. Quintanilla helped her uncle by being his “nurse.” She practiced giving injections on an orange and cleaned his medical instruments.

The family moved to Matamoros, Mexico, where her

Dr. Quintanilla teaching a class at the Houston Police Academy.

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Quintanilla sits with her grandmother who raised her and taught her to do household work. Photo courtesy of Dr. Guadalupe Quintanilla.

uncle opened a doctor's office. Soon after, her grandfather began to go blind, so the family moved to Brownsville, Texas, where they hoped to find doctors who could help him. In Brownsville, Quintanilla's grandmother took her to enroll in school where she was given an IQ test. She recalls, "When I looked at the paper, I could tell that it was some kind of a test. But it was not like any test I had ever seen. There were many shapes—squares and circles and triangles. There were sentences with words missing in the middle. There were questions with numbers. And I couldn't read a single word of it. Why not? The test was in English. I spoke only Spanish. I did the best I could. I figured out some of the math problems. I guessed at the meaning of some words. But I left most of the answers blank. I turned the paper in, feeling very confused. What kind of test was this? How was I supposed to understand?"²

As one can imagine, she scored very poorly and the school labeled her as incapable of succeeding in the classroom. She adds, "You know the sad thing is that I believed it. The sad thing is not that the system decided that I was retarded, it's that I believed it."³ The school put her, a twelve-year-old, in the first grade. She did not spend her classroom time learning, however; instead, the teacher used her as an assistant, taking children to the bathroom, putting up posters, and cutting pieces of paper.

One day as Quintanilla waited for the teacher to bring the children back from recess, she heard a man's voice say, "Donde esta la oficina del principal?" ("Where is the principal's office?") She felt so happy to hear someone speaking to her in her native language that she answered his question and began talking to him in Spanish. Just at that moment the teacher grabbed Quintanilla's arm and took her to the

principal's office. "They both yelled at me a lot in English. I didn't understand anything they were telling me but I was seeing their body language." She felt so humiliated that she did not want to go back to school and cried until she convinced her grandfather to let her quit school. Thus, Quintanilla became a first grade drop-out at the age of thirteen.⁴

Quintanilla's grandmother decided to teach her everything she needed to know to be a good wife and mother. She taught her how to do household work, like cleaning and cooking. At sixteen years old she married Cayetano Quintanilla, a dental technician. By age twenty-one, she already had three children: Victor, Mario, and Martha. She was content, explaining, "I thought that life was perfect, that that was the way life was. I didn't drive, I didn't speak English... He [her husband] would bring everything that was needed. I would only go out with him and the children and I thought that was life, the way it was supposed to be, until my children started going to school."⁵

When Victor and Mario began bringing home bad grades on their report cards, Quintanilla became worried. The school system in Brownsville divided children into two categories: Red Birds and Yellow Birds. Red Birds were the students the teachers considered smart and capable of going to college. Yellow Birds were the students the teachers consid-



Quintanilla always made her family her top priority. Her children's need to learn English to succeed in school pushed her to learn English herself. Here she is with her three children, Victor, Mario, and Martha, and her husband, Cayetano.

Photo courtesy of Dr. Guadalupe Quintanilla.

ered slow and unable to learn. Quintanilla's children were placed with the Yellow Birds. This confused her because she knew how smart her children were. At home, they easily learned everything she taught them, but she hesitated to approach the teachers to find out why they had been labeled as slow. In Mexico, it is considered disrespectful to question a teacher because he or she is considered the child's "second parent." Teachers know best and Quintanilla thought, "Who am I to question a teacher?"⁶

Finally she gathered her courage, thought of her love for her children, and went to talk to the teachers. When she walked into the classroom she immediately noticed that all of the children in the Yellow Birds group were Hispanic, while all of the Red Birds were white. "I thought, well this doesn't make any sense. My children can be slow learners because of me, but what about the other children?" She asked the teacher why the classroom was arranged in this way; why were all of the Yellow Birds Hispanic? The teacher responded, "That's just the way it is."⁷ That answer was not acceptable to Quintanilla, who later learned it was because the children did not know English. Determined to get her children out of the Yellow Birds, she had to learn English herself.

Quintanilla first tried to get help learning English at the hospital near her house, where she also volunteered. She asked if she could sit in on some nursing classes to learn a few words and was immediately turned down because she did not have a high school diploma. Then Quintanilla tried a telephone company that was hiring telephone operators. Although she did not really want to be an operator, she thought that if she got the job, she could begin to learn English. But she was rejected again because she lacked a diploma. She then attempted to return to high school, but the counselor said that the school could not accept her because its records stated that Quintanilla was "mentally retarded." Admitting her meant she would occupy a chair that someone else—someone who could learn—could use. She left dejected and in tears. She explains, "You get to the point where there's one time in your life...that you feel like the whole world has come down on you and you don't know what to do. You cannot go over the obstacle, you cannot go under the obstacle, you cannot go on the sides. You don't know what to do and I felt that way."⁸

The next day, after she had sent her husband to work, her children to school, and made breakfast for her grandparents, she returned to the school where someone suggested she go to the community college. Quintanilla took the bus to Texas Southmost College and asked if she could sit in a class and listen. Again, she was turned down because she did not have a diploma. "So I left. I went home and I started thinking, 'What do I do? What do I do?'" and then I learned that in this world, if you want to succeed, you have to be persistent. You cannot give up. If you want something for you or somebody you love and you know that it's right, you cannot give up. You have to do it."⁹

With determination and persistence, Quintanilla returned the next day and, instead of going to the office, asked the first Spanish-speaking student she saw, "Who makes the decisions in this place?" and he told her, "The registrar." She found the registrar's parking spot and sat on top of his

car, waiting. Knowing the office secretary would not let her through to see him, she waited by the car for two hours.¹⁰ Imagine the registrar's surprise when he found Quintanilla sitting on top of his car. She told him she wanted to learn English to help her children but the school would not let her. The registrar took her to his office and accepted Quintanilla to the college on an individual approval basis. He enrolled her in four college classes but warned her, "If you don't make it, don't bother me again."¹¹ With those encouraging words, she got to work right away.

Quintanilla was the oldest among the college students. Since she had never attended college before, everything was new and unfamiliar, even how to operate the water fountains. She juggled her responsibilities as a housewife and a student, "Every day I woke up and got my husband and children off to work and to school. Then I took the bus to college. I came home to make lunch for my husband and grandparents. Then I returned to college. I got home in time to meet Victor, Mario, and Martha when they arrived from school. In the evenings I cooked and cleaned and did laundry and put the children to bed. Then I would study, often until three o'clock in the morning." She had a hard time with algebra but got help from other students. In her words, she "learned to learn."¹² Despite the many challenges, she made the honor roll every semester.



The Cross Cultural Communication graduations included folclorico dances. MSS1394-0138 EWM.



Dr. Quintanilla involved community members in her program in a variety of ways. Here, a member of the community helps to hand out certificates to the graduating police officers.

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Quintanilla's achievements set an example for her children. She began to speak English around the house and eventually she and her children became comfortable with the language. To her delight, her children's grades greatly improved and they all became Red Birds. After finishing her four classes, Quintanilla enrolled in more. In 1969 after only three years, she graduated with honors from Pan American University, earning a bachelor's of science degree with honors in biology.

Quintanilla moved to Houston in 1970 because Brownsville had few opportunities. Houston had universities where she could earn advanced degrees, but she also thought, "If my children want to be doctors and lawyers, we need to go to Houston." Quintanilla attended the University of Houston where she received her master's degree in 1971 and her doctorate of education five years later. She started working at the University of Houston as a grader but soon became a teacher and later an administrator. She was the first director of the newly established Mexican American Studies Program and the first Hispanic woman hired in that position.¹³

In 1977 tragedy struck Houston's Hispanic community when twenty-three-year-old Vietnam War veteran Joe Campos Torres died at the hands of police. Police officers arrested Torres at a bar for disorderly conduct and beat him while in custody. When they arrived at headquarters, the officers were told to take Torres to the hospital to be treated for his injuries, but they took him to the banks of Buffalo Bayou instead. It is not certain whether they pushed him into the water or he jumped, but Torres's body was found days later in the bayou. The police officers involved received a minor punishment, which angered the Hispanic community. At the one-year anniversary of his death, a riot broke out in Moody Park when police responded to reports of a fight during a Cinco de Mayo celebration.¹⁴

Quintanilla felt deeply disturbed by this event. She also read a newspaper article about a fire in Chicago where seven people had burned to death even though they had a way to escape the burning building. She describes the confusion between the victims and the people on the ground, "They were on the third floor in the building screaming to the bottom, and the people on the bottom were telling them how to get out in English. The people up there did not understand English, and the people down here did not speak Spanish. So the seven people in this family burned to death [when] there was a way out."¹⁵ This story, along with Torres's death touched Quintanilla's heart. She did not want something like the Chicago family's deaths to happen in Houston, but she also knew that to avoid such a tragedy the Houston Police Department (HPD) and the Houston Hispanic community needed to understand each other. This prompted her to start a program to bridge their communication gap in 1978.

Quintanilla got together with Ripley House director Felix Fraga and assistant police chief John Bales and they developed the Cross Cultural Communication Program. The program consisted of Dr. Quintanilla teaching Spanish language classes to police officers at Ripley House. HPD agreed to pay five dollars for each officer who took the course. Upon completion, graduation ceremonies and a fiesta were held with food and folkloric dances.

Quintanilla's main focus was teaching the officers "community relations" through the Spanish language. She not only taught the officers police vocabulary, such as sayings that alert the officers of danger, but she also provided the officers with important cultural information. Quintanilla explains how she helped clear up misunderstandings between the officers and Hispanics. She told the officers, "You tell me that most Mexicans are liars, but frequently they may be giving you the right answer to a wrong ques-

tion. You pick up a man whom we'll call Juan Gomez Perez. You ask him, "What's your name?" He says, 'Juan.' 'No,' you say, 'your last name.' He answers, 'Perez.' He's honest. But what you really wanted was his surname, which is Gomez. The computer gives you nothing about a Juan Perez, whom you know by sight and know has been picked up for driving without a license. 'He lied,' you say. But he didn't."¹⁶

Quintanilla taught the officers the differences between Hispanic and American cultures that could cause misunderstandings between Hispanics and the officers. While teaching, she started to bring her children to talk to the officers and, thereafter, volunteers from the University of Houston and the community. The program became a success in improving community relations as "people [in the Hispanic community] started knowing the officers as people with children."¹⁷

The program did not always progress smoothly. At the start, the police department wanted the classes to take place in the police academy, but Quintanilla insisted that they take place in Ripley House, the community center. She explains, "I wanted the officers to come out to the community and I wanted them to see the community. I wanted them to meet the people because officers meet people, Hispanics and Chinese and Blacks, when they're in trouble or causing trouble. They don't meet them as friends... they don't meet them as family members... I wanted them to experience the community."¹⁸

Getting the Hispanic community to accept the officers also presented challenges. Quintanilla recalls a confrontation she had with the Brown Berets, a pro-Chicano movement organization. One day she arrived at Ripley House and found the Brown Berets waiting for her, angry that she was helping the police department. "They were angry at me that how dare I, who was such an icon in the community with a strong reputation...and everybody knew who I was, how come I was supporting the pigs [police officers]? They were very angry at me, the Brown Berets. And I told them (you know, my legs were weak), and I said, 'You know what? We don't want you in the community. You need to get out of here.' And the police



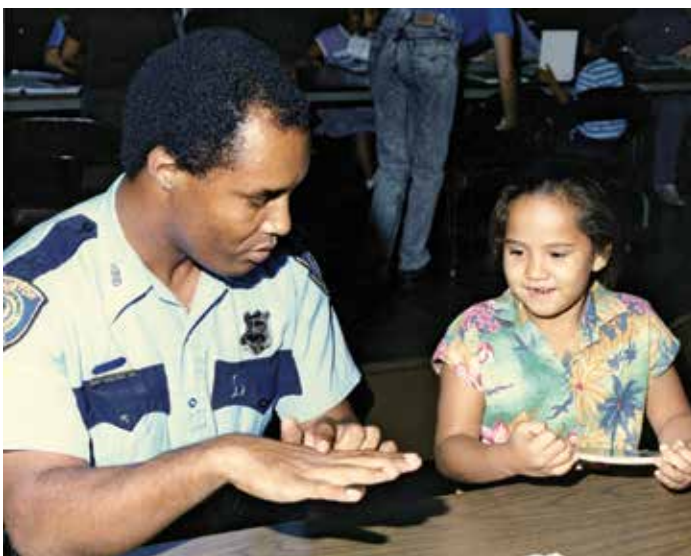
As Dr. Quintanilla's program gathered attention from around the country, she was invited to teach outside of Houston. Here, Dr. Quintanilla teaches a class in Indiana. MSS1394-222 EWM.

officers were inside the building and they were studying and they didn't know what was happening to me outside... and I walked into the building and then I dropped. I was so scared."¹⁹ Worried that her life was in danger because she was working with the police department, HPD gave Quintanilla protection after this incident.

The Cross Cultural Communication Program received national recognition from the Department of Defense and the Department of Justice, which named it the best of its kind in the United States. Quintanilla was even invited to train the security forces for the Pan American Games in 1987. The program also attracted the attention of the FBI Academy, as they saw its value. The Department of Defense asked her to make films on subjects such as communication between cultures and Hispanic body language.²⁰

In 1983 President Ronald Reagan appointed Quintanilla as co-chairperson of the National Institute of Justice. The next year she received a presidential appointment to become the first Hispanic U.S. representative to the United Nations and to serve as a UN international correspondent. She was elected to the National Hispanic Hall of Fame in 1987 and received the *La Raza* award in 1989. Now, the first grade drop-out works as an associate professor in the Department of Hispanic Studies at the University of Houston. As for her children who were classified as "slow learners," Victor is a lawyer practicing in San Antonio, Mario is a doctor who opened his own clinic in Houston, and Martha is also a lawyer, working in Dallas.²¹ Quintanilla's story of defying the odds proves how wrong we can be when we judge based on culture or language. Houston is fortunate to have such an iconic figure who remained true to herself and did not allow labels to define her or her children.

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This little girl from the community helps teach an officer basic Spanish words like family members and colors. MSS1394-0142 EWM