

“Pasando la Antorcha para Compartir Nuestros Cuentos— Passing the Torch by Sharing Our Stories”

By Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™

A tear escaped her eye, hesitated in a laugh line above her cheek, then found its way home inside the corner of her mouth, which had blossomed into a broad smile. Mamá was on a roll. She had a captive audience: my cousins, my sister and me. We hung on her every word, as her melodic voice tickled our senses and nurtured our young souls. Mamá was painting the story of *Médico Pollito*, the naughty half-chick who now was trapped in a pot of boiling water, with no one willing to assist him. If only he had been more helpful, we thought! Mamá beamed as she searched the eyes of her spellbound grandchildren. By sharing stories from our culture with us, Mamá knew she was making a difference in our lives; and she was confident that when this storytelling was over, we would jump up and do something helpful, like set the table for supper. And we did.

Being Cuban-American has meant a bounty of good fortune and positive experiences. My maiden name is *del Castillo*, meaning “of the castle” (from somewhere in España). My immediate family was born and raised in Cuba; their ancestors having emigrated from Spain in the mid 1700’s. By 1940, most of my father’s family left Cuba for the United States, making new lives for themselves in greater Philadelphia.

In the del Castillo family, there has always been a strong tradition of conveying the history of our family and culture through the power of the spoken word, a tradition I am proud to continue. Much of what I know about my heritage and culture came to me orally from Mamá, as well as from my father and his sister, my Aunt Lilia. Our family consists of amateur oral historians who savor and appreciate the importance of sustaining an unbroken line of family storytelling.

My Mamá was born *Balbina Pura Capote del Castillo y Quiñones* in Palmira, Cuba, in 1886. She was my paternal grandmother, but the only name I ever called her was Mamá (not *abuelita*, grandmother). Always the excellent student, she had a thirst for language, reading, writing, teaching and the humanities. Mamá was filled with unconditional love for everyone and everything and had a sense of humor which could lighten up any situation and fill any room with joy. All this wrapped up in a 4’10” bundle of energy, no wonder most people who knew her called her Mamá. When she had children of her own, Mamá passionately shared her knowledge and love of storytelling with them.

What I remember most about Mamá was that she taught us to be good human beings, not only by example, but by story. She freely used folk tales, stories and personal anecdotes to teach life lessons, cooperation, fairness, accomplishments, culture, overcoming adversity, and the importance of *la familia*. Sometimes she would sing a little song or recite a poem to make a point. In many ways, Mamá believed in passing the torch (*pasando la antorcha*) to other family members to help preserve our history and traditions (like a cultural continuum). In some ways, my father picked up this torch Mamá had passed by sharing the family’s oral history in anecdotes and *dichos* (sayings). Aunt Lilia, like her mother, was a natural storyteller who enjoyed telling longer stories.

At family gatherings, after *la comida* (dinner), and before a little *postre* (dessert), everyone moved to the living room, where entertainment and storytelling would commence. Often the cousins, myself included, were asked to sing a song or tell a story, followed by one of the grownups, who picked up the torch and regaled the group with a family story or tale about the struggles some relatives unable to leave Cuba were having. Everything from personal to political. However, Mamá wouldn't tolerate lengthy heated discussions which might ruin a fun evening, so my Aunt Lilia usually took over. Aunt Lilia's specialty was telling the family stories. Her favorite subject, to the delight of the relatives, was Mamá. No gathering was complete without a story about Mamá, one which was true and ended in uproarious laughter by the crowd. For years, I never heard the ending to Aunt Lilia's version of "*El Oso*," a story about Mamá and a bear on the loose, because every time she tried to tell it, the ending got lost in laughter. Eventually, before sharing it myself, I had to finish the tale.

My love of telling Hispanic/Latino stories stems from a desire to encourage audiences to try something new or different. Like tasting a new food: perhaps a sampling of something they haven't tasted before. It may not be a full immersion in the Latino culture, just a taste to savor; but once having tried it and enjoyed it, hopefully, they will want to come back for more ("¡Ay, *que sabrosa!*—Oh, how delicious!").

Stories (*los cuentos*) bridge the cultural gap and connect us all. They are *un hilo común*—the common thread that brings us all together and binds us as human beings, on common ground. We are not so different. We may have very similar values, goals, and aspirations. Quite often, we are simply separated by language. In stories, I frequently use English and Spanish words with similar sounds to help ease this language barrier (i.e., practicing/*practicando*; family/*familia*; problem/*problema*; perfectly/*perfecto*, etc.).

By introducing the Latino culture to a non-Latino audience, a different perspective into the Hispanic/Latino culture is presented. I write/perform stories and adapt folk tales which are uplifting and demonstrate the Latino people's desire to embrace life to its fullest, while at the same time, reflecting their sense of pride, hard work, ethics, deep love of family ties and tremendous sense of humor. Latinos are not afraid to laugh at their human frailties! They are inclusive, friendly and generous, ready to meet and share of themselves with new people. My sharing of the Latino culture is an interactive experience. Audiences are invited to participate in singing and telling the story, while learning some of the language and/or reinforcing what they already know. Celebrating diversity in a positive way gives non-Latino audiences an insight into a culture that may be foreign to them.

It is most important for me to continue working with Latino children because I want to be a positive role model, inspiring them to work hard in school and desire to read as much as possible. Through performances, I seek to excite students about oral literature and reading and fire their creativity and imagination. Through residency work, students' self-esteem is strengthened and self-expression enhanced through solo exploration and ensemble collaboration while learning the fundamentals of storytelling and performing arts. As an added result, students learn new methods of problem solving, communication, and decision making. My goal is to challenge Latino youth not to accept the status quo, but to reach for the stars—to be proud of who they are and what they can accomplish in this world.

Recently I performed bilingual Hispanic/Latino folk tales and original stories to a family audience at Concilio Hispano in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The following week, in an effort

to foster reading and storytelling in the home, I returned to teach the adult participants basic skills. But when I arrived for the workshop, the room was filled with entire families eager to hear *mas cuentos* (more stories). Apparently, word had spread throughout the community that *una cuentista* (a storyteller) was in town. All the adults who had signed up for the workshop returned with their children and extended families. So we had another performance, one with an abundance of participation teaching them the basic skills to share their own stories.

I embrace the fact that I grew up in a story-rich family and community. Rich Latino stories keep our traditions, history, culture, ancestors, language, music, uniqueness, contributions and values alive. As a storyteller and educator, I have picked up Mamá's torch of our cultural continuum and proudly pass that torch to listeners across the globe. It is my hope to continue growing and learning as a representative of my culture and, with others, help influence the direction Latino storytelling takes in the future. Every opportunity to share a little taste of Latino culture and listen to—and learn from—stories of other Latinos is always welcome. *¡Pasando la antorcha!*



Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™, an internationally acclaimed storyteller of Cuban/Spanish descent, writes and performs uplifting tales demonstrating the Latino people's desire to fully embrace life. Known for animated, interactive performances, Leeny shares stories wherever she travels, encouraging listeners to rejoice in cultural diversity. Massachusetts Cultural Council has funded several of Leeny's acclaimed inner-city youth storytelling residencies. Leeny is actively working with other Latino tellers to establish a national Latino storytelling organization.

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