

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

By Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™

[This family storytelling article is published on Parents' Choice Foundation's web site, under "Doing & Learning" [www.parents-choice.org/editorials.cfm](http://www.parents-choice.org/editorials.cfm)]

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.

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 from stories Mamá told, as well as those 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 how she taught us to be good human beings—not only by example, but through the stories she told. 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. Mamá believed in passing the torch (*pasando la antorcha*), through stories, 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 personal story relating a short experience, 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. We all knew 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. "*The Smile*" was Aunt Lilia's retelling of the time a dentist gave Mamá a new set of false teeth that were too big for her mouth and created a problem. 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.

It didn't matter to us if Aunt Lilia's stories didn't have precise endings. What mattered was that she shared these wonderful experiences, allowing us to live the stories again and again at family gatherings. It gave us the opportunity to learn something about our family and its history. A family story doesn't need to be "a perfect story" with a clear-cut beginning, middle and ending. It can be an anecdote, a short account of an interesting, unusual or humorous experience (i.e., something that happened to someone at some point in his/her life). Uncovering these little gems of family stories can be as simple as family members relating their recollections of a favorite birthday or holiday celebration, the birth of a family member, a first day of school, a first date, or a first driving experience. It's the oral sharing of these experiences which keep family traditions and history alive—and oh how rewarding it can be.

My love of telling Hispanic/Latino stories—especially my rich family 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 or family storytelling, 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!"). Above all, I hope to inspire audiences to share their stories with their loved ones and appreciate the power of family storytelling first-hand.

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.).

I embrace the fact that I grew up in a story-rich family and community. Rich family 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. I welcome

every opportunity to share a little taste of my family's stories—and to encourage others to do the same. *¡Pasando la antorcha!*



**Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™**, an award-winning, 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 human and cultural diversity. Leeny has won both a Parents' Choice Gold Award and a Silver Honor.

© 2002 Leeny Del Seamonds. For reprint permission or to contact:

**Leeny Del Seamonds, Master Story Performer™, Box 1268, Westford, MA 01886; 978-692-3961; [www.LeenyDelSeamonds.com](http://www.LeenyDelSeamonds.com)**