

Elizabeth Garcia

By Hannah McIntyre

Elizabeth Garcia, who stayed home and worked while her husband was away serving in World War II, feels that the best career she can have is helping others.

Mrs. Garcia has spent her life working to take care of other people. Born Elizabeth Ruiz, she and her seven siblings grew up in Austin. Both her parents were from Mexico, her mother from Monterrey and her father from Jalisco. The family spoke Spanish all the time.

Mrs. Garcia and all of her sisters and brothers went to Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic School in East Austin. Here they went to Mass every morning, as well as Sunday, and learned to speak English.

"The sisters, for us to improve our English, they used to punish us in recess time if they heard us speaking Spanish. They would put us in time-out."

In time-out the nuns would keep them from going outside, or would forbid them to speak to other students for the duration of recess. At home, however, Mrs. Garcia's parents encouraged the children to speak Spanish by consistently correcting their grammar.

Religion was a guiding force from which her mother and father raised Mrs. Garcia and her siblings, she says.

Mrs. Garcia grew up in a neighborhood in east Austin on East Third St. in a mostly Hispanic community. Religion played a very large part of her life. Along with her seven sisters and brothers, she participated in youth and entertainment groups with her church.

Mrs. Garcia's family was close-knit: every night they would sit at a table and eat a meal together that often consisted of meat, rice, and beans. Every birthday was a celebration. Her mother would make a piñata by wrapping newspaper around an empty oatmeal box and then covering it with crepe paper that she had cut into strips. She would then cut streamers to hang down from the bottom and fill it with candy. After about two to three hours of work she would hang the piñata with a piece of wire, dangling it so that kids could hit it and break it open. She would also make a two or three layered pound cake and a big dinner of chicken and molé (a spicy, thick gravy), rice, potato salad and beans. Aunts and uncles would come join the family and all would celebrate.

Each year on September 16, Mexican Independence Day, Mrs. Garcia's father would get a holiday from work and the family would spend the day together. Her mother would make the girls new dresses and her father would rent a car for the day to drive three miles to the festivities. The family would meet with friends to watch the singing and dancing at the different booths at Zaragoza Park.

Mr. Garcia

In 1944, she was introduced to Willie Garcia by a friend of hers. Mr. Garcia was a Marfa, Texas native stationed at Camp Swift. They dated for about three months. Two days before Mr. Garcia was to be sent overseas for military duty, he asked Mrs. Garcia if she would marry him. Initially Mrs. Garcia said that she would rather wait, but when he persisted, she agreed. She said that Mr. Garcia was afraid that if they waited to get married, she would marry someone else.

Mrs. Garcia's mother sent her to pick out a white dress for the wedding, and the two were married by her Catholic priest in Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. All of her uncles, aunts and godparents attended the ceremony. Afterward, Mrs. Garcia's mother arranged a big party with musicians and an orchestra and everyone danced. "It was very nice," she said.

After the party, Mr. Garcia returned to the base at Camp Swift. The next morning he flew to New York where he would stay until he was shipped overseas. He was stationed in North Africa and Italy before he returned to Austin.

The War's Toll on the Garcias

While Mr. Garcia was overseas, Mrs. Garcia lived with her mother and father and worked at a cleaners. Mrs. Garcia said that her mother believed that once a girl was married, she did not need to go out with friends any longer. So instead of going out with friends Mrs. Garcia stayed at home with her parents and saved the \$15 a week that she made.

The war took its toll on Willie Garcia: only six months after he was sent overseas, Mr. Garcia returned from the war "100% disabled," suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome, also known as shell shock. Mr. Garcia had been stationed where the battles were in North Africa and Italy. His job had been to take ammunition at night by train to the men on the front lines. He was then supposed to rest during the day. However, because of the war going on, Mr. Garcia always had trouble sleeping. Once he returned home, the trouble continued. He would hear train

whistles coming in his head. He would imagine that the environment he had left overseas was still surrounding him.

"The stress was so bad he couldn't eat, he couldn't walk, he used to scratch himself [on the face and arms] and he used to hear voices," Mrs. Garcia said. He stayed in the hospital for an entire year before Mrs. Garcia was able to bring him home.

When Mr. Garcia was discharged, Mrs. Garcia took him home, but was advised by the doctors not to live by herself with him because the doctors were afraid he would get violent. The two lived with her parents for five years. Mrs. Garcia said that Mr. Garcia never had a violent attack. Mr. and Mrs. Garcia used the money they received from the government to help her parents pay bills.

After five years, the couple moved into a home they built and Mr. Garcia began working as a tailor at Joseph's Men's Wear, a store that sold suits for men. They did not have a car, so they rode the bus to and from wherever they needed to go.

Mrs. Garcia said that life with Mr. Garcia was different for her after he returned. She said that he was not himself. She had to learn to be very patient and to understand that he was not the same person she had known before the war.

Adjusting to Life After the War

After the couple moved to south Austin, they got very involved with San José Church. They also began fostering children who needed a home. They fostered four children before they decided that they wanted a baby of their own. Mrs. Garcia said that she wanted a big family very much. However, because of the electric shock treatments Mr. Garcia received in hospital, the Garcia's were unable to have children of their own. They then decided to adopt two girls. The Garcias dedicated their lives to raising them.

Mrs. Garcia says that she has worked hard to give Ann Marie and Elizabeth, her two adopted girls, the life that she did not have growing up. As far as material things, her daughters got cars when they were seniors in high school.

She laughs when she describes how she had to remind them, when they continuously asked for presents, that she could not give them everything.

"I used to tease them [and] say... 'What [do] you think I have... a pot full of gold under the floor?' she recalls.

Mrs. Garcia made sure that her girls never had to do the cooking and cleaning that she and her sisters had to do. She felt that her parents pushed her sisters and her to do chores that took all day to complete. Mrs. Garcia said that she had to sneak out in order not to have to wash dishes all day long. Looking back on this, she decided that she wanted her daughters to be able to avoid this unpleasant experience. She said she felt they would learn to take care of cooking and cleaning eventually. She did not feel it was necessary to push them to do it while they were young.

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They go to Mass six days a week and help out with the Eucharistic services by distributing Holy Communion. They also watch after an 85-year-old woman by taking her to doctor appointments, to the store, and helping her watch after her two children, one of whom is mentally disabled.

Her daughters, Ann Marie and Elizabeth, now both work for Motorola. Right now, Ann Marie and her two children are living with the Garcias while they are in the process of buying a home.

Mr. and Mrs. Garcia are also in the process of moving. They are thinking of building a home on the six acres of land they own in Blanco, which is 52 miles southwest of Austin. As Mrs. Garcia sees it, this is just one more chapter to add in their book of living.

Update, 2005:

These days, Mr. and Mrs. Garcia, now 84 and 80, remain very physically active. They reside on a ranch in Blanco where they raise goats and chickens. They are very involved in the Blanco community, regularly attending mass and visiting with fellow parishioners.

Her daughters, Ann Marie and Elizabeth, now live in Austin. AnnMarie works for Cima Strategies as an executive assistant and Elizabeth is a director at San Juan Diego Catholic High School. While both of the girls have families of their own, they remain close to their parents. They recently organized a big celebration to honor Mrs. Garcia's 80th birthday. The fiesta was complete with Mariachis and many guests.

Mr. and Mrs. Garcia moved to Blanco in May of 2002 and have enjoyed country living.

"We have been lucky that God has given us a long life," Mrs. Garcia says, as she reflects on their lives.

Mrs. Garcia was interviewed by Hannah McIntyre on February 2, 2000 in Austin, Texas.