

Quinceanera Expo!



How an inspired Mexican-American family found a way to honor a venerated cultural tradition and the rights of their girl-child, all on one memorable festive day!

When social worker Javier asked his 13-year-old daughter if she wanted a Quince party, he wasn't at all surprised when she responded with a resounding, "No!" Nor was he taken aback when daughter Andrea said what she really wanted for her 15th birthday was a small family party and a new basketball practice hoop set up in their yard.

Even though traditional Mexican Quinceanera parties celebrating a girl's 15th birthday have become immensely popular here in the United States, there were just so many other things going on in Andrea's life that she wanted to do. She loved her school work, acting in school dramas, and her newest interest, making videos. And she was especially big on sports. Mom and Dad, in fact, were proudly pleased with their daughter's desire to forego the fancy Quince affair.

But a mere three months before Andrea's 15th birthday things went spiraling badly out of control. The family took a trip down to visit relatives in California's Central Valley. When the subject inevitably came up about plans for Andrea's 15th birthday, Javier casually began explaining what his daughter wanted instead of the traditional Quince party.

"What?" The relatives gasped in horror. "But we've already picked out the dress!" "That," says Javier, "was just the first pressure."

In a culture where families often start thinking about a girl's Quince party on the day she's born, there was no way Javier's relatives would hear of foregoing such a venerated, time honored observance.

Back home, Javier and his family now had less than three months to figure out how to straddle one of the most conflicted fault lines running through the heart of any society: how to faithfully honor one's cultural traditions on one hand, while bolstering the rights and wishes of a girl child on the other.

When the two collide, as they so often do, it's usually the time honored demands of tradition that carry the day. And few traditions are more ritual bound than the Mexican Quinceanera. Javier and his family were determined, however, to somehow find a way to honor them both. 2

“We Hit a Gold Mine with this Market” —Quince Vendor—

The exact origins of the Quinceanera celebrations are open to speculation, with some pointing back to a 15th century Spanish ritual where young girls on their 15th birthday were accompanied by their community to the altar of the local church. There the girl would declare in front of all whether she would commit her life to marriage or to being a nun.

Following Spanish new world conquest, variations of a girl's 15th birthday ritual spread throughout Latin America to different degrees. Nowhere did it take firmer root than in Mexico. The Spanish rite blended easily with the indigenous Mexican Aztec ritual in which a girl, on her 15th birthday, was inducted into the role and duties of womanhood.

In present day Mexico, the Quince party, though mostly a backyard affair, is laced with layers of patrimony and meaning. It's an induction into a traditional notion of womanhood. It's princess for a day. And it's a family's presentation of their daughter to the community as available for dating and marriage.

But it's in present day United States that the Quinceanera has escalated to its most lavish, florid, and financially crippling proportions. No doubt the extravagance is fueled in part by newcomers' needs to fortify cultural identity in a foreign land. And as always at the ready to fan the flames there is American capitalism's ever-ready instinct for cashing in on ethnic sensitivities.

Multiple U.S. companies, such as Quinceanera Expo, have merged with the full phalanx of bridal industries to put on blockbuster trade shows in Latino communities around the country. Latino families, claims the Quince Expo website, will spend an average of \$21,000 for the one day ceremony that in all its ritual and regalia tightly mimics a wedding, and often exceeds it in extravagance.

Or as one Quince Expo vendor states on the Expo website, “We hit a gold mine with this market!” Latino families struggle for years to pay off Quince debts.

“Now look! I’m caught in it myself.”

—Javier—

Javier agrees. “The cheapest”, he says, “the very cheapest you can get away with is \$12,000.” Javier says his aunt is still struggling to pay the bills of her daughter’s Quince of two years ago.

Nor is it just the immediate family that’s throttled with the expense. Extended family, friends, neighbors, and community members are constantly being asked to be ‘padrinos’ or godparents, to help defray the costs of the church, the reception hall, the limo, the band, caterers, florists, the cake, the invitations, dance instructors, the dress, the videographers, and any of the many other trappings that have become de rigor for the modern American Quince. Again and again, year after year, as each girl turns 15, Latino community members are tapped to the tune of what Javier says often costs him and others up to \$1,500 a year.

Just weeks away from his own family’s date with destiny, Javier seemed lost in a daze. “For many years in my work as a social worker,” says Javier, “mothers have been coming to me for help in dealing with the stresses of preparing for their daughter’s Quince.” Javier pauses and draws a deep sigh. “Now look,” he says shaking his head at the irony, “I’m caught in it myself.”

But it’s the Hispanic girls and mothers who are most squarely caught in the crushing pressures of the American Quince as they dedicate a year of intense preparing for what is not only just as elaborate as a wedding, but just as stressful.

Girlhood ~ Checklists or Choices?

When Quinceanera Expo comes to town, it’s all business. Flanked with its suite of bridal vendors, the Expo event opens its doors to the crowds of mostly mothers and daughters. Once inside they’re ushered through events and vendors in a tightly choreographed day designed to sign them up for sales and get them started on their “Quinceanera Checklist”, a formidable, year-long scheduled to-do list for mother and daughter to plow through.

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Here are the tasks outlined on the Expo checklist for just the first two months of the 12-month marathon of tasks:

12 Months Before

- Select potential godparents (contributing sponsors)
- Plan on number of guests
- Collect magazines and catalogs for ideas
- Make a planning notebook
- Choose theme and colors
- Contact church priest (Determine parish requirements, book date)
- Ask for referrals for photographers, caterers, DJs, invitation printers, flower shops and bakeries (for such services it is usually best to work with someone you were referred to)
- Research possible event sites for availability and security measures they offer



11 Months Before

- Discuss budget plans with potential godparents
- Visit event sites
- Meet with caterers for tasting
- Select invitation style
- Decide whether you will purchase your dress or have it custom-made.

And so it goes, month after month, for the 12 month lead-up, which, of course, starts when the Quince girl turns 14. It's also usually her first year of high school. But with the pressing chores of Quince planning there's precious little time for keeping schoolwork front and center. And instead of the usual teen time exploring in and out of new friendships and activities, the Quince girl is charged with the high stakes task of holding together her chosen 7 male and 7 female escorts through the tensions of dance practices, formal wear fittings, rehearsals, and the travails of teenage ups and downs.

The months pass. The family and community become more invested, and the girl more and more locked into the Quince goals. There's no changing course.

And that, too, may further help explain the wildly exaggerated form the Quince has taken here on American soil. It responds to the fear among many immigrant families that their girls will sense the new and enticing freedoms around them and jump the fence. With all invested in the Quince, the bridal princess model of womanhood seems enforced and assured.

Javier isn't the only Mexican-American parent who sees it differently. He's encouraging and delighted his daughter is exploring new freedoms and interests. He wants family funds to go for his daughter's education. He wants to see his daughter jumping fences, too.

And Javier also isn't the only Mexican-American parent feeling caught and torn in the Quince bind. Some have begun to avoid the conflict by sending their daughter along with some of her friends on trips abroad as an alternative celebration. But many more succumb unhappily to the pressure. Javier and his family, however, think they've found another way.

**“I’ll do anything. I’ll even wear the dress,
but I will not dance in front of everybody.”**
—Andrea—

The preparations, innovations, and compromises had all been made. As Javier and his family drove the long stretch of highway leading to the big day in the Central Valley he could tell his daughter was nervous. The next morning as everyone dressed when Andrea couldn't find the sash for her gown, the pent up pressures erupted out of her control. “I never wanted this”, she burst out crying to her dad. Javier responded with all his heart, “I didn't want this for you either, m'ija”.

Javier did his best to calm his daughter. But arriving at their friend's backyard venue for the event, he could see how uncomfortable Andrea was in the make-up and dress that were so completely out of her style. “I was worried,” he said. “I could see that ‘look’ on her face, that look you get when you feel horribly out of place.”

But it didn't take long before the family's innovations began to work their magic. Instead of the 7 males and 7 females of the girl's age group friends that are the traditional escorts to accompany and dance with her, Andrea's escorts were the little kids of the extended family, ages 2-to-6 years of age, and they were just plain cute.

This one change avoided anxious months of Andrea having to hold the reigns on 14 age-mate friends. It also completely eliminated the tensions of the ritual sexual pairing of young people that underpin the traditional Quince event. Instead, just as predicted and planned, the restless little ones couldn't sit still, and they certainly couldn't sustain formalities. They began running around, making faces, and melting the mood of the room. Andrea and all began to have fun.

In the complicated negotiations leading up to the event, Andrea had told her father, "I'll do anything. I'll even wear the dress, but I will not dance in front of everybody."

Dancing is a mainstay of the traditional and modern day Quinceanera. Just as in a wedding, the Quince girl's first dance is with her father. She then dances with her principal male escort, and then with each of the other male escorts. The dancing sets the Quince narrative of a princess daughter being handed off by the father for the men of the community to step in, check her out, and vie for her hand.

Javier was more than happy to honor his daughter's wish. Andrea would not have to dance in front of anyone at her 15th birthday. Above all, the flock of frisky young kids jumping and dancing around made the absence of formal dancing unnoticeable.

Risking the Elders' Ire

Javier, himself, had been nervous about remaking his own part in the celebration. The father of the Quinceanera girl traditionally has a narrow, but very tightly prescribed role. He has the first dance with her before turning her over to others. Then later he takes off his daughter's girl-child shoes, usually sneakers, and replaces them with ballroom style high heels.

In a dramatic departure from this script, Javier put together a slide show of his daughter's growing up featuring the many reasons he and his wife were so proud of her. This, by itself, seemed bold enough to risk raising the ire of the traditional elders. But additionally, during the slide show Javier planned to talk with them all about what he had learned about parenting; how he had started out being authoritarian and distant from the daily nurturing of his children, how he had done a lot of yelling, too.

He talked about how over the years, both as a parent and as a social worker, he had learned the many rewards of another way; of hugging, listening, participating, reading and playing.

As Javier talked on through the slides, he couldn't tell how to interpret the somber quiet that came over the room. It wasn't until he finally had a chance to look around that he saw the tears in the eyes of many of the family's most traditional elders. They came up to him afterwards in awe. Their hearts had been melted and moved.

The ruptures of ritual hadn't mattered at all. In fact, they had opened up and freed the celebration and made room for the individual person of their one and only Andrea, not a ritual fairy tale princess.

On the way home in the car, Javier asked Andrea how she felt about the day. Andrea responded from the back seat with a familiar well-honed teenage grunt. Then after a moment she said she really liked the time she had for talking with and being close with the older family members.

But what Andrea liked most of all was yet to come. There waiting for her in her back yard was a new basketball practice hoop all set up and ready to go.



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