

Introduction

It's an exciting time to be a Hispanic person in the United States. Hispanics are rapidly establishing themselves as a major economic, cultural, and political power in the U.S. The population figures speak for themselves: In the year 2000, 31 percent of U.S. residents were Hispanic. By 2009, that percentage had increased to 34 percent. Today, nearly one in six residents of this country, or nearly 50 million people, are Hispanic.

Those numbers will only increase. The Hispanic population of the U.S. is young, with a median age of 27.7 years (the median age for U.S. residents in general is 36.8 years). As this huge group has children, buys houses, goes to college, votes, shops for consumer goods, and so on, their numbers will have an enormous impact on the economic, cultural, and political development of this country.

That impact is already being felt. In 2009, Sonia Sotomayor, a Nuyorican, became the first Hispanic member of the U.S. Supreme Court. The Spanish-language TV network Univision has local stations in more than 50 U.S. cities. Hispanic voters' overwhelming

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support for Barack Obama helped ensure his victory in the 2008 presidential election. The number of Hispanic business leaders steadily grows. That group includes leaders such as Jim Padilla, former president and chief operating officer of Ford Motor Company, and Patricia Elizondo, senior vice president of Xerox Corporation. Monica Garcia serves as president of the Board of Education of the Los Angeles Unified School District, and Dr. France Córdova is president of Purdue University.

Despite successes such as these, challenges still lie ahead for Hispanic Americans. While the percentage of young Hispanics graduating from high school and attending college is rising, it still lags far behind corresponding percentages for Anglos. Too many Hispanics still live in *barrios*, pockets of poverty with dangerous streets and substandard schools. Gangs, drug use, and crime pull too many young people into what might initially look like *la vida loca*; however, this lifestyle leads to prison, despair, and death. Young Hispanics may find themselves caught between the cultural expectations of their parents, and the demands of the world outside their home.

To explore some of the challenges and rewards, the struggles and the triumphs, of being Hispanic in

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today's United States, we have invited ten remarkable men and women to share their stories in this book. They include people now living in Pennsylvania, Texas, California, Florida, New Jersey, and Connecticut. Their family roots can be traced to Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Colombia. The men and women include a professor, a college administrator, several businesspeople, a nurse, a sheriff, a law student, a teacher, and a writer. Their backgrounds include migrant work, prison, single parenthood, and struggles with addiction, racism, and sexism. As diverse as their experiences are, the people who tell their stories in this book share a common interest in reaching out an encouraging hand to young Hispanics growing up in this rapidly changing country we all call home.

Bienvenidos—enjoy their stories!

About Paula González

At the age of 16, Paula González was a high-school dropout and a mother. Faced with the choice between a future of welfare dependence or an unhappy marriage, she took the unusual step of joining the New York City Painters' Union. Over the next fifteen years, she became an expert craftsperson, participating in a variety of projects, including the restoration of New York's Carnegie Hall. At age 37, Paula started taking classes at Brooklyn's Kingsborough Community College, and eventually she earned a degree in sociology at Brooklyn College. As a sociology student, she began reading books about teen pregnancy, welfare reform, Puerto Rican gender roles, and other topics that she had experienced firsthand. Her studies gave her a deepened perspective on her life and the lives of people around her. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Paula left New York to live in Allentown, Pennsylvania. In Pennsylvania she completed her master's degree in social work at Temple University, where she is employed now as a program coordinator.

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Paula González Speaks

I'm a Puerto Rican woman born and raised in the ghettos of Brooklyn, in New York City. I was the youngest of my mother's five children and the most rebellious of the girls. See, I was becoming too Americanized. My mother was raising her girls to be good Puerto Rican wives and mothers. School was not real important in my family, and after the eighth grade nobody cared if I dropped out—as long as I then stayed home doing laundry and other “women's work.” I was taught to do everything in a house: cook, wash clothes by hand, sew, scrub a floor, paint, even fix the plumbing. I was taught that if it was in the house, it was “housework”—and it was my job.

The problem was that I didn't follow the house rules. I stopped going to school when I was 14, but I didn't tell my mother and I didn't stay home. I hung out on the street with all the other dysfunctional kids. Actually, there were things about school that I really liked. I was a “good” student in the sense that I was quiet and I listened. I loved science and history. As long as I could just listen to the teacher, I could absorb a lot. What I couldn't do was read or write—not well. Naturally, as I got older, it got harder to hide that fact.

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When I started high school, I had classes that involved a lot of lectures. I couldn't keep up, because I couldn't spell or write fast enough to take notes. When a teacher would ask me to read in class, I'd put on an act as though I was the coolest, freshest kid in class. I'd say, "What, yo? Me? You're calling on *me*? You think *I'm* gonna read this?" If I had to, I'd create some drama and storm out of class rather than admit I couldn't read.

At home there was no encouragement to do well in school. In fact, it was the opposite. Many times I heard "Reading too much makes you crazy." I think what that really meant was that reading gave you ideas, and ideas were dangerous. Ideas could make you think things that were different from what the group thought. Ideas could make you think you could go further than the group. And staying within the group was very, very important.

The group was the extended family. That was our world. We were taught to distrust and fear everyone else. Most of all we distrusted "them"—the white world out there. By the time I was 14, our family had moved twenty-seven times. We rented by the week, not just because that was all we could afford; weekly rentals also kept anyone from knowing us, kept the neighbors from

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getting curious about us, kept us girls from forming ties with anyone who might notice what was going on in our home.

My father was physically, sexually, and emotionally abusive. He was a barber who changed places of employment almost as often as we moved. I like to say that he was the richest poor man I've ever known. We catered to him as if he were a king. He ate separately from the rest of us, and we had to cool his food so it did not burn his mouth. At night we drew his bath and laid out his underwear and slippers in the bathroom. If anything was not to his liking—from the volume of the TV to the food we prepared—it had to be corrected immediately. Once when I was 13 and he was angry about something, he went outside and began nailing the doors shut. He told us he would set the place on fire and no one would be able to reach us until it was too late. People say, "He must have been crazy." No, he wasn't crazy. If he had been crazy, he would have nailed himself in the house with us. If he had been crazy, he would have hit a man bigger than he was, not a child. He wasn't crazy. He was abusive to the point that he had to control our very souls.

So by the time I was 14, I had stopped going to school and was staying away from home as much as

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possible. I worked the weekends as a candy girl in the Marcy Theatre on Broadway, in Brooklyn. One night my friends were going to a house party, but I got in from work too late and they left me. I didn't want to go home. So I found another party, and that is where I met Christobal González (my maiden name is also González). Oh my, he was so fine. He was tall and cute, with his hair cut in a Caesar, and he was dressed sharp. He asked me to dance, and we slow danced for hours. At the end of the night, he walked me home. When he asked if he could see me again, I said yes.

The first time he picked me up with his customized Chevy Camaro, my friends were going crazy. His car had a leather rooftop with a diamond-shaped window in the back. I felt like the luckiest girl around, and all my friends agreed. My man was fine, he had a car, and he had a job. He told me he was 18, but I found out about a month later that he was really 26. By this time, I didn't care how old he was; I was in love. I was able to talk to him about everything. I told him every secret I had, and he seemed understanding and sensitive.

When my mother found out that I was seeing him, she was afraid I'd become sexually active and disgrace her. Never mind that I was being sexually abused at home. She ordered me to either break it off or marry

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him. She told my father that if he didn't agree to let me get married, I was going to run away. Within a couple of weeks, Christobal asked my father for my hand in marriage, and my father gave it to him. I was too young to marry legally, so my mother went to court and got some sort of exemption for me.

Christobal wasn't so nice after my father gave me to him, and I didn't feel so lucky anymore. I was no longer allowed to do anything without asking my fiancé for permission. But I didn't fight it; both of my married sisters seemed pretty happy, and at last it seemed I was going to be a good Puerto Rican woman. I got busy preparing for the wedding. Christobal borrowed money from his brother-in-law, and we invited all of our friends. When we married, I was 15 and had known him for eight months. For my honeymoon, he took me to the Golden Gate Inn in Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, for one night.

After that, we went to live in the back of his mother's basement apartment. But I didn't care. I had my fine man, and everyone was still calling me lucky. I wanted to have a baby right away, and at 16 I had Christobal Jr. Oh my God, I was in love. He was such a pretty baby. But I didn't know how to take care of him and he cried a lot, and my husband wouldn't help.

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He started drinking and smoking weed every day. He was always losing his job, and we hadn't gotten out of the basement. And now I was 17 and pregnant with my second son, Kenny. I was living with my two boys in a basement with an alcoholic drug addict who was unemployed most of the time. Meanwhile, I was doing the things I thought would make me a good wife and mother. I made my husband's shirts by hand. I starched his underwear.

Things got worse. Christobal humiliated me in public. He spit on me. And he forced me, again and again, to have sex against my will. When I went to my family and to my friends to tell them I was being raped, asking them to help me, they just stared at me. They told me what I was saying was impossible. They said that as a man's wife, it was my job to have sex with him whenever and however he wanted. They said because he was my husband, it could not be rape.

This is something I have trouble talking about even now, so many years later. Right now, thinking about it, I am shaking and feel sick to my stomach. When I began telling this story, I did not plan to talk about this part. It seemed too personal, and I didn't want to feel again the shame and guilt and confusion I had lived with. But then I remembered what it did to me when

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I tried to find someone to listen and instead was told, “No, it’s impossible; no, you’re crazy; no, you’re just making trouble; shut up, shut up, shut up, be quiet about it.” I began to think that maybe what happened to me is happening to some young girl reading this story. Maybe, like me, she has no one to validate what she’s experiencing. Maybe, even though she knows in her very soul what is happening, she is being told, “You are wrong.”

So if you are that girl, I am telling you now: *You are not wrong*. Just because a guy is your boyfriend, or even your husband, he does not own your body. Just because you have had sex with him before does not mean you have given up your right to say no. Forcing someone to have sex against her will is rape. And rape is a crime, no matter who does it.

I looked for a way out. I had quit school at 14. I had no job skills. I could barely read. I tried to leave Christobal and go on welfare when I was 16, but the welfare office told me I had to go back to my parents until I was 18. I returned to the basement apartment for more abuse. This went on for two years, until I was 18. I knew nothing about any resources that could have helped me. I’d never heard of a domestic violence shelter. When I finally left, I stayed alone for only one

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year. I was so lonely. Most of my friends were still single, and my sisters had their husbands and children. I met another older man, Angel, who also seemed very kind in the beginning, and at 20 I had Ivy, my daughter. I left Angel when Ivy was eight months old; I'd found out he was having an affair at work that had started when I was pregnant.

I was now 21 with three kids from two different men who didn't want to take care of them. It didn't matter if I took them to court: Christobal wouldn't work, and Angel offered me five dollars a week. My family wouldn't help either. So I was left on my own to care for my kids. I was scared all the time. I was afraid of losing my apartment. I was afraid of losing my kids. I was afraid I would die and leave them alone. And they could tell I was afraid. Christobal Jr. would rub my head when I cried. I loved them more than anything or anyone else in this world. But they needed and deserved to have a mother who could provide for them and keep them safe. They deserved a mother who was old enough and mature enough to make life decisions for them. Instead, they had me.

My kids went through a lot of hardship and a lot of emotional pain. Everything that happened to me happened to them, too. That's something you don't

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think about when you imagine having a baby. Nothing happens just to you anymore. It all happens to your kids. And when you're young and alone, a lot of bad things happen.

Along the way I met many young Puerto Rican girls just like me, and they all had dreams. We would stay up all night talking about the things we wanted for ourselves and our children. We talked about having our own apartment that wouldn't be taken away from us, maybe even a little house. We talked about having a husband who loved us and would accept our children from other men.

These girls were my closest friends. But when I began taking steps to make my dreams a reality, something very strange happened: I lost most of those friends. When I got off welfare and got my first real job, my friend Mary sent her daughter to return my house keys and to get hers. She imagined that I thought I was better than she was because I was working. I was so hurt. I had thought she was my best friend. She told everyone that I was stupid for going to work and leaving my kids with a sitter. Mary told me that no man was going to want me, that a good Puerto Rican woman takes care of her kids and her house.

Rejections like that happened again and again

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as I took steps to become independent. Just like my parents, the group did not want me going “out there” into the larger world. The message was “If you think *me* treat you badly, you can only imagine how *they* will treat you.” I’d grown up hearing so many horror stories about “them.” But as I looked ahead to a life where every day was the same as the one before it, I began to think, “But my own people lied about so much. Maybe they’re lying about this, too.”

I knew that I could not live the life that my mother had planned for me.

When I looked near me for women who could guide me in another direction, there were none. I had to look further, to find women outside of my family who could help me. These women, who were all older than I was, helped me understand that it was possible for a woman to have a good life that was not filled with abuse. One of the first women who helped me was Lucy Quilles. She was a Jehovah’s Witness who came to my door one day. I was 19, and she was about 30. Like me, she had had her children very young. But she seemed to have it all together. She drove her own car! She had traveled! She was pretty and well-dressed, and her children did well in school and seemed happy. Lucy taught me how to read well enough to get my GED.

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She came over at least once a week during the day and read along with me. She did this for about two years. In the meantime, I went to beauty school and worked as a beautician for three years. That is a very hard life. Beauticians basically make their money working three twelve-hour days—Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. If you can't work those hours, you can't do well. And I wasn't a very good beautician, so my tips were lousy.

I knew I had to do something else to support myself and the children. The trade unions in New York were just opening up to women, so at age 23 I joined the painters' union, and I worked as a painter for the next fifteen years. I liked the work and made good money, but eventually I became sensitive to the chemicals I was working with and had to stop. When I decided to go to college, everyone again thought I had gone crazy. The first day I drove myself to college, I cried all the way. I could hear my mother's voice in my head saying, "There she goes again, always wanting to be different." Even my son Christobal told me I was too old and it didn't make sense. But I made it all the way to my master's degree with a grade point average of 3.87. I graduated with honors.

Today my kids are all grown up. They're all right, but they grew up without a father, and with a mother

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that was always struggling to give them the things they deserved. I was there, but I was always worrying, always scared. Even today it is hard for me not to cry when I think of what they went through.

When I see my little sisters pushing their baby carriages, I know how much they love those babies, and I know how hard their lives can be. For those that are thinking of having a baby, I can only say I wish you would wait a little longer, until you're older and have more opportunities and more skills to care for a child. Because love is not enough—really, it's not. And if your boyfriend, friends, and family members say they'll be there, remember that help comes with a price. People who are helping you will feel that they have the right to tell you how to raise your kids and how to run your life. And people move on, even fathers. If you already have children, don't be scared of doing things differently. Dream big for yourself and your babies. But don't only dream. Do the hard work to make your dreams come true.

We all grow up thinking that the way our family or our community does things is the right way, the normal way. That's natural; kids learn what they live with. And fortunately, for many people, their families and communities are sources of love and encouragement.

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What I want you to take away from my story is this: If the things the people close to you are telling you seem wrong, maybe they *are* wrong. And if you're being told, "But that's how things are, because we're Puerto Rican"—or Mexican, or Dominican, or African American, or Jamaican, or French, or Chinese, or Martian, or whatever—well, I hope you'll question that. Many of the things that happened in my life weren't okay, no matter what anybody said. I knew that. But with so many people telling me, "You're wrong," it took me many years to trust my own judgment. I wish you the strength and wisdom to trust yours.