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A Life of Service
Remembrances from a Teacher's Daughter

Deena J. González

Our mother, Vidal Trujillo González, exited the world peacefully in January 2005. A rosary at our parish church in Garfield, New Mexico, drew a crowd of over five hundred people, mostly former students of hers; one identified himself as probably her oldest student. She would have been enormously surprised and touched, and full of praise for the accomplishments of those who gathered in her honor. For years, my mom served the rural areas of Garfield in Doña Ana County, New Mexico, and Arrey in Sierra County, New Mexico, as teacher, adviser, confidante, and also resident community historian. She volunteered in her retirement years for the local parish councils, for the committees of the archdiocese, and for museum boards, and continued her commitment to Al-Anon to help others recover from the devastating effects of alcoholism.

It is far easier for me to list my mother's many achievements than to convey the utter emptiness that my father, brother, sister, and I all shared during the days in which we organized her send-off. On the night of the rosary, recited to honor her life as part of the Catholic burial ritual, we stood in her kitchen—previously the kitchen of my paternal grandmother, Josefa Jaramillo—heating up in the microwave bowls of *calabacitas* (squash) and potato soup that family friends had brought over, following custom. I stood eating over the table that Mom had insisted on buying recently, though it seemed far too large for the small kitchen. To sit would mean doubling over in agony, and standing somehow made it seem perfectly okay to eat at 9 p.m., although my family would never have dined so late in the evening. Grieving the loss of a parent must proceed in this way, each moment of the "celebration of life" marked by a long line of memories about what is proper and what is not. At that moment, as we ate our bowls of food, and

when I later could recall no flavor, the space or gap loomed so large that we could not even speak of it.

I wondered if seventy years earlier my grandmother had known this feeling, facing a widowhood caused by the accidental death of her forty-two-year-old husband in 1935. Grandma Jo did tell us, when we were children, that my father's sister had insisted after the death that all of the immediate family move promptly from the old home at the far end of the family farm to the new one my grandfather was just completing for them, with its electricity, indoor plumbing, bathroom, three bedrooms, hardwood floors, and a crawl space. People came from all over the county to see the new adobe house and its modern conveniences when the move was complete. Somehow, that new beginning made it possible for all of them—my father, then just fifteen years of age, his other brothers and sisters, my grandmother, and her husband's mother, who lived with them—to think ahead and move forward.

The priest at my mother's funeral mass said that endings were also beginnings, and this would certainly be the way my mother would have wanted us to proceed. Ever the schoolteacher, she cared deeply about lessons imparted. Our screw-ups, our errors, our faults or problems rarely mattered to her. She accepted them in us and, in fact, in just about everyone. She struggled through my father's alcoholism and three decades of recovery, my brother's disability, my PhD program and impossible work schedule, and my sister's PhD studies and community college teaching demands. She cared for aging grandparents until their deaths and grieved a sister who died unexpectedly. It seems that my mother had mastered patience.

I remember her as impatient, too: a liberal Democrat who, at the age of sixteen, left the family ranch and her mountain village of Monticello, New Mexico, for the big city of Albuquerque and residency at the University of New Mexico. She worked three jobs to supplement her scholarship: at the library where she bound books and stamped them with call numbers, at Hokona Hall where she lived as a student and worked as a server in the dining room, and in the homes of professors whose children she watched. Because of World War II, she completed her BA in modern languages in three short years, by age nineteen. She then signed up with her roommates

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from the East Coast for a job working in New York City with the organization that would become Fulbright/IREX.

Those years in New York in the 1940s shaped her consciousness and laid the foundation for her lifelong dedication to education and to a world without borders. Mom peppered many of her stories with the phrase "when I lived in New York." Throughout our lives we heard about strange foods like falafel, about the department store called Macy's, and about the Village, where she shared an apartment with her college chums. Her experiences in New York expanded our worldviews, moving us through and around New Mexico's traditional, rural Hispanic/Chicano culture organized by family, church, and school. The lives of my mother's roommates and their children were stitched into this quilt. Each Christmas, the cards would arrive and we would hear about trips to Europe, to Latin America, and back to New Mexico.

Of the four roommates, two are gone: my mother and Betsy, her wealthy friend from Chicago. Olive and Lee remain, forever a part of our collective, familial consciousness, despite their Euro-American ethnicity and their different lives, as different from my mother's as can be imagined. Somehow, my mother's journey wove these disparate strands into a pattern we did not find at all odd or strange. She left behind a rural village for a city and then that city for another, moving from one region to another. It is a migration duplicated today by many others swept up in the immigrant stream, except it is still rare for a woman alone to have accomplished the journey. My brother, sister, and I marveled at her audacity, yet she remained close to her own parents' values by thinking of others before herself, doing for others as well as for herself, and honoring honesty, hard work, and collective action over independence and individualism. It was not unexpected, then, that we three would in our college years pick up the Chicano credo of service and action.

Mom married our father at age twenty-seven, late in comparison to others of her generation. She stayed home to raise the three of us in our first years, during which time she took up sewing and grew and sold fruits and vegetables. She ran our household according to the ideas of Maria Montessori, organizing closets, drawers, and bookshelves so that we could put things back in their proper places. She also enjoyed reading about the educator out loud in Italian. I learned to read at age four, first in Spanish because I had to attend catechism and the nuns insisted on it. Mom would read Portuguese to us at night, and soon I was also reading comics and prayer books in English.

In the summers of 1961, 1962, and 1963, Mom moved us all to Albuquerque so that she could work on a graduate degree in education. We each found our passion in the city: I loved the public library and made my way to it daily; my brother took in a movie a day and insisted that we live close enough to the cinema to allow that; my sister read and watched television, devouring W. C. Fields. My father landed odd jobs and Mom would attend classes, cook dinner, and hit the books nightly. At UNM's library, she whispered to me that the desks in the foyer were graduate student carrels and that when I was a graduate student, I would be assigned one. I didn't understand the carrel's purpose, but my mother's reverence for it stuck in my nine-year-old mind.

For as long as I can remember, an academic calendar has been more familiar to me than any other kind. Summer, for Mom as for all of us, became the time to read, and the material selected could be anything. At Albuquerque Public Library, with its summer reading contests, I was once denied a prize because the librarians insisted I could not have read more than thirty books. When Mom heard that, we marched in and she insisted that they ask me questions about the books I supposedly had not read. I got the gold star. I think of that incident to this day, and it, too, is folded into the tremendous loss and sadness I feel when I remember a mentor who also happened to be my parent.

Formal education was a constant theme in my mom's life and she extended it to ours. My father's Spanish colonizing family held one of the last land grants given by the King of Spain in the early nineteenth century. They had moved to their present farm and ranching site before the break with Spain and before the break with Mexico. With the family's five generations of land ownership and roots in the soil (of what is now some of the best chile-growing land in the world), it made eminent sense that I would become a historian—although my dad would tell me, my archaeologist brother, and my educator sister that law or business would be better fields for us.

My mother was of the generation for whom the printed word, and not the computer screen, was truly fascinating. Today, the house she lived in and made hers, even with my grandmother's shadow and dad's family on the scene, is lined with books and magazines. Sorting through my mother's magazines and newsletters was difficult and sad, especially having to toss out many on which she had written such things as "Deena, here's the piece on Michael Moore." "Rita, see this early reflection on bilingual education in NM." This ongoing conversation continued in newspaper clippings

she would send in thick envelopes. As I find myself making the transition toward "owning" what was Mom's space or her things, the pieces that constitute mourning come closer together. It's as if I get to know another part of my mother, what mattered to her, and why.

Storage, for which there was never enough space in the old farmhouse, serves to maintain the past, I notice, as I enter closets I've not explored in years and find the prayer books of my great-grandfather, the first catechism of my grandmother, and my other grandparents' marriage license along with the pink slip to their automobile. Uncovering such artifacts help us to preserve our history in this ordered universe of documents, rustic photos, and letters. The new is layered upon the old. For example, all of my parents' AA/Al-Anon retreats and related notes, books, and mementos are filed in boxes that once were full of Tide detergent. My mom, the environmentalist, was determined to reuse everything at least once. The photos, address books, and mountains of notebooks document who was at a retreat and what the speakers said; all attest to a mind that was not aided by a computer and yet organized material as well as Microsoft Outlook.

My sister and I reforge our bond, she the practical community college professor who teaches algebra to students frightened off the subject by teachers who rendered them unteachable. She's not unlike my mother, who would sit at the kitchen table with a pile of student folders, patiently replacing the label "mentally retarded" or "speaks no English" with "bilingual student" or "learning disability, limited language proficiency." At the end of each term, my mother's sense of accomplishment when she could write "fully bilingual" or "best test score in mathematics" was palpable. Children whose only problem was that their parents were migrants or that their parents did not receive a formal education went on to become teachers, administrators, business owners, or lawyers. The families spoke to my mom's role in those achievements, and as the line filed by her coffin, we heard, "She taught me English." Even in death, my mom was busy imparting lessons about what is to be valued, about what matters—a life of service and of justice and hope.

At eighty-two years of age, Mom did not talk about dying, but she did tell me in her last year that she had had a long and good life. A week before she died, she traveled with a friend up to the family's cemetery in the mountain village of her birth. A photo the friend took shows my mom placing a rose on the grave of her grandfather—my great-grandfather. She called my sister and me practically every day that week, rare for her. We knew that a heart condition was worsening and could claim her life at

any moment, although drugs and diet had helped her for over a decade since the diagnosis. My conversation with her on the weekend before she passed on was about her recent dream: she was walking in a meadow, she told me, and she was extremely happy because she saw my grandfather and her godfather calling out to her, asking where she had been. She said she realized it was a dream when she saw my grandmother and I standing on the other side of the wooden fence, because she knew my grandmother was dead. "*Mi 'jita*, I am still feeling the happiness from that dream. I was smiling so much because it was as if your grandfather was just as I remember him." I remember feeling that tinge, a premonition, and wishing or willing it away. I could visualize her smiling as she told me how much she waved and carried on to see her father and her uncle again.

The week of her death, the house had been thoroughly cleaned. New placemats for the kitchen table were in the buffet drawer, new rugs for the entryway were ready to be used, as if in preparation for something about to happen. A quince pie was in the freezer and a note to us with instructions about whom to call in the event of her death, and the message she wanted us to give her pallbearers, was in her purse. My mother left as she wanted, with foresight and planning, and peacefully, suffering not at all; she was just simply gone. I can think of no one more deserving of such an exit, given her life's work and her love of life. Even in our pain, we could see how the alternative—clinging to or fighting for life, enduring hospitalization or extraordinary measures—would somehow seem improper to her life's meaning.

In my eulogy to her, I remembered most of all her compassion—for children whose only problem was that they spoke no English or were learning-disabled, for disenfranchised citizens, for the poor. Mom taught many young people and their parents English and then erased the markers of an intolerant and unjust system so that the baggage would not follow them through their new lives. She got another degree in special education because a number of her kids in the last five years of grade school teaching were in fact specifically challenged. As her students filed past us, each one murmuring, "She taught me English, I'm now at the university," we witnessed her enormous strength and influence. One teacher, several hundred affected. She was our best instructor and mentor, for my brother, my sister, and me, and this final lesson of hers, taught to us in our loss, is perhaps the most difficult one we will ever integrate. I cannot discern eternal life, but I understand the eternal presence we all seem to experience when we meet up with human beings whose egos are small and whose capacity for

life is large. Of all things I would repeat about my mother's legacy, there is one clear epitaph: she loved and helped people. Her life of service to her family, community, and parish formed her as she journeyed from village to city, from small schoolhouse to large university, and back again. I hope this is a lesson I have also learned and made my own.

Vidal Trujillo González (1923–2005)

University of New Mexico, Class of 1943
Teacher: Arrey Elementary School, Sierra County (1962–1985)
Hatch High School, Doña Ana County (1958–1962)
Monticello School, Sierra County (1947–1950)

Mom at Rita's PhD graduation ceremony, New Mexico State University, May 2004. Author's collection.