



START SMALL.

One Person at a Time

ANGELINA GOMEZ'S STORY *By Beth Foreman, Associate Editor*

One

Look at Angelina Hernandez Gomez's big smile

and some people might imagine that she has lived a charmed life without pain or suffering. But they'd be wrong.

She is the first to admit that she hasn't always been smiling, and she

has struggled through what she calls "tribulations" including illness, divorce, and death that would shake others' foundations. "I wasn't always who I am today. The Lord has worked in me through so many people," she shares from her home just outside Los Angeles.

"I remember when I was very impatient and bitter. I've had to learn that the Lord has placed me, a Mexican-American woman, and He chose me for His work in ethnic surroundings." Her philosophy for life and doing God's work? "Start small. One person at a time. That's how God's kingdom grows."

As the 2011–2013 Heart to Heart Sisters Chairman, Angelina is clearly in the right place to serve the Lord with her gifts. Retired from her career as an Information Systems Analyst in the Los Angeles Department of Public Social Services, Angelina finds more time now to share her smile, hugs, and love of the Lord with family, friends, and community. One person at a time.

Born in Brownsville, Texas, Angelina is the second of fourteen children. "I love being part of a big family," and even though they don't live close to each other, "we are still very connected."

Tragedy struck Angelina and her family early in her life. When she was just three years old, her younger brother died from pneumonia. She wasn't old enough to remember Peter, but the story behind his death is important. "Peter died in my father's arms in front of a church while waiting for a priest to give him last rites. My father was very angry and bitter and vowed never to step foot into a church again," she explains.

Soon after Peter's death, the family moved to Houston and was invited to St. Peter's Lutheran Church. "My dad refused to go but said the rest of us could attend. Once the pastor heard my father's story, he visited him every Saturday morning, just like a stubborn German person would do!" Angelina laughs as she recalls this turning point. "The pastor finally convinced my father to come to church."

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From that point on, Angelina and her siblings attended Lutheran schools, first in Houston and then Los Angeles, where they moved so her mother, struggling with heart disease, could be close to advanced medical care.

From a young age, Angelina's little world was filled with the LWML. "My mother was involved with the Ladies Aid Society and well-known for her cooking, usually chicken with rice, Hispanic style! Since I was the oldest daughter, I would always attend meetings with her. She loved the camaraderie, the friendship, the serving. That's where my passion for LWML started."

As with so many families, Angelina's mother was central to building a family of faith. "God has a purpose for all of us, and my mother's purpose was to raise 14 children in the Lord."

Their new church family embraced Angelina's family, especially when her mother became very ill. "We were living in housing projects," Angelina explains, "and Barbara, a young deaconess, asked how she could help us. My father, being the blunt man that he was, said, 'The wash!' And Barbara took four or five bags of our dirty clothes and washed them. She took it upon herself to come all the way to East Los Angeles, to our housing project, to pick up our laundry and do it for us. Wow! That's one of those memories that has built my life of giving to others and embracing the family of God." In the midst of illness and sadness, one woman made a difference in Angelina's young life.

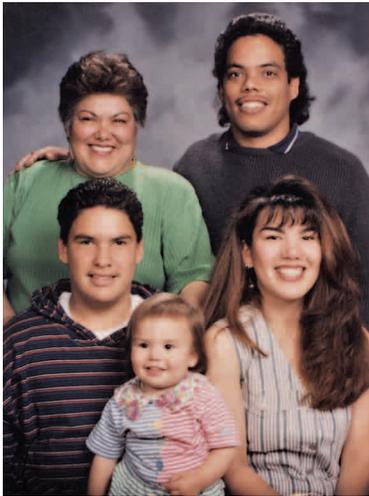
One person at a time.

Tragedy struck the Hernandez family once again when Angelina's mother died after her second surgery. "My mother passed away when she was only 46 years old from the same heart disease that I have. Back then they inserted a plastic valve in her heart. I had similar surgery in 2005 and received a titanium valve which works a lot better than plastic!"

Her church family and the LWML continued to embrace the family when they attended St John Lutheran School in Montebello. "We were a large family, and the Ladies Aid Society assisted us financially so we could attend the school. When my older brother Carlos went to the seminary, the LWML helped him. (The Rev. Carlos Hernandez currently serves on the staff of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Board for Human Care.)



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While her early years were filled with joy, Angelina also experienced and witnessed what she calls “ugliness.” She explains, “When we first moved to California, I saw signs that read, ‘No coloreds’ or ‘No Mexicans.’ I was the only Hispanic girl at our Lutheran high school and, yes, I was the recipient of some prejudice, but I also received much love and understanding there.”

Angelina overflows with stories about the difference one individual can make, especially with small things. “When I was about to graduate from high school, one woman from our church, knowing we were very poor, took me shopping for a dress and shoes. I have never forgotten that simple act of service. Here I am, 69 years old, and I still choke up at the fact that she took me shopping.”

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Like many young adults, Angelina didn’t really want to start small. She was eager for bigger things. “I was a child of the sixties. I wanted to change the whole world,” especially after many hours reading the newspaper to her father, something he encouraged his children to do.

Her path became clear. “I didn’t want to attend a Lutheran college and become a teacher like so many expected. Three of my older brothers served in the military, and I decided I wanted to serve as well,” so Angelina chose the Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA) program. With her brother’s help, she convinced her father to let her sign up. “My father knew that if he didn’t let me go, I was going to run away to San Francisco and become a hippie!”

Angelina completed her training in Salt Lake City and was placed in Houston, where she served in an impoverished neighborhood for two years. “It was a totally different experience where I learned about real prejudice and ugliness in the world.”

While working in Houston, Angelina was privileged to attend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s funeral in Atlanta. Driving into the city, she was escorted by highway patrols. “We couldn’t get out of our car,” she says. “I stood just a few feet away from Coretta Scott King,” the widow of the great civil rights activist. The experience is a powerful memory for Angelina, one that has influenced her life of service.

While Angelina doesn’t dwell on her trials, she speaks about them as one who lives in victory through Christ. Her divorce is one of those trials. After 15 years of marriage, her husband

left Angelina and their three children just after moving them all to his home in Colombia. “He chased another skirt,” she says. “I have a forgiving spirit, and so I eventually forgave him, but being a single mom to Russell, Richard, and Priscilla was not always easy.” Eventually, Angelina remarried, but tragedy struck again when he died from kidney disease after only eight years together.

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A life-long challenge for Angelina has been walking beside her oldest son, Russell. She speaks openly about his struggle with bi-polar disorder and schizophrenia and the challenges he has faced. Russell struggled particularly after the divorce, and Angelina knew he needed to find a place where he could work with his hands. “I was going through so much turmoil and, one day, in tears, I called my brother Eugene in Georgia to ask for help,” she remembers. He invited Russell to move to Georgia and work in his contracting business. “Russell learned to lay tile, install windows, do dry wall and so much more. We were blessed to have a family member who took him under his wing.” Today Russell is doing well, she says, but they had many difficult years, including a five-year period where she heard nothing from him. “Turned out he had been in prison for a couple of years,” she explains. “It hurt me so much that I didn’t hear from him.”

Retirement hasn’t slowed Angelina down. Along with her church and LWML activities, she serves as president of two community senior clubs, where she meets many who are lonely and seeking comfort. “I see people all the time who ask for my prayers. I glorify Jesus Christ my Savior by applying gifts of love and friendship and sympathy to others. And I always give them my smile!”

One of her favorite passages is Romans 12:4–6: *For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them.*

“Each one of us has gifts. As you can tell, God has given me the gift of gab! He has also given me this smile so everyone around me asks, ‘Why are you always smiling?’ I can say, ‘I have

the love of Jesus in my heart. There is no reason why I should frown even though, like everybody else, I have tribulations. I've had fears, illnesses, and tragedies, but I know that the Lord will always guide my way."

It's through these trials that Angelina has discovered how to comfort others. *Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God* (2 Corinthians 1: 3-4 ESV). "If someone tells me their sad story, my heart just pours out to them. I show affection! I embrace! That's the way the family of God should be. God wants us to show our love, to embrace. In that way, we give what the Lord told us to give. *Love one another as He first loved us.*" (1 John 4:19)

Angelina doesn't try to explain the reasons for the pain. Her goal is to embrace, to smile, to comfort. One person at a time. "We don't really know why bad things happen, but God feeds His people through our love and words to each other. That's what we Christians do. It just pours out of us."

Pouring out love in response to a recent challenge is what Angelina did last year when she moved in with her youngest son, Richard, to help with Ryan, one of Angelina's four grandchildren. "Ryan has Costello Syndrome, a rare genetic disease," she explains, that comes with many physical and financial challenges. "Being here helps me provide strength, guidance, and support for both of them." And her smile certainly brightens their days.

Smiling, praying, singing, serving, leading, visiting, and dancing. "That's pretty much me," she says. "If the

music is good — *cumbia* is the best! — then I can dance for two or three hours at a time!" She recently lost almost fifty pounds just by dancing, and she still indulges in her favorite treats from time to time, guava pastries from a local Cuban bakery and her brother's *chile verde*.

In Angelina's book, embracing the bigger family of God is simple. "Through the working of the Holy Spirit in our lives, we have the opportunity every single day to ask the Lord to guide our steps, confident that He will."

Her daily prayer demonstrates her heart: "Heavenly Father, guide my steps so I can achieve the plan for whomever I am coming in contact with. Give me the words that You want me to say when someone is asking for help. Help me to be a good listener so I can give the love of Jesus to others."

One person at a time. 



Heart to Heart Sisters Program *Growing God's Kingdom One Person at a Time*

Angelina's involvement with Lutheran Women's Missionary League goes back many years. She has served in her society, zone and district LWML, most recently as Vice President of Gospel Outreach and Chairman of the Endowment Fund for the Pacific Southwest District. Her work with Heart to Heart Sisters started ten years ago, when Melissa Salomon invited her to attend her first national convention in Oklahoma City to participate in the first Heart to Heart Sister Gathering under the leadership of President Virginia Von Seggern.

When Angelina returned home, she and others were energized to embrace their home congregations, societies, zones, and districts. "We had many new resources for ethnic ministry after the convention."

The Heart to Heart Sisters Task Force grew out of that first gathering, and Angelina joined this team to explore the future of LWML and ethnic ministries. "We set forth with the goal to encourage all women to open up that crayon box and see the different ethnic groups in our churches, to embrace them and get them involved in Bible study, service, mites, and missions." In the two years as chairman of the LWML Heart to Heart Sisters Committee, Angelina has encouraged district leaders as they seek to grow their programs. "Many of these ethnic women are already serving the Lord, but they aren't always recognized for their gifts," she adds. "I'd like to see more and more Heart to Heart Sisters and more districts becoming aware of how rich and fruitful the program can be. I think then we will see a

growth in the LWML."

"The Lord wants us to reach out to the ends of the world and sometimes the 'end of the world' is right in our own neighborhood. We need to open our eyes. He will show us how to embrace others of a different color."

Her advice to those who want to reach out to the ethnic women in their churches and communities? "We can't just say, 'Well, we invite them but they don't come.' What can we do to reach out? Have we developed a relationship with at least one person of another color? Have we brought them into our circle of love? We can commit ourselves to this daily and the Holy Spirit will guide us."

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