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Quinceanera celebration brings family together

By Beth Behrendt, nsfeatures@news-sentinel.com
Monday, November 16, 2015 12:01 AM

Santana Gomez strummed the final chord of “House of the Rising Sun” on her guitar and smiled as the room broke into applause and cheers. It was April 2015, and Canterbury School’s “Coffee House Night” at Mocha Lounge was in full swing.

My eighth-grade son, Jack, was displaying his recent artwork and supporting his friends’ musical efforts.

With Santana’s lovely performance over, her mother, Christina Becerril-Carbajal, approached and asked if Jack had talked to me about Santana’s party. “No. I’m afraid he hasn’t!” I replied smiling.

He’s a 13-year-old boy. At best, I get told we are out of potato chips.

She explained that Santana would be celebrating her quinceanera in October and wanted Jack to be a chambelan in her court. “Do you know about quinceaneras?” she asked kindly. “Oh, of course, I do!” I nodded knowingly. (Because I read a newspaper article about them once!).

“Great!” she replied. “We’ll be starting weekly two-hour dance practices soon. I’ll text you the schedule!”

“Great! Talk soon!” I said, waving goodbye, my mind reeling: “Did she say practices ...? Dancing...? Jack...?!”

PREPARATIONS

As soon as we were in the car, I bombarded Jack with questions in classic ineffective, Mom style. He was, no surprise, short on details. But he was obviously excited about the party and happy to be helping his good friend. That’s all that mattered. I’d figure out the rest. The more I learned, the more intrigued I became.

First: it’s pronounced KEEN-say-ahn-YAY-ra. (Jack soon grew tired of correcting my pronunciation, finally throwing in the towel on my failure to roll my Rs.)

For many Latino families, a quinceanera is a celebration of a daughter’s “coming of age” at 15 years old. Family and friends come from near and far to celebrate the girl of honor. To say these parties can be elaborate is an understatement. Imagine a Sweet 16 party, a bat mitzvah, a debutante ball, and a wedding — all rolled into one!

Planning takes months, even years.

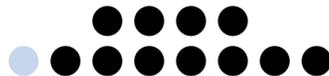
“I think Santana was 4 when she started talking about hers,” laughed Christina.

“I always wanted to have one!” agreed Santana. “Though I guess I thought about doing a Sweet 16 for a little while, ... but a quinceanera is so much cooler!”

The girl chooses 14 friends to be on her court (the boys called chambelanes, the girls damas) and picks a special male friend to be her escort (chambelan de honor). Santana chose her longtime friend, Brian Villareal, as escort. The court attends her at the quinceanera Mass and then performs several choreographed dances at the party afterward.



Santana Gomez, center, and her chambelan de honor, Brian Villareal, practice with the rest of the court for the formal dancing they will do at Santana's quinceanera, a celebration at age 15 of a girl's transition into a young woman. The writer's son, Jack DeSalvo, is at the front right. (By Beth Behrendt for The News-Sentinel)



More Information

Resources

These are the local businesses Santana Gomez's family used in planning their daughter's quinceanera:

* Abeography (choreography)

abeography@yahoo.com

* Classic Café Catering and Event Center

http://www.classiccafeinc.com

4832 Hillegas Road

458-2982

* Creaciones Isabella (quinceanera dresses)

2126 Fairfield Ave.

579-0842

* Rogers Formal Wear (tuxedo rentals)

http://rogers.myclixhosting.com

2809 Broadway

744-5100

* Totally You Alterations

http://www.totallyyoualterations.com

2447 Broadway

744-0698

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THE MASS

Santana's celebration began with a Mass at their home parish, the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Monsignor Robert Schulte, who officiated, said only one or two of these occur at the Cathedral each year. Christina told me, "other parishes that have larger Latino populations, like St. Patrick's, have significantly more."

To prepare for the ceremony, Santana attended classes at the Cathedral and met one-on-one with Schulte.

"We talked about the challenges of being a female — being accountable for your actions," recalled Santana. "Also about the unique gifts you have that can make a difference in others lives."

Schulte said the preparations give the girl "a chance for her to reflect on her status as a religious woman in the world." During the Mass, he mentioned she will ask for "the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, a woman of great faith and unity with God and Jesus Christ."

The Mass began with the court processing down the aisle, followed by Santana, who was escorted by her father, mother and stepfather. Part of the Mass is the presentation of special gifts from select family members and friends (padrinos).

"We wanted to make sure to choose people that are close to her and have an influence in her life," Christina explained. "Her padrinos included her brothers, aunts and uncles, cousins, and her godmother. Also my cousins, who are very close to Santana and assisted with almost every aspect in planning the quinceanera."

The gifts prepare her for life as a Catholic woman and remind the girl of her baptism and the vows she took at confirmation. The gifts are blessed by the priest and then presented to the girl by each of the padrinos. A bible and rosary are obvious gifts, but she also receives traditional gifts of jewelry: a ring and bracelet (symbolizing God's unending love), a tiara (symbolizing that she is "a princess in the eyes of God") and earrings (reminding her to keep her ears turned to the voice of God).

THE PARTY

The party is like a wedding reception in many ways. The room is decorated with twinkly lights, tulle and flowers. A beautifully decorated cake is on display, as well as a formal photo of the girl of honor. The guests are treated to drinks, dinner and dancing. There are speeches and toasts and a father-daughter dance.

Certain traditions make the quinceanera party unique. In the "shoe ceremony," the father assists his daughter in changing from the flat-soled shoes of girlhood into fancy high-heels. Up to that point, Santana had been sporting sparkly, pastel Converse sneakers under her flouncy, formal gown.)

Also a large, beautifully dressed doll is on display, representing the leaving behind of childhood. "It's the last doll Santana will receive as a little girl," Christina said. "It's really special that it was a gift from her Aunt Kristin."

Besides the gifts at the Mass, other padrinos assist by giving gifts or money for the party. Christina said that they did things "like helping to pay for the DJ and the reception hall; giving the guest book and the special pillow on which her new high heeled shoes were displayed." Christina's lifelong friend Lisa Bradley donated a gorgeous, homemade, multi-tiered cake and cupcakes decorated with edible sugar butterflies.

The efforts to prepare the boys and girls for dances they perform at the party are pretty astounding. Even though practices for the whole group had been going on since May, "it's the thing I'm most nervous about," said Santana a week before the party.

Trying to squeeze one more thing into the life of today's already over-scheduled teenagers is challenge enough. As Abraham Gutierrez, the choreographer for the event, stressed, "the kids have to realize what a commitment they are making; we have to battle phones and social media to keep their attention — not every kid is up to the challenge."

His business, Abeography, specializes in choreographing the dances that are a key feature of the quinceanera celebration. He helps the family choose the music and the type and number of dances.

"It's important to respect the traditions of the ceremony," he said, but the music and the choreography reflect the tastes of the family. "The main goal is to keep the girl's mom happy," he said, only half-joking.

After assessing the kids' skill levels, Gutierrez plans dance steps they can master. He attends every practice to keep the kids on task. For Santana and Brian, the practices for their more elaborate dances began in January. By June, the other kids on the court were practicing weekly, even two times per week over summer break.

The kids' performance begins with a couple of traditional formal waltzes. Later — after Santana had changed into a shorter dress that matched her damas and was more conducive to dancing — the kids return for a "surprise" dance to contemporary music with more creative dance moves. Then the rest of the crowd hits the dance floor.

GROWING TREND

Nationwide, a \$400 million-a-year industry has sprung up to support quinceaneras, which have similar requirements as a wedding: invitations, formal dresses, tuxedo rentals, hair stylist, photographer, limo rental, reception hall and catering.

Christina's planning began about a year before the event.

"Luckily, my cousin had planned one for her daughter last year," she said. "She had lots of advice on planning and which local businesses to use."

Santana's elaborate, rose petal-pink dress was purchased from Isabella's on Fairfield Avenue. "The damas' dresses were hand-made by Totally You Alterations on Broadway," explained Christina. "We decided to go this route because Santana wanted a rainbow theme. We couldn't find a store-bought dress that came in seven different colors!"

The chambelanes' tuxedos (as well as those worn by Santana's father, step-father and uncle) were from Rogers Formalwear. Richard Pape, owner, said that the number of quinceaneras for which he supplies formal wear has grown in recent years from "just a few a year to well over 20 percent of our business now."

They are so important to his business that his main goal, when he looked to move to a new building a few years ago, was to "stay in this part of town and continue to serve this community."

The reception was held at the Classic Café. Christina knew they had done a lot of quinceaneras and do the catering as well. "Even though the owner, Terry Clancy, isn't Mexican, he cooks authentically, and we got a lot of compliments on the food!," Christina said.

She is happy to see quinceaneras regaining popularity.

"I remember going along with my grandparents, but I didn't have one," Christina said. "Now a lot of people my generation are doing them for their daughters."

STRENGTHENING FAMILY

It brings family together: "It's a big deal, a family reunion — your daughter is getting in front of friends and family



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and accepting the responsibilities of young womanhood." But most important "is the opportunity it gives girls to connect with their heritage."

Santana concurred.

"I'm excited to celebrate my family and my heritage," she said. "But I'm also really excited to show my friends at Canterbury this part of my culture. It's not something that many of them have experienced before. Of course, Jack is now an 'honorary Mexican,'" she added, laughing.

A large group of her friends from school were there, eating authentic Mexican food and dancing like crazy. But they also listened intently as Santana made her speech. There stood a 15-year-old "girl" declaring the importance of her family, heritage and faith. She then expressed her deep appreciation to her parents — not only for a great party, but also for the hard work and sacrifices they make to give her the best opportunities they can.

At her "coming of age" party, it was obvious that Santana Gomez is already there.

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