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Quinceañera Birthday Bash Preserves Tradition, Marks Passage to Womanhood

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NEWS ARTICLE



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On a Saturday evening in July, Vanessa Negrete, 15, emerged from the hallway of an Oregon Way¹ union hall. Surrounded by young men in white suits, she shyly began performing the first steps of a *vals*—a carefully choreographed formal dance.

About 300 fascinated guests watched as Negrete's escorts, known as her chambelanes, lifted Negrete high above their heads. They twirled her in a full circle before setting her back down. The surroundings were humble. Fluorescent lights flickered, and metal chairs squeaked and bumped against folding tables. But Negrete, in her swaying violet ball gown and glittering tiara and long curls, was radiant. She was the guest of honor. She spent weeks preparing this first dance for her quinceañera. A quinceañera (keen say ahn YEHR uh) is an elaborate 15th birthday celebration common in the Hispanic world. She had worked with the choreographer, the church coordinator, the food preparers, and the dance partners.

Like many Mexican-American girls, Negrete had been looking forward to this night ever since she was a little girl. Last week, she said that at her sister's quinceañera, she imagined how she wanted hers to be. She thought of many ideas and considered if they were possible. At gatherings with girlfriends, Negrete and her friends would start talking about quinceañeras. In Latin America, a girl's 15th birthday party is a coming-of-age celebration. The event symbolizes a girl's transition from childhood to womanhood. "Quinces" are equal parts religious ceremony, family reunion, and raging party. The tradition has its roots in Spanish Catholicism. But the tradition has taken on new meaning as a celebration of shared heritage and new-found prosperity among Latino immigrants in the United States.

Father Jerry Woodman is the priest at St. Philip Catholic Church in NOTES Woodland. He says that a quince (KEEN say), as the party is called, announces that a girl is ready for greater responsibilities and privileges. Woodman is one of two Spanish-speaking priests in Cowlitz County. He officiates over as many as two quinces a week during the busy summer season. The first part of the quinceañera is a 'Thanksgiving Mass' at church. This ceremony encourages a girl to take responsibility for her own spiritual well-being, Woodman said. He added that he does a lot of praying silently for the girls' welfare. Family members and godparents play an important role. They give traditional gifts, such as a Bible and a locket with a picture of the Virgin Mary, to the birthday girl. Historically, a quince announced to a community that a girl was ready for courtship. "In many ways, it's like a debutante ball ... It's a kind of a coming out party. 'Hey guys, here I am! Take a

good look, and invite me to go to a movie sometime!” Woodman said. Most modern girls have greater freedom to interact with boys than girls did years ago. But the ceremony still has meaning for Negrete and her parents, Maria Sanchez and Isidro Negrete. “For most Hispanic people, 15 is the age when you can start dating. That’s how it’s been for my sister and me. ... before I was 15, I would talk to boys. But I would know that if I started dating, it would be behind my parents’ back. It would most likely disappoint them.” She added that now that she is 15 and has had her quinceañera, she can be honest with her parents about dating. In modern times, the second half of a quinceañera is a reception that includes a catered dinner, a series of traditional rituals, and an often-loud dance party with live music. Negrete and Woodman know that this party is often more important to the girls than the spiritual part.

Early in the evening, guests watched as Negrete performed each of the rites of passage for her formal entry into adolescence. First there was a slow dance with her father, followed by a toast. Negrete then changed her flat shoes for high heels, and received “the last toy.” The last toy is a ceremonial doll that symbolizes the end of childhood. Then the lights went out, and a Mexican norteño band and DJ replaced the recorded waltz music. Her guests began to move to the blaring, frantic beat of well-loved songs from Northern Mexico.

Grandmas in support hose and sandals danced along with little girls in party dresses. Wives slow danced with their husbands, balancing their babies between them. Children chased balloons. Young men in sharply pointed boots and dinner-plate belt buckles guided their dates onto the dance floor. “In areas of the U.S. where Hispanic tradition and wealth are more firmly established, these celebrations can be very extravagant and expensive,” said Bisli Vasquez. He is the owner of the San Antonio-based Bisli Events. A low-budget quince costs around \$10,000, but clients have spent as much as \$250,000. Vasquez says that for that price, girls can guarantee their fiesta will have “the WOW factor.” This includes giant, remote-controlled balloons that will explode, releasing a stream of rose petals during the father-daughter dance. “Locally, quinces are more modest, but they still aren’t cheap,” said Sanchez. Negrete’s parents both work full-time. But with four children at home, money is tight. Still, it was important to the couple to give their daughter her special day. “Really for us, it’s a tradition,” Sanchez said. “It means that you’ve started a new phase of your life.” Negrete’s parents worked hard to save \$7,000 over a year. Her generous, though not extravagant, party cost \$12,000 in all. She and her husband sacrificed and spent less money for a year to save \$7,000 of the \$12,000 it cost to throw the party.

“You try to do the best you can do,” Sanchez said. She added that quinces in the Pacific Northwest are often more modest than in Mexico or the Southwest. “Really, here, we have simpler quinces.” “Padrinos” helped to pay for the rest of the expenses. These included a fancy cake, decorations, and the cost of the venue. The word padrino means “godparent.” But padrinos at a quince might be family friends, extended family members, or business associates. They help pay for part of the party with the understanding that the girl’s family will someday return the favor. “Most families will put on an amazing show, but they will get sponsors,” explained Juan Tornoe. Tornoe is the founder of Austin, Texas-based Cultural Strategies, a firm that specializes in helping businesses market to Latinos.

He adds that they ask people if they would like to be the padrino for the dress or for the cake. “They’re contributing because it’s their niece or their granddaughter, or they’ve watched them grow up.” As with formal weddings in many cultures, the quince is also a rite of passage for parents. That is why even families of modest means will spend a great deal. “If you are from humble

beginnings to a certain degree, it's a status sign to be able to pay for a quinceañera," Tornoe said. "It's kind of like keeping up appearances. 'I came here, I worked my behind off, so I can do this.' ... It's fulfilling for them—to be the guy dressed in a suit, the mom dressed in a fancy dress, looking elegant and celebrating their little girl's rite of passage into adulthood." For Negrete's parents, the quince was also an opportunity to celebrate their accomplishments as parents. They could send their daughter, well prepared, into the adult world, her mother said. "We say it's like her second age," Sanchez reflected. "It's different now. ... When she was a girl, we took her where we wanted, told her what we wanted her to do, chose her clothes." "There are times when you worry that they've already grown up. But it was a good feeling for us to be able to give her the party she wanted. It's important for everyone."

Read the passage carefully and choose the correct answer.

1. What happens during Vanessa Negrete's choreographed dance, known as a vals?

- a) She is lifted up by her escorts, or chambelanes.
- b) she cries



2. How can you tell the event is very significant to Negrete?

- a) She wants to celebrate her birthday
- b) She has been looking forward to her quinceañera since she was a little girl.



3. What does the quince announce to the community?

- a) The quince announces that the girl is ready for greater privileges and responsibilities.
- b) The quince announces she is a little girl

4. What traditional gifts do girls celebrating their quince get from their families?

- a) Girls traditionally receive a Bible and a locket with a picture of the Virgin Mary.
- b) A doll and a ball

5. What are the two main elements of a typical quinceañera?

- a) A quinceañera typically combines a religious ceremony with a big party.
- b) A dinner and a toy

6. How many guests did Vanessa have?

- a) 200
- b) 300

7. Where is this celebration common?

- a) Latin America
- b) Asia

8. What does *las toy* symbolize?

- a) She can play any time
- b) the end of childhood

9. Was this celebration cheap or expensive?

- a) Cheap, they spend 7,000
- b) Expensive, they spend 12,000

10. Why are “padrinos” important in this event?

- a) They help to pay for the rest of the expenses
- b) They dance with the quinceañera.