

Boone County, Missouri

A free spirit

Audrey Tatiana Hoyos does not like traditional celebrations. Her quince today reflects that. It is a gathering of close family members and family friends. The only school mate invited was 14-year-old Priscila Garta who will be turning 15 in August. Instead of the traditional party, Audrey wants a trip to her home of origin, Colombia, South America.

"No pleasure in a party, dress, dance or song, would come close to what that trip would mean to me," she says. Her voice calmly carries the weight of her determination to do what would make her heart truly celebrate.

The first fourteen years

This is Audrey's first year in the United States. For many years before that, and with six of her childhood friends, she was eagerly planning a group quince maneuver. Born in the same year, the seven friends wanted to go on an organized tour to Aruba Island. "Quince organized tours are big in Colombia," she says. And on the island, they would have the chance to meet many other quinceaneras, and enter the world of womanhood en masse.

A big unexpected

But today, sitting in her basement bedroom in Columbia, Missouri, Audrey holds a tiny pillow. Her kindergarten best friend Nataly gave this pillow to her when both of them were five. Wistfully, Audrey recalls that she and her six childhood girlfriends loved and supported each other in their growing, learning, and understanding of life. They loved to dream of a future that kept them close to one another always. But that was interrupted.

The chance that changed all

"Only one month before I turned 14, my father got a chance to immigrate to the United States," Audrey says. "He wanted to be with his mother and other family members who had left for America 15 years ago, before I was born," she says. After difficult deliberations, Audrey, and her 18-year-old half-brother Christian, came to America with their dad. Audrey's mother stayed back in Colombia. That is why the trip to South America, which Audrey will take in six months, after the school year is over, means the world to her. "But I know that all six of my friends have had their quince by now and our group dream is lost forever," she regrets.

A year of challenges

And so, this past year leading to Audrey's quince, could not be consumed with preparation for a celebration, even if Audrey wanted that. Instead, the time had to be filled with waking up early, not to practice for a dance or flip through catalogues for quince dresses, but to exchange instant messages with her mom, who she misses deeply, and to study English and navigate her overwhelming new world. "With the transfer from South America to North America, and due to language struggles, I had to repeat the eighth grade," she says softly, holding back the feelings behind the words.

A surprise dress

Nancy Malugani, a trusted teacher and mentor from Audrey's school spoke excitedly about Audrey's unmatched discipline and commitment compared to those her age. "All last winter, day after day, I found her waiting at the door of my office by 7:10 a.m., ready to go," Nancy said. To express her admiration and support of Audrey, Nancy surprised Audrey on her birthday, Nov. 9, 2006, with a trip to the mall to purchase any dress she liked.

A poetic understanding

Audrey chose an elegant gown the deep color of dawn, shimmering with sparkling beads like morning stars. "I wanted it to represent the relationship between darkness and light," she says. "Normally, I would have

chosen a black dress, as black is my favorite color, but turning 15 means a person has changed. Choosing gray-blue is like a graduation from black, and accepting the change in me.”

They all agreed

While Audrey is beautiful on the outside, her personality and character are as visibly and strikingly beautiful too. Eneida, Audrey’s father’s partner said that Audrey is a gifted teenager. “She is smart, kind, honest and caring,” she said. Christain, Audrey’s half-brother, added that she is “extremely responsible, and no one has to tell her what to do. She knows what the right thing is.”

Laughing, Priscila now announced that she looks up to Audrey, and that her quince friend has the best sense of humor! Yes; she is generally shy. But she can imitate anyone, and we laugh a lot at that.”

Community appreciation

Today, relatives and close family friends contributed expressions of pride in Audrey’s rite of passage. Aunt Elizabeth Hoyos, a plant pathologist at the University of Missouri-Columbia, cooked for twenty guests and their children. Audrey’s father had 15 pink roses delivered. Many gifts either arrived with the guests, or were sent in by those who could not come, including a hand-knitted black shawl, a camera, a necklace with a healing stone, and a tiny box with jeweled earrings. And there were envelopes with various amount of money. Audrey’s mother had sent a letter from South America with some money too." I am looking forward to using the money for shopping at my leisure,” she whispers.

Welcoming the future

“Quince is a time of increased responsibility. I am thinking about my future. I want to become a geologist in order to discover the layers of the earth that we stand on. I feel that history is written in the layers of earth like words are written in the papers of a book. I want to go to Egypt and study the mummies and investigate other cultures. I think the future is filled with exciting possibility,” Audrey says.