

Catalina (Katie) Castillo Fierro

Catalina (Katie) Castillo Fierro, 59, the mother of five, is a housewife in the northern Orange County community of La Palma.

She was born in Long Beach, where her parents settled after leaving Mexico in 1915 to escape the revolution there. In January, 1932, her family was among thousands of Mexican immigrants placed on trains in Los Angeles and deported to Mexico. Her parents had not become naturalized citizens; Katie and her brothers were among those U.S. citizens deported.

Scenes from that Depression-era backlash against Mexican immigrants are still in her mind: the humble basket of Christmas toys she clung to throughout the trip; a young woman who raced from window to window inside the train as she tried not to lose sight of her boyfriend outside.

In Mexico, her father was a farmer, successful for a time, then slain by wealthy land owners in a dispute over water rights, she said.

Katie helped her mother raise her sister and six brothers, endured ridicule in Mexican schools because she was an *Americana*, and then returned to California—and renewed discrimination—just as World War II began.

Yet, after all this, Katie exhibits no bitterness. Instead, she speaks of the strong family bonds that helped her endure.

We learned a lot (in Mexico). We learned other customs, other ways of thinking, how to work in the yard and in the home.

When we came back (to California in 1941), we didn't know how to speak a single word of English. We lasted a few months in Westminster. The little ones went to a school where only *Mexicanos* went.

The first time I went to the movies in Santa Ana, I went with my friend. After we grabbed our tickets, we went to take a seat. Then my friend calls me. "No, no, no—come over here." "Well, why?" I asked.

She tells me, they don't let *raza* (our people) come in here. "Do we have to go to the balcony," I asked her.

"Yes, come over here."

"No. I've never liked to sit in the balcony. If they don't let me come in here, then I won't leave them my money."

They gave us back our money and we went. My friend went along laughing. "We're already used to it."

"Well, it's your fault 'cause you let them treat you like that."

So then, from the very beginning, I've always felt myself equal. I felt like a person anywhere. And I still feel that way.

In that barrio, they used to call it *La Garra* (The Rag), there was nothing but Mexicans living there, and the houses weren't that good . . . no sidewalks, no nothing. Even though we had just come from Mexico, it wasn't what we wanted. I wanted to live in a place where you could learn something, not go back-



Katie Castillo Fierro with husband Pete, son Richard and daughter Magdalena

'I never felt I had to be more than a housewife. I'm not a professional, but I learned a lot of things in my life. I've worked. But when any member of the family gets sick, I quit.'

waras.

So then we got out of there real quick. We went to Long Beach.

During and after the war she worked at Douglas Aircraft. Then in 1949 she met Pete Fierro, who was just out of the service. They married in 1950; their first child, Peter Jr., was born a year later. They moved from Long Beach to the barrio in Wilmington and Pete began a 30-year career at the General Motors plant in South Gate.

When I got married, I knew I was going to have children. I said, 'I'm not going to work,' because I worked to help my mother. I didn't have the luxury of not working all those years. I had to have the dinner and the house ready. So when I got married, I said I'm going to be with my children. I wanted to have six children—three boys and three girls.

In the years that followed, Katie gave birth to three boys and one girl. One son was asthmatic and the daughter was born with club feet. Then, at 43, she gave birth to her fourth son, Richard.

He surprised us (but) I was very happy. But I was hoping I would have another little girl. We have our religious convictions. You're not responsible for a life. It's like the ones that I lost. I lost three; the reason, I don't know. I have always thought that if you're going to have a child, it's because God's given it to you. You accept it. It's a blessing.

I have high blood pressure, so I have to be on a strict diet. When (her son) Robert was born, I learned I was a diabetic. But it's no problem. I mean, I have this health problem, fine. I'm the only one, so I don't think it's fair to deprive them of all the goodies.

In 1953, Katie and Pete left Wilmington and bought a tract home in Lakewood.

To save that money was a struggle. It was \$400 down. We gave \$100, then we raised \$300 more. We were criticized: "Those are people with money, what you doing over there?" Our own relatives, they couldn't understand. We didn't say anything and we bought our house anyway.

We were very broke. When you don't have too much, you have to learn how to do a lot of things. I used to make my daughter's clothes, my clothes. Hand-me-downs, I used to redo them, put a pretty scarf on an old dress, stuff like that. As long as I had a good pair of shoes and stockings, you can make even a simple, fresh cotton dress look pretty.

An episode in Lakewood was troubling.

One day a little (Anglo) boy came to visit us. "You shouldn't be living here," He said it innocently. But he remembered that. He's a policeman now. A few years ago he came back and told my husband he was sorry for what he had said to us.

In 1971 the family moved to a new two-story home in La Palma. Katie's children completed their educations. Today, a proud Katie reflects on the survival skills she learned from her mother, now 87.

She has to be the most inspiring, strong person there is. She raised six boys and two girls by herself. Like she always said, *primeramente Dios* (God first.) If you strongly believe, he'll help you somehow.

But there's a lot of things she had to do that I didn't do. She was very obedient, doing everything my fa-

ther said. After my father was killed, she had a heck of a time selling the property in Mexico because her name was not on the deed.

I don't know, but I cannot be very obedient. I believe questioning is the best way to get ahead and better yourself.

She fiercely defends her Mexican heritage.

I have relatives that have changed their names. Well, it's their choice, but I think that I am proud of what I am, where I come from and of knowing two languages.

But the more you know, the more advantaged you are. This is what I tell my children. I'm kind of ashamed to say they don't speak Spanish the way they should. But I'll tell you why. In learning to speak English, Spanish became less important at home.

The two older ones can express themselves pretty well. But Bobby, he refused until his last year in high school. "Why didn't you make me, why didn't you make me?" he told us.

"How can I make you? And besides, if you want to learn, let's start right now. Whether in six months, a year, you can learn if you really set your mind to it."

She reflects on 33 years of marriage.

I never felt I had to be more than a housewife. I'm not a professional, but I learned a lot of things in my life. I've worked. I worked as a waitress 11 years. But when any member of the family gets sick, I quit.

My family has always been first, no matter what.

You can be happy with a family, you can be very productive. That's your happiness, your whole life.