

MY MEXICAN-AMERICAN STORY

By Staff Member
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My name is Angela Cisneros McMichen. I am from Houston, Texas born and raised. I moved to Henrico Virginia when I was 33 years old to help an old friend raise her child while I committed to go back to school and pursue my degree in nursing. I met my husband here and we have been together 18+ years and have a beautiful 10 year old daughter now raising her in Powhatan Virginia.

I was asked to speak about my heritage and I have to say that I am proud to be American of Mexican decent. My family is deeply rooted in Texas as some are previous owners of land in parts of Texas that was once known as Mexico before its settlers won independence from Mexico sometime around 1836; I was raised with my parents and my paternal grandmother that prayed her rosary every morning and every night, blessed me and my brothers at bedtime and fed us delicious Mexican cuisine like buenellos at New Years and Christmas, Tamales at Christmas, crocheted baby clothes, shawls and blankets while we sat at her feet listening to her stories, some true some fairy tales I learned about later in life; I remember her telling some scary stories, probably because two of my brothers and I were quite mischievous and it was her way of keeping us in check. We couldn't wait for her to bless us at night so we would dream happy dreams. One very popular holiday

known as Cinco de Mayo is an annual celebration held on May 5, which commemorates the anniversary of Mexico's victory over the French Empire at the Battle of Puebla in 1862. Led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, the victory of a smaller, poorly equipped Mexican force against the larger and better armed French army was a morale boost for the Mexicans. Cinco de Mayo has become associated with the celebration of Mexican-American culture. Celebrations began in California, where they have been observed annually since 1863. The day gained nationwide popularity in the 1980s due to advertising campaigns by beer, wine, and tequila companies.

I enjoy Cinco de Mayo due to the reminder of the beautiful colors and language of my Mexican heritage. Mexican people are hard working, caring and creative individuals who have an affinity for family and religion. I was blessed to have been raised in a neighborhood with Spanish speaking people from central and south America who forced us to try our hand at speaking Spanish in their homes as they would not accept any other language in hopes in keeping their language and culture alive. America is a melting pot of cultures and we are all blessed to be able to learn from one another and share in all of our cultures and life styles. This is what sets America apart from the rest of the world.



Brandermill Woods
DEI Committee
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OUR MISSION

To educate, embrace, and empower a community of diversity, equity, and inclusion.



OUR VISION

The Diversity Committee will seek open and honest communication and collaboration that will inform and celebrate the cultural, ethnic and sexual orientation of our community without bias.



OUR STORY

By

IL RESIDENTS PETER & GISELA STECH

Diversity is what molded Gisela and Peter into who they are today. Both were born in Germany during WWII, which ended in misery for both. As children, they experienced the war in different ways.

Gisela was born in the eastern region of Germany annexed by Poland at the end of the war. In 1945, her family fled west escaping the approaching Russian front. It took them six months to finally arrive in Bremen, West Germany.

Peter grew up in Hamburg, a place devastated by Allied air raids. His family spent many hours rushing for protection to overcrowded air raid shelters. During one of the worst months, the family was evacuated to rural camps.

At the end of the war in 1945, scarce food supplies were common. The harsh winter of 1946 was particularly devastating as fuel supplies dwindled and coal trains were often a target for desperate parents.

With their education completed and "the world calling us to explore," Peter was given the opportunity by his German employer in 1970 to take a job in the United States. By that time, they were

already married and had two children. They accepted the offer and off they went.

"The chapter of moving is much too long to cover here." But one thing that moved with them was, and still is, the belief that "a stranger is a friend you have not met yet." They learned quickly that customs are quite different. American English differs from British English taught in school. In Britain, a trunk of a car is called a boot, and the sanitation worker is a dustman. Another shock was ice cold American beer compared to a nice European beer at room temperature. They also learned that there is a racial divide and antisemitism in the United States. In their own words: "On occasions our children came home from school asking what a NAZI is? When asking for details they said that some children called them that. Who did the children learn this from? You decide."

Over the years, they had the opportunity to live and work in three countries, as well as travel to some forty countries. They often felt like the minority,

like strangers in foreign places. One thing they learned is that all people regardless of color, ethnic background, language, and culture have one thing in common: the love for family, children, and friendships. There is still hope for a better world.

As to some personal experiences living in the United States for 52 years they said: "Yes, after all these years we still have a German accent. We are often asked where we are from. The answer is: from Midlothian (we have lived here since 1988). Sometimes we get some negative comments about the accent. For us that is the moment to ask how many foreign languages the person speaks or how good their German is. A moment of frosty silence, which almost all the time turns into an icebreaker."

For Peter and Gisela, these were difficult years. They learned early on that those hardships will form one's character, that sometimes circumstances are what they are, that one must adapt to survive. As they grew up, they also learned gruesome details of racially motivated killings by the NAZI regime. The knowledge fostered a guilt feeling even though as children they knew nothing about it nor had any part in it. It makes one look at the world with different eyes when historical details are slowly revealed.

Germans are known as punctual, industrious, meticulous, and mostly very direct in their approach. Need an answer? In most cases, it will be a direct one, not politically correct bla, bla, bla. Just to mention a few other typical customs:

Birthdays are never celebrated before the actual date, Christmas celebrations start on Christmas Eve and include opening presents, and never do laundry between Christmas and New Year's Day (it's a bad omen).

Germany is also known for an educational system that favors not only public schools up to high school and universities but also an excellent apprenticeship system. The latter is a major reason for "Made in Germany" quality of products. All students from fifth grade until graduation are required to take 2 foreign languages. English is mandatory, and French, Spanish, and others by choice. Peter and Gisela went through high school (English and Spanish) and an apprenticeship program for several years. Peter continued higher education at a University for Applied Engineering graduating with a degree similar to a Master of Science in Mechanical Engineering (MSME) in the United States. "We love Brandermill Woods and the staff. It is a great place to live and enjoy. It is also time for us to pay back to society and actively support resident sponsored activities."

