

My Way

The life and times of Jose Fernandez



Ed & Carlos Fernandez

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For the Grandchildren and the greats that follow....

*Your Grandpa Joe was quite a character...and had
a lot of character. Hopefully, learning about his will help you,
as you develop yours.*

Chapter One

Puerto Rican Childhood

It was August 13th, 1937 when Mercedes Fernandez gave birth to a small baby boy in a hospital in Ponce, Puerto Rico's third largest city. He was named Jose, after his uncle, and, just like him, was often known simply as Joe. His father, Eugenio, was thirty five - a year older than Mercedes.

Jose's grandmother was physically a very frail person, but mentally very strong. Jose was to become like her in many ways, because they both loved entertaining guests. She always went out of her way to make people feel comfortable and happy. It wasn't that she had to; it was that she wanted to. She was the kind

of person that insisted guests to her house could not leave unless they had been fed.

One of Jose's favorite stories of his grandma came about on his last visit to Puerto Rico. She was nearly one hundred at that time, but she had insisted that the whole family meet at her house for a family day. The house was packed with uncles, aunts, cousins, and friends and Jose's grandma spent the day sitting on the porch, playing a guitar, and entertaining her guests. At some point in the day, one of Jose's uncles was singing, so she politely asked him to stop, "as she was playing the guitar." He took her words as a suggestion and not an order, and kept on singing. A few seconds later she broke the guitar over his head, then walked back into the house, brought out another guitar, and sat down again. Jose said that it was the most hilarious thing that anybody had ever seen and that his uncle said not a single word more that day; he just sat and listened to her play.

Living in Puerto Rico, Jose's parents were not rich, but neither were they poor. It could be said that his family lived an average, or just above average life.

He was brought up in a little town called Igitas and most of his extended family lived either in Igitas or Ponce, so it was quite a closely-knit community. His mother was a homemaker and his father worked for Pan American airlines for almost all of his working life.

One of Jose's uncles was an attorney, who also owned several barbershops. His son, Jose's cousin,

became a veterinarian and opened up his own veterinary business in Puerto Rico.

Jose's favorite relative was his uncle Vito who lived in Puerto Rico before moving to New York in the mid-1950s, around the same time as Jose's family moved there. Vito was a lot older than Jose, and Jose looked up to him as a mentor and adviser. Vito would often drop in to see Jose's family and Jose always looked forward to those visits.

As a young boy, Jose loved doing things. He could always find something to do, but there were never any stories about him getting into serious trouble. He and his friends spent a lot of time in and around the swimming holes that were to be found in the forest behind his family's house. Like most young boys, he was always seeking out new adventures, playing Indiana Jones in the jungle and spending time with his friends swimming and playing war; the modern-day equivalent of a boy building a tree house in his backyard. And just like any normal boy, he would occasionally get into trouble with his parents. The rules of life for Jose in Puerto Rico were quite simple: have a good time, but make sure you do your homework and chores.

Mercedes and Eugenio had a rule that the children had to clean up after themselves and help Mercedes with the housework occasionally. One of the chores Jose least enjoyed was kitchen duty because he hated being in the kitchen. Unfortunately for him, there



Jose's Dad – Eugenio



Jose's Mom - Mercedes

was no other option because Mercedes was determined that each member of the family would learn to cook.

Jose had two sisters, Ada and Anada, and a brother, Carlos. He had a good relationship with all three siblings, though he was closer to Carlos than his sisters, particularly after Anada and Ada moved to California to get married. Carlos and Jose were always up to something, whether it be playing around or playing up. As adults, Jose and his brother remained close and Jose would often take his family to Carlos' house for a weekend visit or include Carlos on their family outings.

One day when the family was still living in Puerto Rico, Jose and his brother were asked to make the rice for dinner. They carefully measured the rice into the pot as per their mother's instructions, but when it was done they thought that there wouldn't be enough, so they simply poured the whole box of rice in the pan. The first thing Jose's father saw when he walked through the front door a few minutes later was Jose bailing bowls of rice out of the pot. The pot had boiled and there was rice all over the stovetop and the floor. Jose's father did not know what to do but in the end, he just laughed!

Jose's parents were married until his father died at the age of ninety-six. It was a happy marriage. They were both very strong, firm people, well respected by their community and families. His father was the kind of man whom everybody answered to. None of the children wanted to mess with him; the rules were if

Eugenio called, people answered. If he wanted to know what was going on, they told him without beating around the bush. He was also a very traditional person, a man who had neither the time nor inclination to spend lots of money, preferring instead to set it aside for a rainy day.

When Eugenio passed away in 1997, Jose helped Mercedes clean up some of his father's clothes and they came across several wooden boxes filled with cash. His father had hidden money all over the house, because he had lost track of how many banks he had put his savings in.

Mercedes, Jose's mother was a lovely lady but she was also a very firm woman who didn't like to be crossed. She believed that whatever she said was right, regardless of the facts, and she didn't like listening to reasoned arguments, especially when she was wrong. One example of that is the time that she and Eugenio came to visit Jose and his family in New York. It was the early 1960s and Jose and his family were living in a thirteen-story project building in downtown New York. The apartment faced west and from the windows one could see almost every part of downtown New York. As Mercedes was looking out of the window, she said, "My God, you can see the mountains of New York". At first, the whole family had thought that she was just being funny, but as it turned out she was very serious. When Jose said, "Ma, you know those are not the mountains of New York - they are clouds" she became very angry with him and the family realized that like it

or not, those clouds were going to be the mountains of New York, at least for that day.

When it came time for discipline Eugenio was the "softer" of the two. He never used his hands for punishment, but people still knew when he was angry. Mercedes, on the other hand, was quite handy with the strap.

Chapter Two

Winter Wonderland

Jose's family moved to New York in the late 1940s where they lived on the Upper West Side. Jose attended a public high school on 61st Street for his senior years. It was the same school in fact, that the motion picture version of "West Side Story" was filmed in 1961. One afternoon in New York, Jose met some of the blockbuster-to-be film crew as they set up the sets in his school.

As a teenager, Jose's favorite holiday season was Christmas, when the school was closed and the streets of New York were heavy with snow. In winter, he spent much of his free time skating at the Rockefeller Plaza ice rink, or sledding and playing around in the snow with

his friends. Jose often said that for him New York in wintertime was like Disneyland. Some days he would walk to St. Patrick's Cathedral and buy a bag of freshly roasted chestnuts and look at the Christmas mannequins. In the 1950s, display mannequins weren't as interactive as they are now. They were simply stationary figures of Santa Claus and his reindeer. Jose enjoyed it so much so that as a father he wanted to take his children to New York so that they, too, could experience the joy of the 'winter wonderland' of his youth.

In New York, Jose's family socialized a lot within their community. Some evenings they would go out dancing, though most often they would have a "get together" at different people's houses on a Friday or Saturday night to drink, play cards, talk, and listen to music. Each week it was a different person's place, and always the children were welcome. After church on Sundays, the same group of people, plus the local priest would often be found sitting at Mercedes and Eugenio's breakfast table, sharing a meal.

Jose took a couple of weekend and after-school jobs in New York to make some extra pocket money. One of the jobs was working the elevators at the Empire State Building, escorting people up and down. He enjoyed this job and often told people that as a teenager he had met Mickey Rooney and Red Buttons at the Empire State Building.

His second job was working in a local theatre, a job that he truly loved because it let him combine certain

social and professional interests. As a teenager, Jose was the kind of person that always had four or five girlfriends rather than just one. He was a flirt, but he was good at it and no one ever got hurt with Jose, because they all knew that was just the way he was.



Jose posing as a cowboy at the Lincoln home

In the mid-1950s, the theatres in New York City were set out quite differently than today. They had one, two, sometimes three different levels for moviegoers to sit in. Jose would let his girlfriends in through the back door and seat one girlfriend in one part of the theatre and then another in a different area of the theatre. That way as he walked around the theatre to check on the customers, he could spend a little time with one, walk

away, then, spend a little time with another, and never get caught. That's the kind of person he was!

In his spare time, Jose played a lot of stickball and street basketball. Stickball was a popular sport for teenagers in New York back then, because all that was needed to play it was a tennis ball, a mop stick, a couple of friends and a relatively empty street. Once they had those four things, Jose and his friends could just pick out their bases down the boulevard and play for hours. He also loved watching baseball and would sometimes go down to Yankee Stadium and watch the Yanks play. Aside from sports, Jose's three greatest passions as a young man were movies, music and Latin dancing. His favorite singers were Frank Sinatra and the Ray Connors Group although he also liked the Mama's and the Papa's and a lot of Latin music as well.

As a teenager, Jose spent many evenings at home talking for hours on end with his father about history and famous events, such as the sinking of The Bismarck in World War II. Jose's father was an excellent storyteller, always sharing small, atmospheric details such as the temperature, scenery and weather of that particular day until the words became so real that the listener could picture the whole event in his head.

At school, his favorite subject was history because he could use it to challenge his father. Jose's father loved reading, especially history and Jose used to hate it that when Eugenio said, "Jose, did you know this?" Eugenio could tell him even more about that particular subject. One could say that learning more

about history than his father became a personal challenge for Jose. He was a good student, though from time to time his teachers did contact his parents to complain because he wasn't following through on his homework or was talking too much in class. He graduated from high school in 1952 with good grades.

The next year, Jose volunteered to join the US Air Force. Shortly after he enlisted, he was posted to Korea where he was involved with the maintenance and upkeep of many of the fighter jets, bombers and reconnaissance planes. When he returned to the USA, he was stationed at the defense force base in Roswell, New Mexico, where he stayed for a couple of years.

Chapter Three

Roswell, New Mexico

Jose met Emma Lara, his wife to be, in 1955 when he was living in Roswell, New Mexico. One evening, Jose went off base with Ralph, a fellow soldier, supposedly to meet Ralph's sister Sulema who worked at a local hospital. Coincidentally, Ralph's other sister, Emma, also worked at this hospital. Jose often said that he would never forget the moment when he and Ralph were standing at the intersection, waiting for the light to change and he saw Emma walking towards him for the first time.

Before she had even stepped off the curb, he felt attracted to her only to realize a few moments later that Sulema was the woman that Ralph had wanted him to

meet. Apparently Emma had felt the same attraction as she walked towards Jose, and one thing soon led to another.

Emma and Jose dated for about a year before getting married in 1956. He was nineteen and she was eighteen. At the wedding Emma wore a white off-the-shoulder dress and Jose wore his Air Force uniform. They looked a dashing couple and very much in love. After the ceremony the happy newlyweds went to New York City for their honeymoon.

After they were married, Jose and Emma lived in a small house in Roswell. It was their first time living together as a couple, but things were relatively easy for the new couple as they had lots of support from both family and friends.



Jose and Emma on their first family trip to Tijuana, Mexico

He had met Emma's side of the family first because they lived in Roswell, and although everything went well initially, the relationship soon went sour. The short version of the story is that in 1970 Emma's family chased Jose, Emma and baby Carlos out of Roswell in a car, although the specifics of the event and its cause are unknown.

Jose's first son, Carlos, was born in Roswell in 1957, nearly a year after Emma and Jose were married. Jose took his responsibility as a father and husband seriously and was determined to provide well for his family, even if that meant sacrificing some of his own, personal career ambitions in order to achieve it.



Jose with Emma at the Ravina Home

In 1958 Emma and Jose moved to New York, where they lived in a project building in downtown New York. Money was always tight for Jose and his family, and he struggled a lot financially until about 1975, when he started working as a teacher and making a good wage.

In New York, Jose worked at several different places, even taking two jobs at the same time in order to make ends meet. His first job in New York was as a waiter at the Rockefeller Plaza. Then he was offered a job as foreman at a factory in New York's Garment District, which suited him well as he was a skilled sewer, both with a sewing machine and free hand. In later years Jose worked as Head Custodian at St. Rita's Catholic Church, and one of his last jobs in New York was with Louver Drape Co.

In 1959, two years after Carlos was born, Emma gave birth to her second child, Elizabeth, in New York. A year later she presented Jose with a second son, Ed. Shortly after Emma became pregnant with Ed, she was diagnosed with diabetes and was forced to be very careful with diet and exercise throughout the whole pregnancy. After Ed was born, Emma was admitted into hospital almost every year for the rest of her life for treatment of her diabetes.

Jose and Emma's three children, Carlos, Elizabeth and Ed were each very different. As toddlers, Ed soon became known as the "holy terror" of the three siblings, which meant that any time Jose needed a babysitter, particularly when Emma was in hospital, the response

was, “We’ll take Carlos and Liz, but you will have to get somebody else for Ed!”

Jose loved being a father, and took a lot of care to ensure that his children enjoyed the same positive experiences that he had as both a child in Puerto Rico and adolescent in New York. Perhaps because of his Puerto Rican upbringing, Jose felt that childrearing was primarily a woman’s domain and whilst he enjoyed being a parent, he saw his role as being the provider, disciplinarian and establisher of rules; it was Emma’s role to enforce the rules and maintain a balance in their everyday life.



*L-R: Stanley (friend), Liz, Ed, Emma, and Jose
on their first trip to Magic Mountain, CA*

As a father, Jose believed strongly in the need for discipline; he made the rules and, on occasion, spanked his children when they disobeyed him. Like his parents, Jose established a list of chores for each of his children

to complete every day – weekday and weekend – no exceptions. Jose was also very strict when it came to schoolwork and insisted that his children do their homework every night. He believed in As, Bs and Cs and no Ds, because in his words, “A ‘D’ is just a glorified ‘F’.”

When Jose was a child, Eugenio his father, would say to Jose, “Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you what you are. Tell me how you live your life and I will tell you where you are going.” Jose believed strongly in these words that his father said, and he passed them on to his own children, who passed those same words onto their children.

Many years later, when he himself was a father, Jose decided that there was no such thing as a perfect parent, but he worked hard to raise his children well so that they too would know the difference between right and wrong; understand the importance of education and hard work; be aware of the perils of drinking and drugs; and always be willing to help each other or any others in need. He saw his role of father as a guide, and passed that knowledge on to his own children.

Outside of school and chore time in New York, Ed, Elizabeth and Carlos would meet up with their friends. Some of their favorite games were tag, jumping from roof to roof of five-story buildings “because they were so close together” and jumping down the fire escapes. Life was simple in many ways for the children; Emma and Jose knew most of their neighbors and were confident of their children’s security.

When the weather was fine, Jose and Emma would often stroll down to the local park or drop in to a friend's place for a drink and a chat or a game of cards. It was a very close and friendly community and Jose, always the entertainer, was a popular guest.

Each year, Jose and Emma would prepare themselves for the holiday period months in advance; scraping together money for gifts and travel, and organizing family get-togethers.



Emma and Jose

Like most young children, Ed, Carlos and Elizabeth were mostly unconcerned by tighter budgets and always thought that the best time of year was holiday season, when they were able to spend their days celebrating with family and friends.

One year in New York, when money was extremely tight Jose spent Christmas Eve searching high and low for suitable gifts for his three children. He had not been paid until the day before and so he spent hours walking through the streets of New York searching for the "right gifts." As luck would have it, he finally decided on three portable FM/AM radios that he had seen in a thrifty store. The gifts were perfect! Carlos, Elizabeth and Ed had all recently started to "get into" music and the only one thing that they had all wanted for Christmas that year was a radio!

During the summer months, New York became like an oven and Jose and some of the other local fathers would occasionally pry open a fire hydrant for the neighborhood children to play under. When that happened, all the neighborhood children rushed out onto the streets and stood under the streams of cool, fresh water until the fire department arrived to turn it off again.

In New York, the Fourth of July is always a cause for celebration, but for Jose it was also a day to play up and have fun. Every Fourth of July, the men from Jose's church would gather on the streets to play war games with cherry bombs and firecrackers. In New York in the early 1960s the council supplied each household with a

silver-colored aluminum trashcan, and one of the most popular Fourth of July challenges was to throw a cherry bomb in the can and see who could blow the lid the highest.



Having a beer at his sister Ada's house

When the games and warring were over for the day, everyone would head back to one of the parishioner's places for supper and more chatting.

Chapter Four

New Ambitions

In 1969 Jose's brother-in-law, who was married to his sister Anada, passed away in a car accident. Jose attended the funeral, which was in California. He instantly fell in love with this West Coast state. Later that year he left his job at Delta Airlines in New York and moved his family to Southern California where he took a job at a local Shell gas station and attended an automotive trade course at Harbor City Vocational College two days a week.

By this time Ed, his youngest son, was nine; Jose felt that many of the more immediate pressures of raising a young family were behind him. It was time,

Jose decided, to set about achieving his lifelong ambition of becoming an automotive mechanic.

Life changed considerably for Jose and his family when they moved to Wilmington, Southern California. Jose was wary of his family's new environment and imposed a "sundown curfew." His children protested of course, reminding him that, "California is a safety paradise, compared to New York." But it was to no avail. The curfew stayed in place.

In early 1970, shortly after arriving in California, Jose bought his first car; a big, black car with long fins stretching from the back that his children nicknamed the "Batmobile," for obvious reasons. The whole family was ecstatic when Jose drove the car into the driveway for the first time; in New York no one owned a car, so it was definitely a big occasion.



Working on the car in the garage

Another aspect of life that changed was family time and general socializing. Jose had always been a hard worker, but after moving to the West Coast he began working six days a week. Each week, he worked Monday through Thursday from 7:30 in the morning till 9 at night with a break in between, then Friday and Saturday from 7:30am until 2pm. It was a lot of hours but he didn't mind because he loved it. But the opportunity for family social gatherings became fewer as Jose had to squeeze his family time in between his work and study obligations.

As the months passed, Jose and Emma's relationship was strained by the vigor with which Jose pursued his career. There were fewer and fewer occasions when he and Emma socialized alone, as they had in New York, now all the family was included. In response, Emma became more independent, learning how to drive a car and, as the children got older, seeking employment again.

Jose always believed that what made him different from his siblings was that he loved to work with his hands; he did not mind getting his nails dirty, in fact, he found it fascinating. A keen student, the first task Jose learnt at his automotive course was how to change a car's oil, and as soon as he had mastered that he set about changing as many car's oil as he could. When he learned how to tune up a car engine, he proudly offered to tune up everybody's car.



Jose and Emma after buying the Lincoln home around 1973

Jose was a charismatic man; both men and women enjoyed his company, sometimes to an extreme level. One example of that was Mrs. Daniels, an elderly lady who “fell in love” with Jose while he was tuning her car. From that day until the day she died, she wouldn’t let anyone but Jose tune her car! During his time at the garage, he accumulated quite a few customers like that; once he had touched their car, they wouldn’t let anybody else near it.

During Carlos’ high school years, Jose spent a lot of time with his son as they shared a number of common interests, such as automotive mechanics, military collectables and movies. For a number of years, Jose took on odd jobs to make extra money for the family and on many weekends he and Carlos could be

found painstakingly stripping back a car's engine. In the early 1970s, Carlos was quickly becoming a young man and was eager to get a part-time job; much of his life revolved around work, Beach Boys music, friends and "cruising" the streets.



1978 – posing in the rainforest in Puerto Rico

Elizabeth was very active in school, involving herself in the drill team and color guard as well as attending a lot of the sports events. She was very popular with the boys and Jose spent a lot of time during these years worrying how to keep his "baby girl" safe.

Ed was "the kid with all the boys in the neighborhood," keen to be involved in anything to do with music and sports. He was by far the most athletic of the three children, involved in many sports including baseball, and track and field. Jose's new career and Ed's

upbringing collided in some ways, as Jose was often too busy or too tired to spend time with his youngest son.



Emma and Liz at Liz's high school graduation – 1977



Jose and his son Ed in front of the Lincoln home, 1974-1975

On his rare free days, Jose's favorite way to relax was browsing through the Sears tool department searching for gadgets and objects to improve his personal tool inventory. Another of his favorite pastimes was building model cars and he spent a lot of time in the family garage planning and carefully assembling his intricate models.

One day in 1973 when Jose was still a student at Harbor City Vocational School, Emma received a telephone call to say that he was being rushed to the hospital.

When she got there, she was told that he and another man had been working underneath a car that was on jack stands when the other man had accidentally knocked one of the jack stands down. The car started to collapse on them both, so Jose had held the car up with his arms and his legs so that the other man could get out safely. He did, but the car came down on Jose as he let go and he broke a couple of vertebrae.

1975 was a big year for Jose. He bought his first family home in Lincoln Avenue, Carson CA, a big cul de sac neighborhood. The family's house was right next door to Diana's Mexican Restaurant, a fantastic "old style" eatery where everything was freshly made. It was great for Emma too, because the food was perfect for any surprise house parties. He also enrolled in UCLA, hoping to earn a degree in Education.

He loved mechanics, but felt that his real calling was as a vocational teacher. He believed strongly in the

benefits of good teaching and one of his favorite sayings was, “If you do not believe in religion but you need something to get you into the pearly gates, become a teacher because you are doing something positive for a child’s life”.



*Jose at his Aunt Mickie's "Lazy H"
Ranch in Puma Valley, CA around 1975*

Like many parents, Jose found it hard to accept that his children had become young adults. When Carlos decided to move out of the family house in 1975, he carefully chose a time when he knew that Jose would literally be walking through the front door as he, Carlos was exiting out of the garage. Carlos felt that he needed to do it before his father got home because he was sure that Jose would not let him.



Jose, Emma and Carlos



Jose, Emma and Ed at Ed's graduation 1979

Elizabeth moved out in 1978 to get married. Less than a year later his youngest son, Ed, joined the military, got married, and moved away from home, leaving Jose and Emma with just each other for company.

Shortly after Ed moved out, Emma and Jose began to have some “problems” in their marriage, though perhaps a lot of those tensions could be put down to “empty nest syndrome.”

After leaving home, Carlos started working in the retail auto parts business in California while Ed moved to Florida where he was stationed for eight years with the military. Elizabeth’s first marriage disintegrated quickly, but some years after she was divorced she became involved with Dennis. Jose approved wholeheartedly of this new relationship, partly because Dennis was a nice and kind man, and partly because he was a very mature, successful man and Jose believed that he would give Elizabeth all the good things in life that she deserved. When Dennis and Elizabeth bought a house and started settling down, Jose was very happy, because it was what he had wished for himself.

Ed and Carlos, on the other hand, both took a while longer to settle down into family life, a fact that Jose was not too happy about.