

Thursday, January 18, 2007

## Storyteller Uses Fotonovela Format to Get Message to Public

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*Albuquerque Journal*-- By Polly Summar

*Journal Staff Writer*

Ana Consuelo Matiella grew up in a home on the Arizona/Mexico border where fotonovelas were forbidden. "My mother thought they were trash, pulp fiction, like soap operas," says Matiella of the illustrated stories with titles like "Estraña Pasión" (Strange Passion). "When I was a kid, if she found them around the house, she would throw them away."

The twist of fate that finds Matiella now making a living from producing public health fotonovelas, as part of her social marketing consulting work, doesn't escape her.

"She died the year I finished my first one, and she couldn't believe I was writing one, that someone was actually paying me to write one," says Matiella.

It was the early '80s and Matiella was working for the Southwest Arthritis Center at the University of Arizona in Tucson.

"They gave me a pamphlet to translate that was so complicated— it didn't work in English and it was going to be dismal in Spanish," says Matiella.

So choosing a fotonovela format— a passion-filled, easy-to-read story with photographs— seemed a logical choice.

"Diseases can be very devastating to your life— they cause a lot of drama," says Matiella. "We named the fotonovela 'Dolores y Esperanza.' There were two characters, Pain and Hope, and Hope taught Pain how to manage her arthritis."

Today, Matiella can count a wide range of fotonovelas to her credit, from encouraging library use to offering information about AIDS and promoting walking as a form of exercise. She's also worked with various teen groups in doing fotonovelas about teen pregnancy.

Currently, she's producing a diabetes prevention fotonovela for the Centers for Disease Control and has a proposal in to Stanford

University to do a fotonovela on autopsies that would explain why the procedure is necessary to learn more about Alzheimer's.

Matiella does the health research, writes the stories, lines up the actors and arranges the photographs.

## **Natural storyteller**

Fotonovelas started during World War II in Italy, says Matiella, because the country couldn't import movies during those years.

"And in 1980 in Mexico, there were 100 million copies of historietas (in which the pictures are drawn instead of photographed) and fotonovelas published every month," Matiella says, ranging from rosas, Cinderella "poor girl makes good" stories, to policíacas, police dramas.

As one of the first people in the country to produce public health fotonovelas, Matiella gained enough success that she could chart her own career.

And so, after a number of years working for ETR Associations, a health education publisher in Santa Cruz, Calif., Matiella decided to move her family to Santa Fe.

"We came here to be able to buy a house," says Matiella. And she wanted her daughter, Sara Naegelin, now 23, to be raised in a town "where Hispanics weren't just poor— they could be mayor or lawyers or doctors."

And yet, it was the somewhat limited resources of Matiella's extended family growing up that turned her into a storyteller.

"I was bored on those dog-day afternoons when it was 110 degrees and you couldn't go outside because it was too darn hot," says Matiella of the summers she spent at her grandmother's house on the Mexican side of Nogales. "There was no air-conditioning, no TV."

But there was the flavor of life, and it flowed through and past her grandmother's house. "There was the baker who carried his table on the top of his head and then set it down and opened up a beautiful white tablecloth filled with all his breads," recalls

Matiella.

The washerwoman came to the house, too, setting up tubs outside to wash the clothes. "There was the vegetable guy and the grease guy, who came around to pick up the grease from cooking," says Matiella.

"My Tia Paqui would say to me, 'Each one of those people has a story— write what their story is,' and then she'd give me journals and pens to make up a story."

If not for the heat, Matiella describes her life then as idyllic. "Nogales was like 'Leave It to Beaver' for Mexican Americans," say Matiella, 55. "I could walk from my house on the American side to my grandmother's house on the Mexican side when I was 10 years old by myself. Now you wouldn't dream of doing that."

Matiella's father was Spanish-American and a sales representative for a company that imported farm equipment and auto parts from America to Mexico. While Matiella was born on the Mexican side of Nogales, her father moved the family to the American side for a better education for the four children.

"My mother was Mexican and had a sixth-grade education, but she could run circles around you," says Matiella. "She bragged that because she repeated each grade twice she had a 12th-grade education."

Matiella and her cousins spent every summer with their grandmother. "We all slept outside on cots because it was so hot," she says, "and my relatives would tell us stories to calm us down at night."

"One uncle in particular and two of my aunts were great storytellers and they competed. Sometimes it was who could tell it the loudest."

## **Social marketing**

Today, Matiella lives in Eldorado with her partner, furniture maker Dan Stubbs, and in recent years has delved into another

aspect of storytelling she's always loved, writing fiction.

A collection of her short stories, "The Truth About Alicia," was published by the University of Arizona Press in 2003, and she is working on a novel and another collection of stories based on Mexican-feminine archetypes— the whore, the mother, the virgin, etc.— that all take place on the border.

"There are so many similarities between Santa Fe and where I grew up," says Matiella. "Santa Fe is a border town where different cultures come together. El Paisano, next to Big Lots, is like walking into Mexico. And the tortilleria by Felipe's Tacos."

Besides fiction writing, Matiella is just as enthused by new aspects of the public health work she's doing. "I just got certified to do business as a minority business with the federal government," she says. "I'm hoping that will lead to other things."

She began doing social marketing consulting in the mid-'80s, shortly after starting her fotonovela work. "It's about using marketing principles to promote social causes," says Matiella.

"Ana is very skilled at finding out how people think about things," says Nancy Jane Heilman, who works for the New Mexico Department of Health in the public health division.

As an example, Matiella and Heilman cite the research Matiella did with older Hispanic women about mammograms. Matiella found that the mention of breast cancer actually frightened women away from getting mammograms.

"We had to do a campaign without mentioning breast cancer," says Heilman, so the theme became "Mammograms save lives."

Social marketing is never done in a vacuum, says Matiella: "If you're not talking to the people you're going to be sending your message to, you're not going to be effective.

"I pride myself for doing innovative work," says Matiella.

"Anything I've done in my career, I'm always a little ahead of the curve."

### **Fotonovela Dialogue**

César: "If you hadn't gone for your mammogram, the lump could have gotten bigger. I could have lost you, Rosa!"

Rosa: "I'm glad you insisted, Viejo. The doctor said I am going to be all right."

César: "Thank God I am so stubborn!"

& nbsp; Rosa: "Let's not go too far!"

Comadre Jesusita: "Mammograms save lives. If you are over 50, get a mammogram every year. You may qualify for a free mammogram. Call 1-877-852-2585 to learn more."

-- from "You Need To Know!" a bilingual fotonovela for the New Mexico Department of Health