

Our Story: José Luis Sámano & Ema Pérez

José Luis Sámano was born in Irapuato, Guanajuato on March 26, 1939. He remained there for the first six years of his life. “It was a great time,” he said of those early years. “My dad had a good job in Irapuato so we were pretty wealthy, high society there. But he died when I was five years old...my mom had seven kids so that’s when we started having problems. It was hard for my mom to be able to support all of us...one of my older brothers decided to go to Mexico City with one of his godparents to work in their grocery store.”

When Luis was seven he moved to Mexico City with his mother and six siblings, where the family crowded into a twelve-by-twelve foot room. Luis immediately took an after-school job at the grocery store where his brother worked. He eventually grew tired of working at the store and found work at a car dealership. He went to school to learn how to be a mechanic and came to specialize in repairing automatic transmissions, which were new at the time.

In 1960, when Luis was 20 years old, he traveled across the border through Tijuana to go to work with his cousin, Juan, who owned a dealership in Los Angeles. When his cousin picked him up, he informed Luis that they were not going to Los Angeles, but instead were driving to Oregon. “He wanted to come to Oregon because he knew a family, the Bergs, and he had a crush on one of the girls. My cousin met the family when he gave them a tour of Mexico City. So he told me he was going to Oregon. Of course in Mexico we never knew what Oregon was. What we knew then was Los Angeles and Texas and New York, you know the big things, but Oregon, never.”

So Luis and his cousin Juan drove north, all the way to Alvadore, Oregon, where they stayed on the Berg farm for a few days and then drove on to Portland. They stayed and ended up finding work at a Volkswagen dealership. Luis also began dating one of the Berg girls, Nancy, who became his first wife. Luis applied for and received a green card through the dealership.

Luis then moved to Eugene where he worked at a Buick dealership on Olive St. When Luis looked around Eugene in 1960, it was very white: “Everyone was all Anglo people. The only people of color I saw at that time were way over on West 11th. That’s where the Black people used to live. The first time I saw a brown face was at St. Mary’s Catholic Church. I was so happy to finally see a brown face that I could relate to. I went to try and talk to the man in Spanish and he looked at me and said, “No. I don’t speak Spanish. I am from New York,” And that was the end of it. I was really demoralized because it was the first time I’d seen someone who might speak Spanish.”

Luis continued to work at the car dealership and to date Nancy. “Nancy used to go and pick green beans to get extra money. She asked me if I wanted to go with her and I said, “yeah,” for fun. So I went and started picking beans. I don’t know what they sprayed on those beans, but I got a real big rash and that was the first and last time I ever picked beans.”

Luis recalled that Springfield was full of farms, and that high school kids would go and pick green beans and other crops, and then spend their money at the Lane County Fair. During this period Luis also worked with a high school teacher to improve his English and made many friends in Eugene. He then took classes in English and automotive mechanics at Lane Community College. He became an American citizen after taking classes at LCC.

When Nancy Berg finished high school, she and Luis were married at the Catholic Church in Springfield. Their first son, Michael, was born in 1964. At that time, one of Luis’s coworkers decided to return to Mississippi and sold his house to Luis. They had a second child, Debbie, in 1970. Luis went to work for the 4-J School District. After more than ten years of marriage, Luis and Nancy divorced and Luis became a single father. He later met Ema Pérez during mass at the St. Thomas More Newman Center at the University of Oregon.

Ema Pérez was born in Cotulla, Texas on August 11, 1945. Ema’s mother was born and raised in Mexico in a small rural town; her father was raised in Texas.



Clockwise from the top/En el sentido de las agujas del reloj desde arriba:
 1) Mariana, Ema's mom, in 1927. Mariana, la mamá de Ema, en 1927;
 2) José Luis Sámano and Ema Pérez. José Luis Sámano y Ema Pérez;
 3) Ema and fellow students in 1965. Ema y unos compañeros en 1965.

Ema's mother's family raised animals on a small farm. They also owned a store where they sold items such as rice, sugar and coffee. Ema's parents married in secret, most likely to due an anti-Catholic movement that prevailed in Mexico at the time.

Growing up in Texas, Ema found that people of Mexican descent were segregated from whites in restaurants, buses, and other public places. She remembers sitting as a child in the "Colored" section: "Colored meant Mexicans, Indians, and African-Americans." Ema remembers her family working very hard in Cotulla and elsewhere.

"I had six brothers. I was one of the youngest yet I had to work as hard as the rest of them. I always was doing something to help out. When my Dad couldn't get work, he'd take all of his kids out with our old horse and wagon to cut wood and sell it to the neighbors. We would go around to different towns near San Antonio---Beeville, Dallas, Corpus Christi, Mathis, Kingsville...and cut wood and sell it around town or we would work gleaning corn for the farmers. I remember in Tyler, Texas, the farmer let us stay in this big warehouse. There were pinball machines in this warehouse. We worked there for two weeks. The reason I remember that is because my youngest sister died. I had two little sisters after me, but both died when they were babies. We worked there and as soon as we buried her, we left. Then we went to another little town and worked there and then we left. We moved on to another place after that."

Ema began working at the age of six, starting with carrying water and moving on to picking cotton and other crops. "We lived in migrant camp in Tulare, California...we picked grapes there. Then in Riverside we picked oranges and plums, and in Paris, California, we picked watermelons and onions. Then we went to the state of Washington to harvest sugar beets."

Ema came to Oregon in about 1958 at about the age of twelve. She and her family worked in Keizer and lived in a migrant camp by the Willamette River. They picked hops, beans, and other crops. During that time her brother contracted tuberculosis. . The entire family was tested and Ema, her dad and two nieces were then diagnosed with TB and were interned in the Marion County Tuberculosis & Health Center. "It took our family almost a year to get better. My dad and one brother were in the hospital even longer. They had to take part of my Dad's lung out. After that we moved to Silverton. We would go to the Mexican movies that were shown in Woodburn on Wednesdays."

Ema graduated from high school in Silverton and came to Eugene in 1965. She was recruited to the Upward Bound Program at the University of Oregon. "They recruited what they called 'disadvantaged' students, including African-Americans, Native Americans, whites, and Latinos. In fact, there were five Mexican guys and me." Ema completed her B.A. at the University of Oregon in 1972 and a Master's Degree in 1974. Ema had her daughter Consuela in 1975.

Ema met Luis Sámano in 1977. They first saw one another at mass at the St. Thomas More Newman Center at the University of Oregon. Luis asked Ema out to lunch. They got along and about six months later they got married. They each had a house and children and decided to consolidate their property, put their families together, and move to Alvadore. Luis started working for the 4-J School System. Ema worked in family services for the state.

Luis retired in 2001 but has remained active in Lane Community College, teaching at the Puertas Abiertas, (Open Door) Program, Rites of Passage. Ema retired from Adult and Family Services with the State of Oregon in 2003. They continue to be active in issues of concern to the Latino community such as voter registration, anti-immigrant state ballot measures, and bilingual access and education.

Their children have assumed professional positions in the education and health fields in the Eugene-Springfield area. Michael Samano is the head of the Ethnic Studies Program at Lane Community College and completed a Doctorate in Education at Oregon State University in 2007. Debbie Samano- Hopper is a nurse in the psychiatric unit at Sacred Heart Hospital in Eugene. Consuela Perez-Jeffris was Assistant Director at the Office of Multicultural Affairs at the University of Oregon and is now working at the UO Associated Students Executive Office at the EMU.