My Father, My Heritage

Famous dad taught young Lorenzo to be proud of his legacy.

By Lorenzo Lamas, Los Angeles, California

I borrowed Dad's Rolls- Royce one day. My stepmother, Esther, has kept it "mint" all these years.

Thirty-seven years old, and the car is in amazing shape. It just purrs. Slowly, I backed down the driveway, past the wrought-iron gates of Dad's old house and onto Santa Monica's Readcrest Drive.

Soon, I was cruising up the Pacific Coast Highway toward Malibu on the way to pick up my daughter for her baseball tryouts. I guess even 8-year-olds try out.

It was a perfect southern California Saturday, cirrus clouds sweeping the blue sky ahead. As I passed the Getty Museum, I remembered how Dad used to take me swimming across the highway at Will Rogers Beach.

In the ocean, my father swam like the champion he had been in Argentina. He would carry me on his back as he surfed into shore, the water crashing about my young face.

At the Malibu house, my eldest child, Alexandra, came running out to meet me. She suddenly stopped and stared at the long, sleek car that stood waiting. I think she wanted to make sure it was me.

"Daddy-where'd-you-get-that? Whose-is-it-Daddy? Do-you-have-a-new-car?" Her words were all running together.

"It's Papa Fernando's," I laughed.

Gingerly, she climbed up into the car's front seat. "Wow! It's big!" she said. "What's that smell?"

"It's Connolly leather," I explained.

"It's a fancy car," she noted.

"Yes, it is, Alexandra," I assured her.

The car is a reflection of my father. Powerful and graceful. Elegant and confident. Conspicuous but refined. In that baritone voice of his, I can hear him saying, "In a Rolls, Lorenzo, you've arrived!"

A "Driving" Lesson

I remember the days that he'd pick me up from school and how I anticipated running out to the parking lot to find him sitting in the tan and gold Silver Shadow, reading the newspaper. He'd look up from the paper, see me and honk the car's distinctive horn. I would get looks of envy from the kids who saw me climb in and speed off.

Sometimes, other kids would tease me about my name. Back in the '60s, in Pacific Palisades, there were no "Lorenzos" or "Fernandos." All of my friends were Bills and Daves, Jeffs and Jays.

"Where you from, Mexico?" other students jeered. "Is your mom a maid?"

Sometimes, I'd get so mad and feel so completely alone, I wouldn't talk, even in class, even to my teacher.

One afternoon, when my dad came to get me, he saw I had been crying and knew it had been a particularly hard day of teasing. We left the school parking lot and headed down Sunset Boulevard, toward the Pacific Ocean.

I asked, “Aren’t we going to Bel Air?” That’s where Dad and my stepmom, movie star Esther Williams, lived since he and my mom had divorced.

“No, amigo, not yet.” He reached over and gave me a reassuring pat on the leg. “I want to show you something.”

We drove on for what seemed like forever, probably 30 or 40 minutes. Finally, we came to a stop at a quiet intersection just above the ocean. The sun’s golden afternoon light cascaded over the eucalyptus trees lining the street on both sides.

“Come over here,” Dad said, getting out of the car and walking across the street. “I’ve brought you here to show you something, something I never want you to forget. Look up there and tell me what you see.”

I was staring, somewhat blankly. “A street sign?” I asked, quizzically.

“Exactly. What does the street sign say?” he asked, pointing just above a lamppost.

“It says ‘Lorenzo Place,’” I noted.

“That’s right. Lo-ren-zo Place,” he said, pronouncing the street in syllables. “You, mi hijo, have a very important name.”

He gestured with his hands toward the houses below and the ocean in the distance as if he were encompassing all of California, a reverse conquistador who had found the promised land.

“Santa Monica, San Vincente, La Cienega, La Jolla,” he called out, as if there were an audience below waiting to applaud the names of the streets on which they lived.

“Remember, amigo, that before there was a Harry and a Chuck,

there was a Pedro and a Lorenzo. Wonderful names with a history! A courageous band of settlers built missions up and down the Pacific coast hundreds of years ago—El Camino Real!”

He let the moment sink in. My dad, Fernando Lamas, was also a part of American history, and I was to be heir to his story.

I sat hushed at the weight of his words to me. I, Lorenzo Lamas, had a history. It seemed as big as anything I’d ever learned at school.

Years later, when my first son was born, I proudly named him Alvaro Joshua Lamas. Dad was no longer with us, but I know he smiled from that high hill above the Pacific.