

Muñecas

An age-old quinceañera tradition that symbolically ushers a girl into womanhood

BY LESLIE D. ROSE



The muñeca, or doll, is part of an age-old tradition during a quinceañera—a Latina’s 15th birthday celebration that marks the girl’s rite of passage ushering her into adulthood.

Known as “the last doll,” the muñeca fulfills a tradition in some Latin cultures that give girls a new doll as their last toy. Other cultures allow girls to give an old one to a younger relative. Each country has a different tradition associated with its quinceañera, but the doll is a prevalent historical aspect across cultures.

Quinceañera custom gift maker Sylvia Solheim calls the last doll a nostalgic touch.

“The doll symbolizes the leaving behind of childlike things and the taking on of adult things—obligations, responsibility and, most importantly, the receiving of more authority over her life,” Solheim says. “This sentiment is enhanced beautifully when the family includes a younger [girl]. The quinceañera [birthday girl], regrettably but lovingly, gives up the doll and passes it on to her younger sibling, cousin or family friend.”

As many people do, Latinx families have carried their time-honored traditions with them worldwide. When Solheim first started her company 22 years ago, shipments were concentrated in the heavily Hispanic areas of California, Texas and New York, but she’s seen a massive boom in orders from Florida, Arizona and Ohio, with an additional significant percentage of orders from the South and the Northwest.

The 2020 Census shows that Maryland, Washington D.C. and Virginia each have more than 11% Hispanic populations. Solheim also receives orders from the region because these niche items are hard to find in less Latinx-populated areas.

She says she co-created her online store, Quinceanera-Boutique.com, after struggling as a single mother living away from family while planning her daughter’s quinceañera.

“There weren’t many resources, and I had no idea what to do,” she says. “My sister flew in from Texas to help me plan and shop. As I researched the internet, I discovered there were no quince businesses online—just bridal shops peddling wedding gowns for quince events—and no manuals to reference.”

The website’s mission is to help families plan their quinceañeras, and everything offered is strictly for that

event. Solheim, admittedly not a party planner, even wrote a quinceañera planning guide that was sold on Amazon.com. Over the past two decades, she says her content has appeared in several other places.

Such resources have helped Italian-American mother Bethany Ruiz Salguero in her three-year planning of a quinceañera for her daughter, Rosa, who is also Peruvian and Guatemalan. Rosa will give away a doll she received at age 5 to her 3-year-old cousin during the celebration. The doll will wear the same dress as the receiving child.

“It’s been the favorite [doll] that she slept with at night—it’s one of those things that she still has in her room; obviously, she doesn’t sleep with it very much anymore, but it’s always something that’s on her bed. It’s a very special doll,” Ruiz Salguero says.

The doll Rosa will give away symbolizes her entrance into womanhood. But that doesn’t mean she’ll be off on her own. Her excited mother says she takes the challenge more for herself as a parent to step up and give Rosa the life tools she’ll need to be a well-rounded adult.

“It’s basically a milestone that she’s reached 15, and three more years and she’s out of here,” she says. “So it’s my job as a parent in the next three years to give her what she needs so that she can go up to college or she can go and get a job.”

Overall, Rosa’s quinceañera, which will be held in August, will honor the whole of Rosa’s culture with traditional aspects such as switching from flats to high heels, wearing a tiara, paying tribute to people who have guided her life, a Catholic mass, and—because it’s her favorite food—pasta.

“I want her to enjoy it and celebrate her culture,” Ruiz Salguero says. “It’s not just like, OK, we’re having a big party because she turned 15; it’s to thank all the people who have helped raise her and also for her to be stepping into her womanhood almost.”

As for the muñeca Rosa is passing down, whether it’ll be the same doll the current 3-year-old passes along at her own quinceañera depends on a few factors, but one most significantly.

“It depends on how good that doll was made because, if you think about it, it has already been through a lot,” Ruiz Salguero says. ■

