

A URUGUAYAN AMERICAN STORY THAT CONTINUES TO UNFOLD

BY GABRIELA TOLETTI

This last June my father (Ludovico Toletti) died in Montevideo, Uruguay. My uncle Carlos, a few of my father's friends and I were gathered around his coffin when a young woman walked in the room of the funerary home. She looked familiar but I had never seen her before. She immediately gave me the impression of being a determined, a strong, and a courageous woman. Several questions rushed through my mind: Who is this young woman? What relationship did she have with my father? Did she know him? She stood in the room with great presence and asked: Gabriela? I softly replied: I am Gabriela. Then she took a few steps towards me, looked at me with eternal love and said the words that would change my life forever: I'm your cousin Claudia! So we hugged! We hugged, we cried, and we looked at each other with the wonder and love that a mother looks at a new born baby. This was indeed the birth of a wonderful relationship. In a strange, mysterious way my father had finally united us.

I was born and raised in Montevideo, the capital city of Uruguay. At 34,5 degrees of South latitude, Montevideo is the southernmost Latin American capital city. With a population of 1.5 million inhabitants and 67 km of coastline on the River Plate (Río de la Plata) it is the seat of the administrative headquarters of MercoSur (Common Market of the South) Montevideo is a cosmopolitan, intellectual, vibrant and European style city. Some people have described it as a city with a charm that is at the same time romantic and melancholic. I have my own personal reasons to agree with these statements.

Growing up in Montevideo I knew that I had a cousin named Claudia. I knew she was the daughter of my father's brother Heberton. We shared the same last name Toletti, the same passionate blood run through our veins, but for reasons that were mysterious to me my parents had never given me the opportunity to meet her . . . until that day when my father's soul brought us together. Early that morning Dora (Claudia's mother) received a phone call from a friend who with an alarmed voice said: "Dear Dora, I think that your brother in law passed away yesterday. I just heard it in the radio funerary news. I don't think there is another Captain Ludovico Toletti Tamaro. The radio announcement said that the wake is at the funerary home "Martinelli" this morning. His daughter and brother in law are at his side" Dora immediately replied: I need to call Claudia! As Claudia heard the news from her mother she quickly reacted and said: "I have to go. I'm on my way to the funerary home right now!" It was as though she knew that this was a date she could not miss. This was a meeting 41 years in the making. The stars must have been aligned well that day when Claudia and I met, and my Dad's soul started his journey to heaven. I picture that he smiled from above as he saw Claudia and I hug for the first time. After that day Claudia and I have been inseparable! She took me to meet Heberton (My father's brother) and Dora (Heberton's wife and Claudia's mother). For the first time in my life I called Heberton Uncle and I called Dora Aunt and it felt great! They are wonderful, warm and loving people. I also met a wonderful extended family and many of Claudia's friends. Claudia's best friend Virginia told me: "Ahora estás en familia" = You are in the midst of you family now. And, indeed I was! Claudia also told me so many great anecdotes about: El Nono and La Nona: Our Grandparents. As she told me these stories she magically helped me to implant new

memories in my mind. I feel that she transferred some of her memories to my unconscious and as a result some of her memories of our grandparents have now become my adopted memories. Before I returned to the States she gave me other priceless gifts: She gave me a shawl, a mantilla and a napkin that belonged to La Nona, our grandmother, along with many old family pictures. The trip back to the States was extremely emotional to me. I had such precious cargo: I traveled with my father's ashes, family pictures, La Nona's belongings and a new loving family in my heart and in my soul. Since I returned back to Tidewater Claudia and I talk on the phone at least once a week and we e-mail each other several times a week.

Claudia and I are the same age. And I'm going to give it away!!!! We were born in Montevideo in 1964. In 1964 there was not one president in Uruguay. Instead there was a "poder ejecutivo colegiado" "executive branch council committee" formed by 9 people that would take turns rotating to act as presidents. The general assembly of senators and representatives chose the members of the executive council: 6 from the party which received most of the votes and 3 from the party which followed in votes. There were 4 colegiado committee style governments in Uruguay in the period from 1952 to 1967. One of the presidents during the 1963 to 1967 government was Benito Nardone. Years later, a street would be named after Benito Nardone. Claudia happens to live in that street. Actually, she lives in the same building where Benito Nardone once lived. After 1967 the constitution was reformed and we went back to "presidencialismo" presidentialist uni-personal government like we have here in the United States and like we used to have in Uruguay before 1952.

Claudia and I, are mostly European in heritage. Our grandfather Hermenegildo Toletti was of Swiss-Italian heritage and our grandmother Anita Tammaro was of northern Italian heritage. From my mother's side I also received Italian blood via Grandpa Juan Carlos Altieri and a drop of Spanish and Portuguese from the Pereira's. The composition of my heritage is not uncommon to Uruguay. In fact, during the late nineteenth century, social, and political changes produced heavy immigration from Europe, particularly from Italy. In fact, many Europeans immigrated to both Uruguay and Argentina prior and during the First World War. Like my ancestors, many people foresaw the horrors of war and decided to migrate to Uruguay and Argentina. This was a time when Uruguay was economically prosperous, and there was an abundance of jobs. My great grandparents Toletti's and Tammaros were contractors and builders. Contractors were very valued in Uruguay, because there was a construction boom. These immigrants and their families, many of them, like to Toletti's skilled workers hailed from countries with well-defined political traditions making a marked contribution to Uruguayan life. They demanded improvements in the country's schools, they increased the nation's productivity, and they added a fresh measure of social and political awareness to the Uruguayan political parties.

It is not surprising that Uruguay has a European flavor. 9 out of 10 Uruguayans were either born in Europe or had parents or grandparents who were born there. 90 % of the immigrants came from Spain and Italy, in about equal proportions. Many other European nationalities including Portuguese, English, Irish, Welsh, French, German, Dutch, Greek and Scandinavian are also represented in the Uruguayan cosmopolitan population. Other backgrounds and cultures have also influenced our national fabric.

The African Uruguayans for example comprise 1% of the population. Although the Afro-Uruguayan population is small in numbers it has deeply influenced Uruguayan culture constantly enriching the nation's cultural landscape. The country's original inhabitants, the Charrúa Indians, unfortunately have left behind only a legend of their existence which included more than a century's resistance to Spanish and Portuguese colonizers. The few Charrúa descendants though, are very proud of their ancestry.

Every culture and background represented in the Uruguayan population left a deep mark in the Uruguayan cultural landscape influencing the nation's art, music and literature. For instance, around the time of heavy European immigration Tango was born. In fact, Tango is an urban phenomenon that emerged in the late nineteenth century in both sides of the River Plate. The sounds and rhythms of Tango have Italian, African and Spanish origin. Other typical Uruguayan musical genres are Candombe and Murga. Candombe is an Afro-Uruguayan musical genre that expresses nostalgia for the distant African land. Three different kinds of drums called "chico, repique and piano" are an integral part of this type of music. It is supposed that the drums talk among themselves and invite each other to engage in a conversation asking and answering questions. This is the typical music of Uruguayan carnival. Murga is another Uruguayan musical genre. It is identified by a rhythm called "a marcha camión" "truck parade", certain percussion instruments called "bombo, platillos y redoblante", songs that express social and political criticism and satire, and a group of 15 to 17 singers that are divided in 3 voice groups. We also have folk music which is a musical expression that is reminiscent of country popular music. This Folk musical genre is also identified by political, social and country theme songs and guitar as the instrument of choice. I always loved Uruguayan music.

As a child I used to watch Tango TV programs with my Altieri grandparents. Lately I learned that one of my second cousins Alejandro Toletti is the best Tango dancer and Tango dancing instructor in Uruguay. So, in my next trip to Uruguay I will learn from the best! The Uruguayan culture, as you can see, is the result of a magnificent combination of several cultures. The culture of the immigrants from Italy and Spain left probably the deepest mark in the art, architecture, dialects, customs, traditions, educational system, values and food of Uruguay and Argentina. In fact, Uruguayan food is eclectic and it is closely related to several migration movements from Europe, particularly from Italy, Spain and Germany. Uruguayan food is tasty but it is not spicy hot. Uruguayan cuisine has also incorporated some popular South American dishes such as empanadas (Turnovers usually stuffed with beef, ham or cheese). Beef is probably the main national dish! In fact, we are one of the countries with the highest consumption of beef. I gather that my Toletti grandparents were very good cooks. They cooked mostly Italian food, and beef. I wish I had sat at their table and had a meal with them.

My mother's family also had a rich European heritage. My Altieri Pereira Grandmother's cuisine was also mostly Italian and Spanish and it was delicious. My grandmother's name is Zulema Elvira Pereira de Altieri and my mother's name was Zulema Altieri Pereira. My mother had Spanish, Italian and Portuguese heritage. My mother grew up with two beliefs that controlled her life and influenced mine for a long time. First she grew up believing that she belonged to some kind of royalty. My grandmother Zulema Pereira de Altieri fueled that belief. Second she grew up thinking that her parents loved their son more than they loved her. My grandmother Zulema had a lot to do with that too! Consequently my mother's brother (My uncle Carlos) grew up to

become an internationally recognized heart surgeon. My mother never pursued a career but she was a very intelligent woman, who just did not allow herself to reach her potential. She thought a woman's place was only to marry and to have kids, but she secretly, and not so secretly, envied my uncle and his success, and she envied the fact that my grandparents used every opportunity they had to express to the world how proud they were of their son. My grandfather was also very successful. He had a very important job in the judicial system where he was very respected and recognized. He held a professional degree equal to that of an attorney specialized in real estate. My grandmother Zulema was almost as proud of her husband as we she of her son. My mother met my father when she was walking with a friend along the Rambla (boardwalk by the seashore of the Río de la Plata = River Plate River). My father was dressed in his navy military uniform. My mother was very impressed and, as you can probably imagine, so was my grandmother when she found out that Ludovico was a Navy Pilot. My mother and father married on a January day. My mother was not fond of my father's family. She did not like me to have a relationship with the Toletti's. My Toletti grandfather was a contractor and builder just like his father. He loved construction and he loved buildings, just like I do. I did meet my Toletti's grandparents. But, I probably did not see them more than a few times in my life! I do remember them though. I still feel that longing of getting to know my Toletti grandparents. I remember family conversations in which Dora's and Claudias' names were mentioned. I did wonder how my cousin Claudia was like. But I was just a child and did not rebel and say "I want to meet Claudia, it is my right to meet her", because back then I was scared! As it turned out my father was scared too! Because later in life after my mother passed away, he

confessed to me that on many occasions he sneaked out of our house to see his parents. He would tell my mother he was going jogging but he was really going to see his parents behind my mother's back! My Toletti grandparents were wonderful people, Swiss-Italian hardworking immigrants, loving people, family people, fun people and energetic people. I learned a lot more about my Toletti grandparents later in life. After my mother died, my father and I would take long walks in Norfolk. He would tell me anecdotes and great stories about my grandparents. Those walks were so enlightening to me! Through my father's stories I felt that I started to build a relationship with those previously absent grandparents. It was not their choice to be absent. My mother forced them to be absent. Recently when I met Claudia I learned even more about my father's parents. When I was growing up, I thought of them as my father's parents. Now, I have the honor of calling them my grandparents.

As a child I did develop a very good relationship with my grandparents from my mother's side, especially with my Altieri grandfather who for a long time was my absolute hero! He and I were buddies. My grandmother Zulema Elvira was a very intelligent woman. She was an avid reader and therefore a good writer. When I was growing up, I remember she always would say complicated and sophisticated words that I did not know. She always sounded like a poet. Hence I developed my vocabulary and my eloquence. Something that I feel I lost now. Well, I lost some of my native Spanish eloquence because I don't speak Spanish all the time and I will never sound like an American native speaker either. I heard other people explain this dilemma saying that they feel they don't belong here (in the States) or there (in their native country). I personally don't feel that way. I feel that I do belong to both the United States of

America and to Uruguay. I'm proud of having dual citizenship and both nationalities are very dear to my heart. But how did I get here?

My mother facilitated me the road to start a new life in the United States. In fact, when I was a little girl she made sure that I attended private American and British Schools where English was taught. I heard her say countless times, that English was the language of the future and that I needed to learn English, because if something radical ever happened in Uruguay and I had to move to another country, English was the international language that would be useful anywhere in the world. In many ways my mother was a visionary. But, it is actually not uncommon for Uruguayans to learn other languages. There are several private elementary schools and private high schools in which English, French or German are an integral part of the curriculum, especially English. In Montevideo there are also hundreds of private institutions where people from all ages learn languages after work, after school or in their free time. Public schools also provide basic foreign language instruction. Uruguayans' desire to learn languages is fueled by the belief that foreign languages will facilitate better job opportunities either in Uruguay or abroad. Many young professionals actually aspire to leave the country in search of a better life in the USA, Europe or Canada.

As a little girl I did not like to learn English so I reluctantly learned English at school. I was more interested in other topics. Everything about my grandfather's profession attracted me and I wanted to become a lawyer. But my mother discouraged that. She said that if I studied to become a lawyer I would only be able to work in Uruguay, because I would obviously become a lawyer of Uruguayan law. That would be a degree that I could not use anywhere else, should I need to move from Uruguay some

day if something really drastic happened. I never really understood what could be so drastic to force me to leave Uruguay, the country I loved so much! My parents and I would travel to Argentina and Brazil frequently on vacations and when I was 5 we spent a year in Spain. As a five year old girl I would enjoy going to the Prado museum in Madrid with my parents and I would enjoy staring at Las Meninas by the XVII century Spanish painter of the royal court Velazquez more than playing with dolls. My mother was very proud of these signs of aesthetic refinement. In any case, I remember that when the three of us, (my mother, father and I) were returning to Uruguay from one of these trips I would say: “Montevideo, I missed my Montevideo” My mother would say: What is there to miss I don’t understand you Gabriela. I would explain to my parents that I loved to travel but that I felt something so warm and wonderful returning to my loved Montevideo. Anyway. . . I was sent to private English schools, I learned English, I slowly gave up my desire to become a lawyer and I gradually gained interest in the English language. Soon I started to become more interested in foreign lands and less interested in my mother country. I always continued to be intrigued by the world of law and politics, though. My cousin Claudia is a lawyer and I feel so proud of her. I feel she pursued one of those dreams that I had given up a long time ago. By meeting her I feel in so many ways that I went back to my roots, to old dreams and to a new, renewed interest in my native Uruguay. Claudia and I are both only children. There are so many parallels between us. For 41 years I had needed her, and for 41 years she had needed me! I just hope that it hadn’t taken my father dying for us to meet and get to know each other. But, life is strange and sometimes it defies explanation. Growing up I had two other cousins, both daughters of my uncle Carlos, the doctor. The three of us had a lot of fun playing at

my uncle's weekend house by the lake, at my grandparent's ranch and sometimes at my parent's house. But as we grew older we also grew apart. I don't know much about them now and neither does their father Carlos.

As I grew older and finished high school or Liceo I continued to learn English at a private institution called: Alianza. It was around that time that I started to develop my own interest in the English language and in the American culture. I remember that I wanted to understand spoken English so badly. I used to go to The Alianza's library called "Biblioteca Artigas Washington," to watch American TV shows. I would watch old Peter Jennings's news shows for hours. I could only understand a few words, and I tried to figure out the rest from context. By the time I could understand almost everything Peter Jennings said, I was in the last year of my Teacher's Training Course to become a teacher of English as a Second Language (ESL). Consequently, I started to get interested in "scholarships" or pasantías and in the possibility of coming to the States to study. I started to teach English at the Alianza at the same time that I studied Psychology at the University of Uruguay. This was the first time that I studied in a public institution and I loved it. I met wonderful people and I had outstanding professors at the University of Uruguay. The University of Uruguay is completely free. A Uruguayan tradition holds that public education is the birthright of every Uruguayan. The government operates free education from kindergarten through college, and all the way to doctorate programs. Uruguay shares with Argentina the highest level of education attainment in South America. Both countries lead all South American countries in adult literacy and in the proportion of their children in school. The emphasis on education dates from the 1870's when the educator José Pedro Varela inspired many young Uruguayans to become

teachers. He encouraged the whole country to improve the existing educational system. The Ministry of Culture has charge of education and has long been accorded cabinet status.

I attended the University of Uruguay in the mid and late 1980's. Back then the only University in Uruguay was the Public "Universidad de la República." The University of the Republic is composed of several colleges -- law and social sciences, medicine, engineering, architecture, chemistry and pharmacy, dentistry, economic science and administration, veterinary medicine, humanities, sciences and others. Most University studies cover six years and lead to a professional degree in a particular field. Nowadays there is also one private University in Uruguay called La Universidad Católica "Catholic University" and it offers mostly humanities programs.

Uruguay is a country of a little more than 3 million people. Half of the population lives in the capital city Montevideo. It is in Montevideo where the three branches of government reside and also where most of the branches of the University of Uruguay are located. Most young people live with their families throughout University. Because education is free in all levels, and Uruguayans have a thirst for knowledge, there is an over population of professionals, especially from traditional careers such as law, medicine, architecture and so forth. This is one of the reasons why so many young people emigrate to other countries in search of a better life.

I decided to study Psychology, because I liked it and also because Uruguay did not have an overpopulation of psychologists. My mother thought that Psychology was a good profession. One could practice psychology anywhere in the world, but one could not practice Uruguayan law anywhere in the world. As a student of Psychology in the

last years of the military dictatorship I became a little more interested in politics than my parents would have liked me to. I felt very passionate about the process of restoration of the democratic institutions. Also as a student of psychoanalysis in Uruguay we were encouraged by our professors to undergo our own personal psychoanalysis. My parents at first were happy to pay for me to go to a psychoanalyst because they knew it was a requirement of my profession. My psychoanalyst Silvia Arrambide opened a whole new world to me, helped me to question many family myths and helped me to become more independent. It was through my psychoanalysis that I learned to start to value my father and I progressively got interested in my father's lineage. Before undergoing my therapy the "name of the father" in Jungian terms had not been totally established in my unconscious. In a matriarchal family structure the Toletti's heritage had been interrupted and suppressed from my mind. But Silvia, my psychoanalyst started a chain reaction process that in many ways culminated the day I met Claudia. That day, I felt that I had completed a life circle.

My parents ended up hating the whole idea of psychoanalysis and stopped paying for my sessions. I felt for the first time that earning my own money meant freedom. I had been saving the money that I got teaching English. I lived with my parents. As I explained before in Uruguay most young people stay living with their parents even when they are in the University. So, I stopped saving and I started paying for my own sessions. I also started to develop the idea of coming to the States to study. My mother did not like that, but my dad did. He had been in the United States in the late 50's and early 60's training here as a Navy pilot and had fallen in love with the United States. So, he supported my efforts to come to the States and to pursue a life here, something he did not

do and he always regretted not doing. I ended up being chosen to chaperon a group of English Students to Minnesota for a month in the month of February 1989. It was my first trip to the States. There is much I could say about that experience. But I can summarize all just by saying that Minnesota was very cold, and I could not understand how people could live in such extreme temperatures. Granted, Uruguay has 4 seasons, we have fairly cold winters, but nothing like Minnesota's winter. My biggest surprise was when one wintry snowy night my Minneapolis host family invited me to go out for ice cream to the best ice-cream parlor in the town. I would have expected to go out for hot chocolate but not for cold treats in an already freezing night! Anyway . . . As soon as I got back to Uruguay from Minnesota, I was awarded a scholarship to study at Allegheny College in Meadville, Pennsylvania. I had already finished my University Psychology degree of clinical psychologist. So, I returned to the States and I attended Allegheny College for a year. My mother said to me: I hope that I had never made you study English. If you did not know English you would not go to the States and you would not leave me. I wish you had studied law instead! Well, it was too late by then! I think that my mother did not understand that I had a free spirit and that I was going to find the way fulfill my own destiny. I was actually destined to be free, to find myself and to eventually recuperate my Toletti family. Today I feel that I have finally become an integral part of the Toletti family. I even sense that I have made up many of those lost years. However, I will never be able to make up all the birthdays, graduations, Christmases, New Year parties and family gatherings that I missed. . . .

For me coming to the States was a way to fight for my freedom. Not political freedom like in the case of many South Americans who found political asylum in the

States, but to fight for freedom from my parents. I came to the States to be able to find myself, to define my identity and to be free. The concept of freedom is an integral part of the Uruguayan nation and lifestyle. We honor our ancestors and national heroes who fought for our freedoms. The Uruguayan national hero José Gervasio Artigas once said "Con Libertad no ofendo ni temo" = With freedom I don't offend others neither fear others. This and other famous phrases are still being learned in schools and high schools by new generations of Uruguayans who continue to learn about Artigas' courage, determination, resilience and love for freedom. Artigas was a son of a Montevideo family who had adopted the Gaucho (Latin American Cowboy) way of life. He was a patriot who became the leader of the independence movement and led Uruguay to the revolt against Spain in 1811. Artigas nourished his opinions by reading such publications as "Common Sense" and "The Rights of Man" written by the revolutionary journalist Thomas Paine (1737-1809) who committed himself to the cause of independence from Britain. Though these works were considered dangerous by Spanish authorities, Artigas had managed to secure them in Spanish translation. Unlike Artigas I did not read the works of the American founding fathers to learn about freedom, instead I came to America hoping here I would experience the essence of freedom.

I came to the States for a year and ended up staying here much longer. After my one year scholarship, I applied to a few graduate schools and I ended up in Buffalo, NY. By then I was used to people having ice cream in the winter, so not much more could surprise me. At the State University of New York at Buffalo I studied Latin American Literature and Languages. I was a teaching assistant so I taught Spanish classes at the same time that I was studying for my Masters degree and later on for my Ph.D. In the

meantime I married a Buffalonian named Harry and discovered that Harry's family was a little dysfunctional and therefore I confirmed that there is nothing new under the sun. Our marriage lasted 5 years. As a topic for my Ph. D dissertation I decided to use my psychology background to analyze the works of the contemporary Argentinean writer Eduardo Pavlovsky. Besides being a writer, Pavlovsky was a psychologist, a reporter, a social thinker and an athlete. Some of his works dealt with the topic of the military dictatorship in Argentina during the time of the dirty war. I felt that my new area of studies (Latin American Literature) coupled with the psychology that I had learned in Uruguay, was a way to establish a bridge between the new life in America and the old life in South America. My dissertation actually analyses from psychological, social and political perspectives the dramatic works of Eduardo Pavlovsky. I analyze the topics of group dynamics, institutionalized violence and family conflicts. One of the topics that interested me the most was the topic of the authoritarian governments. In his works, Pavlovsky denounces the violence of authoritarian governments and suggests that in a dictatorship the victimizers, utilized by the system, and the victims ultimately succumb to an identical tragic destiny planned by the powerful government institutions.

After I got my Ph. D I got my first job teaching at a small University in North Carolina. I enjoyed my job, my colleagues and my students at Wingate University, but I felt it as such a small place! I longed for a more cosmopolitan place than Wingate, North Carolina. I ended getting a job in Norfolk, VA. When my father learned that I had gotten a job in Norfolk, he was a little worried. He had spent a few months in Norfolk in the late 50's and remembered a very different Granby street than the one we have today.

He remembered Norfolk as a violent and rough sailor's town. My father said: I don't like Norfolk for you Gabriela." I told him that things had changed.

During all the years that I was in the States I saw my parents every year. They would come to see me wherever I was: Buffalo, North Carolina, Norfolk, or I would go down to Uruguay to see them. On two occasions I actually took groups of American students to Uruguay. This was great because I got to spend time with my parents and develop study abroad programs at the same time.

I became an American Citizen in Norfolk, VA. By then my parents had assumed that my life was definitely in America and they missed me too much. So, they decided to sell all of their properties in Uruguay and they moved to the States. I sponsored them to become permanent residents. It was somewhat ironic that I had left Uruguay to be independent from my parents and now I was sponsoring them to become American residents and to be close to me. But I had changed, I had found myself and I could live close to my parents without fearing to lose my identity or my freedom. In other words I had grown up. When I became a true adult my relationship with my parents improved dramatically.

My father was very proud to become an American permanent resident, my mother was upset with the whole process and how complicated it had been. Anyway, my mother was happy to sell all of the properties in Uruguay and invest all the money in properties in Norfolk. The big Uruguayan emergency she had been forecasting for years was almost a reality now. The leftist party called Frente Amplio was becoming more popular. Everyone knew that the Frente Amplio would win the next elections. My mother thought that the Frente Amplio could become communist, and she feared that a communist

government would take away everyone's properties earned by hard work. So, my parents happily invested in Norfolk. The three of us had a lot of fun together looking for properties, buying rental properties, remodeling properties, and so we established a small family business. But my mother was still not totally happy, she missed the Uruguayan culture and she kept repeating that if she had known the end results she would have never made me study English when I was a little girl. You have to understand that despite the somewhat dysfunctional aspects that I'm sharing with you about my mother, she also had very wonderful qualities and I loved her very much. See, she was an intelligent, moral, self learned and educated woman. We did have good times together, she had a great sense of humor and I remember we laughed and joked a lot. She wanted me to become a successful woman and therefore she provided me with the best education available in Uruguay. I meant the world to her, to the point that in her unconscious mind I represented something of an extension of her. I did try to please her as best as I could without jeopardizing my own identity. My mother had a hard life. She fought cancer for 15 years and died in Norfolk in 2001.

After my mother died, my father and I became closer than ever. My father became my best friend. I love him so much and I will miss him eternally. I will miss his jokes, his wit, his colorful and fun personality, his great food, his interesting stories, his distinguished and yet simple look, his sometimes crazy ideas, his phone calls, his unannounced visits, his support, his love, and so much more. My father lived in a house in Ghent and I lived in another house just a few minutes away from him. My father would go to Uruguay every 6 months and stay in Uruguay for a month. I stopped going to Uruguay. I really did not feel the need to go to Uruguay after my parents had moved

to the States. As years passed I progressively lost my connection to and my interest in Uruguay. I did ask my father to bring me teaching supplies from Uruguay, and we did occasionally talk about Uruguayan current events and about the political situation of Uruguay and Argentina. But for several years that was the degree of my involvement with my mother land.

My father fell in love with Tidewater. He enjoyed walking in Ghent, he enjoyed meeting my friends. My friends Gregg and Steve became his friends, and my friend Randy became his adopted son and my adopted brother. Randy was the son that my father never had! Randy and his dog Fronz brought so much joy to my father's life. Randy and my father worked on remodeling our rental properties and building additions. Fortunately my father was also able to get to know Chuck, the man who I plan to spend the rest of my life with. My father loved Chuck and was very happy when Chuck asked my father for my hand! My father Ludovico said: That is a good idea!!!! I agree! I approve!

My father started to feel sick in April 2006. Months earlier he had bought a ticket to visit Uruguay. He left on May 1st. It was supposed to be a one month trip. But this time he would not come back to the States. He got extremely sick and weak in Uruguay. I immediately traveled to Montevideo. My Uncle Carlos and I ended up taking care of him in the hospital until he passed on June 10, 2006. I will be eternally thankful to my uncle for his help and support during the hardest time of my life. Actually my uncle Carlos was living in Asunción, capital of Paraguay when I told him about my father's sickness. Carlos moved to Uruguay just to help my father and he is now still living there. My father died in the Military Hospital (Hospital Militar) in Montevideo

and the military sent a huge flower arrangement to his wake. As I mentioned earlier my father had been a Navy Pilot.

There are mixed feelings regarding the military in Uruguay as well as in Argentina and several other South American Countries. He was in the Navy during the beginning of the military dictatorship but he soon retired. My father had received orders supervise a prison that was ironically named: Libertad = Freedom. There were violations to human rights being conducted at this prison. Fortunately he did not want to be part of this and he retired. I'm very proud that my father retired when he did. His hands and his heart have always been clean. He never tortured or help torture anyone, he never killed or help to kill anyone, in other words, he did not succumb or conform to the military regime that controlled Uruguay from 1973 to 1985.

The military regime had not started as a repressive dictatorship but soon turned into one. But, how did the military get to power? During the 1950's Uruguay's economy began to decline. Inflation increased dramatically, and the country lost markets for its agricultural exports. As Uruguay's social and economic problems increased, a well organized terrorist movement called Tupamaros emerged. The Tupamaros took their names from Tupac Amará, a rebellious Peruvian Indian of the late eighteenth century. Success in suppressing the Tupamaros helped Uruguay's military to achieve popular acclaim and to emerge as the dominant force in the nation's government. In June 1973, still riding high in popular esteem, Uruguay's military leaders closed down the legislature and took control of the government, acting as they announced at the time to preserve the nation's newfound domestic tranquility. For three years the military ruled through the device of a council of state dominated by the military. In 1977 the armed forces

announced a timetable that called for the full restoration of democratic institutions by 1985, but they maintained tight control of the political process infringing in human rights violations. The military regime started like an effort to fight the Tupamaro Guerrilla but ended up like an effort to repress anyone who was an independent thinker. During this period many authors, professionals, intellectuals and politicians fled the country in political exile. Nowadays Uruguay is a democracy. The current president, elected in democratic elections, is Tabaré Vazquez from the socialist party Frente Amplio. Tabaré is a socialist and he did not turn into a communist like my mother had once feared. Many people are not happy with the Frente Amplio's government, though. It is progressively loosing popular acclaim. Nowadays, however the military has the place it should have in a democratic government and therefore the military has regained respect from the citizens.

I'm proud of the fact that my father was a Navy Pilot and I'm proud of the fact that he knew when to retire. Claudia and I have talked about all this. In such a short period of time we have talked about so much, we caught up, we had so many years to catch up with and we did. Sometimes I feel that if I had been part of the Toletti family when I was growing up, I wouldn't have left my country, it would have been too hard to leave.

But I cannot complain. I've had and I continue to have a wonderful life. And today, here I am in front of a wonderful group of people, telling them about Uruguay and about my heritage. I'm celebrating Hispanic Heritage month and I'm feeling more Hispanic than ever and more American than ever. I'm extremely proud of being a Uruguayan American. I'm proud of my American friends (Gregg, Steve, Ross, Randy,

Betty Rose and so many others) I'm proud of my Uruguayan cousin Claudia and of my American adopted brother Randy. I'm proud of my Fiancée Chuck Christie. I'm proud of the Toletti's, the Altieri's and the Christies. We are all unique but in so many ways we are all the same. We are many and we are one. Let's celebrate the differences and let's celebrate the similarities. Let's celebrate this wonderful, beautiful, colorful patchwork that our American nation is. Let's celebrate our rich heritage.

One day over a year ago I was very sad and a friend of mine, Pat Brady (A TCC Spanish professor) sent me an e-mail that I will never forget. He said: "Remember that you are never alone. You carry with you the genes of thousand of ancestors and perhaps embody many of their characteristics." I have now confirmed that indeed, we do! I actually believe that only when we connect to and acknowledge our ancestors, our genes, our history and our traditions we are able to become more human, more authentic, more mature and more free. We need to get in contact with our past so that we can embrace the future with open arms and so that we can make a valuable contribution to our inherited and adopted nations. We cannot run away from our roots. I came to the States to find myself, but I did not know that finding myself and finding freedom was not as easy as leaving and exploring a whole new world. In order to find myself I needed to leave and rebel but I also needed to come back to my roots. Ironically enough, I needed to leave Uruguay to eventually establish a stronger, more intimate and more meaningful connection with Uruguay, with my roots and with my family. I needed to leave my family so that one day I could become a more integral part of my family.

Everyone who has come from another country has brought with him or her, a story that like mine, becomes part of the American fabric enriching the cultural landscape

and helping us to become a more tolerant, a more rounded, and a more colorful society. But let's keep the relationship between all of the cultures alive, fluid and changeable. The best lesson I have learned is that to be rounded and complete we need to go back to our roots. I feel that as I develop a stronger relationship with Uruguay I become a better Uruguayan and also a better American and as a consequence I have more to contribute to my students, to my community, to my family and to the Portsmouth campus that I love so much. As my Uruguayan American story continues to unfold, I feel that my own personal relationship between Uruguay and the United States of America becomes stronger and richer. In December I'm going to Uruguay with my fiancée to spend the holidays with my Uruguayan family. This will be the first time that Chuck goes to Uruguay, and the first time he will meet Claudia, Dora, Heberton, Carlos and others. And so we build more connections as my Uruguayan American Story continues to unfold and thicken.