



# Conversations with “Abuela” (Grandma)

By José E Rodríguez MD

I went to Puerto Rico a few months ago and sat down with a remarkable woman, Olga Eladia Velázquez del Río (Abuela Orpa). She is my mother’s mother. She is the oldest living person in my family, and at 93 years old, she still does everything for herself. I only hope that I have as much energy and health as she does when and if I make it to that age. As usual, when it comes to telling a story, Abuela Orpa will talk about her mother before talking about herself. And this story is about Abuela María, my maternal grandmother’s mother.

Abuela María was born in 1889, in Añasco, Puerto Rico. Her parents were from Spain, and they owned property in Añasco. When María was 10 years old, a terrible hurricane attacked the island of Puerto Rico from the west, San Ciriaco. San Ciriaco was the longest living, the strongest, and the deadliest of all Atlantic Hurricanes in Puerto Rico—killing almost 3,500. It spent a record 2 days on the Island of Puerto Rico. It destroyed Añasco, and the flooding isolated most of the survivors on one hill, on my great grandparents property. They had lost everything, including hope. María then prayed to the Virgin of Monserrate, asking her to save all of those that were on that hill. She also made a promise that if she were to survive, she would give 10 dollars to the poorest of her neighbors. The people on the hill did survive, and they rebuilt Añasco. María did not live to fulfill that promise, but my Abuela Orpa did fulfill that promise after her mother’s death. María’s faith lives on today in her heirs.

María later grew up and went to college. This was many years before women in the United States could do the same. She became a teacher, and soon after that married my great grandfather Marcial Velázquez, and had many children. She taught first, second, and third grade at the neighborhood school in her new home, San Sebastián de las Vegas del Pepino. She worked there for 35 years! I find it astounding

that she worked outside the home the entire time that she was married. Years after her death, the school was renamed as the Maria S. del Río Elementary School.

María was one of the few people in the town with a college education. Many people thought that she was a doctor. Workers, Neighbors, and friends came to the house to get “cured.” I had no idea that she was a healer; I thought I was the first one in my family!

María could cure “culebron” a fungal infection that causes a rash in the skin that looks like a snake. The people would say that when the “head” of the snake touched the “tail,” the person would die. María used herbs and tincture of violet to cure them. María only took care of poor people and she would never accept payment for her services. She would simply ask that the people pray for her. My grandmother said that those prayers were always answered. There was never a shortage of food in Abuela María’s home.

I never knew the stories about María’s faith or her healing until this year. The fact that she only took care of poor people truly resonates with me. I have dedicated my medical career to the service of the poor, and I have never worked in a private practice setting. I never understood why I was driven to do this; I thought that it was only because it was the right thing to do. When I graduated from medical school, I had no intention to teach, yet now, I cannot see myself practicing medicine without teaching. I know now that part of the reason that I am driven to teach and heal the poor is programmed in my DNA from Abuela María. I learned many other things about myself in that conversation with Abuela Orpa. But that is for a different “conversation with Abuela.”