The Quinceanera is the celebration of a girl's fifteenth birthday and is practiced in many Latino communities. Traditionally, the celebration proclaimed a young woman's maturity and her readiness for marriage. In contemporary times, the event is interpreted by some in the Latino community as an indication that a girl is mature enough to wear high heels, use make-up, and begin dating (Hurtado, 2003). The Quinceanera ritual has been preserved by many migrating peoples whose origins are in Latin America. In the United States for example, families migrating from Mexico continue the ritual practice even for girls who are first generation United States citizens.

The Quinceanera is celebrated in many regions of Latin America, including Central America, the Caribbean, and Mexico (Castro, 2000). Interestingly, the Quinceanera is not widely celebrated in present day Spain. The ritual may be rooted in the indigenous traditions of the peoples of the region that is now known as Latin America. For example, rites marking an Aztec girl’s transition to womanhood have been described (De Sahagun, 1977). Other possible sources of indigenous influences may be related to the African contribution to Latin American cultures, rooted in the Afro-Atlantic slave trade. For example, in Mexico, the forced migration of Africans of West and Central African origins began in the 1500’s (Aguirre Beltran, 1986). Rites of initiation for girls from these African regions were common (Field, 1961) and may have persisted after the Africans’ introduction to New Spain.

Perhaps, indigenous and African traditions were blended with the Catholic and social celebrations of the Spanish upper classes resulting in the Quinceanera ritual whose present form incorporates a Catholic mass and party celebration. The names of the escorts who participate in the ritual, “Damas”, and “Chambalan” also suggest some contribution of French cultural tradition perhaps during the time of the French occupation of Mexico. The magnitude of the Quinceanera celebration ranges from a small gathering in the family’s home to a huge cotillion like event with hundreds of guests and participants.

A girl may begin planning the Quinceanera as early as her fourteenth birthday. She identifies “godmothers” and “godfathers” who are members of the community and who will locate resources and pay for aspects of the celebration. The godmother of the gown pays for the girl’s dress, the godmother of the cake pays the bakery fees, etc. The godmothers and godfathers may make a large celebration possible for a girl whose own family economic resources are not sufficient to cover the costs of the event. The preparation activities shared between the girl and her godmothers and godfathers may also serve to strengthen and unify the community who will support the young girl’s transition to womanhood and who will be available to her as confidants and sources of support in the future.

The celebration begins with a mass. The church is decorated by the godmother of decorations who has offered her creative and monetary support for this purpose. The young woman, often referred to as “The Quinceanera”, is accompanied by her escort. She may be preceded by seven or fourteen couples, the boys known as “Chambalan” and the girls as “Damas”. The Mass follows the usual order, including the “Homily”, the Catholic version of a sermon. A special blessing given to the girl by the priest may be inserted. Special symbolic spiritual gifts may also be given during the mass. The gifts may include a Bible and rosary, a cross or other religious necklace, and a ring. The Homily, is an opportunity for the priest to remind the girl of her spiritual commitments to her family, her community, and to God. At the end of a special Mass such as that for the Quinceanera, the participant may make a votive offering to an altar for the Virgin of Guadalupe, a representation of the Virgin Mary embraced by Mexican Catholics.

The party room decorations may include balloons and streamers, a gift table and a table for the cake. A special table is set for the girl and her attendants. The decorative themes demonstrate a constant tension between adornments and...
symbols related to childhood celebrations and adult parties. For example, the representations of the girlhood doll are prevalent in gift table and cake decorations, while table settings include sophisticated champagne glasses and bottles, a shimmering “disco ball” and other lights and special effects reminiscent of an adult dance club.

The girl is formally presented to her guests, and dances a specially choreographed waltz with her male attendants, the “Chambalán.” The waltz culminates in the gesture of the boys together lifting the girl overhead on their interlocked arms. She dances a special dance with her father and also the “godfathers” who have provided economic support for the event. Significantly, she is crowned with a tiara by one of her godmothers and may also receive the gift of a scepter. Other special gifts include a huge child’s doll denoting “the last time she will play as a child”. Another gift is the “surprise”, a huge box wrapped and elaborately decorated. This gift is sometimes a pair of high heeled shoes. The girl’s flat shoes are replaced with the heels by her father, representing the last time a father helps a little girl dress herself.

There may be a special song sung by the father for his daughter. A champagne toast is offered by the girl’s parents symbolizing her first adult drink. During the party, the girl acts as hostess, greeting her guests, and making sure that they are comfortable. The celebration continues as a very adult event with music and dancing. At the end of the party, table decorations and favors are given to the guests as gifts.

To view complete photo essay contact photographer.

REFERENCES
De Sahagun, B. (1977) La Historia de las Cosas de Nueva Espana II. Mexico, Editorial Porrua S.A.
Wendy Phillips, earned her Ph.D. degree in Psychology at Georgia State University, is a visual artist based in Atlanta, Georgia. Her current projects include work in the Costa Chica of southern Mexico where people of African descent live, and includes documentation of their daily lives and African rooted traditions. She has also worked in Cuba, Peru, Honduras, and Guatemala. Her work was commissioned by the Atlanta Airport Art Project and is hanging in the International Terminal at the present time. Contact her at michaelgott@mindspring.com.

The girl is formally presented to her guests, and dances a specially choreographed waltz with her male attendants, the “Chambalán.” The waltz culminates in the gesture of the boys together lifting the girl overhead on their interlocked arms. She dances a special dance with her father and also the “godfathers” who have provided economic support for the event. Significantly, she is crowned with a tiara by one of her godmothers and may also receive the gift of a scepter. Other special gifts include a huge child’s doll denoting “the last time she will play as a child”. Another gift is the “surprise”, a huge box wrapped and elaborately decorated. This gift is sometimes a pair of high heeled shoes. The girl’s flat shoes are replaced with the heels by her father, representing the last time a father helps a little girl dress herself.

There may be a special song sung by the father for his daughter. A champagne toast is offered by the girl’s parents symbolizing her first adult drink. During the party, the girl acts as hostess, greeting her guests, and making sure that they are comfortable. The celebration continues as a very adult event with music and dancing. At the end of the party, table decorations and favors are given to the guests as gifts.

To view complete photo essay contact photographer.

REFERENCES
De Sahagun, B. (1977) La Historia de las Cosas de Nueva Espana II. Mexico, Editorial Porrua S.A.
Wendy Phillips, earned her Ph.D. degree in Psychology at Georgia State University, is a visual artist based in Atlanta, Georgia. Her current projects include work in the Costa Chica of southern Mexico where people of African descent live, and includes documentation of their daily lives and African rooted traditions. She has also worked in Cuba, Peru, Honduras, and Guatemala. Her work was commissioned by the Atlanta Airport Art Project and is hanging in the International Terminal at the present time. Contact her at michaelgott@mindspring.com.

I briefly met José E. López three years ago at the University of Illinois at Chicago when he was lecturing about the case of Vieques to a group of undergraduate students. Right from the start I thought that he was like a walking-encyclopedia; what I didn’t know was that he was one of the most vital leaders of the Puerto Rican community in Chicago. For more than 30 years he has been the Executive Director of the Juan Antonio Corretjer Puerto Rican Cultural Center. We met on several occasions and the topics appear in the order that they were discussed.

PRIMERA CONVERSACIÓN
EM: In “Making the Impossible Happen”¹ you mentioned that you went to an old school that had a closet where the teachers put the Puerto Rican students. You also said that there was no attempt from the teachers to make Puerto Rican students be part of the classroom setting and that until they knew English, they were completely segregated; could you please tell me more about that experience? And also, did your brother, Oscar López-Rivera go through a similar experience?
JL: Well, let me just say right off the bat that Oscar did not go through the same experience because when he came here in 1957, he went directly into a high school; when I came here I went into a grammar school. Nevertheless, I am sure that many of the things about discrimination and marginalization existed there.

In terms of my experience, the idea was that we—the Puerto Rican students—were a burden on the school; that in actual fact we were coming in and, you know, why should they really deal with us? There was no concept that in actual fact we needed to be part of the school, it was more like, you are a burden on the school so you should stay outside of it. In other words, you are in here, you are counted as a student, but we really don’t have any kind of commitment towards your educational experience.

And so, in this old school they had these classrooms and annexed to them they had these huge coat rooms were the kids would hang out their coats. We were put in there by the teachers because we were taking up the other students’ time.