

PEOPLE

by Alice Adams
Adary Jacques, Photographer

Christina Morales

Morales Funeral Home Segundo Barrio (Second Ward) Houston, Texas

Director Filling Big Shoes in Houston's Hispanic Community

She was bequeathed an immense legacy of funeral service by her grandparents. Since the 1930s, long before her birth, her extended family has included at least 30 funeral home owners, directors and embalmers.

Fortunately, Christina Morales also inherited her grandparents' unrelenting standards of excellence and their vision for lifting up their community. In fact, this third-generation funeral director and owner of Morales Funeral Home continually pioneers innovative ways to make a onceexclusive setting for funerals a center to honor the Hispanic culture through the arts and other support for the community.

Christina's journey hasn't always been easy.

Her father, Joe Morales, was a funeral director and a radio personality on the family's Spanish-language radio station. Blessed with movie-star good looks, he quickly gained celebrity status. However, the stress of these responsibilities led to his sudden and unexpected death in 1979. Christina was just 11.

"To this day, the funeral for my father was the largest service we've ever had," she said. "My mother was late bringing us to the visitation, so my grandfather took us, cutting in line for the viewing because, when we arrived, there was a line of people around the corner, waiting to pay their respects."

Her father's death – the result of a massive stroke – was sudden, but it was comforting to the pre-teen to see how well-regarded her father was in the community.

After the funeral, Christina's mother and grandmother,



Above: Angela Vera Morales and Christina Morales (1992)

Below Right: Houston Community College name dedication of the Felix H. Morales Building

Angela Morales, became embroiled in an estate battle, followed by an estrangement. Alcoholism took its toll, and, four years later, her mother died of a broken heart. Christina and her siblings were orphans. She was 15, and her oldest sister was 20.

The teenager was adrift for the next few years: "We first went to live with this relative and then another. My brother went to live with an aunt. Then I moved back to Houston to live with my older sister, which meant we were more or less on our own. I dropped out of school. There was nobody there to tell me to go. We were surviving. I found a job as a hostess at a restaurant. I was 16."

"When I was old enough to drive, I used money from my mother's death insurance to buy a car," she said. "Then I started looking around. What I saw was reality. You can't get anywhere without a high school diploma, so I found out how to get my GED."

Then came a life-changing event.

"A big black Cadillac drove into our driveway," Christina remembered. "It was my grandmother and her driver (she always had a driver.) She rolled down the window and hollered, 'I want to talk to Christina. Tell her to come out."

When the teenager walked outside, her grandmother motioned for her to get into the car. The girl obeyed.

"My grandmother said even though she and my mother had been estranged, she knew what was going on, had been watching me, knew what I had accomplished and asked if I wanted to come to work at the funeral home," she said. "I waited two days, and then called my grandmother to tell her I'd decided to give it a try. I was 18."

She said she took working at the funeral home very serious and was proud of herself for getting to work on time every day. "I felt I had some level of knowing what families were going through," she said. "I also was bilingual, so I could help them in language that made them comfortable."

"It didn't take me long to discover it's the best feeling in the world to help people who need so much after a loss. I loved being able to do whatever I could for each family. It felt right ... like a perfect fit," she added.

She has worked at the funeral home the past 31 years.

The first service she could remember was for her father's biological father: "I was about 5, and my dad lifted me up so I could see my grandfather, and I gave him a kiss on his

She also remembered her father leaving the house at all hours, going on "body calls," which is how the children referred to first calls.

When Christina graduated from Commonwealth College of Funeral Service in Houston in 1992, she had already arranged a funeral.









Above: Morales Funeral Home, circa 1970's

Left: Max Morales at the helm of the first Morales emergency ambulance, circa 1945

Below left: Morales radio advertisement

Below right: Joe Morales, circa 1950's



"We were a small staff," she explained. "My grandmother expected me to take the lead and do whatever needed to be done. "I remember my first funeral was in Spanish."

Her most unforgettable service was for a 4-year-old boy: "When the parents came to make arrangements, I noticed his mother was surprisingly calm. Apparently they knew – and had known for some time – he wasn't going to recover."

"She told me her son had told her not to cry because he knew he was going to be in heaven," the director remembered. "But I found it strange, though I was not yet a mother myself, that the mother wasn't crying, nor did she seem the least bit distraught."

"On the day of the visitation and funeral, we were waiting for the parents to arrive. Eventually, the mother's sister came in, asking where her nephew was going to be because she was bringing the boy's mother."

"The sister left, and, when she returned, it was all she and the boy's father could do to hold up the mom. The woman was in pieces emotionally and could barely stand."

"It's been 30 years since that service, and it has been the most difficult service I've done," she explained. "The woman's husband had to take her home early. It was just heartbreaking ... and it has stayed with me. It's always so much harder when it's a child."

:::::::

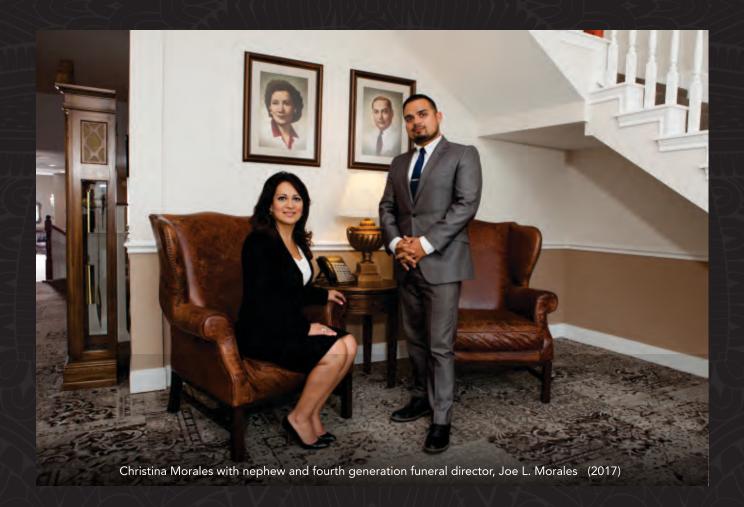
"When families come to us, we do everything possible to make them feel comfortable," she said. "We've had such a long history of providing compassionate care. It's our tradition ... it's family taking care of family."

Christina believes being a funeral director for the right reasons makes her a good director: "I know my grandparents got into funeral service to help people and to honor our culture and its traditions. I believe our family truly has been there to help people. I know it's a business, but we are here to make them feel comfortable and to see us as an extension of their family."

About 97 percent of her business is Hispanic, though this year, they've directed six Anglo and three African-American services. They serve about 300 families annually.

"Thirty years ago, our services were all Mexican. Today we have families from El Salvador, Honduras and about 50 percent Spanish speaking other first-generation Mexicans, Central and South Americans," she said.

"Our cremation rate jumped from 20 percent to 32 percent in one year, which was unbelievable. Our analysis, however,





showed we're offering more packages and services, and we're doing a much better job of explaining the options," she said.

"Hispanic families want the closure that comes with being with their loved one and with family and friends," the director explained. "We're able to offer more than direct cremation, so we handle many services with cremation and viewing using rental caskets."

Outreach and Growth

After taking a class for small business owners, Christina solidified her vision of growth through service to the community.

"We opened a reception hall in 2015," she explained. "A segment of the graduation process was to develop a growth plan. We had been leasing a radio station building behind the funeral home but perhaps we were missing a greater opportunity."

"I decided the options were to open a second location or remodel the radio station space and use it for receptions – the option I chose," Christina explained. "But I've been surprised. Rather than using the facility for post-funeral receptions, more people use space for celebrations – graduations, quinceañeras, baby showers, birthday parties and anniversaries. It's also used by our local Ballet Folklorico for practices."

For the past two years, Christina and staff have hosted onenight holiday markets, as well as two larger annual events.

"My grandparents bought a ranch near Three Rivers, Texas and struck oil. They wanted the money from the oil to go to a foundation that supported education in the Segundo Barrio and several other communities," the funeral director said. "The Foundation gives scholarships, and, for Houston, also provides free school supplies. We started this one in August, just before school started 20 years ago, not really knowing what to expect. We had so many kids show up, we saw this was a very real need in our community, so we decided to make it an annual event. For the past several years, we've been able to purchase 2,000 packages of supplies."

"We have our suppliers go through the Houston ISD supplies list to build the packages," she continued. "Then the kids sign up online to attend, show up, get supplies and stay for two hours of activities.

"About two years ago, we noticed the kids were not eating healthy, so we had UTHealth come to educate them about the importance of a healthy diet," she added. "We also

invited the UTHealth School of Dentistry to conduct free dental exams, and we've arranged for college information, free haircuts and immunizations, along with free Zumba lessons for kids and adults."

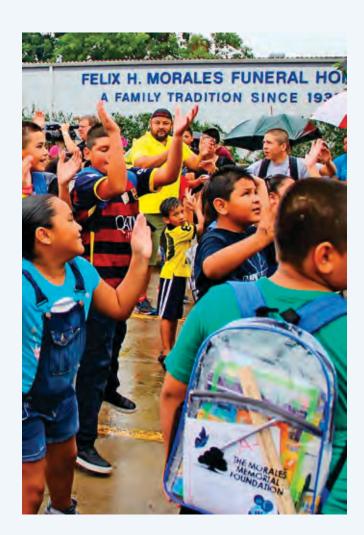
Serving on the Mayor's Hispanic Advisory Board and a familiar face at City Council meetings to lobby for her neighborhood, Christina has arranged for the new HISD superintendent – himself an English-as-a-second-language student in Arizona – to be a special guest at this year's back-to-school celebration and 20th anniversary event Aug. 19th.

Meanwhile, "Death by Chocolate" is held every year at the funeral home, benefiting "Shoes For Kids," a nonprofit with roots in Houston's East End. Proceeds provide a new pair of shoes for eligible children selected by their schools.

"I attended a similar event years ago and thought it was a great idea. Flash forward to 2014 when Yolanda Black Navarro convinced me to organize the "Death by Chocolate Dessert Party & Silent Auction," Christina recounted.

"Yolanda believed, as do I, a pair of new shoes not only keeps a child's feet warm, dry and comfortable but also helps their self-esteem."

Black Navarro passed away after a battle with cancer, but her namesake event, which kicks off Halloween's Day of the







Dead at Morales Funeral Home, continues to draw donors. Attendees enjoy yummy chocolate desserts, light bites, exotic drinks (some chocolate) and plenty of surprises in the silent auction. The proceeds buy shoes for more than 2,000 kids. Last year, Christina assisted Shoes for Kids in raising over \$15,000 in one night.

And just when you thought you'd probably heard it all, on Aug. 5, Morales Funeral Home will host The Pilot Dance Project in its premier of Jennifer Mabus' "Requiem," which examines the rituals of grief of Houston's East End and the story of the Morales family legacy. Christina said it ties in perfectly with her grandparents' vision.

"They built this funeral home to serve the community, and we do that in more ways than one. We take pride in supporting and hosting events the community can enjoy with us," she said. "That was their vision, and it has continued for three generations."

Lessons Learned

Christina Morales counts her grandparents among her blessings, particularly her grandmother – the wife of a successful entrepreneur, funeral director and radio personality: "My grandfather was the visionary, but my grandmother got things done. My grandmother and I became closer after my grandfather passed away. I was 20. How did she know I would be a good funeral director when she offered me a job?"

"Here's what I learned from working with her:

- 1. Don't feel sorry for yourself;
- 2. Hard work is so important;
- 3. Loyalty is incredibly important;
- 4. I know it doesn't sound sweet but tough love;
- 5. When I made decisions, in some cases, she encouraged me to use my head instead of my heart;
- 6. One disagreement we had she used to have all bank statements mailed to her house. She made me a signer on her checks and then said my signature was too big. We had a little falling out. I didn't feel it was that important. She was meticulous:

7. Another time, people were hosting a gathering for her. I wasn't invited. She canceled the whole event. As she explained, 'Don't surprise me because you will be surprised.' I'm the same way. I like to know what to expect."

The First Morales Generation

Born in the German community of New Braunfels, Texas, on May 27, 1907, Felix Hessbrook Morales – funeral director, radio personality and civic leader – was one of 10 children born to Mexican father Felix and German mother Hillary Hessbrook Morales.

After his father's death in 1921, 14-year-old Felix contributed to his family, working as a shoeshine boy, selling newspapers and doing construction work.

In his late teens, he moved to San Antonio, where he delivered newspapers, worked at his brother Andrew's funeral home and managed his own six-cab taxi business. On March 12, 1928, at age 21, he took time out to marry Angelina (Angela) Vera.

"As my grandmother told the story, her own mother was dying of cancer at the time and wanted to see her daughter married," Christina said. "Naturally, my grandmother was distraught, and, when Felix asked what was wrong, she told him her mother was dying and wanted her to marry.

"Felix asked whom she planned to marry, quickly adding, 'What about me?"

And so they were married.

After selling his taxi business and borrowing \$150 from his brother, Felix and his wife moved to Houston in 1931 in the heart of the Depression. The new Mrs. Morales was quiet, genteel and smart, educated in a San Antonio Catholic school during the early years of the 20th century.

"She worked with my grandfather in establishing the first Mexican-owned funeral home in Houston and was definitely 'the strong woman behind the successful man," granddaughter Christina explained.

As Angela Morales told an interviewer in 1979, when they came to Houston, there were no funeral homes for Mexicans. Instead, the Mexican dead were laid out in the garages of a few white-owned funeral homes. Mourners would gather in those garages for funerals. Similarly, public and church-owned cemeteries were white-only.

When Morales Funeral Home opened in the Hispanic neighborhood in Houston, there was one competitor – the Mexican Funeral Home owned by Victor Landig, a caucasian who also owned Landig Mortuary School.

The Mexican Funeral Home was operated by a man who came from Spain. The priest of the neighborhood parish, also from Spain, directed parishioners to use the Mexican Funeral Home exclusively.

Morales Funeral Home, the nicer of the two facilities, struggled at first, but the couple was unafraid of working long hours, doing whatever it required to serve Houston's poorest residents. They donated services to many poor families. Felix, unable to purchase needed equipment, built caskets, and Angie sewed clothes for the deceased. She also served as an interpreter in court cases and became a notary public, services the funeral home provided free to the neighborhood.

"Most of the funerals we got were not Catholics unless it was a friend, but, most of them, when we went, we waited because the burial permit had to come through the priest. Our attorneys got our permits because the people were entitled to a Catholic burial."

In the interim, Felix began classes, earning his director's/embalmer's licenses in 1936.

After the Depression, the funeral home moved to new, expanded facilities and, in 1940, the Morales' purchased 10 acres for a cemetery.

When Felix got his draft card, he was classified as "1-A." Always looking ahead, he asked his wife, "They might call me any time, so what are you going to do? You have to make up your mind or else I'll go to the service, and we'll come back and have to start from scratch again."

Angela said, "Well, I couldn't run this funeral home by myself." He said, "You have to, so you have to go to embalming school." Angela said, "embalming school!

"There were three Latinas in my class at Landig – one from Laredo, another from San Antonio and me from Houston," Angela said. "As far as I know, I was the first Latina licensed in Houston."

She took her state board exam in Austin in November of 1942. It was very difficult, but she passed. And she became totally involved in the day-to-day operations of the funeral home until 1970.

"I did embalming; I drove the ambulance – everything," she said. "Then I found being in the front office, making contacts with people, was better for the business because I was able to communicate."





"I was very involved with the Red Cross and Salvation Army," Angela pointed out. "In fact, they used to call me 'the mother of the Mexican community' because your problem became mine. And since I am bilingual, I could communicate."

"As a notary public, I became sort of a domestic court, from about 1940 until about 1970," she said. "Then Social Security came in, the Alien Registration Act, the Motor Vehicle Registration ... People would come to the funeral home with their cards, and they wouldn't know English, so I'd fill them out – and then I'd say, 'You don't owe me anything, but, when you die, you be sure and come to me."

Felix Morales died June 9, 1988, at age 81. His wife of 60 years died five years later on June 7, 1994. She was 87. Both are buried at Morales Cemetery in Houston.

With a successful funeral home and cemetery, these funeral directors were only beginning to make their mark on Houston and, in particular, its Hispanic community.

A Voice For The Voiceless

By the mid-1940s, Morales Funeral Home was wellestablished as one of the premier firms serving greater Houston's Mexican community. Felix and Angela also had become known for their tireless efforts as volunteers and activists. Now Felix sought another challenge.

"By 1945, we had a little money saved, which I thought would be for our retirement," Angela remembered. "We had taken our first vacation to New Orleans, and he came back with this bright idea he wanted to own a radio station. Of course, he'd had it in his mind for years. When we were sweethearts, back in 1926 in San Antonio, he would pick me up from work, and, before we went home, we'd always go to Brackenridge Park. It was somewhere to talk.

"Felix had a Spanish-language program on a San Antonio radio station at 11 at night. He would buy block time and sell it to advertisers. Then he would announce his program, play his guitar and sing. One day at the park, he said, 'You know, one of these days, I'm going to own a radio station."

"So I asked him, 'Would it cost a lot of money?' and he said, 'Well, money should never be an object in anything you want to do in life. I'll get the money somehow. That's a side issue."

"And I thought, oh, he's just talking."

"That was the first time he mentioned it, and he mentioned it again on two or three other occasions," Angela remembered.

As he waited to put his plan into motion, Felix purchased time from white-owned radio station KXYZ, sold it to advertisers and produced a Spanish-language radio program, first airing only at 11 on Saturday nights. However, it's popularity grew until it became a nightly program, broadcasting news, interviews and live and recorded music ... and when scheduled musical groups failed to show up, Felix would pick up his ever-present guitar and sing, something he loved to do – and did well.

However, the Federal Communications Commission soon ruled against radio stations selling time to outsiders. That ended the Spanish programming, so, in 1942, Felix applied to operate his own station.

WW II, of course, slowed the permitting process to a turtle's pace. The application was delayed until 1946, the permit until 1950, and that they even navigated Washington's maze of bureaucratic red tape was due, in part, to the efforts of the Morales' good friend, U.S. Rep. Albert Thomas.

The station, KLVL-AM in Pasadena, officially went on the air on May 5, 1950, to celebrate Cinco de Mayo and Angela's birthday. "La Voz Latina," became the first Spanish-language radio station to cover news for the Gulf Coast area and soon established a reputation for community service. KLVL produced such programs as "Yo necesito trabajo" (I need a job), during which unemployed persons called in and received job referrals.

Angie Morales produced a program titled "Que Dios se lo pague," in which she asked listeners to assist needy cases in the community. Each day at noon, programming was silenced so Father Patricio Flores, later archbishop of San Antonio, could offer a prayer for peace.

Initially, Angela was overwhelmed by the station's start-up costs. But her husband assured her the project – while costly – would benefit the entire community.

"There has to be a voice," he said. "There is no Mexican newspaper."

Angela agreed: "When I asked how we were going to afford it, Felix already had a plan: 'Well, we're going to sell cheaper so everybody can advertise."

As the radio station gained more listeners and both businesses were doing well, Felix and Angela launched additional philanthropic activities, including giving thousands of dollars in scholarships to college-bound students at Felix's high school in New Braunfels, the high school near their ranch in Three Rivers and the Hispanic community in Houston.

In 1954, for example, KLVL collected more than \$10,000 and eight carloads of food, clothing and other necessities to help victims of the lower Rio Grande Valley flood, prompting Juan Francisco Hernández to write a corrido in honor of the Morales family and KLVL. Because of its commitment to service in the community, the station was dubbed "la madre de los Mexicanos" – the mother of the Mexicans.

After his death in 1988, Felix left KLVL to Angela, and, for the next decade, it would carry on as "The Latin Voice" in honor of Morales' legacy in Houston's Hispanic radio community. The business was sold in 1997.

christina@moralesfuneralhome.com 713.223.1167



30 SOUTHERN CALLS SOUTHERN CALLS