

# Tribute to María Martin

By Josie Méndez Negrete

My family and me, and the entire world have lost María Emilia Martin—a good-hearted, compassionate, and loving person. Now, a dancing star of the universe, she guards those of us who were left behind.

A friend, like no one else, María always found the best in each one of us. Her love had no boundaries.

A master teacher and a bilingual journalist, María's stories and narratives drew attention to our humanity, making our histories visible, especially when it concerned the disregarded and forgotten. More than a cultural envoy and storyteller, María dispensed love and shared the beauty she carried. With María, I learned to better hear and see that which is readily forgotten or ignored. With her, I embraced alternative ways of seeing and being in the world.

Through her loving voice, María fed my imagination with her reports. She taught me to better see, hear, and sense all that could make the lives of the marginalized better. Her words linked me to the difficulties of everyday life, particularly to those who left their communities of origin for a better life. I often saw and recognized myself as one among humans and non-humans who have had no choice but to migrate for our survival.

The greatest bequest María gave Jorge Negrete, me, and our beloved son, was her unconditional love and treasured friendship. Along with the gift of Guatemala—the Mayan nation she dearly treasured and loved, guided by Don Isra—short for Israel—in his taxi, we drove in and around Antigua. Informed by his deep knowledge of his country, Don Isra took us to various parts of the city, and

with pride often pointed to the churches built atop Mayan temples, as a symbol of pride for his ancestors. It was he who found me the gift from birds—chile piquins to spice up my meals—recognizing that I missed that condiment because Guatemalans did not share the taste for spicy foods there I craved.

The most memorable time of our visit to Guatemala began when Don Isra took us to board a boat to Lake Atitlán. The village of San Pedro was our first stop, where we shopped and rode in a Spurs-decorated-Tuk-Tuk to happily stroll their open-air markets. Later, we sailed to Santiago, spending a couple of nights where we feasted on their delightful food. The second day of our stay, we visited Maximón—a hybrid spiritual figure signifying Maya and Spanish spirituality. María was a strong follower and believer.

Nuestra casa, es tu casa. “Whenever you want, our house is your house,” I would readily say, in response to her request for housing. When María came to San Antonio, our casa became her home. Some stays were short. Others much longer.

It was in 2019, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when María was expelled from Kyrgyzstan and Guatemala refused to let her return to Antigua, that she made our San Antonio home again, she stayed in the main room of our San Antonio residence; she was there for nearly eight months. It was during that time that María asked me to work with her on the publication of that book she had been carrying for too long—*Crossing Borders, Building Bridges: A Journalist's Heart in Latin America*. In 2020, I published the book through Conocimientos Press. What a delight it was to be in partnership with her—her collaborative spirit, creative mind, love, and her



María's home base in San Antonio was the home of Josie Méndez Negrete, her husband, Dr. Jorge Negrete and their son, Robert.



knowledge is embedded in that book.

A benevolent and generous person, María was known for making herself readily available to help and support her friends. The maximum example of her love was displayed in March of 2023, when María came to stay in our home. This time it wasn't her professional work, she came to support us in realizing our dream of walking the Portuguese Camino to Santiago de Compostela—she had walked the entire route and found it to be the most spiritual and growth inspiring activity she had ever done. For this reason, she booked herself to be available for us.

Because of her, and her love and care for our son, knowing our adult special needs son would be under her care, Jorge and I left without worry. Kindly, compassionately, and caringly, Maria stayed with our Rob while we cared for my mother-in-law her last days of life, before departing to Europe. Truly, this walk was a most amazing way to reclaim my youthful memories of the village of my birth, Tabasco, when I had no other option but to leave my home to reunite with the family who had left my younger sister and me to migrate to the United States. Songs, scents, and recollection from childhood surface in the sounds of the church bells that dredged lyrics long buried inside me—Bendito, bendito, bendito sea Dios / Los Ángeles cantan y alaban a Dios, the aroma and scent of the flower, and the faces of my great aunts who loved and cared for us in our parents' absence appeared to me as if to illustrate the music.

Our house was María's house. She felt at home with us. She loved my cooking. Without over-indulging she ate to her hearts content. *María te llevó adentro de mi corazón and I will never forget that you were a star within my universe.*

Recently, María called to meet her housing needs in San Antonio, she needed a place to continue working with staff and volunteers at the Esperanza Peace Justice Center's Community Radio Project. We were unable to accommodate her request—the back house was under construction and another person now occupied the vacant bedroom we had. Not to be discouraged, María went about seeking shelter among her friends. Because I had been caregiving Amá in San José, California, I would not see María until Jorge and I drove close to seven hours from Alpine, Texas—where we had planned to climb and walk the Big Bend National Park, but without

doubt María took priority over Big Bend and to the hospital we went.

We left our hotel at sunrise when the sun was peeking over the mountains. It was a beautiful drive, reminiscent of the one we took some years ago, when we drove to Blanco, Texas to pick up María after her release from the rehabilitation center where she had been recovering from cancer.

After a medical procedure that failed, María made the decision to relinquish medical intervention and opted for hospice. It was drizzling when we arrived. Still, the drive to Austin was filled with memories of María. We recalled her happy and beautiful face and the loving ways with which she treated our son.

When we finally arrived at Room 486, on the fourth floor of Ascension Seton Medical Center, where Elaine had let me know that the staff and her family were expecting us. As we entered the room to our left, we found a beautiful, glowing face without make up, not a María we have ever witnessed.

She was elated to see us. Her eyes focused on us, as María asked her sister, Christina, to give her the notebook with which she could communicate with us. She couldn't speak. María had lost her voice because of a tracheotomy, but to get her message across she pantomimed her love for us, with kisses and air embraces with her arms. The oxygen tube with which she breathed was not in her way or if it interfered, she pushed them aside as she wrote, "Jorge and Josie. My angels are here."

María crossed over December 2, 2023, at 6:43 am.

At my age I have had to confront mortality through the

loss of people who passed away. Every death has been difficult to bear, but losing María leaves a gap in my heart that will most likely not be filled. I imagine that her family, friends, and community will also live with a void in their hearts.

BIO: Josie Méndez Negrete, PhD, professor emerita of The University of Texas at San Antonio, is founder and publisher of Conocimientos Press that published María's book, *Crossing Borders, Building Bridges*.



María with Josie's husband, Dr. Jorge Negrete.