



Mara Morales Zuñiga was born in 1966 in the capital city of Managua, Nicaragua during the rule of the tyrannical political dynasty known as the Somoza Family (1937-1979).

Her father and mother were born into poverty with limited access to education. But like many others who struggle against adversities, they overcame poverty and fled the oppressive government. They immigrated with their seven children to Brooklyn, New York to start a new life.

Mara's father arrived in the United States in 1969. The rest of the family followed in 1972, three days before a major destructive earthquake in Managua. The disaster left about 11,000 people dead and 300,000 homeless.

The family settled in the Bushwick area of New York, populated primarily with Puerto Rican and Black Americans. The area was economically depressed, and jobs were difficult to find. Her mother was able to get a job at a clothing manufacturer in the Williamsburg area and her father found a job as an auto mechanic and service station attendant on Bushwick Avenue. They were extremely grateful for being able to come to the United States and they worked hard. Soon a customer suggested her father should start his own business and aided in finding a location and setting up the business. With only an eighth grade education, no knowledge of the English language, culture, or business background, he took the risk. Despite many difficulties, setbacks, and disadvantages, through their faith, love of family, and commitment to their community, her parents overcame the challenges they encountered.

Mara and her brothers and sisters attended New York City public schools in mainly depressed areas. Struggling to support their large family, her parents had little time to be involved in their children's

school activities. Despite all the shortcomings and failures of the New York City public schools, Mara credits the development of her “can do” attitude to the encouragement of the dedicated teachers she encountered along the way. Teaching staff comprised mainly of Black and Jewish teachers provided discipline, direction, and inspiration for the students. At home she was always reminded that she was in a country where anything was possible.

As a fifth grader, Mara decided to take a chance and apply for acceptance to another school district in Bensonhurst, New York. Her application was accepted based on her good grades. This transition enabled her to avoid the local middle school her older brother had attended where fights and bullying had become an everyday occurrence. It took three buses to travel from Flatbush, New York to get to Bensonhurst. At the age of 11, one of these trips resulted in her barely escaping a kidnapping attempt while walking home alone because she had missed the third bus. Although an improvement over her previous school district, Bensonhurst was not without its share of racial bias.

Having skipped a grade in middle school, due to scholastic honors and demonstrated art skills, Mara applied to the prestigious High School of Art & Design in Manhattan. She studied photography, interior design, drawing/sketching, and architecture.

Upon graduation she decided to travel back to Nicaragua. The country was in the midst of great economic, social, and political upheaval as a result of the Sandinistas having overthrown the government. The devastation and chaos she witnessed had a life altering effect on her world view. Children were handling machine guns, women wore military uniforms and carried weapons, and many men had disabilities. Despite the food shortages, people were happy and celebrated what would hopefully be a new chapter in Nicaraguan history. The expectations were high for the new government her father and family had sacrificed for and supported for many years.

Upon returning from Nicaragua Mara attended the prominent State University of New York at Stony Brook. She studied electrical engineering, eventually transferring to the prestigious Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, New York located in the historic district of Clinton Hill. She continued her major in the field of electrical engineering, which at the time was a male dominated field. It presented a whole new set of cultural challenges. By necessity, these challenges led her into embracing the Feminist Movement.

While attending college, Mara met and married her husband, Marcos. At the age of 22, they started an asbestos abatement business and at the age of 24 bought their first home in Colts Neck, New Jersey. Mara remained an activist pursuing political changes in U.S. foreign affairs with respect to Nicaragua.

Suffering injuries sustained in a serious automobile accident, Mara was forced to withdraw in her final year of college to undergo intensive physical therapy. During this period her father decided to retire and needed someone to assume management of his auto repair and preowned car sales business. Since all her brothers already had positions in the company, Mara assumed the managerial responsibilities enabling her father to retire. Working in a male dominated field challenged her once

again just as it had with her Electrical Engineering studies. She was constantly tasked with proving her skill and knowledge.

Due to her bilingual language skills (Spanish), business acumen, and experience with a variety of world cultures, Mara was subsequently recruited by a mortgage bank to assist in processing mortgages for minority communities. She consulted with many mortgage lenders in various positions as loan officer, processor, underwriter assistant, and regional manager until she moved to Georgia in 2002. Mara wholeheartedly believes more should be done to assist working families and individuals in navigating the complex and sometimes misleading process of realizing the American dream of home ownership.

Upon arriving in Buford, Georgia, Mara took a position in the Norcross Georgia Department of Labor (DOL) Career Center as a motivational speaker, coordinator of resume writing workshops, and job placement officer. The commute time to and from work created stress on family obligations making it impractical to continue. Mara decided to again pursue a career in the mortgage industry but closer to Buford. She was hired by Countrywide in 2005, however, the position was located in Athens, Georgia. Still a long commute, Mara decided to relocate to Athens. She was attracted by Athens' diversity and metro city-like features. She specialized in lending to the minority communities once again.

Foreseeing trouble in the mortgage industry, Mara decided to take a different path and go back to school to pursue a teaching career. Having her children in Athens public schools was a major concern. After a year of majoring in Black History at the University of Georgia (UGA), Mara decided to be more effective in her children's schooling. Because the children were struggling in school at the time, she believed it was best to be involved immediately and directly in their schooling. So, Mara became a full-time stay at home mom.

Soon, she became a Local School Governance Team member at Winterville Elementary and later Cedar Shoals High School. When her son was struggling in fourth and fifth grade, Mara took him out of public school and home schooled him in sixth and seventh grade. He returned to Coile Middle School for eighth grade and was ahead in his class. Her son graduated from Cedar Shoals High School with honors and under dual enrollment, and continued on to Athens Technical College. Max is dedicated to his studies and sports such as skateboarding and parkour.

Mara then dedicated her time fully to her husband's business as Chief Financial Officer (CFO). The business mitigates and removes environmental hazards such as asbestos and mold. For the past 15 years, Mara and her family have lived and worked on their family farm growing crops and raising cattle, focusing on marketing to locally grown outlets.

Her husband and her daughter have always been involved in the music industry as singer/songwriters and performers. Mara's husband, Marcos, is originally from Quito, Ecuador and plays music from the Andes. He has played in various New York and D.C. venues in the past. Mara's daughter, Sarah Zuniga, graduated from UGA with a Bachelor's Degree in International Affairs, studied abroad at

Oxford University in England, and received a Master's Degree from King's College. Sarah has played at the 40 Watt Club, Foundry, Hendershots, and in the Georgia Theatre as the first Hispanic female to headline as a solo artist. She is also coming out with her second CD soon.

Mara and family dedicate volunteer time to help individuals, not organizations. One of the people she admires the most is Mother Teresa. The following words from Mother Teresa are what touched Mara's heart as a volunteer in facing a world full of problems: "Never worry about numbers. Help one person at a time and always start with the person nearest you".

Mara has taught English as a second language (ESL) and Government Studies to undocumented residents. She has taught in school and church environments. She has tutored children facing difficulty in Math, at no cost to parents. She has earned the name of "Maestra" with some, which means teacher in Spanish.

Mara has kept up with foreign politics especially regarding Nicaragua. She has seen how power has corrupted what was once seen as a hope for poor countries. Countries that once sought to empower the poor now have small governing bodies that rule, not govern. Such groups feed and house people like animals and give them no voice in their government or the management of their economies. The failed revolution of the Sandinistas revealed its true nature, especially evident this year with Daniel Ortega's election tampering and imprisonment of political opposition.

Mara's parents retired to Nicaragua twenty years ago to serve as missionaries to help the poor. Her oldest brother joined them as a lawyer and advocate. All of them are returning to the United States in 2022 due to the tyranny of the current Nicaraguan government.

Mara's present view is that education and entrepreneurship are the best means of getting people out of poverty, while mechanisms of economic prosperity remain in check by its citizens exercising their civic responsibilities.

God is the main ingredient in any definition of success. A strong loving family creates strong individuals, regardless of the adversities that life brings. Strong individuals create strong communities and strong communities create a strong nation. Communities must return to helping each other and assist where possible.

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