

Stories of hope bear testimony to God’s faithfulness

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Gus Reyes, director of the Hispanic Education Initiative and affinity ministries for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, compiled and edited a book, 100+Stories of Hope, allowing Hispanic Texas Baptist leaders to tell—in their own words—how God helped them overcome academic challenges.

With the author’s permission, selected excerpts from their stories follow.

Ed Alvarado, ethnic ministries, consultant, Texas Baptist Men



“Born of Mexican immigrants who settled in the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, I came to Texas at an early age. Mom and Dad were hard working and religiously Catholic. Hope came to my life at age 6 when a missionary family, the Anders, invited our family to an evangelical church, and their daughter, Naomi, shared Christ with me—that God had sent his Son to die on the cross for me. She also told me that I was very special in the eyes of God, which I believed wholeheartedly! Thereafter, I was baptized at the age of 14 and served as youth president at Primera Iglesia Bautista in Donna.”

Micaela Camacho, retired principal, Fort Worth ISD



“If the word ‘hope’ is defined as the belief that a desire can be obtainable, my story of hope started very early in life. I knew I wanted to be a teacher and that I would have to go to college to become one. I hung on to the old adage, ‘Where there’s a will, there’s a way,’ knowing that finances would be a barrier to my getting there. I chose to attend Technical High School in Fort Worth because I could graduate with a business diploma. I knew that if I acquired some skills—typing, shorthand, bookkeeping—I would be able to work while in college. Then, I heard about the Texas WMU Latin American Scholarship. When I reached the financial assistance desk during registration at Howard Payne University, I proudly said, “I am a recipient of the WMU Scholarship.” No letter, no certificate, few questions asked, and I was now a freshman at Howard Payne University. And the skills I mentioned? They were the vehicles I used to receive a work-study scholarship—secretary to the dean of women for four years. Iglesia Bautista Calvario in Fort Worth was my training ground—Sunday school, Training Union, Girl’s Auxiliary, singing and playing the piano. Unforgettable teachers and mentors were Barbara Wensel, Richie Harris and Evelyn Schwartz. Encouragers were the ladies of the WMU and the pastor’s wife, Eunice Grimaldo. While in college, Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana in Brownwood gave opportunities to serve as pianist and Sunday school teacher.”

Leobardo Estrada, deceased, former pastor and coordinator of language missions, BGCT (As told by his family)



“Our father always put his trust in God, knowing that he would provide. God placed many people in his life to help him prepare for ministry. While he was serving as a pastor in Alpine, some students at Sul Ross State University who were training to be teachers helped him complete his high school education. Mrs. Murphy was always there as a surrogate

grandmother to encourage him, provide him with clean clothes and occasionally support him financially, including giving him his first \$25 typewriter from Sears. While serving as a pastor in Dallas with a wife and four children, he attended Southern Methodist University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. It took him 14 years, but he persisted and earned his degrees.”

Josue Grijalva, president emeritus of Hispanic Baptist Theological Seminary (Baptist University of the Americas)

“I fell in love with school ever since I was in kindergarten in a church. I would tell my mother to dress me up because I wanted to look my best when I was studying. My mom and dad encouraged me a lot and were willing to sacrifice in order for me to stay in school. When I finished high school, there was only one Hispanic Baptist going to college. A missionary, J.O. Moye, encouraged me to go to college. I decided to go to Howard Payne. While I was there, a number of teachers, including Cap Shelton, encourage me to do my best in school. Every weekend, I traveled to San Antonio to start the third Hispanic Baptist church in the city. It was in this church that Dr. Rudy Sanchez was converted and felt the call to ministry. Dr. Sanchez also went to Howard Payne University, and while he was pastor in Corpus Christi was instrumental in encouraging Dr. Albert Reyes to pursue his education and prepare for ministry. I also encouraged Dr. Rudy Hernandez, who served as the first Hispanic evangelist for our state convention. One of my joys was to serve as president of the Hispanic Baptist Convention when, along with the leadership of Dr. Daniel Sanchez, we organized the Baptist Youth Congress—Congreso. I have had the privilege of training many Hispanic young people for ministry.”

Felipe Garza, vice president, Buckner Children and Family Services



Felipe Garza

“I was born into what some might say today was a family of poverty. We worked in the fields hoeing cotton, picking cotton and cutting broomcorn. Our summer days started at dawn and ended at dusk. We migrated to different communities depending on where my father could find work for us. We faced hard economic issues, as well as battles of alcohol abuse and domestic abuse. At the time, I did not realize the degree of poverty or the dysfunction that was part of my family. My father gave us a hard work ethic and commitment to achieving our dreams; my mother showered us with the love of Christ. They both insisted on their three sons doing well in school. The church family at Jerusalem Baptist in Runge held us together. Pastor Hilario Hurtado guided the flock. Uncle Eligio Garza and Tia Rose served as our youth pastors. Abuelitos, aunts and uncles provided us guidance, support and gave us a sense of belonging. Youth interns, such as Victoria Ponce, a student at what is now Baptist University of the Américas, served as our mentors.”

Alcides Guajardo, pastor and denominational worker

“My parents insisted that we get an education because of their lack of one. It was difficult, because I went to school knowing no English. We were migrants. We would leave the Valley around April 1 and harvest beets in Montana and the Dakotas. Then we traveled to harvest peaches or cherries in Michigan. We would travel and harvest crops or pick cotton through December. Then, we went to school January through March. We missed most of the school year working as migrants. It was hard to keep up. The greatest help to me was my pastor Manuel Urbina Sr. He was tremendous influence on my parents. He pushed us to go to college and through a

Master of Divinity degree. We experienced much more success in school when we were able to attend all year long. God's grace got us through school and the doctorate degree."

Robert Morales, development officer, South Texas Children's Home Ministries

"We all have dreams. Some wish to become athletes, astronauts, musicians, engineers or teachers. Mine was to become a successful business executive. Those were my plans, my hope and my vision. But God had other plans for me. His plan for me was ministry ... investing in the lives of others. I will always be grateful for my youth minister, Tom. He invested in me. He took the time to disciple me, to encourage me and to help me seek out God's will in my life. I will always be grateful for my parents. They provided the example of living a life that honors God. They instilled the importance of attaining a quality education and developing a strong work ethic. More importantly, they showed me to love my neighbor ... anyone that the Lord puts in our path. I have crossed paths with many people through various job experiences. While varied, these work adventures include higher education, church staff, financial services and childcare. People have always been the core of my work. As I visit with each individual, they all express the need to be heard, the need to be appreciated and the need to make a difference. There was a time I, too, needed a listening ear or a hug of support. Because of the care of many, I am the person who God crafted me to be."

Carlos Paredes, deceased, coordinator of evangelism among Hispanic Texas Baptists (As told by his family)

"Our father was first and foremost a man of prayer set within the context of

witnessing to whomever would listen to the magnificent story of our Lord Jesus Christ. Having had a mother who dedicated our father to the Lord's ministry even before he was born, he was profoundly affected in his early years by his mother's testimony of physical persecution at the hands of his grandfather because she wanted to know Christ as her Savior. Knowing that through this time of persecution in his mother's formative years and her persistence in prayer, fortitude in Christ allowed her the blessing of becoming one of the pillars of La Primera Iglesia Bautista de El Paso. It was prayer that sustained him throughout his 60-plus years from being a pastor in Austin, serving the Baptist General Convention of Texas in various capacities, preaching the love of Christ in many crusades around the world, teaching and serving as a missionary alongside our mother, and finally sharing his knowledge of evangelism as director and instructor with Hispanic Seminary extension.

Albert Reyes, president of Buckner International



“One of my high school teachers said I would not be going to college because I was struggling in algebra. Another teacher said she thought I could achieve much and encourage me to dream big. Dr. Rudy Sanchez said I needed to go to college before I went to seminary. I also knew the Lord was calling me into vocational ministry. I had to reconcile the voices I was hearing. I learned to listen to the voice of God first. Several pastors and local churches encouraged me while I was in college. Rev. Fortunato Gonzalez and Primera San Angelo were instrumental in my life as a college student. Hermana Cuellar fed me on many Sunday afternoons. Adan Cepeda and his family always set another place at the table for me. Dr. Rudy Sanchez continued to encourage me through seminary. Rev. Jonathan

Hernandez, pastor of Primera in Arlington, encouraged me during my seminary years. Dr. Daniel Sanchez encouraged me to pursue Doctor of Ministry studies in missiology. My wife, Dr. Belinda Reyes, believed in me, and my parents encouraged me to continue my education. She finished her master's and Ph.D. before I did and encouraged me to keep studying. My father-in-law, Rev. Baldemar Alvarado, always saw me in the best light. This made me want to go beyond his vision for me."

Jesus "Jesse" Rincones, pastor of Alliance Church, Lubbock



"I am a first-generation high school and college graduate. My parents faced harsh educational challenges. When my grandfather died, my father had to quit high school to care for his family. As a child, my mother would hide in the fields when the school bus would come for her. She was unable to advance past junior high. However, these experiences did not keep them from encouraging, challenging and supporting me to get an education."

Eli J. Rodriguez, state coordinator for the Hispanic Baptist Convocation of the Laity

"Praise God, my mother believed in education. Constantly, she would remind me God needed prepared leaders to carry on his work. Fortunately, her Garcia family from Mexico was well prepared academically, thus giving her the persistence of advocating education. The problem was not the wanting; it was the lack of finances. After much prayer, the alternative was to join the Navy and return home with the opportunity of attending college. I am thankful to God for the special gift he gave me in my wife, Eve, and for

her encouragement in achieving my goal in education. Thanks for the prayers of great men of God—Pastor Rafael Muñoz of Primera Iglesia Bautista Mexicana in San Antonio, Dr. Rudy Sanchez, Dr. Rudy Hernandez, Dr. Carlos Paredes, Dr. Charlie McLaughlin, Uncle Ciro Garcia and churches, as well.”

Daniel Sanchez, dean and professor of missions, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary



“After finishing the ninth grade, I dropped out of school to help my family financially. I worked in a meat company delivering large portions of beef. By the end of the day, the white gown that I was wearing was covered with blood of the beef chunks. One day, I looked at myself in a mirror and asked myself, ‘Is this what God wants me to do with the rest of my life?’ That night I prayed, ‘Oh God, if you will open up a way, I will go back to school, because I know that you have called me to serve you.’ Two weeks later, Rev. Demetrio Galan told me about the Valley Baptist Academy. Two years later, I graduated from there as valedictorian. With the encouragement of Drs. Rudy Hernandez and Rudy Sanchez, I went to Howard Payne University. Then it was on to Southwestern Seminary, serving as a missionary in Panama, then studying in California and then Oxford. ... The encouragement I received in every school inspired me to do my best. ... Now I am a professor who trains missionaries at the seminary. At every graduation, when I put on that elegant graduation gown, my thoughts go back to that gruesome, blood-stained gown I used to wear at the meat market, and I thank the Lord for what he has done in my life.”

Rudy Sanchez, deceased, Texas Baptist pastor and denominational leader (As his daughter, Rhoda Sanchez-Gonzales, recalled hearing her father’s testimony)


Rudy Sanchez

“I grew up in San Antonio with five other siblings. Both my mother, Angelita Garcia-Sanchez and my father, Ignacio Sanchez, were not Christians. My mother and I were presented the gospel by my kindergarten teacher, Jovita Galan. When I was 9 years old, my mother and I accepted Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and were both baptized. My mother passed away that same year. Because of my mother’s death, my father was unable to care for his children alone. We went to live at the children’s home in San Antonio. I was active in my church, Iglesia Bautista Antioquia, where I served in various ministries as a teenager. I was called to the ministry when I was 15 years old and preached for the first time at 16. I graduated from high school and, by God’s grace and with financial help of my aunt, Rebekah Martinez, my pastor, Dr. Josue Grijalva, and church family, I was able to attend college and graduate. I graduated from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. My education prepared me to serve in Baptist denominational work and be a leader in my community. I served as chairman of the board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas and on several state commissions. I also served on the board of trustees of Baylor University Medical Center in Dallas. I served as senior pastor at Primera Fort Worth, Dallas, Corpus Christi, Gainesville and Trinity Baptist Church of Houston.”

Alex Vasquez, associate general counsel for Walmart Stores


Alex Vasquez

“Law school was a huge challenge for me, but God was faithful. He provided for my financial needs through scholarships, jobs during school and loans I was able to repay after only 15 years in the career with which he blessed me. I remained active in Iglesia Bautista Ambler in Abilene during my college years and Highland Park Baptist Church in Dallas during my law school years. God provided many people through these church families who prayed for me and offered encouragement. There are too many to name them all, but some are my parents, Paul Vasquez and Bea Bernal Vasquez, my extended family members including George and Martha Solis and life-long friends like Joe and Lonnie Alcorta, Elias Cancino, Dr. and Mrs. Julian Bridges, Moses and Rachel Perales, and so many others. Also, my involvement in BGCT youth activities through the years gave me valuable mentors and leadership experience that has proven beneficial over and over again. I was blessed to serve with leaders such as Frank Palos and Eliseo Aldape who taught me so much about serving others.”

Patty Villarreal, national director for church and community initiatives, Buckner International

“I knew since fourth grade that I wanted to go to [Patty Villarreal](#) college and that I would go to Howard Payne University. I had no idea what I was going to study, but I had a goal—college at HPU! We kept moving farther away from the area, but my goal was always to go to this school. It was small but friendly, and my professors would know who I was. I had no idea how counter-cultural I was in my pursuit of college. As a young Latina in South Texas, I was surrounded by strong messages that

my role in life was to marry out of high school and raise a family. Growing up in small towns, my friends would talk about their Quiencenieras and future plans for weddings. It was difficult to go along with their conversations because I felt that I was supposed to do more than just get married. I wanted to help people, make life better for them, but I wasn't sure how. Little did I know that growing up in a poverty culture, there would develop a strong sense of social justice in my soul. I especially had a burden for children who could not reach their potential due to circumstances beyond their control. It was at HPU that God helped me identify my calling was in social work. I praise God that he has allowed me to be his instrument and see how he loves the helpless and unlovable."

Sylvia Villareal, bilingual kindergarten teacher for 36 years

Sylvia Villareal

"Having been born into a Christian home with educated parents, going to college was an expectation for me. I chose to go to Hardin-Simmons University because my father had received two degrees from there by the time I was a toddler, and he used to enlighten us with interesting stories of his experiences while he was a student. Hardin-Simmons not only provided me with an excellent education; it furthered my spiritual experience with its

inspirational chapel programs we were required to attend twice a week. Socially, I made lifelong friends whose children are friends with my children. Among my fondest memories are those of the wonderful hermanos from Iglesia Bautista Ambler. They embraced me as a daughter and I, in turn, loved them like my own family. On Sunday nights, we were served a delicious meal made by the hermanas, since our school cafeteria did not serve meals on Sunday evenings. Fun and fellowship would follow these meals after church. (It was a good way to get us to go to church on Sunday nights!) As a recipient of the then-called Latin American Baptist Scholarship given through the Mary Hill Davis Offering, I was aware that I had a responsibility to make good grades. I am grateful to my parents for providing the means to attend and graduate from one of our Baptist institutions.”

En Español

José Rivas, professor at Howard Payne University and academic dean at Mexican Baptist Bible Institute

Dr. José Rivas, anteriormente profesor de Jose Rivas  teología, Griego, filosofía, y casa cada curso ministerial y bíblico enseñado en Howard Payne University, de decano académico del Instituto Bíblico Bautista Mexicano en San Antonio, fue un

hombre con un llamado y una pasión por compartir conocimiento a estudiantes de todas edades; un hombre que entregó su vida ayudando a otros a alcanzar su potencial educacional indiferente a obstáculos; un hombre que estimó a cada individuo como teniendo dones, talentos y habilidades inherentes al llamado a Dios en sus vidas. Salió de un barrio de la Ciudad de México solo habiendo completado el sexto grado de primaria. Sin embargo, al entregarse al señorío de Cristo Jesús a los 15 años inició su peregrinaje inmediatamente a realizar su llamado. A través de una serie de eventos que Dios puso en su vida, incluyendo el conocimiento de Dr. Guy D. Newman. Llegando eventualmente a Howard Payne University como profesor de Biblia siguió sus estudios hasta completar su doctorado en Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary siendo el primer hispano en lograrlo. Su esposa Inés Rivas fue instrumental en asegurar que no dejara el plan de Dios para su vida. Muchos de sus estudiantes habiendo terminado, regresaban trayendo otros al Dr. Rivas sabiendo que él les ayudaría tal como ellos fueron ayudados, animados, y exhortados a lograr más allá de sus propias expectativas. En breve, José Rivas fue un hombre lleno de esperanza; esperanza de que Dios lo utilizara como instrumento para que otros también pudiesen realizar el llamado de Dios en sus vidas.