

# A drag queen's final tribute to the grandmother who loved and accepted him

By NIGEL DUARA JUL 03, 2015 | 3:00 AM | SANTA FE, N.M.



Paul Valdez wore a black dress that he made to his grandmother's funeral. He knew it would cause a stir, but he kept secret his reason for wearing the dress.

From under his black veil, sweat trickled down Paul Valdez's face.

On the long walk to the casket in the towering Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis of Assisi, dozens of pairs of drifting eyes found him and bored in. To his left, through the veil's spider web of nylon gauze, he could feel the spite in his aunt's voice.

"At your own grandmother's funeral," she hissed. "Dressed like a girl."

His grandmother, Eva Griego, made dresses for thousands of girls. They got to know her as "Mama," usually beginning with the fitting for their first Communion. They would see her again before their quinceañera, which marks a girl's entrance into womanhood, and then once more before their wedding.

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Of the thousands of rolls of fabric she cut into sheets, the last fabric she touched was sewn into a dress for a boy, her grandson.

Framed in a tight bustle and trimmed with black crepe, the dress Valdez designed was inspired by Victorian mourning garments. He pressed the dress' black cravat close to his throat and felt himself sway for a moment before his grandmother's coffin.

Valdez is a drag queen and a gay man. Neither really has a lot to do with the other, he says, but in Santa Fe, both are identities that have earned him as little attention as the city can possibly bestow.

"It's look away, look away," said Valdez's husband, Richard Polley.

"It's not a place where you'll be killed for it," Valdez, 35, said. "But they'll pretend you don't exist."

For those who hold to convention, the growing number of men like Valdez — who assert themselves without shame — is unnerving. But sometimes just one traditionalist offering a helping hand can bring about acceptance: For Valdez, that person was his grandmother.

The basilica where Griego lay in a casket is central to Santa Fe's heritage, a monument to the Spanish Catholics who slaughtered the original inhabitants and claimed the land for New Spain to win glory for God.

The ground beneath it marks the city's history: A small church burned in a Pueblo Indian uprising against Spanish colonizers, rebuilt as a soaring European revival in a low landscape of adobe, a place where the proper rituals of 15th century Spanish Catholicism are carefully preserved in incense and candlelight.

Into this cathedral walked Paul Valdez, dressed like a girl.

He peeked over his shoulder at the 70 or so people behind him. The disapproval was palpable. Valdez tried to hug the priest, but the priest held up his hands.

Even his family, who'd long put up with his habit of driving around town in dresses, was anxious.

"I didn't want people whispering and pointing at him," said Luisa Penner, Eva's sister-in-law.

Valdez endured, smiled a small smile. He understood that mourners, even among his own family, would think he was showing off, making this day about himself. But he had a secret: the reason why he was in that dress. He hadn't told anyone. Not yet.

After the funeral, mourners spilled into the tight, twisting streets surrounding the basilica. Men kissed their fingers, made the sign of the cross and gazed into the April sky.

Valdez raised his eyes too and thought back to a little girl in Mexico who had a talent with cloth.

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On the day her grandfather died in her neighborhood in Chihuahua city, Mexico, little Eva saw her chance. Her mother and father were busy with the funeral preparations. The trio of paid mourners fussed over her grandfather's body on the kitchen table, covering it with cheesecloth to keep the flies away.

She sneaked to the back room, the one with a loom and yards of black fabric, and got to work. She was 7, as she later told Valdez, but she knew from watching her mother and grandmother where each length of cloth should connect with another.

When she was done, she brought her mother, Sicilia, her work: a black dress she pledged to wear at her grandfather's funeral. It was her first attempt at sewing anything other than flour bags, and she ended up with a tangled mess. Her mother scolded her for wasting expensive fabric. But the mourners intervened.

*She has a talent*, they insisted. *She has a gift*.

When people in this high desert city tell the story of the dressmaker of Santa Fe, this is the part about her first creation they remember most: The collar was crooked — *chueco*.

The dress with the crooked collar became family lore. So did the man who taught her to sew.

His name has been lost to time, Valdez said. He was a dressmaker in Griego's neighborhood, and when she reached age 15, she became his apprentice.

One morning there was a commotion in town. Someone screamed, Griego told her grandson. It was the dressmaker, impaled on a stake on his front lawn. He was gay, Griego said, and he was killed for it.

"She only told me that story once," Valdez said. "She never mentioned him again."

Griego moved to the U.S. in the 1950s and started work in 1963 at Lamar's, a Santa Fe dress shop. By 1977, she and her husband, Steven, had saved enough to buy their own store.

Eva's Bridal Boutique would serve customers from across the world. For \$200 to \$1,000, women could buy a dress unlike any other, something entirely their own.

When Valdez was 4, he picked up a pair of scissors and began cutting out patterns. Griego told him later she knew then that he would take over the shop one day. But she was also worried.

She saw in him the same things she saw in the dressmaker from Chihuahua, a man who made dresses and never dated women.

In his early teens, Valdez told his grandmother what she had already suspected: He was gay. He remembers that Griego was not surprised.

Valdez saw an opening to introduce his grandmother to another side of his life. He began taking her to drag shows, where the men in long dresses and short, sequined frocks mystified her at first. But once she saw Valdez onstage, one of her dresses draped on his narrow frame, she told him she assented to this world, whatever it was.

Griego had grown up with the morals of an earlier Mexico. She saw sin in a woman's exposed ankles. But she told Valdez that he looked beautiful.

Ana Valdez, Griego's daughter and Paul's mother, said that after struggling for years to fit in with other boys, her son found his best friend in his own family.

"She wasn't tall, but she had ..." Ana searched for the word, "power, I guess you could say. And once she said Paul was going to be who he was, himself, that was it."

Eight years ago, the family attended Paul's commitment ceremony in Santa Fe, Ana said, and there were no problems. His grandmother's presence helped ensure that, she said.

Eventually, Griego decided everyone, especially gay men, should get married. "She said marriage brings people closer to God," Paul said.

All those dresses, all those stitches, the hours bent over her sewing machine wore her down. Her back began to ache. Her husband, Steve, spent his last years sitting in a rocking chair, holding down fabric with his feet while his wife crouched to cut it. Increasingly, she relied on Valdez.

Not long after Steve died in 2006, she began to forget. The woman who never took notes forgot a customer's alterations. Then she laid the fabric inside out on a dress.

After more than 30 years of running the store, Griego retired in 2007 and Valdez took over. He turned the store into a specialty wedding shop for gay and lesbian couples, a move his parents supported. When the family decided to sell the building, Valdez took the store online.

The dementia set in quickly after Griego stopped sewing. She was forbidden from leaving the house without her daughter, and her diet was carefully monitored. But Valdez would sneak Griego out for a bag of Trader Joe's marshmallows, which they gobbled in the car, or hamburgers and a shake.

As his grandmother's health deteriorated, Valdez was drawn to bolts of black tricot, a type of nylon gauze. A classic design came to him, with a cravat and a veil. He set to work. Griego saw the dress he was working on and joked about the collar. "Looks like mine," she told Valdez.

The dress seemed to mirror his grandmother's fading vitality. Valdez added a cuff to the left sleeve, and his grandmother came down with a fever. He set the hem, and she was hospitalized.

Valdez put the dress away. Her breathing normalized. She came home from the hospital, and right away, asked about the dress.

"I don't want to make it if it will kill you," he recalled telling her.

"You better hurry and get it done," she said.

It's bad luck, say the superstitious in Santa Fe, to embroider a funeral dress before a person dies. It's as if one is pushing a person through death's door. So Valdez left off the crepe and clasps and the tiny black wreaths on the veil.

At his grandmother's bedside, Valdez cradled her head and called her "Mama."

"That black dress," she said to Valdez. "Is it done?"

He said it was close. She had a request, and what she asked of him would have to be their secret until the funeral.

Eva Griego lived more than 50 years in Santa Fe. She knew its culture, its mores, its taboos. So she must have known very well what the request would bring — the trouble it would cause her grandson, the disapproval it would create at church.

But she hadn't bowed to convention in 81 years, and she wasn't about to now.

"When they lay me in the ground," she said, pointing to the last dress she would see him make, "wear that."

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