

Alma's Family Part I

Alma was born in New York City in 1943. She was the middle child of Manuel and Miriam were born in Puerto Rico, migrated to New York City and lived in East Harlem in the housing projects on 115th Street and Madison. Manuel worked for Con Edison; Miriam was a homemaker and spiritualist. Together they raised their three children, Ramona, Alma, and Carlos, who went to public school and all of whom graduated from high school. Manuel and Miriam were simple people, believed in the value of education and while they were strict disciplinarians, were in no way abusive to their children. The family was Catholic, went to Mass every Sunday and spoke Spanish at home – the children were bilingual, the parents spoke English, but primarily spoke Spanish. Alma always said her parents were good to her, especially her father, but she had a conflictual relationship with her mother because when she was eight her mother was “taken” from the family and had to go to what Alma described as “spiritual training.” She was in this training away from her family and children for two years, which clearly traumatized Alma. When her Mom returned to the family, Alma said, “she was never the same, but if she hadn’t gone to the spiritual training she would have died because it was part of God’s plan for her.”

When Alma was 16 she met Pedro, a married, 35 year old man who lived in East Harlem. She and Pedro dated, she knew he was married and he was clear from the beginning of their relationship that he would not divorce his wife, with whom he had three children. Alma and Pedro continued to date, much to the dismay of Alma’s parents who tried unsuccessfully to stop them. Pedro had no legal source of income – he was a well-known number’s runner in the community and it was said that he also sold drugs.

When Alma was 18 she became pregnant and nine months later gave birth to Anthony. Her parents said she could not continue to live in their home and helped Alma get on public assistance and apply for Public Housing. She moved into a housing project on Park Avenue and 105th Street where she lived for the remainder of her life. Pedro was excited about having another son, and provided Alma with some financial support. With Pedro as the children’s father, at age 20 Alma had Dionne, and at 22, Judy. Each time she gave birth, Alma realized the additional stress to her life and after the birth of Judy, she and Pedro began to argue more than usual. She accused Pedro of having other women in his life beside her and his wife, and their relationship became more and more contentious. One day when Judy was two, after a very big argument, she and Pedro split and from that point forward they were no longer a couple. Although Pedro continued to provide some financial support for the children, the money came in less and less.

When Judy was 4, Alma met Santos, with whom she had a brief relationship. Their relationship was as Alma once described it “crazy.” Santos sold drugs, and was addicted to heroin. Alma herself never took drugs, but was non judgmental about those who did. After dating for about six months, Alma found that she was pregnant and nine months later gave birth to Brenda. A month after giving birth, Santos disappeared and Alma never saw his again, she heard a few years later that he was sick and later died.

When Alma was 30 she met the man she called the love of her life – Carlo. Carlo was the only man she legally married, and she never had any children with him. They lived together, mostly happily, as Alma reports in the same apartment where she always lived, he ran numbers, she helped, but like many of the men with whom she was involved, he had a substance abuse problem mostly with heroin. Although he didn’t always sell drugs, sometimes he did. When Alma was 34, a police officer came to her door to tell her that he husband had been found shot to death near the East River. Alma was devastated by this news but immediately sprung into action, collecting money for his funeral and disposing of any drugs or weapons that he had in their house.

With Carlo’s death, Alma said she was finished with men in her life and she never dated again. Alma’s life now focused on her children.

Alma's Family Part II

Anthony, Alma's oldest, and her only son, like many boys his age wanted to hang out on the streets with his friends, at first Alma was very strict with him – she said in her own word “If he came in late or if he didn't tell me where he was going when he came home I beat the shit out of him.” As Anthony got older, his conflict with Alma became more and more hostile and when he was 15 years old, Alma had him placed in Mt Loreto Homes for Boys in Staten Island. He stayed there for three years, visiting Alma periodically. Alma felt that he was better off at Mt Loreto than on the streets of El Barrio. When he came home he, as Alma said, “Just went back to doing the same shit he was doing before – hanging out on the streets, messing with girls, and not in school or working.

Anthony eventually became the father to three children, with two different women whom he dated but never married, he was moderately involved in his children's lives – mostly financially, giving their mother's money and buying the kids gifts at Christmas and for their birthdays. Anthony did not graduate from high school and was not employed. His primary source of income was selling illegal substances on the street for bigger dealers.

Dionne, Alma's oldest daughter never liked school, she cut classes frequently and dropped out when she was 16. Like her brother, Dionne started hanging out with a crowd that Alma did not like – guys who sold drugs, older guys who did drugs.

Dionne never had a job and when she was 16 she got pregnant with Anne. At that point Alma told her she needed to get out of the house and helped her get on Public Assistance and get into Public Housing. Five years later Dionne gave birth to Pam, and two years after that with her only son Mark. Different men fathered all of her children, and none of their fathers were involved in their children's lives. Dionne had a great sense of humor, loved to party, and “dated” lots of men.

Judy, Alma's middle daughter also hated school and dropped out at age 16. Judy had a very violent temper and frequently got into fights in school with peers and teachers. She was suspended more than once for fighting. At 17 she dropped out of high school.

When Judy was 17 she dated a guy from her neighborhood off and on, and got pregnant. When she told her boyfriend she was pregnant he said he doubted it was his baby and they got into a huge fight and split up. Like her sister before her, Alma

told her when she told her that she was pregnant that she had to leave her house and get on Public Assistance.

Once on PA, she applied for Public Housing and got her own place one month before her baby was due. When the baby was born, Judy knew something was wrong, everyone looked so worried, her son, Manny was born with Down Syndrome and several other major health problems and he died after living for four weeks. Judy was heartbroken and devastated by this sad event. After a year or more of depression and mourning, she met – Rafael, a nice guy from her neighborhood and after three months of date she was pregnant again. Her son Joshua was born, healthy and strong, Judy was very relieved and happy. One year later Maria was born, then Dina, then Sandy, then Veronica, then Maura, and finally, Elsa.

Judy, did not work she stayed home to take care of the kids and supported her family on Public Assistance and with help from Little Sisters of the Assumption on East 119th Street. At times her temper still got her into trouble especially when someone criticized one of her children, she was arrested twice for assault, but then released. Once her two oldest daughters were placed into foster care, when she went to the Emergency Room at Mt Sinai for a test for herself and when questioned by the doctors about the children she could not to their satisfaction explain a bruise that Maria had on her forehead. The police were called and the ACS worker and police took the children that night from the Emergency Room and placed them into foster care. Judy did not know where they were being taken, her girls had never been away from her for even one night and she was grief stricken and very angry. Judy was devastated and traumatized by these events. She fought hard to get her kids back, Alma hired a lawyer to help her and after three excruciating months in foster care, Judy was reunited with her girls. She never had contact with ACS again after that episode. Rafael, her constant boyfriend, whom she never married, had odd jobs, usually off the books without benefits, but has supported and stayed with Judy for more than 25 years.

Brenda was Alma's third daughter and baby. Brenda hated school, refused to go most days starting when she was 13. She began dating boys when she was eleven. Alma tried to control her, but the more she tried, the more she rebelled against her mother's rules. They continued to live together, in fact, at this point it was just Alma and Brenda in the apartment, but they did not speak. Unlike her sisters, Brenda did work in a clothing store on East 86th Street, even as a 15 year old. But shortly after finding this job Brenda got pregnant with her first son and Damien was born. A year later, Pete, then her daughter Tamara, then Charlie and finally Brendan. All of her children had different fathers; none of them were involved in their children's lives, in

fact, most of the children never met their fathers. By the time Brenda was 25 she had five small children. Unlike her sisters, Alma did not tell Brenda to leave when she got pregnant, but she adamantly refused to babysit or to be involved in caring for her grandchildren saying, "if she opened her legs to make them, she can take care of them, I already raised mine."

To be continued