

STOCKTONSpeaks!

RICARDO S. CUEVAS

Being the eldest of five children, Ricardo S. Cuevas always had a sense of responsibility, of somehow being more adult than his siblings. Ricardo was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico, and grew up in the neighboring town of Zapotitan. He has three sisters—Reynalda, Angelica, and Marisela—and a brother, Gerardo.

His feelings of responsibility were enhanced by the absence of his father, who first came to the United States in 1961. Ricardo's father wanted to make a better life for his family, but to do that he had to leave behind his wife, young son, Ricardo, and a daughter. The elder Cuevas' lonely journey took him to California, where he found work as a farm laborer. Eventually, he became a farm foreman with supervision responsibilities over other workers.

Ricardo's early years in Mexico, where he was raised mostly by his mother, a schoolteacher, were happy years. An energetic and creative boy who loved Mother Nature, he spent time in the outdoors where the children lived, riding horses, playing hide and seek, and climbing up into the mountains near their home. He enjoyed life even though the family had little money or material possessions. It was during those years that Ricardo developed a love of running, which became a passion as he grew older.

After eleven years of separation, in 1972, Ricardo, his mother, and sister followed his father to California. Ricardo was then 12 years old. It was a reunion which has lasted to this day, never being broken except when each child left home at marriage to establish a separate household.

As much as Ricardo loved being reunited with his father, being in the United States was not easy for him. Growing up in Mexico meant that the Ricardo spoke only Spanish. He was thrust into an American school knowing no English. Learning the new language was a major challenge. Ricardo had a

hard time communicating with his teachers and his schoolmates. Doing homework was difficult. It was hard enough trying to make sense of what he was being told, but then he went home to a household where no one else spoke English either and had to complete homework assignments without help which made little or no sense to him.

On the playground, he was harassed and teased by his schoolmates for his inability to comprehend the language. Other boys, in the way of adolescents everywhere, pulled tricks on him. Leading him to believe they were trying to help him improve his language skills, they would encourage him to repeat words they would say to him. He thought they were teaching him new vocabulary to help him make an adjustment to America. Ricardo didn't know, until later, that what he was learning were "dirty words," the kind children delight in saying in secret among them, away from disapproving adults.

Being the determined person that he is, he worked hard to become proficient in English. While it took him two years to master the language, he did it—*and* still kept up with his class. He now speaks English fluently. But even at 44, Ricardo Cuevas considers Spanish his native language. Though bilingual, he prefers Spanish and speaks it often.

During his teenage years, Ricardo worked alongside his father on a 4,000-acre farm outside Stockton. Since his father was the foreman, Ricardo was in a position to learn many of the farm's operations. He learned the schedule of work and how to operate various pieces of farm equipment. Little did he know how critical all that knowledge would be. The year that Ricardo was 16, his father fell ill and for a while was unable to continue the range of duties of a foreman. To Ricardo's surprise, the owner asked him, a teenager, to take over as the foreman and to help manage the farm operations and to supervise the workers. That meant he had to tell the grown-up workers what to do!

Wow! Here he was, not yet 17 and he had to take over his father's job and take on an adult role. It meant less free time for him; he had to cut down on visiting with friends and riding his bike on long, leisurely jaunts through the

countryside. Ricardo proudly accepted the assignment; it made him feel special. He was pleasantly surprised to find that none of his co-workers questioned his new role. The farm owner's dependence on him for such an important task and the attitude of his former co-workers—coming to him for advice, getting instructions from him, and being willing for him to supervise their work—gradually made him realize he was becoming an adult. At least, they certainly were treating him like one!

His work on the farm continued even as he attended school. Ricardo's father taught his children to work hard and always to go to school. They instilled in Ricardo and their other children the importance of education. For Ricardo, school was important not only for what he could learn in the classroom and as a stepping stone toward an eventual career, but also because it allowed him to pursue his passion, the sport of running.

Running gave him a sense of physical freedom and unleashed his youthful spirit. And because he was so good at it, he began competing as an athlete in cross-country running. He excelled. As a freshman in high school, Ricardo became the top ranked cross-country runner in the Valley Oak League, the first student from East Union High School ever to achieve that rank. During his high school track career, he led the team as its captain to the Valley Oak League title.

In 1979, Ricardo had the momentous privilege and honor of being coached for two whole months by Arthur Lydiard, a famed running coach considered one of the greatest coaches in the world. A New Zealander, Lydiard was himself a championship marathoner who trained runners such as the great miler, Peter Snell. It was a memorable experience for Ricardo and a great moment in his young life.

Ricardo continued his education at San Joaquin Delta College, where he joined MeChA, a college organization for Mexican-American students to bond together and work toward goals benefiting Mexican-American interests. He readily identified himself as a member of this ethnic group. Not only was he

born in Mexico, he was also a part of a close-knit family where Spanish was spoken by his siblings and his parents. Moreover, he had worked with Mexicans all his life and his friends were Mexican. Joining MeChA gave him an opportunity to affirm his strong attraction to his heritage.

If Ricardo was not in class or working on MeChA projects, he could be found at the track. He was still heavily invested in cross-country running and became one of Delta's outstanding athletes. But all of these activities and successes were almost brought to a tragic end. In 1980, a drunk driver hit Ricardo, causing serious injuries. He lost all his front teeth in the accident. It seemed that he might never run again. Ricardo was devastated. Running was his passion, and he couldn't imagine not doing it. He didn't run for an entire year, the time it took him to recover from his injuries.

It was a formidable obstacle, but one that he overcame. He was determined to go back on the track, and did just that. He worked his way back onto the Delta track team and competed in the state championships with great success. He placed 2nd in the 5000 meter run and third in the 10,000 meter cross-country event at the California State Community College Championship meet that year.

After Delta, Ricardo went on for more schooling. Remembering his father's admonitions, he worked hard and was determined to finish his education. He didn't want to end up doing hard labor on a farm. After all, his father brought him to the United States to take advantage of the opportunities in this country. He attended Arizona Automotive Institute and later studied at the Sequoia Automotive Institute.

Ricardo attributes his personal strength to his parents' teachings and to his religious faith. Religion played an important role in the Cuevas family. As a boy, from ages 6 to 12, Ricardo served at the altar in the Catholic Church his family attended. It was a serious responsibility for this young boy who solemnly and proudly carried out the duties of the priest's assistant. All the lessons he learned in church strengthened his spirituality. It helped him cope with stresses in

his life and particularly gave him courage after his encounter with the drunk driver.

When he married his beautiful wife, Analuisa, at the age of 21, his family treated him fully as an adult. And he realized the change as well. No longer could he think just about himself and what *he* wanted to do. He had to work to support his wife. Ricardo was now grown up and had true adult responsibilities.

His family always expected big things from him and was confident he would be a success. Their faith in his abilities gave him self-confidence. Ricardo remembers dreaming of growing up, marrying a good wife, having children, coaching track and field and cross-country while teaching at the high school level. He kept his eyes on the prize and is now the head coach of track and field at East Union High School, the same school where he won early notice as an outstanding runner. He treasures the fact that his students view him as a role model.

Although he himself no longer competes, he runs with his students and, by doing so, motivates them to keep up the sport. His coaching abilities resulted in East Union's track team winning its second Valley Oak League title soon after he joined the staff. Now, after seven years there, the last two as its head track coach, the school has won a total of five track titles.

Ricardo's father tells him there really is no difference in the way the two of them were raised. They were both taught to respect their parents and their elders, to work hard, and to get an education. What is different is that his father had little opportunity to go to school in Mexico. Ricardo, on the other hand, not only had educational doors open to him, but also career opportunities, not available in a poor Mexican village.

Ricardo Cuevas says he owes his life and his success to his beloved father. The elder Cuevas came to this country for a better life for his children, and they got one. From his father, Ricardo learned the value of hard work. The father, who Ricardo holds in high esteem, inspired the son to strive hard in life regardless of the circumstances. In return, Ricardo Cuevas wants to inspire his own

children and future generations of his family—to take pride in hard work, to strive to reach their goals, and above all, not to give up on an education. Those are his keys to success.

Interviewer: Bunna Hang

Author: Janelle Fleming

Ethnic Group: Mexican-American

Generation: Middle