

**MIAMI STORIES**

## Bridal shop owner specializes in helping teen girls dress for their quinces

**BY LILIAN ZAYAS LLANOS**  
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I was born in the Oriente Province of Cuba in 1953. I came to the United States when I was 12 years old and my family settled in Hialeah.

My parents bought the house that they still live in today, and we started our business in Hialeah in 1968 as a clothing store.

My parents would work in the factories during the day and would sell pants and shirts door-to-door on the side. The business grew, and we decided to open the location where we are to this day. In 1979, we bought another building and expanded, but we also kept the original store.

I grew up in the business beginning when I was 14 working for my parents. Then I went to Miami Dade College to study fashion design. I started working in 1997 with the *quinceañera* dresses, which I love.

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Family relatives who were turning 15 around that time wanted *quinceañera* cruises, which were a new fad. They were looking for their dresses, and we were going to the meetings and decided to get into the business. We have been doing that ever since.

My husband and I are now the owners of Zayas Bridals. He worked for us when we got married, and now he's in the administration.

We have three sales people who have been with us for a while, and a couple of seamstresses who work with me. It's a small operation, but it's working out well.





Lilian Zayas Llanos at her shop Zayas Bridals in Hialeah.

Photo provided by HistoryMiami



When we came from Cuba in the 1960s, the situation here was not good. But my mom put money away, and when I turned 15 I had my party at the house for the sake of the tradition. *Quinces* here in Miami were very simple in my time. I went to a lot of them, and I danced at a couple.

At mine, I wore a white miniskirt with a tiara, and I had a photographer come to the house, and my friends came, and we took pictures and had a dance party. As a mother, now I understand wanting to have that special day for my daughter, and I'm thankful that my own mother did that for me, too.

The *quince* tradition came from the Mexicans: the Aztecs and tribes in Mexico. They used to have a special ceremony for the girls approaching puberty to give them different roles for their different tribes. Then the Spanish came, and the Emperor Maximilian changed the whole thing, and wanted to adapt the custom to more of a fancy ball with beautiful dresses to present the girl into society.

It's changed into sort of a rite of passage. I know a lot of moms who don't let their girls pluck their eyebrows or put makeup on until their *quinces*. That's when they wear their first heels, put makeup on, and they're excited.

It's also not just one big dress anymore. Every year there is a change in this business. In the beginning we started with the cruises and they wore all white. Then they started doing colors — champagne and ivory — and with the parties it's the same. Now they go with themes, such as Disney themes, so we have dresses that we try to not make look like a costume, but fit the theme of the party. Themes require a lot of planning ahead of time.

I learn something new every day. Some girls are very excited about doing this, others just want to please their mom. But most of them dream about this day for a long time. When they come in, we like for them to feel like a princess.

I have friends in the business who do big parties. Once, there was a girl who came in on an elephant. They had to get a permit to bring it over, but they had money and she wanted to do that so they did. That's a little extreme, but it happens.

Some parties are as big as 500 guests. The most popular ones are around 100 or 150, and 200 is considered a big party. The way I see it, weddings can happen at any time, but a *quince* is an event that happens once in your life, and it stays there forever.



Lilian Zayas Llanos at her shop Zayas Bridals in Hialeah.

Photo provided by HistoryMiami

I have two girls. For them we had a small party at the house; I didn't have the business back then. I'm planning the *quinces* for my granddaughters already. They are still young, but I'm excited to do that.

I think *quinceañeras* will stay. Many who come here have been planning since they were little girls. It's rewarding for me; I don't do it so much for the money; my reward is seeing the faces of the girls when they come back and say they had a great time, and they bring me a picture, and they recommend somebody.

At this time in my life, I've enjoyed it so much that I am also able to help the community. We've worked with Make-a-Wish Foundation girls, in cruises and parties, and we've done work with schools and to make parties for groups of girls who don't have much. I like to do that.

Miami influences what I do. My husband once told me that this was the capital of *quinces* in Florida, and I think it is. I have people coming from Tampa, West Palm, Orlando to get dresses here.

There's a mix of cultures, too. Before it was more of the Cubans giving all of these big parties, but since we have people from all over, and because these people are growing up together in school, this mix of cultures influences our parties, like our colors. We have people from Brazil who have these parties, and I have some girls that are from the African-American community who do Sweet 16s, and they have Cuban and Spanish girls dancing at their parties, too. It's a nice thing to do. It brings the community together.

*This Miami Story was transcribed from an interview between Lilian Zayas Llanos, owner of Zayas Bridals in Hialeah, and the HistoryMiami South Florida Folklife Center as part of a research project exploring the question "What Makes Miami Miami?" The Florida Folklife Program, a component of the Florida Department of State's Division of Historical Resources, directed the project.*

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