

MELANIE ORENDAIN  
by Susan Samuels Drake

NOTE: One cozy, wintery night, in 1980, I'd nearly finished reading the *Times Tribune*, Palo Alto's local daily at that time. An article on law students who'd recently passed the California Bar caught my eye. In the "O" list, one name: Melanie Orendain. Here's the September, 2009, revision of an article that's been gathering dust since '80.

Melanie was 14 the last time I'd seen her family as they left Delano for Texas. Her father, Antonio, would organize farm workers along the Mexican-US border, expanding the farm workers' movement for justice. She had been a skinny adolescent, warm and thoughtful for such a young person. She could motivate her siblings without threat!

The Orendains had picked cotton, chopped weeds, and performed other back-breaking work in Hanford, California during the Fifties and early Sixties. Antonio, "Tony" to his coworkers, grew up in Mexico. A proud, quiet, handsome man, his mustache and usual black attire reminded me of a cross between historic Mexican heroes and Johnny Cash. He was determined to do what he had to in order to send his five children to college. Rachel, Melanie's mother, had given up dreams of a nursing career to be an attentive mother. The day-to-day grindstone and hot sun never wore away this couple's exceptional dedication to striving for a safer, more economically viable work life.

When César Chávez began holding house meetings in the Hanford area with farm workers, the young organizer brainstormed with farm workers about what that different life might be. Dormant dreams were tapped which led the Orendains to join the new movement in Delano. Smiles are what I remember most about this family, even though I knew they carried financial and health hardships on those proud shoulders.

I was so excited the night Melanie and I caught up on each other's lives over dinner at my Palo Alto home in the late 1970's. She said, "When we were little kids, I hated to pick cotton. I'd sit on the full cotton sacks and dream. But Mom would say 'You don't like this kind of work, Melanie? Then you better plan on going to college. Because this is what Mexicans do if they don't get an education; they work in the fields for the rest of their lives.'" Rachel had a way of setting her jaw when she said things like this. Melanie's mother talked to her girls about following professional careers. If wife/mother invitations came along, those were valuable, too. But first things first.

When Melanie thought of college, she wanted to return from Texas to California. Someone mentioned Stanford. She'd never heard of it; but "it sounded OK." She also applied to the University of Texas. She chose Stanford "just because it was in California."

Eleven years after we'd last been together, the 25-year-old Melanie was as lovely, poised and friendly as ever. She's a Gemini, complete with the adjectives "quick, verbal, enthusiastic." She didn't hesitate in her determination for equal rights as a woman and a

Chicana—not strident; only confident. Her accent was unaffected by California’s warped pronunciation of Spanish words.

Melanie’s sister Nancy followed her to Stanford. Nancy felt shy about such a big school, so Melanie told her little sister, “Just hang up your Harvard admissions certificate on the wall and you won’t have to worry about a thing.” (Nancy’s scholarships were from Harvard, Yale, Brown and one Melanie couldn’t recall.) Nancy wanted to be with her sister, so she chose Stanford.

Melanie married another Texas-Stanford student, Miguel (Mickey) Baeza. Pregnant with their son, she swam laps daily until the day before he was born. Not one to waste time, she spent only four hours in this first labor. She told me how proud she was to be Mickey’s wife and Mischa’s mother. Her in-laws didn’t mind that she kept her maiden name; they bragged about “our daughter, the lawyer.”

Melanie talked about her first day at Stanford. “Dad brought me to Palo Alto, carried my suitcase up to my room and then had to leave right away for a farm workers’ convention in Fresno. The R[esident] A[ssistant] was a Rah-Rah and I wasn’t feeling so rah-rah myself. So I was alone in our completely bare room when my roommate and her parents arrived. They walked in the door and asked me when the rest of my stuff would arrive. The mother had a hard time covering up her reaction when I pointed out all my worldly possessions in one suitcase in the corner.” They had just hauled their daughter’s four suitcases up from the car. The mother said, “Well, let’s all go over to Stanford Shopping Center. My girl still needs a few things.”

Melanie’s impression of that cluster of high-end stores? “You can imagine what I felt like when we got there. All I knew about California stores were places in Hanford and Delano; they never had \$50 blouses there. That night, when we returned to the dorm, I was all set to go back to Texas. I had brought \$150 with me to cover the rest of the school year. When I called the airline ticket office and the voice on the other end said it would cost more than that to fly home, I knew I’d have to stick it out.”

Wounds healed quickly once Melanie’s classes began. However, several times, the ignorance of the academic community left her feeling out-of-it. For instance, she and another student rushed to write a paper for a journalism class. They knew that it wasn’t their best. The “B” grade surprised and satisfied. But the prof’s comments on the paper were far from satisfying. In their paper, Melanie mentioned that using “sleepy Mexican” and “*manana*” to imply something different from the Pilgrims’ work ethic perpetuated the Second Class citizenship imposed by the white majority on Chicanos. Melanie confronted the professor, who said something about “overreacting” and “you’re too sensitive.” So Melanie explained the weakness of the professor’s dismissive point of view. The prof became angry, said she’d raise the grade, but she wanted the students to leave her office. Melanie assured her the “B” was deserved; it was only a broader viewpoint the students

wanted changed. The professor raised the grade, threw Melanie out of her office, and missed the point of the confrontation.

“In Hanford,” Melanie recalled, “I think it was in the fifth grade, I’d written a paper on Atlantis, just for the fun of it. Donovan was a popular singer then, and he had a song about Atlantis. Using just a dictionary and the encyclopedia (my parents got us a set), I did this really great paper. So I guess that’s what made me think I’d like writing for my life’s work. But then all the pressure of the media-field didn’t seem so great after I got into journalism classes. Journalism seemed too hard to me, so I decided to try law for a career.” Three years at UC Berkeley’s School of Law (“Boalt Hall,”) culminated in her passing the Bar.

“Where did your strength come from, especially during those first months at Stanford?” I asked. She had explained earlier that some Chicano students wasted time panning Stanford for its “whiteness” and affluence, all the while milking it for its rich educational experience. The bitterness and often ensuing drinking/drug problems, she felt, were pitiful. She credited a collective of Mexican-American women for rescuing her from what could have been a rougher four years. Those women dwelt more on inner-development and less on knocking the Establishment. Melanie felt sorry for “stoners” and others whose negativism prevented them from developing successful communication skills.

Strength came, too, she remembers, from the time that Robert Kennedy came to Delano to woo the farm worker vote in 1968. His charisma affected her permanently. Coupling traits she saw in him with her parents’ relentless sense of justice, Melanie dedicated her law career to working for the common good.

The night Melanie and I had dinner together, Mickey stayed home with Mischa, then one year old. Mickey’s father was the first Chicano admitted to the Plumbers Union in Texas. Melanie’s husband also graduated from Boalt and passed the California Bar. Then he added a Master’s in Business Administration from Stanford to his curriculum vitae.

Melanie would have preferred to return to the San Joaquin Valley of California to begin her law career, but Texas called her husband home. What did a young mother, on her way up the career ladder and winning the Equal Rights game in the early Eighties worry about? “Mischa. We will be able to give him whatever he wants once we’re both working in Texas. How do we keep from spoiling him?”

*Melanie, now known as Nina, emailed the following updates in September, 2009:*

My family:

Mickey was the one who insisted on all M names to match Mickey and Melanie :)  
Miguel Paz Orendáin Baeza born Berkeley, CA 1979, USC 2000; Mischa since the day he was born.

Marcos Abel Orendáin Baeza born Dallas, TX 1985, Loyola University New Orleans 2007

Melina Luz Orendáin Baeza born Dallas, TX 1990, sophomore Saint Louis University  
Mía Raquel Orendáin Baeza born Dallas, TX 1991, freshman Saint Louis University  
Melina and Mía are my "Irish twins"; a little less than a year apart; they're the same age for about three weeks every year.

We've lived in Dallas ever since leaving Stanford after Mickey finished his MBA in 1981.

The barest details on the rest of the Orendáins:

Amada: San Diego State University 1975, University of San Diego School of Law 1990.  
Amada is an immigration magistrate in Miami, Florida.

Abel: University of Pennsylvania 1981, University of Houston School of Law 1984. Abel has a plaintiffs personal injury law firm in the McAllen, Texas.

Nancy: Stanford University 1982, Harvard JFK School of Public Policy M.P.H., Harvard Medical School 1987. Nancy is not practicing medicine currently, living in Gladwyne, PA.

Joseph: University of Texas 1995, University of Houston School of Law 1998  
Joseph is an Assistant District Attorney for Hidalgo County in Edinburg, Texas, also lives in McAllen.

My mom died in 1985 and is buried in McAllen. Daddy lives in the Valley; Pharr, Texas.

Orendáin family tradition for several years now; all five of us make it to the Valley once a year for either Christmas or Thanksgiving, based on my family's alternating between the Baezas in El Paso; this year's schedule is Christmas in the Valley.