

QUINCE EXPO LIGHTS THE WAY TO PLAN A PARTY

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

For Cassandra Bond of Davie, next June will be a very important month. On the 19th, she will turn 15 and the day before, she and a few hundred of her closest friends and family members will celebrate the occasion with a traditional Cuban-style Quince.

While that occasion is eight months away, Cassandra and her mother, Barbara, have already started to plan and line up all of the participants.

“It’s pretty hectic,” said Cassandra explaining why they have started so far in advance. “We have to pick out the dress, choose the music, and learn the dance routines.”

To help pull everything together, Cassandra and her mother attended the recent Fifteen Candles Quinceañera and Sweet 16 Expo held on October 19 at the Sheraton Biscayne Bay hotel in Miami.

At the show, the two were able to talk with photographers, caterers, travel agents, scene and backdrop builders, music providers and others about the various elements that will be involved in the party.

“We started early because you have to book many of the providers at least a year in advance,” explained Barbara. “Cassandra wanted to have the Quince party on her birthday, but the hall was already booked for that day. So, we had to choose the 18th. At least at midnight we will be able to sing happy birthday for her and it will be her actual day.”

“Quinces are coming back,” said Marlene Oliver-Sosa, a partner of NJC Corporate Communications of Hollywood Beach who developed the publicity for the expo. “There is a new emphasis on family values and a greater interest in the family now than there used to be.”

“There is also an interest in the glamour of the party,” Oliver-Sosa explained. “Girls want to dress up like a princess. Their mothers, who are paying for the Quince, are saying that this is my girl, give her what she wants.”

While quince parties are common among all Latin American nationalities, they are especially popular among Cuban families. “It’s a tradition that goes way back,” said Barbara Bond. “Girls in Cuba used to marry very young. My grandmother married when she was 14, so she was already pregnant at her Quince party. It was a way to bring the girls out into the world and announce that they were ready to be married.”

Some vendors said that they are seeing more interest in quinces among residents of Broward County. “We have a lot in Pembroke Pines,” said Esmeralda Rabadan of Miami Lakes who helps girls and their mothers plan quince events. “We have a lot of clients

who are not Spanish that have been to quince parties and want something like it," she explained.

Rabadan said that with a growing divorce rate, parents are more willing to put \$20,000 or \$30,000 into a party for their daughter than to invest that amount in a wedding that might not last.

"We had quince parties back home, but they were not as elaborate and were more subdued," said Maribel Fernandez of Miami, speaking of her Colombian background. "They were more like a family-oriented birthday party."

"Cubans go all out, there is no limit," she said. Fernandez helps her Cuban and other Latin friends by catering many events including quince parties. "I like to cook," she said, explaining her interest in catering. "I came from a big family and we were always entertaining."

Fernandez said that her Catering by Maribel business provides a wide variety of foods for quince events. "We usually serve Lechon with rice, black beans, mixed vegetables and coconut chicken."

Mayra Etayo of Miramar who is president of the National Association of Wedding Planners and operates her own event planning company, said that the 15 Candles expo was a good opportunity for vendors and families of young women planning their quinces to get together. "We sent out 5,000 announcements to our list and vendors lists," Etayo said. "It is a good opportunity for the vendors to get exposure."

One vendor getting exposure was Leyda Rojas of Exclusive Party Designs in Miami. "If someone wants a castle for their theme, we will custom build it," she said, showing photos of elaborate stages that were built as backdrops for quinces. The stages are used for the opening ceremony of quince parties where the young women are formally presented to those in attendance.

For Cassandra, the expo was her chance to talk with those who might provide services individually or to planners such as Etayo who will stage the whole event for the family. "I am going to use Phantom of the Opera as my theme," she said. "You'll see that theme in the scenery and the decorations and the music at the beginning of the party."

Cassandra said that the Phantom theme was unusual for a quince, but she wanted her party to "be different."

QUINCE EXPO LIGHTS THE WAY TO PLAN A PARTY, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, Nov 12, 2003