My First Quinceañera  
July 20, 2015

A quinceañera is a ceremonial rite of passage marking a girl’s coming of age. Steeped in Latin American history tracing back to the Aztecs, a quinceañera is similar to a Sweet Sixteen birthday party, but is celebrated at the age of fifteen. Although traditions may vary slightly by country, a quinceañera is a day where the birthday girl gets to be a princess as she enters into adulthood.

A few weeks ago, Abi, HFF high school intern and Ashton local, invited the intern crew to a quinceañera in Victor, ID. Having never had my own quinceañera (much to my mother’s dismay) and never even attended one, I was ecstatic. Not only would it be a chance to dress up and practice my Spanish, but also an opportunity to learn about my heritage.

After exchanging several texts about what outfit to wear, we were off to Victor. Upon arrival, we were served rice, chicken mole, and barbacoa. It was too spicy for Natalie, but I found it downright delicious. Tables were cleared after everyone had eaten and a chair was placed in the center of the room to signal the start of the ceremony. Cindy, the quinceañera, emerged in a tiered, red floor length gown, hair curled to perfection. Two family members presented her with a crown (I swear, it must have been 10 inches tall) and a younger relative presented her with la ultima muñeca (the last doll), which was dressed as a miniature version of the birthday girl. The quinceañera then danced a choreographed dance with her chamberlains (male friends and relatives), the family shared a bottle of sparkling cider, and the rest of us were served cake and sat in anticipation of dancing as the bands (there were two!) set up.

When Abi asked if I could dance, I was confused. Expecting the night’s music to consist of Top 40s and Billboard Top 100, I responded, “Of course I can dance!” But when Abi gave me a look of skepticism and brought Natalie and I outside to teach us a few “basic steps,” I learned that we would be dancing cumbia.* My excitement turned to hesitation as we headed back inside and watched as older couples danced effortlessly to this patterned dance. Abi danced with her dad, her dad danced with her mom, we danced with each other, and then people started to ask us if we wanted to dance with them.

I danced with teenage boys and father-figures, laughing in embarrassment as I stepped on people’s toes and spun in the wrong direction time and time again. But once I learned the pattern and allowed my partner to lead, I really started to have fun. I met all kinds of characters, ate delicious food, learned a new dance, and had the opportunity to witness a part of my culture I had not seen before. Thank you to Abi and her family for inviting us; it truly was a highlight of my summer so far.

*Cumbia is a courtship dance with African and New World influences dating back to the 1800s.