

## LOOKING FOR JUAN

By Alicea Jones

No one knew what had happened to Juan Ramirez. He had gone to Mexico sometime in 1986 to check on his business affairs and, more important, to marry his sweetheart, Teresa. In two weeks, he would be back in Georgetown, Texas running Ramirez Grocery on 5th Street as usual. Two weeks, three, then a month passed and Juan had not returned.

Carl Doering had met Juan about 10 years earlier. He had heard about the Mexican restaurant in the store and how the aroma of tamales and chorizo drew Southwestern University students there every day. Curious, Carl not only discovered a good place to eat and shop, but he also found Juan who was to become a good friend. Even when Juan was busy training a new cashier or inspecting the produce aisle, he was glad to stop what he was doing to visit with Carl.

Carl was president of Walburg State Bank and president of the Georgetown Country Club where Juan frequently delivered ice for the club's big events—another opportunity for the two men to connect. Carl looked forward to seeing Juan and admired him for his industriousness and reliability—qualities important to a banker. So when Juan applied for a loan from the bank, he got it.

### **Odd Turn of Events**

Juan had been as punctual with his loan payments as he was opening the store every morning. Then around the time of his trip to Mexico, the loan became delinquent. Surprised, Carl checked at the grocery store for several weeks, hoping to get information about Juan's whereabouts. Finally, Carl got the news he had been dreading. "We discovered he had gone to Mexico and had a bad accident," Carl said. Someone told Carl that Juan had died in the accident. But Carl was not ready to say goodbye to his friend, at least not that easily. "Digging into it," he said, referring to his search, "we found that he did not lose his life but he lost part of his mind because of the accident."

It was true. The accident had been violent, and Juan lay in a Mexican hospital in a two-week coma. Carl, not knowing anyone in Juan's family, continued asking around the neighborhood for Juan, but no one he asked knew his whereabouts. He did however know that Juan owned a home in downtown Georgetown that he had been renting out. So Carl decided to step in for his friend. Every month, Carl would go to pick up the rent. With the rent money, Carl paid Juan's loan payments, property taxes and insurance. Carl deposited the excess into a savings account at Walburg State Bank that he opened in Juan's name and continued to keep the property taxes current. Carl did this for twenty years.

For Carl, collecting Juan's rent was the only gesture of friendship he could offer to his missing friend. Yet Carl was restless; he wanted to find Juan. Over the years, he would periodically search the neighborhoods and contacted Hispanic churches in the area. Still, no Juan.

About four years ago, Carl decided to take a different tact in his search. "I contacted a missing persons company out of Austin, Texas," he said. "They found twenty different Ramirezes in and around Austin, Round Rock and Georgetown," he said. "I figured one of them might know: a nephew, a niece, a cousin or something. But none of them panned out."

Two years later, following a tip, Carl drove down West 17th Street in Georgetown. He slowed down when he came to the small one-story church he had been told about—a beige brick building with a green and white sign out front: *El Buen Pastor Pentecostal Church, Rev. Jacinto Castillo*. Carl knocked on the front door. "The pastor came out and I asked him whether he had ever heard of Juan Ramirez. 'Absolutely,' Pastor Castillo exclaimed. 'He's a member of our church.'" Pastor Castillo went on to tell Carl that Juan's sister, Susie Orona, brought him to church every Sunday. Carl felt as if he had just won a marathon.

“She was living in Round Rock,” Carl said. “My wife [Dolores] and I went up to her door and asked who she was, and I told her who I was. I told her I was looking for Juan Ramirez.” Juan was there, and Susie invited them in.

Juan walked slowly into the living room toward Carl. Juan and Carl stood face to face for the first time in 25 years. Carl knew Juan right away. It took Juan a few seconds longer to recognize Carl. “He didn’t say much because his mind wasn’t clear,” Carl said. Susie told Carl about a young relative who deposited Juan at her doorstep 25 years ago. “He had become [Juan’s] legal guardian and took [Juan] for everything he owned then dropped Juan off with me and never came back,” Susie said. Juan was like a baby and Susie had to do everything for him.

Carl told Susie about the house Juan owned in Georgetown and how Carl had been collecting the rents all these years. Susie was skeptical at first, but when Carl told her about the \$9,000 that had accumulated in the bank account, her heart leaped.

Susie desperately needed to move but finding a place she could afford proved impossible. She had her three boys and Juan to care for. So when she heard that there was a home in Georgetown and cash to fix it up with, she could hardly believe it.

“I was just in shock,” Susie said. “You don’t see this kind of thing where people are looking out for someone else.”

With the help of the church, Pastor Castillo, and the money Carl had saved for Juan, Susie was able to make repairs to Juan’s home and move in this past year with Juan and her high school son. “I truly believe God had His reason for it to happen this way and wait this long,” she said. “I think I can say Mr. Doering is an angel sent from God.”

End bar

Juan has partially recovered since the accident and is able to dress himself and hold a conversation.

However, he still struggles with his memory. "He forgets things that happened an hour ago," Susie said.

But Juan remembers important things from his past, like his friend Carl Doering.