

## *Second Union remembers ...*



### **Julio Rivera**

**ATTENDED UNION CHURCH OF PONCE 1969 – 1973  
UNION CHURCH IN PUNTA LAS MARIAS 1973 -1986  
SECOND UNION CHURCH 1986 - 2015+**

**By Robert Zoba**

#### Julio Rivera: A Life Well Lived

Julio Rivera was born in the little town of Barranquitas, Puerto Rico in 1930. He is not certain of his exact birth date since, back in the day; a midwife delivered numerous babies in the course of a fortnight and then reported them all at once to the regional registrar. But Julio thinks he was born somewhere around April 7th.

Since 1930 marked the depth of the depression in the US, it was a difficult time for most. However, it was even worse growing up in a poor, rural town in Puerto Rico. In fact, even owning shoes was something of a luxury in Julio's hometown. Consequently, in order to preserve his footwear, Julio had to walk to school barefoot, carry his shoes, and did not put them on until he entered the premises.

#### **50th Jubilee Celebration – 2015**

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787-720-4423 [secondunion.org/50th-jubilee-celebration](http://secondunion.org/50th-jubilee-celebration)

However, even as a young boy, Julio was industrious. One way he made a little money was to provide janitorial services at the local Catholic Church. Occasionally, he would discover, on the floor of the sanctuary, coins that had fallen out of parishioner's pockets. Being a poor boy from a poor family, he was sorely tempted to drop them into his pockets and consider them a "tip" from the Lord. However, when he looked around at the faces of the statuesque saints in the sanctuary, his conscience was stricken; he dutifully put them in the offering box. He believed his reward would be in the Lord.

During this time in his life, Julio even considered life as a priest in the Catholic Church, but when he was overcome with a crush on the young, attractive nun who directed the choir, he concluded that celibacy was not one of his "spiritual gifts".

In his teenage years, Julio started attending a local Mennonite Church. One evening he felt the voice of God telling him to give his life to Christ. He obeyed that voice and found salvation in Christ. In his excitement, he came home and shared the good news with his parents. Unfortunately, the news was not welcomed in this strictly Catholic household. Thus, Julio was called to consider the very costly call of discipleship early in his Christian life. That is, he either had to renounce his faith (and attendance at the Mennonite Church) or leave the house. Julio decided to stay true to his new-found faith and was quickly shown the door.



Out on the street that night, Julio wondered what would happen next. But, it seems, God had a plan. That very night, the pastor of the Mennonite church was unable to sleep due to a feeling of unease in his Spirit. His wife told him that maybe one of his boys was in trouble. So, like a good shepherd, he went searching. And, lo and behold, his wife was right. The pastor found Julio on the street, heard his sad story, and decided to take Julio into his family as one of his own kids.

This was a fortuitous development as it eventually led to Julio's completion of high school and subsequent acceptance at Hesston College in Kansas. It is was there that he met Thelma, the love of his life. Thelma was at Hesston keeping an eye on her younger brother Donald. Julio had immediately made a splash on campus as "that dashing Latin from an exotic, distant land". Therefore, when he asked Thelma out on their first date, she thought he was joking. He showed up with an orchid corsage. She was impressed.

They got married June 8<sup>th</sup>, 1954 in Indiana. Rita and Anita soon followed.

Being a faithful Mennonite, Julio was, by definition, committed to passivism. Mennonites do not believe in participating in war in any form. This, too, was Julio's conviction. However, his local draft board was not convinced of either Julio's theology nor of his sincerity. Thus, they offered him a cruel ultimatum: either enters the military (and go against his religious convictions) or be sent to prison (and abandon his life and family). Julio appealed that decision to the regional level. But his appeal was rejected. He appealed again to the national level. But he was rejected there as well. Finally, Julio had to appeal to President Harry Truman himself. At the last moment, a reprieve was granted by President Truman.

After graduating from Hesston College, Julio went on to pursue a Master's Degree in Social Work at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. During this time, he began working in Detroit at the local YMCA several days a week. These were the dark days of heated, racial tensions in the 60s. However, the Lord used Julio to build bridges with nearby African-American communities by integrating them into the life of the YMCA. Julio's leadership was recognized and he was promoted within the organization. Thus, even after graduation, he continued with the YMCA while Thelma taught school.

Eventually, Julio felt a call back to the Island of Enchantment and took the chief executive position at the YMCA in Ponce. Julio was met with overwhelming challenges requiring 10-12 hour days in order to bring about change in an institution that had seeming lost its original Christian mandate. After several years, both his doctor and his family told him that if he continued this regimen, he would lose everything. Julio decided it was time to relocate to the more prosperous YMCA of San Juan. (Before he relocated, however, Julio was visited, one day, by a vitamin salesman with a thick, Austrian accent. Outside of the world of body builders, few people knew the name of this enterprising salesman. Julio employed him at the YMCA for a seminar. The young salesman's name was Arnold Schwarzenegger ;-)



The move to San Juan provided greater opportunities for Thelma, Rita, and Anita, but even bigger challenges for Julio at the YMCA. The corporate culture there was rife with nepotism, thievery, immorality, and even fisticuffs among the residents. Julio had to work hard to overcome these trends, establish his leadership, and turn things around. He very quickly introduced the concept of converting the YMCA into a family center rather than keeping it as the private domain of men. He also discovered that the employees were not being paid the national, minimum wage and were not receiving the benefits of Social Security. This was an inequality he quickly and vigorously addressed. But still, the work was so taxing and the challenges so overwhelming, it began to threaten Julio's health.

Thus, after six years, Julio became the island director of Junior Achievement where he managed over 13,000 kids, worked with board members of some of America's top corporations, and developed fund raising techniques that he still finds useful at 2UC. Many of his alums graduated with high honors from high school and went on to attend universities all over the world. This is a legacy that still lives on in the lives of these kids and their families, including our own Harry Delacruz.

In addition to his professional work, Julio was always active in church life. For many years, while Julio, Thelma, and family lived in the *Condado*, they attended the Union Church of San Juan. They eventually found their way to Second Union where Julio has served as the "social conscience" of Second Union for many decades. At one time or another, Julio has filled the chair of nearly every committee at Second Union. However, he is best known for his leadership of the Outreach Committee which oversees the largest budget of any committee at 2UC. Julio has been very careful to visit, vet, and establish a relationship with nearly ever ministry that we support. As a result, we are assured that we are getting a lot of "bang for our buck" in the monies we donate.

So too, we do not simply send organizations money alone, but Julio makes sure we are more personally involved as he is forever initiating food drives, clothing drives, and organizing visits. Indeed, Julio serves as a mini-Salvation Army as we get tons of donated clothing and appliances that are personally directed to those deemed most needy. Likewise, many of our Roman Catholic recipients are surprised that we, a predominately Protestant church, support their ministries. However, if their ministries are meeting the true needs of the poor in the name of Christ, Julio has always been quick to support them. Consequently, 2UC is known as a church that gives and gives and give by so many in our community.

This is due, in large part, to Julio's efforts to use the resources that are generously given by so many of our members for those most in need. This is a legacy that will live on in our community and will be a legacy that will continually hearken back to Julio and his heart for the poor. Indeed, I believe, one day, when Jesus asks Julio if he clothed him when he was naked, fed him when he was hungry, took him in when he was a stranger, and visited him when he was oppressed (Mt. 25:31-46), Julio will be able to say, "Yes, Lord, for when I did it unto the least of these my brethren, I did it unto thee."

And I believe the Lord will say to Julio, "Well done, thy good and faithful servant. Enter into my glory."

