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How Four Latinx Lesbians Restarted Their Lives After Being Wrongfully Imprisoned

BY: **EMILY STARBUCK GERSON** 26 APR 2018

Despite cultural shifts, legal victories, and an ever-increasing number of resources, being gay in today's world isn't easy. But it was far more challenging in the '90s, when prejudice against gay and lesbian people was more commonplaceand more acceptable.

This rampant discrimination is what led four lesbian Latinx women in San Antonio, Texas, to be wrongly convicted of a heinous crime simply because they were gay. After serving well over a decade of prison time, the women were freed and eventually exonerated.

Abruptly torn away from their partners and families and wrongly locked up during the prime of their lives, nobody would blame the four women if they moved far away, laid low, or fell to pieces. But since being released and exonerated, the San Antonio Four have shown remarkable resilience, stood up and fought for justice, and tirelessly advocated for justice reform and LGBTQ people. They spread their message far and wide through activism, speeches, and their new careers.

This is the story of how their sexuality led to a legal nightmare, and how they're now using their experiences to change the world.

Four young friends trying to find their place

Anna Vasquez remembers being at a bar in San Antonio's gayborhood in the '90s and watching a young man stumble into the front door with a knife in his back. With gay-bashing being commonplace, it wasn't safe to be out in most places. In this climate, and after seeing how the gay kids at school were treated, Vasquez decided to stay in the closet until after high school.

Vasquez came out as gay after graduating in 1993 and began attending a local college, but after a few classes,

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financial aid fell through. She dropped out and began working at Little Caesars Pizza to save up for more classes.

While working there, Vasquez hit it off with a customer, Cassandra Rivera. The mother of two young children, Rivera worked at a grocery store and had recently separated from her husband. The two began dating and moved in together, becoming what Rivera describes as a normal, happy family.

The couple spent a lot of time with Elizabeth Ramirez, a high school friend of Vasquez, and Kristie Mayhugh, an out lesbian and coworker of Rivera. Mayhugh had been attending college elsewhere but was taking a break to live and work in San Antonio. Mayhugh became Ramirez's roommate, and they dated briefly.

The four women became a tight-knit group; they all understood the challenges of being a gay Latinx in a conservative town. The friendships were especially important to Ramirez, who'd also struggled with her sexuality.

When she came out to her mom at 16, she faced rejection. She became legally emancipated and went to live with her older sister, Rosemary Limon. Her sister's husband, Javier Limon, made passes at her. Eventually, the Limons split up.

Ramirez got pregnant shortly after high school, and her sister's ex-husband reached out with love letters, offering to take care of her and her baby despite not being the father. She rebuffed him, and he was angered by her rejection.

A favor turns into a nightmare

Ramirez eventually got her own apartment. In the summer of 1994, a year after most of the women graduated high school, Ramirez agreed to watch her sister's seven and nine-year-old daughters while she traveled. Ramirez's three best friends, Vasquez, Rivera, and Mayhugh, helped her throughout the week.

Months later, just days after Ramirez gave birth to her baby boy, law enforcement officials brought the women in for questioning. Mayhugh says the investigators asked pointed questions about their sexuality. Ultimately, the four women faced allegations that they had sexually assaulted the girls during their stay. And not just molested them, but gang-raped them as part a devil-worshipping sex ritualaccusations they all vehemently denied.

The women felt so confident in their innocence, they didn't even ask for lawyers during the interrogations. They thought telling the truth would save them.

But it was the early '90s, and the nation was in the final throes of "Satanic panic." In fact, in 1993, three teenagers in West Memphis, Arkansas"the West

Memphis 3"were wrongly accused of murdering three young boys in a Satanic cult ritual (and in 2011, after nearly 20 years in prison, they were freed).

Fears had swept the nation that a Satanic cult existed, and that secret membersespecially daycare workersabused children as a form of "Satanic ritual abuse." While the four women were busy living their lives and unaware of this trend, psychologists, District Attorney offices, and other experts had bought into the hysteria, creating a modern-day witch hunt. Even Dr. Nancy Kellogg, the pediatrician and child abuse expert who examined the girls, put in her notes that the "crime" could be Satanic-related.

Dr. Kellogg also said a "scar" on one of Limon girls' hymens indicated sexual abuse. Despite murky and changing allegations, charges were pressed, and the salacious stories ran in the media.

"Honestly, I feel like we were tried in the public before we went to trial," Vasquez tells *INTO*. "They put out this juicy story, the one where it was four lesbians, and they sacrificed these two children like lambs."

It was decided Ramirez would be tried separately as the supposed ringleader of the crime. The remaining three would be tried together.

Rivera remembers their sexuality being a big part of jury selection, with half of potential jurors raising their hand when asked if they were uncomfortable with homosexuality. The women were told that their sexuality wasn't supposed to be a factor in the trials, but homophobia was at the forefront of both.

"At the beginning of my trial, the prosecutor painted the picture to the jury," Ramirez remembers. "They said, 'Close your eyes, imagine a lesbian female sacrificing her nieces to her friends and holding them down, and doing all these things to them.' Of course in the jury's mind, they're trying to picture it, and it's horrible. This is their aunt, someone who's supposed to be loving and take care of them. And here she is sacrificing them to their lesbian friends."

She says throughout her trial, they repeatedly pointed out that she was gay, and insinuating that it means she was capable of the crime, and that's why her victims were female. The same arguments were brought up in the second trial.

"They didn't want to listen to anything else that was going on as part of the allegations. Just because of the fact that it was four lesbian women, and we're Hispanic and poorit was all because we were gay," Ramirez recalls.

In 1997, she was convicted and sentenced to 37 and a half years. The remaining three women were convicted in 1998 and sentenced to 15 years each. Appeals failed, and they were locked up in the summer of 2000.

All four women were put in different units, and after seven years together, Vasquez and Rivera were torn apart. For a few months, they could write to each other, but the prison stopped allowing this, Rivera says. With no way to communicate, their relationship fizzled without closure. It would be over a decade before the women would experience freedom again.

A slow path to freedom

Letters to various innocence projects weren't helping. But Darrell Otto, a Canadian data scientist, stumbled upon the case. He did research, corresponded with the women, and was confounded since the case didn't fit with any known patterns of female sexual offenders, which are rare to begin with.

Otto contacted Debbie Nathan at the National Center for Reason and Justice, a nonprofit that helps people wrongly accused of crimes against children, who then reached out to Deborah Esquenazi, an LGBTQ filmmaker. Nathan told her about the San Antonio Four, and while initially skeptical, Esquenazi met with the women and soon became devoted to telling their story.

Rivera says she was uncertain about speaking publicly, since the media had previously portrayed her and her friends like Satan-worshipping monsters, but after sitting down with Esquenazi, she could tell the filmmaker was the perfect person to tell their side of the story.

Esquenazi interviewed each of the women and cut together a short film about the injustices of their case, focusing on the tragic separation of Vasquez and Rivera. She shared the film everywhere she could, and people started noticing, including Rosie Gonzalez.

Gonzalez, a prominent gay attorney and current judicial candidate in San Antonio, was actually contacted years prior by Vasquez's current girlfriend, who was looking for help in raising awareness of the case. But since Gonzalez focuses on family law and child welfare law litigation, not criminal law, she was unable to help and suggested they contact the Innocence Project.

A few years later, Gonzalez was at an event for Allgo, an LGBTQ Latino organization in Austin, where Esquenazi was there screening the short film. Gonzalez realized it was the same women she'd heard about years before. After learning more about the injustices these women experiencedand feeling like her profession had let these women downshe offered Esquenazi any help she needed. Gonzalez helped host screenings of the film, which gained the attention of the Innocence Project of Texas.

They began working the case and found a retired investigator who had kept all the case files. Esquenazi and the Innocence Project of Texas couldn't afford to duplicate the numerous boxes of records, so Gonzalez let them spend days in her office using her copier, paper, and ink for free. While she'd never met the women, Gonzalez wanted to help their cause however she could.

Then, Vasquez was unexpectedly released on parole in 2012. Things soon began falling into place for the remaining women. The same year, one of the Limon girls recanted her allegations on camera to Esquenazi, saying nothing had actually happened; that her father and grandmother had coerced her and her sister into make the accusations.

Also, a new medical study had found that many forensic science methods, including the one Dr. Kellogg had used to identify sexual assault, lacked scientific foundation. In 2013, Dr. Kellogg signed an affidavit stating that her previous testimony was factually inaccurate since science had changed.

In light of the findings that many forensic science techniques were no longer reliable, a Texas bill was passed that helped people challenge convictions made on what was now known to be junk science. The Innocence Project of Texas submitted evidence, and the state agreed the women deserved new trials and released the remaining three in 2013. By this point, Ramirez had been in prison for nearly 17 years, and the other two for close to 14. They were all in their early forties.

In 2016, a judge overturned the women's convictions, deeming a new trial unnecessary. However, he said there wasn't enough proof to declare them innocent. The Court of Criminal Appeals disagreed, and in November 2016, declared the women "actually innocent."

This official exoneration entitled the women to compensation from Texas, which is calculated based on the number of days served. Rivera says she received just over $1 million, plus a healthy monthly annuity for life. Their compensation package also pays for in-state higher education. Each of the four donated $100,000 of their compensation to the Innocence Project of Texas.

At the end of the saga, Esquenazi finished a full-length version of the documentary and debuted it at the Tribeca Film Festival in 2016. Entitled *Southwest of Salem*, the film has been pivotal in raising awareness about the case, and it was nominated for an Emmy and won numerous awards, including a Peabody award, the GLAAD Media Award for Outstanding Documentary, and the Critics Choice Award for Best First Feature. The women have toured around the world, speaking across the world about their experience. This opened even more opportunities for speaking and appearances.

"Deb put it out there in a way where the public could actually see the facts," Rivera says. "When we went to trial, people just saw what the state wanted to present or what the newspapers said, which was not the facts. There were so many people in our community that weren't really there for us. But after they saw the documentary, people opened their eyes to the injustice."

They also used their spotlight as an opportunity to give back. Some in the LGBTQ community in San Antonio wanted to host a fundraiser for the women when they got out. But by the time the event happened, the women had been exonerated and compensated. So they donated the funds to Thrive, a San Antonio shelter for LGBTQ youthone of the few in the nation.

When asked if this could still happen to someone today, all four women answer "yes" without hesitation. They believe that people still have strong prejudices and misinformation about gay people and refuse to set their biases aside. Ramirez points out bills in Texas that have targeted gay couples that want to adopt or transgender people using bathrooms. She says her partner, who people easily identify as lesbian, doesn't feel comfortable in public bathrooms and often asks Ramirez to go with her when kids are around.

As long as these biases exist and as long as young people are ignorant of how the justice system works, they all believe it's fully possible for someone else to get caught up in the system today just as they did in the '90s. Now they're devoted to ensuring this doesn't happen again.

Here's what the four women are doing with their timeand compensation dollarssince their release.

Kristie Mayhugh

Last spring, Mayhugh moved to the Houston area, where her mother lives and is in poor health. Mayhugh didn't get to be around during the years she was incarcerated, and until she was cleared of the crime, she had to get permission to even leave San Antonio. Now she's making up for lost time and taking care of her mother.

Mayhugh says she's not worked in the past year to give herself time to really absorb everything she's been through. Counseling has helped her process her feelings and reestablish a relationship with her mom. While she says there's no money in the world that could compensate her and her friends for everything they lost and the time they spent in prison, it has helped make life feel a little more normal.

"By this time, all of us would have been settled in a job and with education and had a career," the now 45-year-old says. "Everybody else that's the same age as us, they're married with kids and a house, settled in their career. The money has made it for us to be normal again, to be on the same level as everybody else. We were starting from the bottom." Mayhugh purchased a home for herself in the Houston area in October.

After taking time to get settled back into life outside of prison, Mayhugh feels better and ready to pursue higher education. Prior to the legal debacle, she had attended two years of college with the goal of becoming a veterinarian and was taking a break from school. Now, rather than spending the hefty number of years it takes to become a vet, she's starting school at a small vet tech institute in Houston in July. She's excited to finally enter the field she's been wanting to pursue for so long.

Mayhugh also finds it important to participate in speaking engagements, since she says people often aren't properly educated about the justice system or LGBTQ people.

"A lot of people have misconceptions about the gay communityI don't know why, but some people relate being gay or lesbian to some kind of deviant sexual behavior, like something is wrong with us," she says. "That's really why I think with our case, especially in the '90s, things took off because we were gay, and they thought, 'of course they must have done it.' Now, even though times have changed and things are different, there's still always a lack of education."

In addition to trying to help the world become more open-minded about LGBTQ people, Mayhugh and her friends also like to help educate young people about the justice system and get involved in changing the laws. "We were very naive and just felt like the law was there to protect and serve, but you never really know the real ins and outs of everything until you get caught up in some situation," she says. In between taking time for herself, her family, and education, she tries to be involved in activism around these causes whenever she can.

Elizabeth Ramirez

While Ramirez was in prison, she met a woman named Angel, and they quickly became each other's support system. They weren't sure if the relationship would work after prison, but it did, and Ramirez married her this February, with Rivera by her side as her maid of honor.

While Ramirez and her now-wife were in prison, they worked at a print shop and learned the trade. Upon release, both women began working at a print shop in San Antonio, Litho Press, utilizing the skills they honed behind bars. Ramirez's wife is a supervisor at the shop, and the two got the owner on board with a re-entry program to hire ex-offenders. They have already hired one woman Ramirez met in prison, who is working there part-time on a trial basis.

Ramirez says leaving prison and trying to make your way in the real world again is harder than people realize, especially since technology progresses rapidly, and when you come out, you have so much to learn. Between that and the stigma of prison, many people go back to prison because they feel that there's nothing for them out here, she says. And sometimes they don't have a chance, especially when they tick off the box on job applications that they have a felony.

Hiring these people gives them a chance, but it's beneficial for the print shop, too, Ramirez says, since these people already have skills. Ramirez enjoys attending job fairs for parolees on behalf of the print shop. When the ex-offenders learn she's been to prison, knows what they've been through, and isn't judging them, they show visible relief.

"When I see them, I see myself," Ramirez says. "I try to be compassionate and understanding and willing to help as much as I can. I think that's why I really enjoy it. It gives me the satisfaction to know if I can help just one person, then I know I did the right thing."

Ramirez also loves being on the speaking circuit with her friends. She says some of the events include conferences The Innocence Project puts on for lawyers. "We feel like the only impact that we can do is if we show our face and let them know there are real life people here," she says. "It affected us. The job that you take and the oath you take is important, because you're dealing with people's lives. It's not just a license and you go on with that, and 'here's another conviction.'" In addition to raising awareness to professionals, she finds it impactful to educate people on criminal justice.

While in prison, Ramirez took an online course in criminal justice since she wasn't aware of her rights or the law when she found herself in trouble, and she didn't understand why her defense didn't call experts on her behalf. She took the course to educate herself and help steer others in the right direction, since she found that many prisoners don't understand their rights and make mistakes that can harm their chances at freedom (for example, she says, blowing your shot at habeas corpus, not realizing you get one chance only).

She and the other women have also done some talks with juvenile offenders who don't think getting in trouble is a big deal. "They don't get a taste of what

prison life really is and what's taken from them, so we share that," she says. And she doesn't hold back or try to paint a pretty picture when she tells them about her years behind bars. "I let them know this is not a game, it's your life," she says.

Ramirez also relishes the opportunity to spend time with her family. While Ramirez's mom initially rejected her after she came out, they reconciled a few years later, and her mom eventually became a huge advocate for her. After receiving her compensation, Ramirez was thrilled to purchase a home for her 74-year-old mother, who had only ever previously lived in apartments.

One of the most powerful moments in *Southwest of Salem* is when Ramirez sits down with her niece and forgives her. "That took a lot," Ramirez says of that moment. "The whole time I was in prison, you know how they say when you're way down, all you can do is look up. God was such a big part of my life and has continued now." She credits God and prayer for giving her the strength, patience, and persistence she needed until justice was finally served.

Recently, Ramirez got a tattoo of the blindfolded Lady of Justice on her shoulder along with the date of her exoneration.

Cassandra Rivera

After being released from prison, Rivera stressed about finding a job as a convicted sex offender and felon. She had her son, now in his early twenties, take her around town looking for work. She got lucky when the manager of The Wash Tub, a car wash chain in San Antonio, learned about her case and said he'd be proud to hire her just two weeks after her release. At that job, she met Tiffany Hurtado, another manager at The Wash Tub, and felt some mutual attraction. Eventually, Hurtado asked her out, and the two married in December 2016.

Rivera left The Wash Tub and was trying to figure out her next move. Local lawyer Rosie Gonzalez needed help in her office. She had become friendly with the San Antonio Four after helping with their case and reached out to Rivera, asking for help spreading the word. Rivera decided she wanted to take the role.

Rivera joined the office last summer, where she helps run the law firm and Gonzalez's campaign. Rivera didn't know who Gonzalez was when she was locked up, but she later learned how involved Gonzalez had become with their case. "She was one of our voices out hereshe was one of our advocates," Rivera says. "She felt a strong belief in us and put the word out, and because of her, a lot more people heard about us."

Gonzalez raves about Rivera as a crucial member of hear team and praises her work ethic, smarts, resilience, and positive attitude. She says having Rivera in the office really helps brings the purpose of their work home and provides a unique perspective.

Rivera says Gonzalez is a passionate attorney who fights for what she believes in, making the partnership an ideal fit. "I love her drive and I want to be a part of that," Rivera says. "We're a team and we work on the cases together, and I'm learning how the system works inside and out. It's amazing."

She's also motivated by being a part of and learning so much about the system that failed her, she says. Since so many of Gonzalez's cases involve Child Protective Services, Rivera says she's also gotten to learn the ins and outs of how it works.

Her work frequently has her at the courthouse in downtown San Antonio, where she's run into the prosecutor from her and Ramirez's trial. Rivera says it's hard seeing them, knowing all the horrible things they said about her and her friends.

"But it makes me feel good to know we've been exonerated, we've been completely cleared and innocent, and I'm able to walk into that courthouse every day and they see that; they know that they didn't break me," Rivera says. "It also makes me happy that my kids see how strong I am and that I've become something. I never thought I'd be where I am today."

After being accused of something so ugly, Rivera does sometimes feel on guard around children, even those in her family. But she tries to not let it get to her too much. Like the other women, Rivera enjoys all of the speaking opportunities and spreading the message that life shouldn't be taken for granted and can be taken from you in an instant. She says she and her young friends had no knowledge of how to handle their legal problems, and in retrospect, handled everything so wrong. When speaking, especially to youth, Rivera says it's important to educate them on their rights sand how to handle encounters with law enforcement.

"We want them to be knowledgeable on the justice system; if something like this happened to us, it can happen to anyone," Rivera says. "We thought we had to cooperate fully, which we did because we had nothing to hide. But we didn't have our lawyers present, and there were so many things we should have done at our trial."

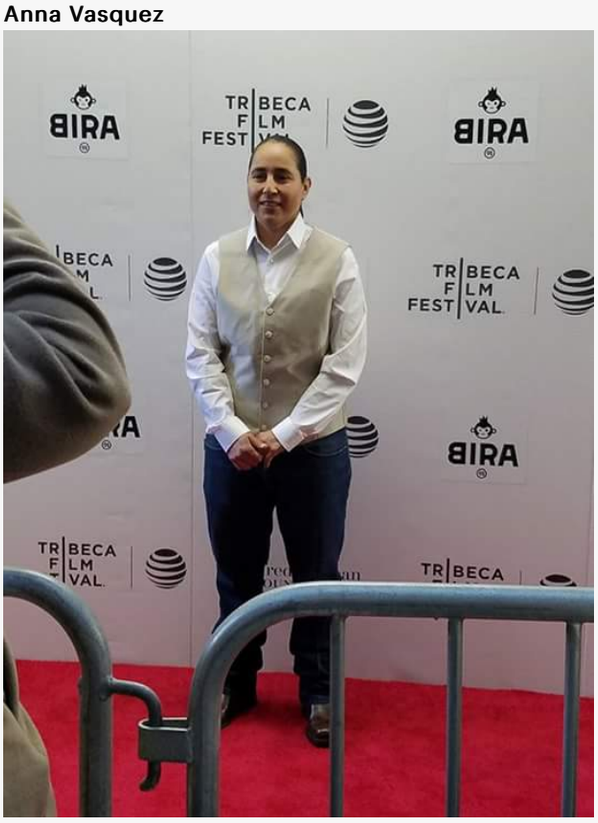
She especially enjoys speaking at high schools and colleges, so that young people can hear their messages early. "We need to start early and plant the seed young so they grow with it," she says.

Rivera says she also frequently shares information on

Facebook, such as what wrongful conviction does to people and how we can help more people prevent wrongful conviction. She also helps the Innocence Project as much as she can and is passionate about LGBTQ causes.

“There’s so much we want to do,” she says. “A lot of people are like, why do you want to stay in it? You’re practically back where you started. We stay here because we can’t let it go. A lot of people would just want to forget, but we can’t forget.” Across Rivera’s forearm now read the tattooed words “Innocent 11-23-16.”

Anna Vasquez



When Vasquez made parole in 2012, a few years shy of her sentence, she was stunned. “I was completely unaware that I would be paroled, and I almost had a sense of survivor’s guilt, because I really felt like, ‘God, why me? Why not Liz or Cassie that had children?’” she says. “They need them.”

She devoted herself advocating for her three friends still behind bars, appearing in the media and trying to bring awareness and prove their innocence. “That was my focus from 2012 once I was released until the day before Thanksgiving in 2016, when we won our exoneration,” she says.

When Vasquez first got out of prison, she moved back to the San Antonio area and found work at a tortilla factory. Gonzalez says she saw Vasquez as a sharp, articulate person who would be an asset to her law office and wanted to hire her upon her release. But this was well before the exoneration, and as a registered sex offender, Vasquez’s parole officer wouldn’t let her work for Gonzalez since the work involved children. Gonzalez argued that children never came to her office, but the state wouldn’t permit it.

But in March of 2016, the Innocence Project of Texas proposed a full-time job to Vasquez. She’d wanted to volunteer for them, but getting to be a part of it as a colleague was a no-brainer, she says.

Vasquez’s duties run the gamut, from finding the nonprofit organization funding to helping assess potential cases and working with the attorneys. She's also working on a project that will allow volunteers to help investigate cases under the guidance of an attorney or investigator. Another key responsibility of hers is being involved with the Texas exoneree community and rallying them to testify at the legislature.

"We're not just trying to help the wrongfully convicted that are already sitting in prison, but we're also trying to change laws and the way they're doing investigations," Vasquez says. "Just this past session, myself and the girls went to the Capitol to testify on certain bills, and we helped to pass HB 34, and now it's mandated that these investigations have to be videotaped." The San Antonio Four's interrogations were not filmed, so it was their word against the detectives, making this bill especially meaningful to them.

Vasquez says they're also working to raise awareness about jailhouse snitches, who are often given plea bargains or other benefits for testifying against people. This can result in made-up testimony that gets people locked up.

In addition to traveling the world and speaking on behalf of the film and the Innocence Project, "We're actually trying to change laws so this doesn't happen," Vasquez says. "We want to stop people from going to prison, not just helping them after the fact."

Of all the speaking opportunities, Vasquez says she especially loves speaking at high school and universities since she feels they're our future, and they're a brave generation, especially given the recent anti-gun walkouts.

"Even though I hate talking about it, I hate what we went through and the charges, they're just disgusting," she says. "But at the same time, I really feel like we can't stopwe need to tell our story, we need to tell people what happened to us. And that this still occurs today."

Vasquez says going through this experience has made her a better, stronger, more compassionate person who is less judgmental and materialistic. For a time, she says, she lost faith in the system. She says she grew up watching people on TV who were accused of something and assumed they did it, but she no longer thinks that way.

She now gives everyone the benefit of a doubt. For example, when she seems a homeless person, she no longer judges, but thinks that something made this person that way. "Maybe they got involved in drugs, or maybe something happened and they lost their job; it could be as simple as that," she says. "Everybody has a story, and I really feel like we should just have more love in the world, more compassion toward people, and really accept that people are different. Everybody's different, and nobody's wrong because of that, and nobody should be judged because of it."

One may think the story of Vasquez and her friends is one of redemption, but Gonzalez begs to differ. "Their story isn't one of redemption, because they don't need to be redeemed," the lawyer muses. "It's of hope. If they'd lost hope, they'd have stayed in forever. They never stopped fighting."

Emily Starbuck Gerson
Emily Starbuck Gerson is a writer, editor, and passionate storyteller currently in San Antonio, Texas.

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