

## Miracles Do Happen

*By Sheila Johnson*

I was born and raised in El Paso, Texas, which was cited as one of the All American Cities by President John F. Kennedy in 1969. El Paso was a clean, friendly, overall unbiased dwelling place whose municipal government did not enforce any of the federally incorporated Jim Crow laws which, unfortunately, were still on the books throughout the sixties. Growing up in this friendly, unprejudiced region of the Lone Star State afforded me the privilege of learning and becoming fluent in the Spanish language. My parents encouraged us to master not only one, but as many languages possible during our academic careers. Little did I know that by acquiring this beautiful, romantic language, I was also preparing myself to experience one of the most unforgettable miracles of my life.

After completing two years at the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) in 1971, I was catapulted into the future by what seemed to be a time capsule moving at lightning speed. My experience inside of that container included relocation, marriage, culture shifts, children, and high school and college graduations.

1996 found my then husband and me waiting in a crowded Atlanta airport for our delayed flight back to Denver – standing room only. We had just spent a few days with our son who received an athletic award from Georgia Tech Institute, and we were both overloaded with pride and tired from all of the excitement. As I was indulging in one of my favorite pastimes of people watching, a short, brown-skinned, gray haired woman approached me speaking Spanish because she did not understand English. She was anxious and she frantically pointed to her wheel chair-bound husband who appeared to be very ill. Although it had been twenty-five years since my last conversation in Spanish, I could clearly understand her frightening story – word for word.

The day before we met them, Mr. and Mrs. Morales had flown for almost twenty-three hours from Puerto Ayacucho, Guatemala to Atlanta, Georgia. They were scheduled to catch a connecting flight to Denver, but airline delays out of Puerto Ayacucho caused them to miss their flight. Consequently, they spent the night in the Atlanta terminal without any assistance from the Airlines. Mrs. Morales' attempts to call her son were futile because the telephone number that she dialed directed her to an *English-speaking* recording. Appalled that no one had helped this elderly couple, I barged my way through the crowd holding my new friend's hand and asked the attendant for a Spanish-speaking assistant, afraid that my slow communication with Mrs. Morales would cause them to miss their connection again. The woman lowered her eyes and said, "Lady, you're in Atlanta and that's like finding a needle in a haystack."

Enter Clark Kent (female version): we flew up over the crowd, entered a phone booth (no cell phones at that time), dialed the number, spoke with her son, and I assured him I would stay with his parents until they arrived safely at the Denver baggage claim.

That *one* telephone call purchased a first class seat for me, along with Mr. and Mrs. Morales (compliments of the airlines), rendered hugs from every family member present when we arrived at baggage claim, made me the recipient of five years of letters and Christmas cards from their son, consigned a lifetime of gratitude to God and to my parents for insisting that we become bilingual, and it gave me the joy of remembering that miracles do indeed happen.