

# Feliciano Family Offers True Inspiration

by Janet Drake Fair

**F**eliciano might seem like an unusual name in East Texas, but, it has actually become quite familiar for several reasons. Moving to Jacksonville, Texas and later to Tyler, this dynamic family quickly made an impression. Their participation in community activities combined with establishing a family business, has helped the name become even more known. Today, another generation of Felicianos call East Texas home and the family's contributions to our community continue to grow. Although many of us can say we know Jose, Wanda, John, Jeff, Juanita, Edie, and April, there are only a few that know the truly inspiring story of this special family.

It begins in Aquidilla, a small town on the west coast of Puerto Rico. It was there, in 1920, that Gao Feliciano was born. With his mother's death at age 2, followed by his father's death when he was 15, Gao did not have an easy life. On his own as a teenager, he shined shoes to take care of himself. But by age 20, he had found a vocation. While working at a paint and body shop, Gao realized he had a knack for restoring cars. He eventually used that talent to work his way up and open his own body shop, which he operated for many years. And now at age 82, is still considered the expert in Aquidilla.

Gao married a local girl, Carmen and they were thrilled when their only child together, Jose Anselmo Feliciano, Sr. was born on March 9, 1939. They watched their infant son grow to a happy toddler before they realized something was wrong. At the time, the town of about 20,000 offered little in the way of medical specialists. Knowing their son's development was not like that of other children, they continued to love and nurture him, hoping for the best. But, by the time Jose was a year and a half old, he had been diagnosed as a deaf mute. With no family history, abnormal pregnancy or accident to explain it, Gao and Carmen were at a loss as to why their child could not hear as they could.

The only thing they knew to do was to enroll Jose in a deaf school, three hours away in San Juan. Thus began Jose's



Top: Edie, pregnant with Jose, Jr.  
Middle: Jose, Sr. with son,  
Jose, Jr., July 1963.  
Bottom: Edie's father, Tim, was  
the 'super' of their building.

short-lived formal education. Whether it was frustration, boredom, or embarrassment, he was constantly getting in fights. So, he quit school in the 6th grade and started working with his father at the body shop.

Perhaps another reason for Jose's unhappiness or restlessness was the departure of his mother. When he was just 5, Carmen and Gao divorced and Carmen left the island to join other Puerto Ricans in New York City. Renee Ithier, Jose's best friend and also a deaf mute six years older, tried to explain to the little boy that his mother was okay and had just moved away. Not really understanding at that age, Jose was determined that one day he would do whatever was necessary to find her.

Finally, when he was 19, although his father was afraid for him, Jose, wearing a sign declaring his disability, travelled to New York alone. Gao arranged for friends to meet his son at the airport. In 1958, the Puerto Rican community stayed in close contact and Jose was quickly reunited with his mother. He moved in with her and found a job at a paint and body shop.

At the urging of his old friend Renee, who had also moved to New York, Jose met some of the students attending the local deaf school. Finding so many others like him gave Jose confidence, self-assurance, and hope. And in 1961, when he met a pretty girl on the subway going to a bowling tournament for the deaf, his hopes really soared!

Edie Georgetta Napier was born in New York City on September 20, 1946. Her parents, Edith and Tim, like Jose's parents, did not have an explanation for Edie's deafness. Their other 2 children, like themselves, could hear. Edie became a student at the deaf school learning how to adjust in the hearing world around her.

Jose and Edie soon began dating. Once Tim was convinced Jose could provide for his daughter, they were married. Edie settled into the role of housewife, making their first home in Queens, New York, comfortable. Jose's salary continued to increase at the paint and body shop so they moved to 47th Street in Manhattan. The neighborhood, called

“Hell’s Kitchen”, because of a local restaurant, was a mixture of medium to low income families. It was in this neighborhood, on November 13, 1962, that Jose and Edie’s first child, Jose Feliciano, Jr. was born.

As deaf parents, Jose and Edie had the difficult task of raising a hearing child. But they had already proven to themselves that they could handle most anything and although they knew they would need help, they were determined to do everything they could -- first.

Edie quickly learned how to interpret the needs of her baby by depending on her other senses. Baby Jose would sleep next to her so when he started kicking -- which accompanies crying -- she would wake up and feed or change him. Wanting to make sure Jose learned to speak properly, Edie and Jose, Sr. asked their parents to be with the baby as much as possible, which they did with pleasure. Life settled down and another son, John, joined the family on March 22, 1964. Jose, Jr. remembers a different New York than the one today. “I went to public school #51. It was only a couple of blocks from our apartment



Top: John & Jose, Jr., NYC, 1965.  
Bottom: Jose, Sr.’s father-in-law, Tim Napier, joins him with baby, Jose, Jr. and a family friend in 1962.

and I remember walking to school when I was in the 3rd grade.” Having an older hearing child also gave the Felicianos comfort as their family grew.

In 1970, Jose, Sr. began worrying about raising the children in the city and neighborhood that was constantly changing. With friends in Tucker, Georgia, he decided to move the family there and quickly found another job painting cars. This move was 9 year-old, Jose, Jr.’s first experience at handling financial matters for his parents. He negotiated the rent, for \$50 a month and dealt with the utility companies to establish services.

It wasn’t long before Jose, Sr. decided a better opportunity awaited them in Fayetteville, North Carolina. “John and I were in school. Dad was at work and Mom went into labor with Jeff,” recalls Jose, Jr. “She caught the bus to go to the hospital. Later that day, they announced over the loud speaker that John and I had a new brother. It was November 5, 1974.”

From North Carolina, the family moved again seeking a better life. This time they moved to Orlando, Florida.

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John joined big brother, Jose, at a TJC fraternity party in 1981.


This time, while Jose, Jr. negotiated the rent and utilities, John was watching so he could help as well. And finally the three brothers got a little sister. Edie gave birth to Juanita on August 25, 1976.

With Edie's parents getting older, the Felicianos decided to move back to New York for awhile to be closer to family. They stayed for several months letting the children get to know their grandparents and making sure Edith and Tim were taking care of themselves. Satisfied that everyone was okay, it was time for yet, another move.

Having deaf friends in Jacksonville, Texas was reason enough for Jose, Sr. to relocate there. They sold most of their belongings and arrived in Texas on a Greyhound bus with 6 cardboard boxes. For the first 3 months, they shared a home with another family, paying \$75 a month. Texas was a new experience for the Feliciano children. "My first experience with hauling hay was not fun," says Jose, Jr. "It was hard work, especially in the heat. I knew quickly that I didn't want to do that again!"

The children became involved in school and community activities. Jose, Jr. played baseball and football at Jacksonville High School and graduated in 1980. "Those were great years," he says. "Although, it was difficult for me to attend the sports banquets with my parents. For the first time that I can remember -- I was embarrassed. In order for them to understand what was being said, I had to use sign language. And I could sense the whole room staring at me."

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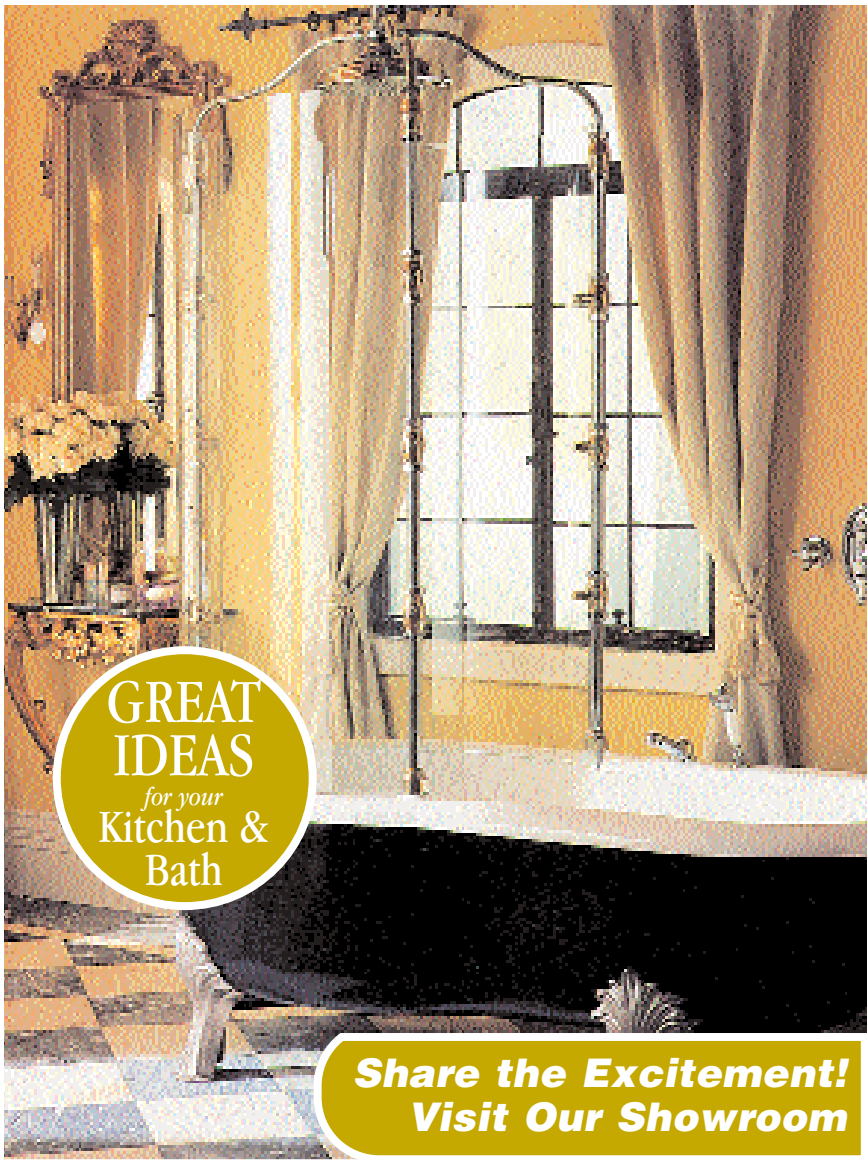
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**Smith County Historical Society sponsors "Houston-Bowles" Exhibit**

The exhibit will reunite, for the first time since 1836, Cherokee Chief Bowles sword, given to him by Sam Houston and the original treaty guaranteeing the Cherokees East Texas land. A special program, Saturday, Nov. 2nd at 2:00 p.m., by the Smith County Historical Society, will open the exhibition.

**Exhibition: Tyler Public Library • Nov. & Dec.**



*Jose, Jr., Jeff, Jose, Sr., and John at Jeff's & Marci's Nov., 1999 wedding.*

Wanting to attend Tyler Junior College, Jose, Jr. worked that summer, saving money. "I flagged for road construction, working in the hot sun again. That job really made me appreciate what education could do for me."

While going to TJC, Jose, Jr. worked part time in sales at Montgomery Ward. He also became a Belle Guard at TJC and joined the Sigma Phi Epsilon fraternity. "TJC, the organizations, and the people helped me gain confidence in myself. I also realized how foolish it was for me to be embarrassed about signing for my parents. It just clicked one day, that I loved my parents and I shouldn't treat them any differently. From then on, I never gave it another thought and I, nor John, Jeff, or Juanita treated our parents like they had a disability."

In 1981, Jose, Sr. and Edie divorced. Jose, Sr. moved away and Edie moved to Tyler with the other 3 children. Knowing her eldest son would guide the younger ones in the right direction, Edie named 18 year-old Jose, Jr. guardian of John, a high school senior, Jeff, seven, and Juanita, five.

Jose continued working at Montgomery Ward but started taking advantage of his position, showing up late for work and taking long lunches. When his supervisor fired him, he wasn't upset because he had a back-up plan. He was majoring in Petroleum Technology at TJC and had a lead on a job. He left with just one class remaining to graduate. The promised job never materialized and reality sank in. Jose had no job and a family to support.

Learning a valuable lesson, he asked Montgomery Ward for his job back. "I realized how unfair I had been to my co-

workers and employer. They expected an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. I had let them down, as well as myself. And that was not the kind of example I wanted to set for my brothers and sister." Given a second chance, he was an exemplary employee from then on.

In 1982, recommended for an insurance job, by a co-worker, Jose began a new career. He was responsible for collecting the weekly premiums for policies sold to mostly low-income East Texans. After a year, he wanted a change.

Providing for his family was Jose's top priority, not falling in love. But, Wanda Morriss, a pretty coed, waltzed into his life at TJC. Knowing she was 'the one', he didn't want to let her go and proposed marriage. They began planning the wedding of their dreams. But, as Jose struggled to deal with all his responsibilities, he felt he wasn't being fair to Wanda. With a deep love and strong commitment to each other, they decided to postpone their marriage.

A new job opportunity was offered to Jose by the owner of a health insurance agency, based in Emory. He called on



*Jose, April and Wanda, Christmas 2000*

businesses interested in the company's health insurance policy. He travelled statewide, returning home on Thursdays. Jose was 19 and his income was quite impressive. But after two years, he felt he could better serve his clients by offering them a variety of policies. Jose wanted to be an independent agent.

In order for Jose to quit his job and start over, he had to have some capital. Without any hesitation, John turned his entire savings of \$8,000, over to his big brother. John had managed to save the money while working as a waiter at Hollytree Country Club. In 1984, working from home, Jose became an inde-

pendent insurance agent and was on his way to also becoming a health insurance specialist.

That same year, he also created what has become a holiday tradition in Tyler. Realizing that close friends were moving away and worried that they might lose touch, he and Wanda organized an annual party. The first "Jose's New Year's Eve Gala" was held at the Sherwood Forest Apartments clubhouse with about 100 people in attendance. The next year more people attended and it continued to grow each year. The gala is now held at Harvey Convention Center and limited to 1,000. The party, sponsored by the Felicianos and friends, is designed to break-even. "The original purpose still remains," says Jose. "It's a special occasion for old friends and family to be together -- that's all."

Working as an independent agent, from home, gave Jose an opportunity to become more involved in his siblings lives. He started coaching baseball and football and loved every minute of it. And knowing sign language was an added bonus in the sports arena. "I was coaching Jeff's baseball team and he


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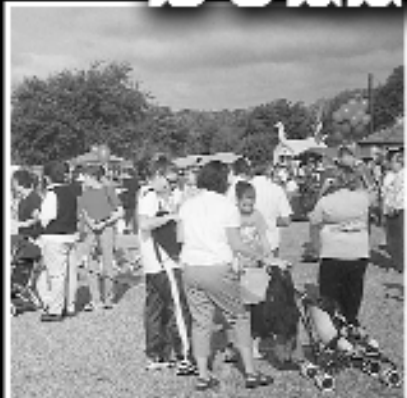

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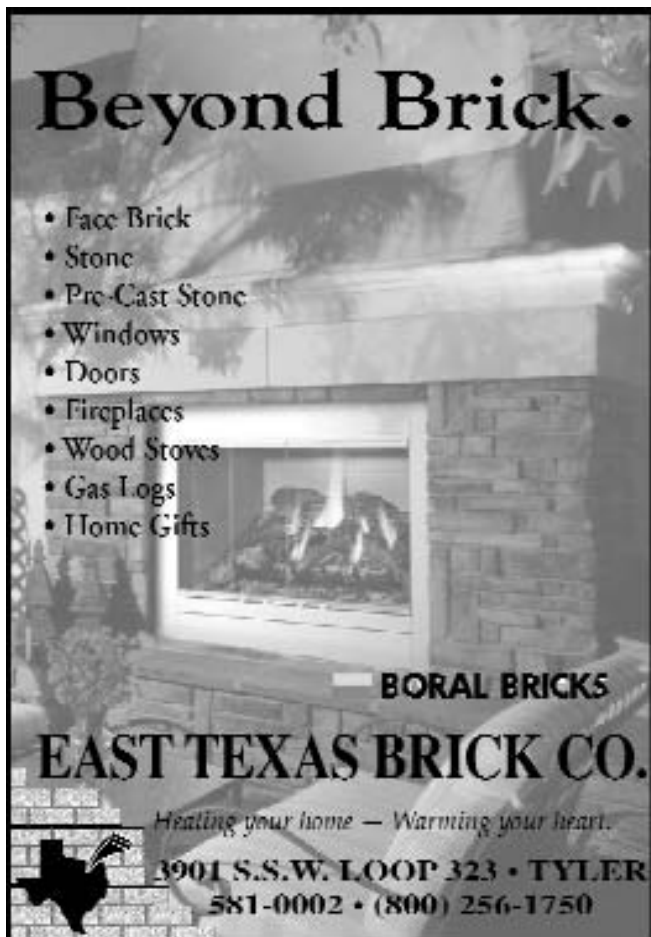
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was the pitcher. We were at bat and there was a play at the plate. The umpire called us out and I knew it was a bad call. When Jeff came out to warm up, the umpire walked over to the 2nd base umpire and admitted he had made a mistake and should have called safe. Jeff overheard him and signed to me what he had said. When the umpire came back to the plate, I repeated everything he had just told the other umpire. With a puzzled look, he threw me out of the game!”

In 1988, Jose formed Feliciano Insurance and began an aggressive advertising campaign. The business grew rapidly. John came on board in 1991 and a year later they had 12 employees. Jeff and Juanita also joined the company, making it that much stronger. Wanting to provide as many services as possible for their clients, Jose enrolled in the 3-year Certified Financial Planner program. With only about 8 CFP’s in the area, and only 6 practicing, Jose is proud of this achievement. “John and Jeff will both be taking the exam this year and I think that says what kind of commitment we have to our clients.” The Feliciano Financial Group is the largest Certified Financial Planning firm in East Texas. “And I can’t thank John, enough. We wouldn’t have this company, if it hadn’t been for him.”

On May 30, 1992, Jose and Wanda were married. And on August 10, 1993, they welcomed the next generation into the world, with the birth of their daughter, April.

The Feliciano family has been involved in several organizations and projects including: Tyler Jaycees, Boys and Girls Club, UT Tyler Patriot Golf Classic, Roger’s Children Theatre, Junior League of Tyler, American Heart Association, Leadership Tyler, and the Women’s Symphony League. Jose is a past member of the Tyler Independent School Board, serving from 1994 to 1997.

Eddie still lives in Tyler and is well taken care of by her children, daughters-in-law, (Jeff married Marci Floyd on November 13, 1999), and granddaughter. Jose, Sr., owns a paint and body shop in the Washington D. C. area and is married to Aurea. Gao, who suffered a stroke, still lives in Aquidilla and paid a visit here two years ago.

The Feliciano children plan to become very involved in the local deaf organization, building the program to provide additional benefits to the deaf community in East Texas.

Looking back, Jose, Jr. feels very blessed. “I think growing up with deaf parents taught us some valuable lessons. We know that we can depend on each other and that our family ties are strong. Perhaps our parents’ disability taught us not to take anything for granted. We’re happy. We love Tyler. We love each other. What more could you ask for?”



*Celebrating the new year; (back) l-r, Jeff, Wanda, Jose, Jr., Juanita, John and Jose, Sr., (front) Edie and Aurea.*