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Part of the Circle

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PART OF THE CIRCLE

BY BECKY ST. CLAIR

Xiara Mercado grew up in a non-Christian household in Puerto Rico. No one went to church and they certainly never talked about God. Though they might lean more agnostic than atheist, the point was that the family didn't make a place in their lives for God, and that didn't seem to be a problem for them.

When their dad died, Xiara's brother turned inward to try and cope with his grief, spending much of his time engrossed in video games and trading cards. He also found himself to be the victim of much bullying at school, so their mom enrolled them in Academia Adventista Metropolitana, where Xiara finished high school with plans to attend the University of Puerto Rico (UPR) with many of her friends.

Around this time, UPR began experiencing student strikes, resulting in graduation delays of nearly a year for many of them. Several other problems followed in the wake of these events, and Xiara decided she didn't want to be a part of that situation. Due to a misunderstanding of terms (in Puerto Rico "undergraduate" means not yet in college and "graduate" means college student), Xiara's aunt, who had offered to pay for her airfare to go to the University of Florida, purchased tickets for the wrong enrollment date.

Xiara ended up staying in Puerto Rico, where the only other option was to attend the Adventist School, Antillean University.

"I had just gotten away from all that!" Xiara says with a laugh. "I have tattoos, I wore earrings, I wanted to go to parties and hang out with my friends, but none of them were going to Antillean."

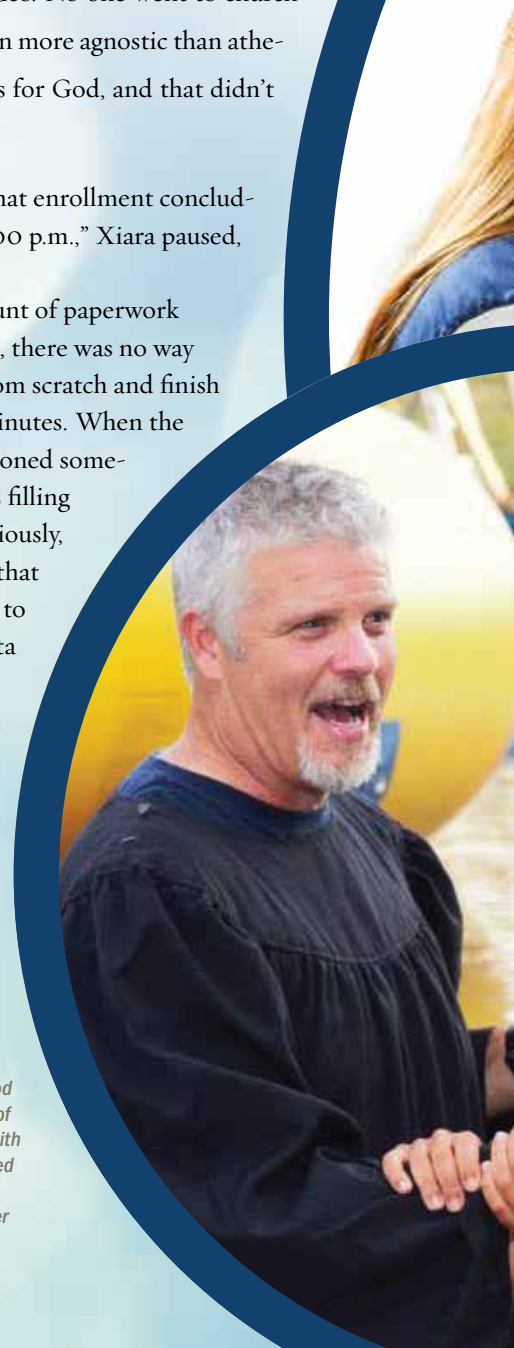
With her options limited, Xiara went to the enrollment office at Antillean University on a Friday, to ask about the deadline to enroll.

"They told me that enrollment concluded for the year at 1:00 p.m.," Xiara paused, "It was 12:50."

Due to the amount of paperwork enrollment requires, there was no way Xiara could start from scratch and finish everything in ten minutes. When the staff member mentioned something about perhaps filling out paperwork previously, Xiara remembered that Antillean had come to Academia Adventista Metropolitana and, as a joke, she'd filled out an application.

Amazingly, they still had her paperwork on file. By 1:00 p.m., Xiara was enrolled at Antillean University, though not

Gymnastics put Xiara Mercado on the road to God from agnosticism to a life of faith-guided discipleship with Christ. Xiara was re-baptized by Charlie Thompson last summer at Indiana's Timber Ridge camp.



The Gymnics are more than a team on the gym floor; they are a family who enjoy serving and nurturing others. Xiara with Gymnics teammates, left to right, Emma Magbanua, Leslie Allen and Nayeli Moretta.



Dave Sherwin

Brian Tagalog

without some hang-ups, she admits with an embarrassed grin. Since she had filled out the application originally as a joke with her friends, Xiara had indicated she was Russian, which caused some problems with her qualifications for scholarships. Fortunately, those problems were resolved.

“I was so happy I was in school, but so annoyed that it was the Adventist school,” Xiara said. “The only good thing about it was that the campus is four minutes from my house.”

Despite her annoyance, Xiara knew that attending college was something she needed to do, so she set about finding something to motivate her to stay in school. Being an active person, Xiara looked to athletics and sports to keep her interest.

“There was no girls’ basketball team; volleyball didn’t start until second semester and I don’t like soccer,” she numbers on her fingers the options she considered. “The only other thing I saw that sounded interesting to me at all was a gymnastics team. It sounded kinda fun, so I signed up.”

Despite signing up of her own accord, when she showed up for tryouts, Xiara “put on a mean face,” as she described it.

“I tried not to interact with anyone,” she says. “I wanted my old friends — not these uptight, religious people,” she laughs as she remembers how she felt that day.

Xiara made the team and looked forward to giving gymnastics a try, although she still had no intention of making friends.

“The environment was completely different from what I was used to,” she says. “Everything I was trying to get away from — worship, praying, God, I was finding myself more and more surrounded by. Even the gymnastics team had worship before every practice.”

Intimidated, Xiara found herself in a catch-22 situation: she didn’t want to make new friends, but she also didn’t want to be shunned by her new teammates for not being Adventist, so she avoided conversations that might reveal her secret.

“Every worship was related to what we’d be working on in practice that day,” she says. “I paid attention and did everything I was supposed to, but I felt I was living a double life. I still liked to hang out with my old friends on the weekends and go to parties and drink, but despite my best efforts,” she laughs, “I actually started making friends on the gymnastics team.”



Xiara Mercado (top left) found God through gymnastics both in Puerto Rico and at Andrews (pictured here).

Her new friends repeatedly invited Xiara to attend church with them, unaware that she didn’t attend church at all. She insisted every time that she had other plans. Finally, because they wouldn’t stop asking, she told them she wasn’t a Seventh-day Adventist.

“I told them in no uncertain terms, ‘I’m not taking my earrings out and I’m not dressing up,’” she recalls. “And they said, ‘We’ll go casual with you. Let’s go!’ So we did.”

That was in November 2010. The weekend prior was the last time Xiara remembers going to a party or drinking alcohol.

“The team was a no-drug, no-alcohol team,” she explains. “I didn’t want to get kicked out because my priority was gymnastics. I wanted to get better and better. I was having fun, and there was a notable difference between the friends I had at college and my outside friends. It was a difference I was starting to appreciate.”

That same month, the Antillean gymnastics team attended Acrofest, a gathering of Adventist academy, college and university gymnastics teams from across North America. The one team that stood out to her was the Gymnics from Andrews University.

“They were cheerful,” she recalls with a smile. “They were always singing and laughing and they had worship every night where they made a circle and prayed together as a team. They were so close. I wanted to be just like them.”

The following summer, Xiara’s gymnastics friends convinced her to participate in colporteurage (selling Adventist

WE LOOK AT OURSELVES AS MISSIONARIES DISGUISED AS GYMNASTS

books door-to-door) with them. In a series of events that is a story in its own right, Xiara was baptized in August 2011. While she knew it was the right choice to make, it didn't make things easy at home.

"I don't regret it at all, but it was hard," she says with a note of sadness. "Things were different in my house. My family wanted me to go do things with them on Sabbath that I didn't feel right doing, and it put a huge strain on my relationships with them."

More than ever before, Xiara clung to her gymnastics teammates. "They were my family," she admits. "I was baptized while colporteur, but I met God through gymnastics."

After three years at Antillean University, two of which she spent as captain of the gymnastics team, Xiara woke up one morning and realized she wanted to go to Andrews University. She applied, was accepted and made travel plans.

When she discovered that Andrews offered an exercise science program, she immediately enrolled in the School of Health Professions, excited to be working toward a degree that would help her put her passion for physical activity to good use for others.

At the start of her second year on the Gymnics team, Xiara was elected captain. She was elated to now find herself in a position of leadership on what was, to her, a dream team.

"We take turns nominating each other to present worship the following day at practice," says Xiara. "Hearing everyone else's points of view and how God is working in their lives and how they apply their experiences with him to Gymnics and school and everything, was so exciting to me. I was living the dream."

The Gymnics are more than a team on the gym floor; they are a family who enjoy serving and nurturing others. Together they created the Gymnics Circle, inviting non-members for a chance to experience what it's like to be on the team and learn more about gymnastics. They put together care packages for student missionaries around the world and travel to academies and special education schools to put on shows with a biblical message.

"We look at ourselves as missionaries disguised as gymnasts," Xiara explains. "We call the blue mats on which we pray, practice and perform 'the blue church.'"

The team takes their slogan, "Pray — Practice — Perform," very seriously.

"It's not just a catchy phrase we wear on our shirts," Xiara says. "It's a life motto. Pray every instant. Practice your faith. Perform your beliefs. It's not only about staying close to God, but also practicing what he's taught us and serving others in his name."

Xiara graduated in May and will be going into the United States Air Force in December. She chose to begin that month because she didn't want to miss one last Acrofest, the 25th anniversary event happening in November at its place of conception: Andrews University. Though she knows it will be hard, she has no intention of giving up her faith.

"My devotion to God will not waver," she says with determination; "I will not change my views. God will provide and make it work for me. I'm not worried."

Her relationship with her family also has improved; in fact, Xiara feels it's actually better than ever.

"I think it needed some space," she says. "We needed to establish some things, such as the fact that I'm completely into my faith and it's not a phase — it's my life."

Although in the beginning, Xiara's family was not willing to support her financially due to her decision to follow Christ to Andrews, they now help her with whatever she needs. Occasionally, Xiara sends her mother books from the Adventist Christian Bookstore and is thrilled that her mother is actually reading them.

"I can say they're believers now," she says with a smile. "My mom has always struggled with anxiety and depression, and I've told her multiple times I'm praying for her. Now she asks me to. It's amazing! One day I hope my family will actually come to church and make the important decision to follow Christ for themselves."

Xiara loves talking about gymnastics, her Gymnics family, and telling the story of how God used them both to bring her to where she needed to be — with him.

"Gymnastics built my faith more than anything," says Xiara. "It's showed me the joys and benefits of being a Christian rather than the rules and regulations you sometimes find people focusing on. Gymnics surpassed the expectations I had and grew me and my roots as a Christian person deeper than I ever knew possible."

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