**BALCAZAR, Eva**

Note dated March 3, 2017, from Eva Zelig to Ralph Grunewald:

...Below I’ve attached a doc of the memoirs of Eva Balcazar, a JOE.  I was her guest in San Antonio when the Holocaust Museum there screened my film a year ago or so.  I decided to interview her about her Ecuador experience for your Jews of Ecuador website.  I am still waiting for her to send me photos....I would greatly appreciate it if you add this doc to the website.  Thank you, Eva

MEMOIRS OF EVA BALCAZAR

I was born in Berlin in 1930. My parents were Siegfried Rosenthal and Berta Rosenthal Meyersohn. I was a little girl when one day, my mother sent me to the store near our home and a group of boys wearing brown shirts and swastikas came down the street. One of them started yelling at me, calling me Jewish pig, then began to throw stones at me. I was terrified and ran back home. Crying, I asked my mother, “why are they doing this? I don’t even know them.” My mother had a hard time explaining what was going on. By that time, I had become used to seeing signs and posters that read, “Forbidden to Jews.” But my father defied them and took me to two places forbidden to Jews: an aquarium and Sanssouci, the palace of Frederick the Great, King of Prussia, in Postdam. I was able to attend a Jewish private school in our neighborhood called Kalisky Wald Schule, about six blocks from my home. I knew most of the Jewish kids in the neighborhood and we walked to school as a group.

On November 9, 1938, Kristallnacht erupted—the massive attack on Jews throughout the German Reich. The following day we went to school; we gathered in the schoolyard and the principal told us we had to go home as synagogues were burning and Jewish men were being arrested. We all ran home. By that time, we had moved with my father’s widowed aunt. That is why the Nazis did not come looking for my father. We had moved because we were forced to sell our house, probably for a small sum, and give it up. My father went underground: he rode the subway back and forth for many days, moving from one car to another. My mother desperately tried to get a visa to any country. After about a week, she obtained a two-week visitors visa to France. We met our father at the train station in the middle of the night. Many family members came to say goodbye and we departed for France.

I have two memories of that journey: one was that we were body searched before crossing into Belgium. I recall being taken from my parents. They took off my clothing and did a cavity search. I erased that from my mind until, years later. The first time I had a gynecologic examination it all came back to me and I passed out cold. The other memory was about my father. In the First World War he had been a volunteer of the German army and was sent to the Russian front. He was awarded the German Iron Cross. As we crossed the border into France, he lifted the train window and threw out the Iron Cross with great anger. More than seventy-five years have passed but I vividly remember the expression of disillusionment and anger on my father’s face.

Through a contact, my parents had learned of a man who gave visas to Peru. We had no money as we were allowed to take out only ten marks per person. However, while still in Germany, my father bought three tickets to travel by ship to South America as he knew that in Paris we would obtain visas to Peru. We boarded the ship *Virgilio* in Marseille. Even though we had first class tickets, our quarters on board were in the hold of the ship because it was overloaded with refugees. During the day, though, we used the first class facilities and ate all our meals there. When we stopped in the Canary Islands some passengers got off and we were able to sleep in first class.

While I roamed the ship freely during the crossing my parents spent hours playing bridge with other refugees. They had known some of them in Berlin. Three were going to Ecuador. We were approaching Panama when the captain told my father that our visas were forged and he would have to take us back to Europe. My father said we would jump into the ocean rather than return. The captain apologized but said he could do nothing about this situation. Among the bridge players my parents became acquainted with was an Ecuadorian army colonel who was returning home after serving as the military attaché of Ecuador in Rome. Col. Pedro Pablo Borja Larrea came from an upper class family; one of his grandfathers had been president of Ecuador. The colonel was highly respected. When he heard of our plight he told my parents, “If the Peruvians don’t want you, we Ecuadorians will welcome you.” Later we learned that Ecuador and Peru had been rivals for many years.

On new year’s eve 1938 we landed in Colón, Panama. Col. Borja took my parents to visit Ecuador’s consul. In search of the consul, they went to a party at a hotel where Col. Borja found the consul and asked him to issue a visa for my parents. The consul said it would be an honor to accede to the colonel’s request. On the visa was written: “Courtesy of Col. Pedro Pablo Borja Larrea.” That’s how we ended up in Ecuador.

We got off the ship in Salinas, which then was a fishing village, but we were far from shore as there was no pier. A small motor boat brought us to the beach and that was the beginning of our life in Ecuador. We boarded a tram that traveled from Salinas to the port city of Guayaquil. My parents were horrified by conditions in Guayaquil, but  Col. Borja was always with us and helping us. He put us up in a hotel for the night. The next morning we were to travel to the capital, Quito. However. I had gotten very sick on the tram—probably from something I had eaten. Col. Borja brought an army doctor to examine me. He gave me something that made me feel worse and forced me to eat bananas. Despite this treatment, I recovered.

After a couple of days we went across the Guayas river by motor boat and boarded the train to the Andes highlands in Durán. We went as far as the town of Riobamba, where Col. Borja had a car waiting for us for our trip to Quito. We arrived in Quito at night while I was sound asleep. We stayed in Pension Almeida on Plaza Grande, across from the Presidential Palace. The pension was on the second floor of a building that housed the Municipio de Quito--Town Hall--on the first floor. We stayed there a few days and moved to an apartment that probably Col. Borja secured for us.

On the ship that took us to Ecuador we also befriended a couple by the name of Alomia. The husband had been a consul of Ecuador in Italy. They had a son with whom I played. When we arrived in Quito they said they had lots of old furniture in storage that they would give us. My parents went to the couple’s home in the Mariscal Sucre neighborhood and were told to take whatever they wanted. So they got beds, tables, chairs, a sofa, and many other things we needed. Ecuadorians were wonderful. Every Ecuadorian we met was fascinated by these new people. At school it was the same--the teachers adored us.

While still in Germany, when my parents learned they had to emigrate my mother filled thirteen large crates--called lifts--with china, crystal, silver, Persian rugs, books, my toys, pots and pans, bedding and mattresses made of horsehair, linens--everything that had some value. The crates were shipped to Holland at the end of 1937 or early ’38 where they sat in a warehouse. They arrived in Ecuador about half a year after we arrived and were transported by train from Guayaquil to Quito. Nothing was missing and nothing broke, except for one or two wine glasses.

In the beginning we survived with the help of the Jewish community. Later, by selling much of what was in the crates. That helped with the groceries and paying back a debt: my father had borrowed money to ship the crates from HIAS, the Jewish organization that helps refugees.

In Quito, Col. Borja formed a partnership with a Jewish German immigrant, Theodore Leib, whose family had owned a paint factory in Germany. Col. Borja told my father they were going to build a paint factory and asked him to manage it.

I never asked my father what his business had been in Germany. He might have been an industrial chemist because he had some know-how in that field. The Colonel and Mr. Leib bought some land which they divided into three parcels, one for each to build their homes, and the third for the factory. My father took part in the planning of the factory. There was a minimum amount of machinery because it was not available. Everything was done by hand in Ecuador. There was no paint manufacture in the country at the time. Buildings were painted with whitewash—a mixture of calcium and milk.

The partners imported materials and machinery from the United States to grind and mix the pigments. There was a simple cement room with a cement bench outside the main building where they kept kerosene stoves to boil paint components such as lacquers that had to be melted. It was a dangerous place. It didn’t blow up but when it was in use my father supervised everything carefully, hoping no accidents would happen. A year after our arrival they launched “Pinturas Cóndor,” one of the first industries in Ecuador.

Everything was interesting and new and I was interesting to the local people because there were few of us Jewish girls. They were amused when I would enter an Ecuadorian home and curtsy. I was told I had to shake hands when I met people. My broken Spanish amused them. I made myself understood with hand signals, acting out what I wanted to say and they loved it. I made friends with kids in the neighborhood but my parents did not have social contact with Ecuadorians.

Col. Borja not only saved us, he also brought many other refugees to Ecuador. Among them was the Erdstein family from Austria, who in turn brought a sister of Mrs. Erdstein. The sister, Sofia, and the colonel fell in love. She was not a beauty but had pizzazz and great presence. She fascinated him. Their relationship was a scandal in Quito. He put her up in the house he had built next to the factory and lived with her there. He was married to a distinguished lady who was very religious and went to mass daily. They had two girls and a boy. Eventually they divorced and he married Sofia, with whom he had a daughter.

A week after we arrived in Quito my parents registered me in a school that was recommended to them. I had already been in third grade but they placed me in first grade because I couldn’t speak Spanish. However, I could read and write in Spanish, even though I didn’t understand what I was reading and writing. I came home from school and told my father I wasn’t going back because the kids were laughing at me. They said, “she is so big and cannot talk.” My father said, “I’ll make a deal with you: if in three months they still treat you like that I’ll get a teacher to teach you Spanish.” He didn’t have money to hire a tutor but made the promise hoping I would learn Spanish quickly. In three months I became fluent in Spanish. I adapted fast. My parents would try to put certain limits on my freedom. They warned me not to get close to indigenous people because they feared I might get sick. I was fascinated by them, by the barefoot women carrying big trays on their heads and babies on their backs. I wanted to sit on the donkeys that delivered wood, milk, vegetables. It was all intriguing.

I realized much later that the exile experience must have been very traumatic for my parents. They were overwhelmed by the challenges they had to face. My father was a beloved member of the Jewish community but he never got over the exile experience and the extermination of his family. At home he would often have fits of anger. He was in charge; what he said was the law and my mother tried to accommodate him as much as possible. Many times I saw them get into terrible fights over trivial matters, which they did not do in Germany. He was frustrated and bewildered. My mother cried a lot. They both must have been deeply depressed. As a child, I wasn’t that aware of their situation. I had a very close relationship with my father; we had many interests in common. When I was about eleven years old he took me to visit Quito’s churches. He had a sense for art and that’s when I learned to love Spanish Colonial art. We both participated in the exiles’ theater of Quito. He was a very good amateur character actor.

I don’t think my father was ever really happy until he retired and had economic freedom, thanks to the reparation payments from Germany. The worst preoccupation always was the lack of money. He never got paid what he was worth. Except for their relationship with Pablo Borja, my parents hardly had social interactions with Ecuadorians. I don’t think Pablo was ever a guest in our house. They were probably embarrassed that they couldn’t offer him the luxury he was used to. We lived half a block from the factory and often visited his home. He was always very friendly and kind to us. He admired the ability my father had for other things besides mixing paints.

All the Jewish refugees were in their little world. All their social activities were with the Jewish community and practically all of us spoke German—a language that many Central Europeans spoke in addition to their native languages. Quito’s Jewish community had no rabbi until the mid-1980s. Some of the refugees, though secular, knew enough about ritual to be able to lead religious services.

To make ends meed, my parents rented one of our bedrooms to boarders who were all refugees. I had a lot of freedom because my parents were busy trying to survive. When I started high school at a school called 24 de Mayo, a girl who had transferred from a Catholic school became one of my best friends. We hit it off right away. She was the daughter of a divorced couple and had a brother. Her father was from Portoviejo, a town in the coastal province of Manabí. They were quite a tribe with lots of cousins and I was always in the middle of all that family activity. I adapted well to life in Quito and had a great deal of freedom. During the Second World War, Galo Plaza—who later became president of Ecuador—founded the American School. Many of the children of the Jewish community transferred to that school but my father didn’t have enough money to send me there.

Life was different for my parents in Quito. My mother had been a housewife in Germany and now she ran a business. She sold clothing that she made to order. She often had me model for customers the clothing she had made for me. She was very busy, always working. Years later she hired five women who were always hard at work at sewing machines. One of the bedrooms of our apartment was turned into a workshop. My parents rented the sewing machines because they could not afford to buy them.

My parents never asked me where I was going. I had no chaperones, like many girls in Ecuador at the time. As an only child I was used to being by myself and was always reading. My mother let me read anything I could get my hands on. She said that if I didn’t understand what I was reading, no harm done, and if I did, it would be too late anyway. I read “Gone with the Wind” when I was about 11 or 12 years old and my mother’s friends said, “how could you let her read that” and that was her reply.

We had a book exchange in the Jewish community and all books were in German.

La Mariscal, the area where we lived, was a residential neighborhood. At the time it was practically in the outskirts of Quito. There were mostly one-family homes but also a few apartment buildings. Many members of the Jewish community lived in the neighborhood in those buildings, though some lived in private homes. We moved from our first apartment to a house closer to the Condor factory so my father could walk to work. It was located in an area called Belisario Quevedo, pretty far out of town. It was far from my school so I took the bus in the morning and went back home by bus for lunch because I had two free hours between classes. Bus fares cost only ten “centavos.” You had to watch out who you sat next to because you would end up with fleas. In the beginning I was bitten by fleas and had terrible sores. After some time I became immune and no longer suffered. We also were in constant danger of getting lice. The buses were always so crowded that riders would hang out the door. My parents were very upset by the dirt that surrounded us and the danger of disease. Many of us suffered from hepatitis, bacterial infections, amebas, constant intestinal troubles. In the beginning we were shocked when we saw indigenous people eating lice they picked from each other’s hair. We were also surprised seeing indigenous women urinating in the street.

Soon after arriving in Quito, Erna Preiss, a Hungarian dance teacher who had a dance school, wanted me to be one of her students. I had already studied some dance in Germany. I was 15 years old when the theater director, Carl Loewenberg, asked me if I wanted to act in a play. At the time I was involved with dance and had begun to direct dance programs in my school. Mr. Loewenberg asked my parents to allow me to participate in the theater. They were delighted and that’s how my theater activities began. My first play was “The Trial of Mary Dugan.” I played a prostitute who was a witness in a trial but only spoke three or four lines. Mr. Loewenberg had been a theater director in various cities in Germany. He had been a student of Max Reinhard, the Austrian theatre and film director, and was very generous sharing his knowledge with us. I acted in his theater and also started to direct school plays. We would stage all kinds of shows, including musicals.

Everybody in the Jewish community attended the theater. We always had full houses. Sometimes we staged what we called Colorful Evenings, a mix of talent and vignettes, with singers and musicians. Those shows were held at the community center, called Beneficencia Israelita. We also had opera evenings. Berthold Weiser, a cousin of the writer Benno Weiser, would bring music records, play an entire opera and explain all about it and the composer. He filled the hall every time he appeared. It was very emotional, and that was how I was first exposed to opera.

Even during the war years, musicians and theatrical companies from other countries would perform in Ecuador. My father always made sure the three of us would attend but we had to sit in the uppermost theater balcony of the Teatro Sucre as we couldn’t afford higher priced tickets. I was lucky to see pianist Arthur Rubenstein perform, as well as violinist Yehudi Menuhin, and the New York Symphony Orchestra, among others. They probably performed in Ecuador because they couldn’t go to Europe during the war. Theater groups also came from Argentina and Chile and performed in German. There was not as much theater in Ecuador as in Europe so we filled the void with our own theatrical productions.

After graduating from high school I felt I was missing something. I had stopped dancing because I realized I could not go beyond the point I had reached. Physically I was not really suited to dance: my hips were too broad and my legs probably too short. My dance teacher offered to hire me as her assistant. She realized I had newer ideas than her ultra classic methods. I  discussed this with my parents. My father said that was no future for me. That’s when I started to work as an apprentice at “El Figurín,” a fashion boutique—the only one in Quito at the time. One of the owners was Fritz “Friro” Rosenthal, a former member of the Cabaret der Komiker in Berlin. His partner was Peter Schaper. By that time they had made a lot of money. They would travel to Europe before the war to buy fabric. I joined the boutique in 1947. By then they would go to the United States every every six months, returning with fabrics and trimmings. Friro was always at the front of the store. He was a charmer who would talk women into buying the most expensive fabrics and most beautiful dresses. Peter was the genius who designed the clothing. I learned how to design and cut dresses, suits, gowns, etc. It was the time when flounces, drapings, sequins, embroideries were popular. About thirty women worked there. They were experts. At least five did hand embroidery; they also sewed sequins and appliqués. We had at least six or seven experts in tailoring. Prior to working at the boutique, the women had worked in tailor shops making men’s suits. The tailoring was great. I learned to do all of that. Peter and Friro shared all their knowledge with me.

Six or eight months later I met some Spanish bullfighters who were visiting Quito for the season. I approached one of them for his autograph. I wanted to learn bullfighting. They said they’d show me. I met them on a Saturday and we drove to a ranch where they had bulls. The bullfighters showed me bullfighting passes. Then I joined a group of people involved in bullfighting. It was a wonderful year during which I continued to practice on weekends. I would tell my parents I was going to a friend’s hacienda close to the town of Latacunga. At some point I actually performed in public at the bullring in Riobamba with a young bull that wouldn’t follow my lead but I was able to make a few passes. I was a novelty but I didn’t kill the bulls--I just made the passes. I went by the name of Sol Rodríguez. Sol was the name of a character in the novel, *Sangre y Arena* written by Spanish novelist Vicente Blasco Ibañez. Rodríguez was for Manolete--Manuel L. Rodríguez Sánchez--a famous bullfighter. My parents found out about this activity. I came home and my father was furious: how could a girl from a good Jewish home engage in such behavior. So he put a stop to my bullfighting ambitions.

In 1949, when I was nineteen, I met my future husband through a girlfriend. One day, her boyfriend called me at work, which was unusual. He told me he had just broken up with her and wanted to talk about it with me and go to the movies. I agreed to meet him. I went home and told my mother that I just did a stupid thing: I agreed to go out with him but felt as if I were betraying my girlfriend. My mother told me to go anyway. It was raining very hard. He rang the doorbell. I went outside and noticed he had  arrived in a jeep. He told me he had brought along a friend, an American who was different because he spoke Spanish. I sat next to him and we were introduced. His name was Joseph Balcazar but everybody called him Joe. There were no street lights so I couldn’t see him clearly. I could only see his white teeth. We arrived at the movie house. At the time we didn’t care what was onscreen—we just went to the movies. We stood by the light and I realized Joe didn’t look like the typical Americans we saw in Quito. I later learned he was of Spanish, Mexican and Native American descent. He smiled and I smiled back. We went in and had a nice chat. The next day I was on my way out of the house and noticed the jeep coming up the street with the two men inside. They said they came to see me and suggested we go somewhere to eat. I went with them and learned that Joe was a World War II hero. He was 35 years old and a member of the United States military mission to Ecuador. My friend said we should all meet the following day for dinner at the Hotel Colón, then go to a nightclub called La Fiesta. Joe and I fell in love.

I later learned that my friend and Joe were driving in the jeep when they saw me walking in the street. Joe said, “that’s a pretty girl.” My friend asked him if he would like to meet me and that’s when he came up with the idea of calling me. From then on I saw Joe every day after he ended his work day at five in the afternoon. He was an instructor at the infantry school of the Ministerio de Defensa.

There was hardly any traffic in Quito then. Only members of the U.S. military drove jeeps. Joe would wait for me in front of El Figurín. We would eat at some place and go to the movies. He introduced me to several of his friends. I didn’t speak English but they all were nice to me. They never thought we would get married.

In May, 1950 I had my birthday and Joe threw a surprise party for me. There were guests from the U.S. embassy. I didn’t know what a surprise party was and was overwhelmed. Prior to the party I had already introduced Joe to my parents and every time he would visit me at home he would bring something for my mother—cans of food or cartons of cigarettes because my mother was a smoker. We all smoked then. My parents liked him. He was a solid person. My father at one point decided to find out more about Joe. Everybody he spoke to gave him a positive report.

After that birthday party my mother would invite Joe to Sunday dinner. One day I told him that I was aware he would eventually return to the U.S. and was wondering how that would affect me. I said he was wonderful and I loved being with him but one day he would say, “it was nice knowing you but I have to go away.” That’s when Joe asked me to marry him. I said yes but he would have to ask my father for my hand. I told my parents and they said I had to consider the fact he was not Jewish. That didn’t bother me, and though he was Catholic, he was secular. My parents worried that I would go away to the U.S. and that he was much older than me.

One night after dinner my father took Joe aside for a talk. From what I understand, he told him he could not give him the dowry he might expect, as had been the custom back in Europe. Joe said, “I don’t want money from you; I am marrying Eva because I love her.” My husband’s version is that my father said, “You’ve been going out with my daughter for three months and people are starting to talk; what are your intentions?” Joe told me he said his intentions were honorable and my father told him they would announce the  engagement. My husband added, “and all of a sudden I found myself engaged to you.”

We got married two years later. My first son, Patrick Joseph, was born ten months later. When Joe’s tour of duty in Ecuador was over, we were assigned to Fort Knox, Kentucky--my first taste of the U.S. We lived in primitive barracks and could hear the rattling of the trains that would bring gold for storage in Fort Knox. Joe was sent to Korea and I went back to Ecuador, where my second son, James Arnold, was born. When Joe returned he said he wanted to leave the army but still needed four years to complete twenty years of service. He took an assignment in Aurora, Illinois as an ROTC professor at a military school. There he got orders to go to Panama where he was an instructor at the School of the Americas. My parents would visit us during end-of-year holidays and I would take our two boys for summer vacations to Ecuador where we had a great time. Joe would join us for short visits whenever he had some leave time.

My father worked in the paint factory until he retired at age sixty. After all those years my parents finally got to fully enjoy the few years they had left together. My father died at 64; he had diabetes and his kidneys were destroyed by the poor quality of insulin available in Ecuador. He had dialysis treatments once a month at a hospital, even though he really needed it once a week. That also contributed to his early death.

Although my father was very ill, he decided he wanted to visit his younger brother in Israel. My uncle, Irving Rosenthal, had emigrated to Israel with his wife in the early 1930s. They lived in Haifa where he worked as a carpenter. My grandmother joined them in 1937. My uncle was a rowing champion and founded the first rowing club of Israel. The club’s team participated in the Olympics.

In 1960 my parents came to visit us on their way to Spain, Italy, and Israel. My father was very fond of Joe, with whom he had a lot in common, and he adored his grandsons. When my parents arrived in Panama, I realized my father was very ill and told my mother he should be hospitalized and forget about travel. She was in denial and said his health had improved. There was no way to convince her. I asked one of the army doctors to examine my father. He got the most thorough exam he ever had. The doctor said my father would die probably in about a year. The first thing to do was to let him eat whatever he wanted because he’d been starving himself. Because of the diabetes he couldn’t eat any carbohydrates, and because of the kidney damage he could not eat meat, so he was hardly eating. I told the doctor I didn’t want my father to go on that trip but he said not to deny him his wish.

When my parents departed I told my husband I knew I would never see my father again. In Spain he was very weak, still undernourished, and got pneumonia in the Madrid winter, so they decided to go to Israel right away. They arrived there the next morning. My uncle took my father to the hospital and he died four days later.

My father had a sister, Grete, who with her husband emigrated to Brazil. When he died, Grete came to live with us in Ecuador. Then she also went to live in Israel. So my father, his sister, his brother, their mother, and my uncle's wife are all buried in Haifa. My mother’s brother, my uncle Hans, who had first gone to Argentina, later came to live with us in Ecuador.

Three months after my father’s death, my mother returned to Quito, but she had no home because before the trip my parents had sold their house intending to buy an apartment. They had discarded some belongings while keeping some in storage. She moved in with a friend until she found her own apartment. She was delighted to learn that we planned to return to Ecuador once Joe retired from the army because he loved the country.

After the Panama assignment we went back to the United States and spent some time in Fort Dix, New Jersey. Before returning to Ecuador, Joe stayed in the U.S. to finish his master’s degree in Romance languages at Princeton University. He spoke English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, and French. He also knew a smattering of Yiddish because he grew up in a Jewish neighborhood in Chicago.

Meanwhile, in 1964 I had gone ahead of him to Ecuador because the army ships your goods only within a year of retirement. So we took everything there including a jeep. We couldn’t take a car because it was not a utility vehicle, but the jeep was to be used in business. We owned some land Joe had bought when he was first stationed in Ecuador, and we emigrated as industrialists or agriculturists. Years earlier I had become an American citizen. I am still grateful to Ecuador that my boys, being in their sensitive teens, grew up in a healthy environment while in the U.S. the drug culture was exploding.

Joe returned to Ecuador in 1965. Going back as a civilian was very different from being the high class member of the military mission in Quito. We started a fiberglass manufacturing business in a chicken coop. We put everything we had in it and borrowed from the bank to buy machinery to manufacture merchandise made of fiberglass. We made tables, chairs, shower stalls, bathtubs, sinks, wash basins, etc. Joe went to Florida to learn a process called hand molding because the more sophisticated machines used in the U.S. were too costly.

Eventually we built a large factory that Joe designed, and we had about 30 employees. Joe had a partner who was half German, half Ecuadorian. It was a struggle in the beginning; it took a couple of years to succeed. I had been teaching at the Colegio Americano. I taught Spanish as a second language to American and other foreign students. I had been trained as a language instructor in Panama by the Monterey army language school. Later on, in the U.S. I also taught German as a second language.

After living in Ecuador twelve years we returned to the U.S. We lived in Miami for ten years, then moved to San Antonio, Texas, where I live. Joe passed away in 1999. Afterwards I volunteered at two museums for many years. Currently, I am deeply engaged in a different type of volunteer work, which is most rewarding. I volunteer for the military’s Wounded Warrior and Family Support Center, which helps warriors of all branches and genders. We create a home atmosphere for them in a building built thanks to donations from San Antonio residents.

I welcome everyone who comes in. They usually are on crutches or in wheelchairs. They fought in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If I met them before I give them a hug and a kiss. If they are newcomers, I welcome them and usually can tell if they are approachable or not. If not, I don’t touch them. If they look approachable I give them a hug and say, “Thank you for your sacrifice, how can I help you.” I help them to register and they get a welcome package. I give them a guided tour and explain the benefits. For the last seven years I’ve  been awarded the gold presidential medal for working 500 hours a year. I also got the outstanding volunteer award from the Wounded Warrior Center. And I got recognition from Fort Sam Houston as an outstanding volunteer. This work gives purpose to my life.

Eva Balcazar