



Vikki Carr

Singer known worldwide found her true loves in S.A.

Grammy winner found romance, special cause here

By Michael Quintanilla
STAFF WRITER

Four-time Grammy winner Vikki Carr, who has made San Antonio home for more than 20 years, is chatting about the love of her life, her husband Dr. Pedro DeLeon.

The couple — Carr, 73, and DeLeon, 85 — celebrate their 22nd anniversary today.

“He is one of the reasons I fell in love with San Antonio all those years ago. The other reason was Holy Cross High School,” she said.

Long known as the “Angel of Holy Cross,” Carr has performed numerous benefit concerts for the West Side school since 1968, when she first learned it was in danger of closing. Through the years, Danny Thomas, Larry Gatlin, Trini Lopez and others have joined her on stage to benefit the school she saved, which went coed in 2005.

“I came here to perform at HemisFair in '68 when there was a knock on my hotel room door,” Carr recalled.

In the hallway stood several men from Holy Cross. They pleaded to speak with the singer about a project to save their school.

“They didn't look dangerous; so we let them in and they told us the story about the school's financial predicament. I asked them, ‘How the heck did you know what room I was in?’ They said the bellmen are Holy Cross boys.”

By then Carr — an El Paso native whose birth name is Florencia Bisenta de Casillas Martinez Cardona — had been a Grammy nominee in 1964 for best new artist. Four years later came four more nominations for her signature song and international hit “It Must Be Him.” Her album that year was up against the Beatles' “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band,” which took the prize.

Carr, who has recorded more than 50 albums, received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2008. In 2012 she was nominated for a Latin Grammy for her self-produced Spanish-language album “Viva la Vida,” a sweet thank you to fans.

Come July, she'll receive a philanthropic award from the San Antonio Association of Hispanic Journalists.

The oldest of seven children, she grew up in California's San Gabriel Valley. She started singing at the age of 4 and launched her career while still a teenager. She's performed with legendary entertainers Tony Bennett, Tom Jones, Danny Kaye, Jackie Gleason and Count Basie.

Frank Sinatra said Carr “possesses my kind of voice.” Dean Martin said she was “the best girl singer in the business.” Bing Crosby called her one of his three favorite all-time singers. And while on a Las Vegas stage, Elvis Presley announced she was a favorite, too, because “she sang from the gut.”

Carr said often she can't help the tears when she performs, especially while singing Bobby Goldsboro's lyrics to “With Pen in Hand,” a song about a woman



Vikki Carr performs with fellow singers Tony Bennett (top center) and host Tom Jones for a 1969 TV special. Actor-comedian Fred Willard is at bottom right.



Carr performs at the Music Center's 50th anniversary in Los Angeles in 2014.



Carr poses with Dr. Pedro DeLeon in Chandler, Ariz., where she performed her hits.



Carr, who helped Holy Cross High School during its financial struggles, was honored there during the 2000 graduation ceremonies.

going through a painful divorce without forgiveness from her husband.

“Music is universal and can touch everybody on every level — funny, happy, loving and sad,” she said. “And hopefully in my past 57 years of performing, I've done that.”

She recalled that her first hit songs shot to No. 1 outside of the United States: “He's a Rebel” in Australia and “It Must Be Him” in England. Of course, the songs then triumphantly hit the charts in the States, too.

“Still, I think a lot of the success that I have had has been based on people telling me, ‘You can't do it,’” she said.

Carr has appeared on television, stage and film, performed for presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford, Ronald Reagan, George Bush and Bill Clinton. In 1973, she was the “first regular female guest host” of the “Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson,” according to a Carr assistant. In 1981, she received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame.

But it's her commitment to education and leadership development for Latino youth that she values more than any accolade she has received.

Brother Stanley Culotta, president of Holy Cross of San Antonio, remembered talking to Carr about the school's hardship all those years ago.

“She replied, ‘I'm just a little lady, but I have a voice I can offer.’ She may



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be a little lady, but she ... saved us,” Culotta said.

“She put the spotlight on Holy Cross when we needed it the most. Best of all, she recognizes that education is extremely important. And she is so proud to hear when students are funded under her own scholarship.”

Carr, who established the Vikki Carr Scholarship Foundation in 1971, was Holy Cross' first female honorary graduate.

“Imagine that,” she

said. “I mean, that's really something.”

So is her marriage to DeLeon, who still clocks in part-time at a South Side practice. The two met during one of her early Holy Cross fundraisers. DeLeon often hosted post-concert suppers for the brothers.

“When I first saw him, I fell in love with him,” she recalled. “We were both attached to other people at the time, but we made eye contact and the chemistry was there.”

Singer Gloria Estefan joined Carr on the red carpet for the 2008 Latin Recording Academy Person of the Year Tribute to Gloria Estefan.



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Coming Saturday: San Antonio's first stretch of freeway.

Carr suggested they go to dinner. While sipping wine, she asked, “Do you mind if I kiss you? I've waited for this for 30 years.’ His lips were trembling, and he must have been thinking ‘Who is this woman? Man, she comes on strong.’”

And the kiss?
“The kiss was everything.”

Nine months later, they wed at San Fernando Cathedral with Carr's parents present.

“It has been a wonderful marriage,” said Carr, who has three stepchildren and three grandchildren. “I cherish every moment and don't take anything for granted. I just keep going,” said Carr, who turns 74 on July 19. And there's no sign of stopping.

Summer will bring concert dates in San Diego and Monterrey, Mexico. Several months ago, she packed them in at the Tobin Center. Last month, in Las Vegas, she performed to a full house on the night of the boxing match between Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao.

“Why they would book me to do a concert on that night I'll never know, but more than 1,000 people were there, and everyone was happy,” she said.

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