

My name is Natalina Hernandez. My husband is Luis and we have been married for 11 years. We have three children, Avianna 10, Luis Jr. 8, and Marie Joy is 5. We moved to Naperville in 2022 after living in St Louis for a few years. First order of business when we arrived in Naperville was to find a church. This may seem like a simple task to some but when you are married to your complete opposite, decisions like that don't come super easy. So we set out to find a place where Luis and I both felt at peace. After attending mass at three different churches, we came across St Thomas. We came to a 430 mass on a Saturday and listened to Father Peter's service. We were both sold. We had found our church. I then needed to get the kids enrolled in RE ASAP. I headed to meet the Direct of religious Education at that time. After one conversation with her, not only did I sign my two oldest up for the upcoming year but somehow, I was now a 1<sup>st</sup> grade RE teacher. I like to call that "the St. Thomas effect". The kids and I have just finished our 4<sup>th</sup> year with St. Thomas's Religious Education program. It is one of the many things that has helped fill our cups at this church and we, as a family, are extremely grateful for it. We look forward to coming to mass each week for a spiritual reset (and by we I mean mostly me unless it is donut Sunday then they get a little more excited). My son Luis just received his first communion a couple weeks ago here in this church and we look forward to many more blessings to come at St. Thomas.

I grew up in Itasca which is about 25 minutes north of here. My father is Mike and my mom is Barb and I was one of six girls. As you can imagine, my dad golfed. A lot. I had the privilege of having a stay at home mom. I loved having my mom home and I knew one day I wanted my kids to feel about me the way I feel about my mom. My sisters and I had a very blessed upbringing. We were, and still are, very tight knit. So much so that all of them and my parents still live in Itasca. I on the other hand, felt a little distance wouldn't hurt anyone and surprisingly enough, my husband agreed!! As kids we always had to share a bedroom with another sister or even two. I have shared a room with each of them at least once. It is undoubtedly what has built our bond. The sharing of one bathroom though, is also what threatened that same bond. Screaming matches would often ensue in the mornings. My poor mother...looking back she had the patience of a saint. My sisters and I are all very different but then again all very similar too. We would argue and fight but we also loved hanging out together and shared laughing fits. The biggest difference for me growing up was that I was a tomboy in every sense of the word. So much so that I would sometimes get mistaken for a boy. I wore backwards hats, gym shorts, baggy t-shirts and michael Jordan basketball shoes. I did not care about much outside of playing sports and riding bikes throughout the neighborhood with my pals. Back then, sports were not as relevant for girls as they were for boys. For a somewhat talented female athlete finding a team I could compete on at a higher level was hard to come by. At the time, the girls' teams were not pushing me towards my potential so I went to try out for the boy's travel soccer team.

I made the team and began competing around Illinois with the boys who would become my very best friends. Some of which I still keep in touch with today. Not only was I the only girl on the team, I was the only girl in the league and in any tournament we attended. It never once crossed my mind that I did not belong. My team was very supportive of me and often times protective. If a boy on the other team ever made a comment to me or teased me for being the only girl, my teammates would rush to my defense. They made me feel confident and accepted always. Much like my parents and family members did too. Even though I was a bit different with my likes and dislikes than most girls and even looked different, I never once felt like I couldn't be myself. There were definitely mean words thrown at me sometimes but I always enjoyed being me. At the time I did not recognize this but in today's society it has forced me to reflect on my younger self. What if I was ten years old in today's world? How would I parent a daughter that only wants to act and look like a boy? It then leads me to - I would do exactly what my parents did for me. Nothing. They allowed me to be me, always. Except on Holidays and special occasions they would make me wear a dress and then I would have a jewel bag in tow, with my shorts and gym shoes for after dinner. That was my only rule. And I loved it. With this simple rule it allowed me to understand that God created me as a girl and I should be proud of that but also you can be who you are on the inside as well. In today's world there are endless amounts of information and opinions circulating, it is hard to fathom how a ten-year-old girl whose brain is heavily developing is able to navigate. So, when I think of my ten-year-old self I think of how grateful I am to have two parents who did not try and sway me from being myself, they encouraged it. They made it known to me that God created me exactly the way I am supposed to be, period. This has given me the ability to walk with a confidence in my adult life. Some people in my close circle may even tell you I am cocky. This though, only pertains to when I am competing. If you have not gathered by now, I am pretty competitive in most things and I enjoy winning. I competed in sports all through high school and a little bit in to college. Sports were my life for a long time. I was not one of those kids that knew exactly what I wanted to do when I grow up. So once sports were over for me, I was a bit lost and life became stagnant. I was in my early 20's now and I always had 2 or 3 jobs to keep me busy but I did not feel I was moving forward necessarily. I believed in God but at that time, I would not say I had a strong faith either. It was not until I met Luis that things started to change for me. Remember I told you I was married to my opposite? Unlike me, Luis knew what he wanted to do since he was young. He had gone to college and had degrees. He had a plan. A whole life plan! His plan had a plan! He also knew he was going to marry me pretty shortly into our relationship. I on the other hand, was not ready to let go of some of my old ways and clung on to bad habits and maybe even some toxic friendships. The more I clung on to my past, the more Luis showed up. I am certain he wanted to grab me and shake me! I was clinging on to my past, Luis had a future plan he was following. And then God stepped in. He blessed us with a beautiful healthy baby. It was time to let go and let God. Although a plan can be good, God's plan is greater. I stopped trying to hang

on and I simply let go and surrendered to Christ. Once I let go, my life unfolded in ways I never thought possible. As we grew closer to God, the blessings came pouring in. As I mentioned, we now have three beautiful children and live a simple, but very fulfilling life. one that I would not trade for the world. Motherhood is by far my greatest blessing and I am so proud to be a mom. I am also so proud of the mother's that are in my life. My mom, of course is the world's greatest but also the mother's that I lean on for support when I need it. It truly does take a village and God has blessed me with several amazing women to walk the journey with.

I wish all the mother figures a very happy Mother's Day and I hope you get celebrated the way you all deserve. God Bless.