

# Faces

THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE AUSTIN SPECIAL

ELIZABETE GOMES

I showed up at Elizabete Gomes' house hacking and coughing like a tubercular case. Most folks would have politely asked me to return when I was plague-free. Not Gomes. She immediately took the matter in hand, spooning an herbal cough remedy into my mouth that seemed like a 10W40 version of Karo syrup. The cough, I might add, subsided almost instantly.

Thirty-nine-year-old Gomes has devoted most of her adult life to healing arts. A registered nurse with a degree from the University of Texas, Gomes recently completed three years of intense training in oriental medicine, and is board certified in acupuncture.

This is a far piece from her childhood on a modest farm in Brazil, more than an hour from the nearest city.

"I remember deciding that I wanted to come to the United States when I was sixteen," recalls Gomes with a slight accent. The only one of four siblings to attend college, Gomes perceived the United States as many immigrants do: The Land of Opportunity. "In the US, if you're willing to work hard, you can achieve anything. In Brazil, even if you work hard, you may not get anything out of it."

Before coming to the states, Gomes considered moving to a more cosmopolitan city in Brazil. "I realized that I was just changing the address of my problems," says Gomes, with a lilting laugh. So, at age twenty-two, speaking little or no English, the resolute young Brazilian embarked on a journey to the United States. "I had a round-trip ticket, one hundred and fifty dollars in my pocket and seven hundred dollars worth of debt." She laughs, adding, "I think the only reason I made it at all was because I was so stubborn and hard-headed. The round-trip ticket was like a security blanket...having that kept me going."

It was a tough transition. "The first six months that I was here, I cried myself to sleep every night." She desperately missed her home and family. "It makes me sad that I had to leave my country to fulfill my dreams," recalls Gomes, who now enjoys dual citizenship. "I was homesick and I spoke no English, really, to be able to communicate effectively and feel connected."

Once in Austin, she obtained a job making pizzas and signed up for an intensive English program at UT. "I came out of that class, my head swollen with grammar," she says, spreading her hands wide to demonstrate, "but couldn't speak the language at all."

Undeterred, she signed up for theatre classes at Austin Community College. "I would get my classmates to record my monologues. I would listen to them until I could read it, then tape my voice



by Laura Barton

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and compare it to theirs. I would practice saying it until I sounded just like the recording. I spent hours and hours doing that. That's how I got the cadence down."

Acting classes not only improved her English skills, but netted a role in a stage production. Ironically it was called *Native Speech*.

Despite Austin having the resource of a fairly large Brazilian community, Gomes chose to further immerse herself in the language and culture by choosing American roommates.

One of the hardest things to adjust to culturally was in the area of personal interaction. "In Brazil, people touch. There's a lot of physical contact. I was used to hugging and kissing. Even on the street there's more contact. Here, there

was this space, that was clearly marked, that you don't trespass. But then on the other hand, verbally they were much more prying. They ask personal questions that Brazilians would consider very rude. In Brazil, you would wait until a person volunteers that information or it comes up in conversation."

During her last year of nursing school, Gomes' sister Elizete came to Austin with her husband and young son. "We had always been close," she explains, remarking on how much it meant to her to have family close by. "I hadn't realized just how lonely I felt. It was just incredible to have the support of my family."

Only five years after arriving in Austin, Gomes received her bachelor of science degree in nursing from UT and embarked

on a career as an acute-care nurse, working in Seton's Intensive Care Unit. Later, she worked as a case manager and helped create a protocol for patient care.

While recognizing the contributions of western medicine, Gomes' experience working in hospitals prompted her to question traditional medicine's fragmented approach to patient healthcare.

Gomes found herself drawn to Eastern medicine, with its integrated, holistic approach to health. When asked which was harder, nursing or her training in oriental medicine, she responds with an emphatic laugh. "Oh that's easy, oriental medicine. A friend had told me to think of it as medical school, and that was good advice, because that was exactly what it was like...three years of med school."

"I thought I was reinventing myself," says Gomes, thoughtfully, considering her decision to pursue training in nontraditional medicine, "but really, I came back to my roots, full circle. I grew up with my grandmother and my mom using simple home remedies, and my grandfather was a healer in his own right."

Though her grandfather had no formal training, he studied and read, keeping notes of his remedies. He was often called upon to minister to the ill in the community. Gomes hopes to someday get her hands on her grandfather's little black book of herbal remedies.

Though pleased with her new career, Gomes values her training and experience in nursing, finding that they enhance her practice in oriental medicine.

"I have the experience to know when I can or can't help a patient, to know when I need to send them to a different doctor." Additionally, she finds that those initials—RN—seem to lend more credence to her services, since oriental medicine is still viewed somewhat skeptically by middle America and mainstream medicine.

As a still-practicing nurse and part-time instructor at the UT Nursing School, Gomes is well aware of the prejudice against nontraditional medicine. "But, you know, the interesting thing is that I have doctors who come to me for treatment, who would never send their patients here. They wouldn't want to admit that they're using acupuncture or herbal medicine."

"I feel very lucky to be earning a living doing something that I love. When a client walks in the door—no matter what kind of a day I've had, or what's going on in my life, personally—I have an instant sense of peace and calm. I'm in a position where I can really help people...where I can make a difference in their lives." g