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Local woman celebrates 109th birthday

What could top being serenaded by Flaco?

By Vincent T. Davis, Staff Writer Updated 8:24 am, Friday, July 22, 2016

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Photo: Jerry Lara / San Antonio Express-News

IMAGE 1 OF 5

Flaco Jimenez serenades Maria Gallegos Lopez with birthday wishes as Dr. Richard Prezas looks on. She's the oldest WellMed patient in South and Central Texas, the health care company said.

Surrounded by family members, clinic physicians and staff, **Maria Gallegos Lopez** beamed as the group celebrated a historic milestone – her 109th birthday.

Lopez smiled Thursday afternoon as a staff member wheeled her to the head of a long red table, lined with balloons at the WellMed clinic at 4438 Centerview on the city's Northwest Side.

Awaiting her were vintage photos of her life in the 20th century.

Television cameras and smartphones captured images of the woman who had once lived in homes without electricity, telephones or running water.

A shiny cash adorned the dress of the great grandmother who paid 5 cents to ride a trolley car when she was

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A shiny sash adorned the dress of the great-grandmother who paid 5 cents to ride a trolley car when she was much younger. And they posed beside the matriarch, who as a teen, watched rescuers pull the dead and the living from swollen waters caused by the flood of 1921.

Before she blew out the candles on her technicolor cake, her daughter **Rosemary Galvan** watched as music legend and Grammy winner **Flaco Jimenez** led the group in singing "Happy Birthday."

"I really like to see older people that age," said Jimenez, a WellMed patient and spokesman. "It really inspires me. I'm getting there myself."

Currently, **Adele Dunlap**, 113, of New Jersey is reported as the oldest person in United States. According to the **National Center for Health Statistics**, the number of centenarians rose 43.6 percent from 50,281 in 2000 to 72,197 in 2014.

WellMed serves more than 280,000 patients, mostly seniors, in Texas and Florida. Representatives said there is no other WellMed patient older than Lopez in Central and South Texas. There is only one other client older than Lopez in the health care company's network.

Her physician, Dr. **Richard Prezas**, said his patient is pretty healthy, despite failing hearing and eyesight, and a pelvic fracture from a fall a few years ago.

"I think the biggest thing is family support," he said. "Her family is a testament to her upbringing. She's always very happy, no complaints, and she's not hurting."

Prezas has cared for Lopez and her second husband for the past five years.

After her first husband died 21 years ago, she fell in love at the age of 90 with a man 16 years younger at a senior center. They lived alone for 15 years before moving in with her daughter. Family members take her to visit him twice a week at an assisted living facility where he now lives.

At the age of 18, Lopez traveled from Monterrey, Mexico, to live in San Antonio, where she made a home with her husband and daughter on Wyoming Street. It was a painful experience when they lost their home, through eminent domain, to make way for the construction of HemisFair '68 and the Tower of the Americas.

Lopez celebrated her actual birthday on July 10 by attending Mass at **St. Anthony Mary Claret Roman Catholic Church** and dining at a Mexican restaurant with 45 guests. She ate rice, beans and cheese enchiladas doused with hot sauce.

Interpreting for her mother, Galvan gave the crowd her mother's secrets to a long life: honest living, don't waste your days sleeping and put *chile* (hot sauce) on everything.

"We're blessed," Galvan said, sitting beside her mother. "We thank God that she's fine. I couldn't ask for anything else."

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