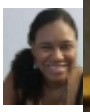
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Don Tony Rodriguez's Parrots [1]

Submitted by Ana Teresa Rodríguez [2] on 7 December 2014 - 2:28pm



 [3]

Mr. Tony Rodríguez Vidal / Picture provided by Ana Teresa Rodríguez

I bet a "mallorca con azúcar" from La Bombonera, that if you ask anyone the name of an endemic animal from Puerto Rico, many would name the Puerto Rican parrot (*Amazona vittata*) [4]. One of the first scientists responsible for people knowing about this bird and recognizing its endangered situation, was my grandfather, Don José A. Rodríguez Vidal (Don Tony; 1925-2009).

He was born on January 9, 1925, in Mayagüez, Puerto Rico, and completed his higher education in agronomy at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez campus [5]. Don Tony started his

professional life as a vocational agriculture teacher at Barrio Garrochales in Arecibo. In 1949, he moved to Barrio Bayaney in Hatillo to teach agriculture to sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students. He taught the same subject in Barrio Bajadero in Arecibo.

As a college student, he completed most of the biology courses, which allowed him to teach this subject as well. He taught biology night classes for World War II veterans.

In 1953, Don Tony started working as a biologist for the Division of Forests, Fish and Wildlife. It has in this role that he spent 3 months studying and researching the doves (tórtolas) that inhabited the Guánica Dry Forest [6]. His work resulted in one of the most important studies related to this bird. In 1956, Don Tony was assigned to study Iguacas (Puerto Rican parrots) in El Yunque National Forest [7]. Completing this comprehensive study was one of the most important scientific endeavors Don Tony got involved in. Although it took almost 3 years, his findings challenged well-established paradigms about parrot population, and alerted our nation about the endangered status of this native bird.

In 2007, the Puerto Rican Senate recognized my grandfather, agronomist José Antonio “Tony” Rodríguez Vidal, for his hard work of conservation and protection of the Puerto Rican parrot. I remember that, when I visited his house to congratulate him and to tease him about the politics of the whole affair, he gave me a manila envelope that said: “Don Tony Rodz.” When I opened it, I found a document from the mid-fifties. It was a copy of the study he completed during his stay at El Yunque, a study that alerted the federal government, what is now the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service [8], about the Puerto Rican parrot’s severe risk of extinction and the urgent need to develop and implement a conservation plan to save it. Don Tony reached these conclusions after spending many months deep in El Yunque, studying and analyzing the parrot’s habitat.

Don Tony Rodríguez with his family / Picture provided by Ana Teresa Rodríguez



I remember joking with him about how a black agronomist from Mayagüez dared to convince the gringos to send him to El Yunque to observe a bird. He always answered with a loud laugh. My grandfather loved to laugh, and when he talked about his beloved parrots, his smile was the widest and his eyes were the brightest, as if he was proudly talking about one of his sons or daughters.

Don Tony liked to talk passionately about many topics, but he especially appreciated when an employee of the Aviary or a college biology student contacted him to discuss details of the conservation process for the Puerto Rican parrot. If you were at the right place at the right time, not only could you listen to a detailed description of the science behind his study, but you could also enjoy all the stories that can only happen to a person who moved to a dense rainforest, such as El Yunque in the 1950s, to go after parrots. The anecdote I treasure the most, and the one I am sharing now with the same love and humility he told it, was his story about how he found his first research assistant.

When my grandfather arrived at El Yunque, he soon recognized that it would take him countless hours to identify the Puerto Rican parrot's nests. Facing this complication, he used a very peculiar way to find an assistant. See, my grandfather loved books, especially Sun Tsu's "The Art of War", so he settled in, devised a strategy, and walked down to a local *cafetín* (a bar). Once there, he asked for the best parrot hunter around, and the name of "señor Carbonero" quickly came up. Soon afterwards, my grandfather found "señor Carbonero", asked how much he would charge for each parrot chick, and in no time he was under contract.

This was not a hunting contract, of course. As a research assistant, the deal was for "señor Carbonero" to take my grandfather to the parrot's nests and to count the birds, without capturing them. Furthermore, "señor Carbonero" would identify other parrot hunters in the area to make similar deals. When Don Tony was asked how he could have as assistants the same people responsible for diminishing the parrot population, he gave two main reasons. First, there were no people better than "señor Carbonero" and his friends at easily identifying the location of the nests. Second, by educating the hunters about the parrots and the environment, he redefined the hunters' role to nature conservationists. My grandfather always appreciated in life the great work of his assistants. I, as his granddaughter, can confirm how proud and grateful he was toward this group of guys who echoed his cry of alert, one that started one afternoon in our Forest.

Even though my grandfather served as Director of the "Vivero de Árboles Forestales" (a position he kept for 24 years), professor at the University of the Sacred Heart [9], advisor for the Departments of Agriculture [10] and Natural Resources [11], and was a nationally recognized sculptor and wood carver, nothing moved him away from his commitment to protect our Puerto Rican parrot.



Deputy Secretary of the Interior Lynn Scarlett dedicates the flight cages of the Iguaca Aviary to José Antonio Rodríguez Vidal at the grand opening

Today, after 60 years of José Antonio "Tony" Rodríguez Vidal's first warnings about the threatened status of the Puerto Rican parrot, Puerto Rico celebrates the birth of two parrots outside of the Iguaca Aviary [12], located in El Yunque. The aviary now has Don Tony's name in honor of his work. Remembering my grandfather's face when he went into the aviary and saw the parrots flying around him, is remembering his smile, his voice and the sparkle in his eyes. Recognized by many as The Lord of the Trees, he was a tireless promoter of the Puerto Rican culture, our forests, and his beloved parrots.

I, along with my family, doubly celebrate this event and commemorate a person who, in life, taught us to love both the Puerto Rican parrot and the nation that is its home. Thanks, Don Tony, for being an example of gallantry and tenacity. Thanks for the outcry that started in 1950, a long road that becomes a bit shorter with the birth of two new "grandkids".

Wilson J. González Espada contributed with this story.

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