

THE NOT-SO-SECRET LIVES OF
REAL
"MORMON" WIVES



BÖHME, CONDIE, DOWDELL, EGAN,
JACKSON-STOWELL, MELAZZO, MERRILL, OWEN

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1

FERNANDA BÖHME
The Fashion Mogul

JOURNEY TO AMERICA

“Someday you will go to the United States of America,” our highly intuitive maid told my mom. It was 1986 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. My family had never even thought of going to America. Why would we? What for? Our lives were here.

My mom laughed. “You’re crazy—that would never happen.”

The maid continued, “You will work like slaves for many years, but one day, your daughters will be very successful entrepreneurs at a young age.”

My mom looked at her in complete shock, her eyebrows shooting to her hairline.

How could she know such a thing? She couldn’t. It was crazy. After all, my sister and I were toddlers, still in diapers at the time.

Yet six years later, our family of five—my mom, dad, sister, my younger brother, and I—found ourselves on an airplane with a one-way ticket to Utah. There was no turning back. My dad was convinced it was an opportunity of a lifetime to further his education at Brigham Young University (BYU) and also give us a chance for a better future.

We were members of the Igreja de Jesus Cristo dos Santos dos Últimos Dias (*The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints* translated into Portuguese). We were members before I knew Utah existed on the map. We left everything we knew—our extended family, our culture, our language, our life in a big city surrounded by the jungle.

As the plane landed on a brisk spring day in Salt Lake City, the white-capped mountains were dramatically contrasted by the almost royal blue skies and desert landscape that was so different from where I came from. *Wow*, I thought. *It’s like I’ve gone to another planet!* Everything was different. Everything. From the small airport to the clean streets to the quiet neighborhoods.

As we drove out of the airport, I thought, *Where is everyone?* Why are there no people walking around? The first night, it was so quiet I couldn’t sleep. Where was all the busy, loud traffic?

We lived in a high-rise in Rio, and now, in Provo, Utah, we lived close to the ground in student housing, high in the mountains. This place was far from the

loud, bustling city I was accustomed to.

The first day of school was like climbing Mount Everest. I was eight years old, spoke zero English, and had jet-black hair that was so different from the pale shades of blond and brown that surrounded me. The kids at my school stared at me for hours on end, and like a Jaguar on exhibit, I didn't want to show my spots.

Surrounded by tons of other kids, I went through the cafeteria alone and was served up food I'd never seen in my life. *Corn dogs and apple pie? Kids drink plain milk with no chocolate? This is absurd!*

And those weren't my only trials. I was also excluded from all the activities because I was the new ESL student (English as a Second Language), along with my sister, Vivien, who was a grade up.

Our first winter here hit me like a blizzard, swooping in unexpectedly and rattling me. I'd never seen such weather. At first, the snow delighted me, but soon that delight faded with the increase of the icy-cold chill. One day, as snow fell in great big flakes, my parents took us to a thrift store called Deseret Industries to get ourselves some warm coats.

Our first Christmas morning was . . . well . . . there were no gifts under the tree. My dad was a full-time student at BYU, finances were extremely tight, and the mentality was that of "be grateful you're even in this country." But at around 7 a.m., we opened the door to a blizzard-filled sky and found that someone had dropped off a basket with toys, food, and other pleasantries.

"Who would do this for us?" I asked.

My family had no idea either, but that didn't stop my little brother from guessing. "Angels?"

Whether it was the kind from heaven or just people doing God's work, we all had to agree. To this day, I still don't know, but it was a kind act I would always remember. Could it have been someone from the local congregation?

We had been members of the "Mormon" church since Brazil. That was one thing we were very grateful for—the local ward where we attended church took us in as their own family. (*Ward* means a local congregation in the Church.)

This is something amazing about the "Mormon" church. If you were to be dropped off anywhere on the globe, the members of the local wards would take you in as their own.

The Church also has the largest group of organized women in the world, an organization called the Relief Society (*Sociedade de Socorro* in Portuguese). Millions of women spread their light throughout the world. It's powerful, and never had I felt that power, warmth, and welcoming so strongly as I did that Christmas morning. Perhaps we weren't invisible after all.

Soon finances got even tighter as the money we came with ran out and my parents had to find work. Every nationality has their work cut out for them when they come to the US. For the Brazilians, it's cleaning buildings.

My parents started to clean buildings and left us three kids alone at home. It was September, and the skies got dark earlier. I swung on the playground swing set outside while my siblings stayed inside our apartment. Lights shone through our neighbors' windows, showcasing, like a TV show, what was happening inside each apartment. Families were having dinner together and winding down for bedtime.

It was pitch dark, and as I gripped the metal ropes of the swing, I thought, *This is your life now, and you're on your own. You face the world alone.* Heavy thoughts for an eight-year-old.

I eventually went inside late that evening, hungry, and waited till midnight for my parents to come home.

That night solidified something in my mind: If I wanted anything, I had to work for it.

I soon learned from a few friends we'd made that you could take out the trash for people in our complex if you knocked on their door and asked, and they'd pay you 25 to 50 cents to do it. The dumpsters were far away, so it became a profitable little business for my siblings and me because most people didn't want to make that trek.

That change got us our snacks and drinks, so we were happy.

But that wasn't the end of my drive—my desire to seek more. Later, I went on to win a school fundraiser because I knew how to knock on every door in the community. I was very competitive. Even on Halloween, we had to get more candy than any other kid in Provo. There was so much candy it filled our entire tiny living room! We didn't care if we woke people up in their pajamas—we were still knocking on doors till midnight. We spent the next several weeks

eating our candy and building pyramids and fortresses out of thousands of smarties.

THE NOT SO “AMERICAN DREAM”

I believe that my parents, at this point, were overwhelmed in a new country, with a language they struggled to learn, raising three kids, and broke. We were in what you call “survival mode.” We, as kids, had to be the adults in the home, translating everything from the phone bill to rent. My parents got assigned more buildings to clean, and soon we were going with them. Every day after school, we would come home, eat, and leave.

These were massive office buildings, some even several stories high. My sister and I would get the trash from every cubicle. Occasionally, we would find a nickel or dime on the ground, and that would be our vending machine budget for the night. You see, my parents worked for minimum wage, and we worked, well . . . for free. It didn’t matter if you were tired or hungry.

After cleaning three to four giant buildings every night, we’d head home exhausted, knowing that tomorrow would bring more of the same. If you were hungry, there was no McDonald’s drive-through in between buildings. You’d wait till you got home, but even then the options were slim to none.

Most of the time, the Church fed us. The Church has its own food manufacturing capabilities with its own grocery stores to help people who are going through hard times. This system also provides relief, in the form of food and other supplies, to areas around the world affected by natural disasters. While we were so grateful for this organization that kept our bellies full, we were facing a different kind of disaster.

Six days a week, we did the same thing: go to school, come home and eat, go to work cleaning multiple buildings. Repeat. Again and again and again.

One particular time, as I was taking out the garbage under a cubicle, I found a family photo taken in Hawaii. I stopped and thought about my long-lost childhood back in Brazil—going to the beach on weekends and taking an occasional walk in the mornings along the shoreline before school started.

While lost in those thoughts, staring at the photo, I recognized a colleague from elementary school in the picture and my face heated. *I would be*

completely mortified if my friends ever found out I clean buildings till midnight every day.

A little self-consciousness aside, I didn't usually feel sorry for myself—but I did wonder if those days would ever end.

Day after day, year after year, it went on for almost a decade.

For a family of five, we lived under the poverty line. Even back-to-school shopping was not an option. We got hand-me-downs from the kids who got hand-me-downs. My sister, Vivien, and I wanted to be part of dance lessons and other groups, but that would require payment, so that was a no as well.

As we were preparing for the last day of school field day, the elementary school invited a local dance teacher to choreograph the final performance. After several days of practice, the dance teacher approached me and remarked, "You're a very talented dancer. What academy are you part of?"

I froze. I didn't know what to say. I'd never received such a compliment. Even if we could pay for dance classes, we had to clean buildings every night and didn't have time for anything else. "I don't belong to any dance groups," I answered.

"Well, you should look into it," she replied. "In fact, you should join our academy."

The embarrassment of sharing my harsh reality with the dance teacher was beyond what I could handle. I thanked her and quickly disappeared into the crowd of kids, pretending to be uninterested.

Years later, in junior high, I wanted to join the orchestra, so I got a babysitting job to pay for the lessons and made monthly payments to rent a violin. I was thirteen and thought it was time to do something new. I had severe ADD, as many creatives do, but I was determined to learn to play, and I practiced for hours every week when I wasn't cleaning buildings at night. My practice chart was always the highest among my peers in the junior high orchestra.

Violin wasn't my only hobby. I also collected *Vogue* magazines. In between the Bach concertos, I would memorize every designer's collection.

At sixteen years old, I took a sewing class at the local fabric store and sewed a replica of the Balenciaga two-piece silver Lycra swimsuit. Shopping for clothing was not a regular activity given our circumstances, but I somehow

always dressed differently. I never enjoyed the selections offered at the local mall, but I valued couture as the global designers' "It" items to have. I loved the art expression and the dramatic photo shoots. I studied fashion magazines meticulously at Barnes and Noble and the Borders store.

When it was time for prom, I thought the dresses at the local mall were just blah. So I got inspiration from *Vogue* magazine's photo of Gisele Bündchen wearing a leather skirt outfit. My mom, who could sew and make a pattern, helped me put together this very avant-garde snake pleather dress with a zipper all the way up to a mock neck. We worked all night, but at 1 a.m., the sewing machine broke. We couldn't finish the dress.

"Sorry," my mom said, giving me a regretful shrug. "You're going to have to go to prom in one of your church dresses."

I sobbed at the tragedy. Buying a dress at the store was too expensive for me, and besides, prom was the very next day. I prayed for a miracle, but nothing happened, and the machine still didn't work. It was a Saturday and we had state band and orchestra concerts all day. I cried all the way home on the bus that afternoon because prom was just a couple of hours away and I didn't have a dress to wear.

A band colleague named Malorie noticed me and asked, "What's wrong? Why are you upset?"

Between sniffles, I said, "I don't have a dress to wear for prom. Our sewing machine broke last night and the dress is unfinished." I wiped the tears off my cheeks.

Her face brightened, and she pushed a lock of her blond hair behind her ear. "You know, my mom is a seamstress! I'll ask her if you can come over and she can finish your dress."

A weight lifted from my chest as hope filled my heart. "Really?"

She nodded. "Grab your dress and bring it over."

Right after the bus ride, I ran home, grabbed the pieces, and went straight to her house. Malorie's mom, Jennifer, quickly sewed the dress in her atelier as I stared on with so much gratitude.

Jennifer handed me her daughter's dress to finish the beading while she finished mine. "So . . . who cut this pattern?" she asked.

“I designed it, and my mom cut the pattern. It’s really on the low end,” I answered, rather embarrassed thinking it wasn’t up to par.

“Let me tell you, Fernanda—this is not just some basic entry-level construction. This dress is actually quite complex and takes skill. I think you and your mom know way more than you’re telling me,” Jennifer said with a wink.

I smiled. *Perhaps we underestimated ourselves.*

Jennifer finished the dress in no time and handed it to me with a big smile.

“Thank you! Thank you!” I hugged it to my chest.

“My pleasure,” Jennifer said.

I couldn’t believe how quickly she’d been able to pull it together for me! I sprinted home to finish getting ready. It was indeed a miracle from above and showed me that the Lord truly cares about the small details in our lives.

Near the end of my high school years, I decided I wanted to attend the University of Utah for music. My violin teacher, a renowned Korean violinist, agreed to mentor me. Months later, he let me go and told me to pursue fashion. Apparently, I came better dressed than musically prepared . . . or so he thought.

I was so confused. I didn’t know which way to go.

My high school counselor said, “You can’t be a fashion designer, an interior designer, a photographer, a stylist, a graphic artist, *and* a violinist. It’s just not possible. Pick one thing to do for the rest of your life.”

I was shattered. My brain was running a million miles a minute *and* in several directions. I had too much creativity and no outlet for all my plans. *But of course*, I thought, *as the poor immigrant kid at school, my future options will be slim.* It wasn’t like my dad was networking at the country club. We always lived in what you call “low-income” apartment communities, so it wasn’t likely I’d get to be an intern in some fancy company doing fancy, important tasks.

At the end of my high school years, and the beginning of my music college days at the University of Utah, I got a job working at a credit repair law firm downtown in Salt Lake through a band buddy from school. I worked there for many years, always finding new ways of improving my tasks, and then I moved on to improving my department as a whole and cutting costs in the six-digit range for the company.

One day, the law firm director told my boss, “I need your department to recommend the sharpest employee. We have a new position and would like to recruit from within.”

After my name was submitted, there was some confusion.

“I think there’s been a mistake,” the director said to my boss. “Fernanda works in the mail room. Out of the entire department of analysts, IT, and data services employees, there’s no way that your sharpest employee works there.”

My boss assured the director that there was no confusion.

I moved up, but I wanted to do more—perhaps something creative on my own. I wanted to move to New York City, attend FIT (the Fashion Institute of Technology), and have the city life I always dreamed of. That dream consisted of listening to Buddha Bar, a compilation of chill lounge and world music, while wearing Versace down Fifth Avenue.

That dream got slashed quickly as I once again reminded myself of my reality. Instead, I joined the Salt Lake Community College Fashion Institute. I took full credits and made monthly payments to get an associate’s degree with an emphasis in fashion. I worked two jobs, went to school full-time, played in the local orchestra, and played the saxophone in a bossa nova jazz group. Whatever I did, I was going non-stop.

When I was twenty-two, my sister, Vivien, approached me with an idea to open a fashion line with modest pieces that didn’t exist on the market. I thought, *No way! I don’t want to touch retail.* Besides, we had no money and no connections to make that happen.

Still, I thought about it for a while and realized that perhaps if I didn’t take the chance, I would be stuck at my job forever—or worse, watching others doing something creative while I only dreamed about it. By 2007, a year later, I had obtained an American Express credit card, and that’s how we got our initial funding.

My sister and I attended a Vegas trade show and met a few vendors that fit our “look.” It was very intimidating to have thousands of people walking very fast all around us who knew exactly where they were going, literally and figuratively. We, on the other hand, were lost—not sure who to visit, passing out business cards that said “BÖHME,” and hoping for the best. It was a learning curve to talk the talk and walk the walk.

Months later, I got on a plane to Los Angeles and walked the streets by myself through the homeless shelters where the showrooms were to get inventory from the Korean vendors . . . another learning curve that made our once figurative dreams literal.

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