

“A Journey to Survival” Transcript

Gustavo Presidente: I don't know anything different. I mean, I know high level of trauma and working within that trauma and figuring out where to go from there. And that happened from a very very young age and it happens to a lot of people.

Title screen: Gustavo is currently working towards a Master's degree in Social Work.

Gustavo Presidente: My name is Gustavo Presidente. My family is from Central America. My dad is from El Salvador. My mom is from Honduras and I was born in Los Angeles.

Gustavo Presidente: I work at a counseling agency here in Eugene called Options Counseling. We have a contract with Child Welfare where we provide intervention services and preventative services to families involved in the child welfare system. Child Welfare either has a choice to remove the kids, or provide intervention service, or reunification services. That's where myself and my team come in and we try to do whatever is possible to try to make sure that the family can stay together as a unit.

Gustavo Presidente: At this point, I am the only bilingual/bicultural staff member on my team and as a result, I receive all of the monolingual Spanish-speaking cases.

Gustavo Presidente: I just finished a year long internship at the department of youth services and I had a couple of roles there. One of them was to work with families or youth who had been involved in sex offense cases. In addition to that, I also worked as part of a mental health team. We provided what we called “stabilization services” to the youth that were at the highest risk of committing suicide. A youth would disclose that he or she was having suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideations and we would go down there and provide support services to them.

Title Screen: Gustavo was born in the United States. His family returned to El Salvador before his younger brother was born.

Gustavo Presidente: El Salvador, I still remember being over there and running through sugarcane fields to go get water. And another memory that I have is us drinking water out of the well and how hot it was and how foresty it was. And also, when my dad left to come to the United States for work and to get an apartment, I remember the day he left. I even remember where he was walking, which direction and how the terrain looked. Yeah...

Title Screen: The family stayed in El Salvador until the violence during the civil war (1979 - 1992) became too unbearable.

Chelsie Simonson
Latino Roots II 2015

Gustavo Presidente: Things got pretty bad. My mom would tell me that, I was I guess too young to remember, but when they would be dropping bombs or what she perceived to be bombs right in front of the home and we would all just hide inside of the tub. She always tells me how she would protect us. At the same time, the government, according to my dad, was going around to little towns and were saying "You guys need to join us and if not, we are going to kill you." My dad was one of the people that they told that to, so he decided to leave.

Title Screen: The family returned to the United States in stages

Gustavo Presidente: The idea was that my dad was going to go to the U.S. and find a job and an apartment. Once he was ready, they were going to send me because I was the easiest. I could just board a plane, since I was born here in the U. S. I remember when I was on the plane, leaving El Salvador and going to the U.S. We landed in somewhere called the San Fernando Valley and the city that we ended up moving into was Northridge.

Gustavo Presidente: I remember living with my father and being sent to all of the babysitters because my mom wasn't around. My dad would kind of prepare me for their arrival. He would say things like, "You know you have a brother, right? He's going to come here pretty soon." I just had this imaginary vision of my brother for some reason. I thought he was like something out of a cartoon. I remember opening the door and saying "Brother!" but he didn't speak any English, so he was just looking at me like "Que?"

Gustavo Presidente: And things were going pretty good but then the Northridge Earthquake happened in 1994 and we lived in Northridge, right across the street from the Northridge middle school. Our apartment building sank and we were homeless for a while and staying with various family members, probably for a couple of years.

Title Screen: Gustavo discusses the difficulty that he had navigating the education system in Los Angeles

Gustavo Presidente: School was crazy in LA. I got into a fight with two kids and I got suspended the first day of elementary school and things just kind of got worse from there. Actually by the time that I got to middle school I had been kicked out of the whole district, which is a pretty amazing accomplishment, I guess, because LAUSD is humongous. I mean, the school that I was going to was pretty bad. We're talking about gangsters and kids with all sorts of mental health issues. It was fights every day.

Title Screen: Gustavo was eventually able to graduate with a high school diploma after a difficult educational journey.

Chelsie Simonson
Latino Roots II 2015

Title Screen: Street gangs were prevalent in L. A. Gustavo discusses the ways that gang culture was a part of daily life.

Gustavo Presidente: You know, it's hard to put gangsters in a box. Talking about it now, I can say that they were gangsters, but when I was growing up they were my friends. They were the people in my neighborhood that took care of me. When you would go outside, they would play soccer with you, throw a football around with you. They would protect you. If somebody else wanted to start something with you, they were right there. You knew you could call them. I have an older brother. He was involved a little bit with MS13 so it was a part of my family and it was everywhere. I looked up to the gangsters, to be honest with you. I dressed like them. I wanted to be like them. They had the nice cars. They had a lot of girls.

Gustavo Presidente: But then things started to get more serious. People started getting killed. One time when I was walking home from school, a couple of people came out and pulled a gun on me. They put it to the back of my head and asked for my stuff. I've seen two kids get killed right in front of me, all because they were wearing khaki pants and white t-shirts. I've had a couple of friends, actually more than a couple of friends, who have killed people and now are in jail. I don't know. It was a different time for sure. Friends that you went to elementary and junior high with were now legit gangsters. And I was a part of that crowd, on some level.

Title Screen: In 2007, the violence in Los Angeles became too much and Gustavo's family moved to Oregon.

Gustavo Presidente: Things were getting pretty bad. I didn't want to move but somebody shot up our house. I think that was when my dad was like "We need to go." 2007 is when we moved over here. We just needed a change of scenery. I was terrified of coming here. I thought there were only old people here.

Title Screen: Getting a college education presented a new set of obstacles for Gustavo.

Gustavo Presidente: Growing up, college did not seem like an option at all. When you grow up in the Hispanic community, particularly in L.A., a good majority of people are undocumented so that option isn't there for them. That was the case for a lot of my friends and I internalized that. I didn't think that I could go to college. Nobody ever talked to me about things like student loans. I battled with the thought of "Is there a higher purpose for me?" It just got me curious and I started looking into schools.

Gustavo Presidente: When I first told my parents that I wanted to go to college, they were very very upset with me. They thought that it would take away from my ability to work, actually they knew that it would do that. And then came the time when I was applying for my FAFSA and I had to get their information. I thought it would be fine like "Hey dad, I just need a little bit of your information, here and

Chelsie Simonson
Latino Roots II 2015

there.” Well my parents are very private people. There is a culture, a component of this, around being secretive. At the time, my mom, my dad, and my brother were residents. They were worried that anything that had to do with the government, any form of assistance that they were connected to was going to impact their ability to become citizens one day. They didn’t want to do it. But they came around to it and I started going to college.

Gustavo Presidente: I got my Associates degree in Business, then a bachelor’s degree in Human Services, and now I am working on my Master’s degree in Social Work.

Gustavo Presidente: To answer your question about why I decided to become a social worker. I know it is kind of cheesy but I didn’t choose it, it kind of chose me. People in the Hispanic community are social workers, I mean they really are. The awesome part about my job is that I get to show people that. The change that you see when people view themselves in that way, it’s kind of magical. It’s amazing to me how sometimes when people are at the lowest place of their lives they can pull together strength and laughter and happiness. And seeing that gives me a lot of hope for myself and also for humanity.