

OH 18 OMA Oral History Collection
Stories of OSU Hmong and Latinx Students
Arts and Social Justice Practicum Winter 2016
“Voices Without Borders” Parts 1 and 2

Part 1

Date: February 23, 2016

Location: Oregon State University Native American Longhouse Eena Haws

Length: 00:32:02 (of 00:42:44 total)

Interviewees: Alejandra Mendoza, Lorena Ambriz, Guadalupe Garcia, Warren Wang, Gina Chang, and Nitché Verdugo

Interviewer: Nitché Verdugo

Transcriber: Daniel Loera

AM: Alejandra Mendoza

LA: Lorena Ambriz

GG: Guadalupe Garcia

WW: Warren Wang

GC: Gina Chang

NV: Nitché Verdugo

[00:00:00]

NV: Okay, so today is February 23, 2016; we're at the Native American Longhouse and this is for the Arts and Social Justice Practicum course and this is with Mai Xee and Nitché. We'll start out with introductions and I'll go first. I'm Nitché Verdugo; I'm a sixth year in, majoring in ethnic studies.

LA: My name is Lorena; I am a third year majoring in sociology.

GG: Hi, I'm Lupe Garcia; I'm a senior in HDFS and working on becoming a scientist.

GC: I'm Gina, I'm a second year and I'm studying psychology.

WW: My name is Warren and I'm a third year studying biochemistry and biophysics.

AM: My name is Alejandra; I'm a fifth year studying math.

NV: Perfect, so I'm going to explain a little bit about this project again. It's basically bringing together the Hmong community, but also the Latino/Chicano community to speak about the stories behind their families coming to the United States, but also talking a little about their experiences or influence coming from migrant families. So

how this is going to work is I will start with my story; I will have four minutes to say that story. After each story we will take a deep breath, have a moment of silence to have the story sink in, and then we'll move on to the next person and we'll go around. You, feel free to skip, but if you want to share eventually, we'll give you that space as well. After we go through everyone's stories we will do a moment of reflection where we will actually be drawing or writing on these pieces of paper and this will be added to the diary that Mai Xee and I are going to put together with our stories that we will be sharing across campus, strategically in spaces where we want our stories to be heard on campus. Does anybody have any questions before we start?

GC: Do we have to use up the four minutes?

NV: No, no.

GC: Okay.

NV: I know it feels like a long time, yeah, but it's up to us. Yeah you don't have to use the four minutes.

GC: Okay.

NV: And if you want to share more than one story we can also go around twice. So let me set up the timer, okay. You good? You good?

AM: Yeah.

NV: Okay, so I guess I'll start. So my mom is from Veracruz, Mexico and my dad is from La Paz, Baja California Sur, also Mexico. And they migrated to California back in 1990, 1990. They wanted a better life for themselves and they knew that they were carrying me because I was not born yet. We arrived to East LA and our first home was actually a shelter, we were there for a couple of years, I was born there and my parents were doing small jobs. They were cleaning houses they were working at the hospital cleaning the emergency rooms, but things were just not working out and so eventually having connections with the community, we were able to move from the shelter to a garage which was one of our friends, best friend's home and in that garage we were living with six other families and so it was tough to kind of have our own family space, but it made it, we made it for ourselves to have that family with the people who were in there. They would always be changing, but we would find a way to connect with them and be able to know what they were up to and where they were headed. Eventually my parents were able to join an organization, the United Farm Workers group and they

were able to teach people from El Salvador how to speak Spanish, but also teaching them how to write in Spanish. So I think that kind of helped them kind of connect with the community, but also for myself to kind of gain an appreciation for the people who we were being a part of in the community. And I think growing up in those spaces and being able to learn about the differences and inequalities between communities and other resources that we were being given to us made me realize that that's something that I wanted to fight for. So growing up I realized that I wanted to support workers' rights and I wanted to work with the communities that I grew up with in East LA. And I am first generation here in the United States and I feel like I'm very proud of where I come from and I think the work ethic and the respect we have for people that are not from our community is very strong and so I take that with me in everything that I do, the passion that drives me is my parents and their hard work and I want to make it up to them and I want to give back to them eventually after I graduate. I'm doing all this for them and also for myself as an individual. With that being said that is my story. So now we are going to take a moment and take a deep breath *[pause]*, we're going to let that sink in *[pause]*, and now who wants to go next, Lorena, Alejandra? We'll go around the circle eventually. Can you say your name?

[00:05:48]

LA: So my name is Lorena Ambriz. I come from Michoacán, Mexico. My parents are both from La Palma, Michoacán. I was born there as well. My father migrated to the United States when he was about 14, undocumented at the time; it was just way easier back then to just cross back and forth. He would spend most of his time in the United States and every December he would go back home and he'd, he'd send money to my mom all the time so she could feed us because I have four older sisters and it was me at the time so it was three older sisters, so it was four of us. So he would work in the US and send money to Mexico and then come visit us in December and I remember that'd be the best time because we actually got to eat dinner, so it was really fun. Like, I mean, we always ate, but it was big, like a big dinner so it was cool, but anyways, so he, so since he was 14 he was migrating back and forth and then when I was four, so after my mom had four daughters, he was able to save up enough money to get us papers, so he got us all residentships here so we were able to migrate documented into the United States. And that was 1999, so the first, my first home was in, up in Oregon, its Eastern, Oregon, its super different over there. So that's kind of how I grew up, we came, we came straight into a home, like my dad had a house for us so we never, I personally never in the US, I never really struggled with finding a home or food or shelter. Like,

my dad had always provided that for us since I was really little. The little town I was from was very, it was population was 700 people so it was extra small it was very predominantly white. A lot of like agriculture is in that area so a lot of like white business or white farmers who like owned like 90% of the land, but I guess growing up I didn't really value much because I was very assimilated into the American culture so I would and also I'm like very light skinned so it was very I guess easier for me to just like merge into like that culture. I spoke English so of course like first grade or something like that, but after that it was just pretty easy, just blending in. So I never really like took into consideration our roots back then or like, like value my parents as much as I should have because like from my point of view it was like this is normal. Like everyone has food and shelter, so I wasn't really exposed to the things like, as well as like being super sheltered so not really talking about those things. It's also very ignorant so, but thankfully my parents didn't want me to come to University because in our culture the woman can't leave home unless she's married, like "under the protection of the man." But they supported me in the end when I said I was going to come here, so they like came here and I was able to like just find, open my eyes to all the different realities of what people go through and the differences and injustices and inequalities. And I guess being here and hearing like these kinds of stories that people were sharing really made me like who I am currently, like trying to fight like for equity and justice in this society because it's pretty fucked up. So that's my story.

NV: Thank you for sharing. Okay, so we're going to take a deep breath *[pause]*, let that sink in *[pause]*. Lupe, when you're ready.

[00:09:52]

GG: So hi everyone my name is Lupe, so I guess where my, where my story started from my dad originally came from Guanajuato, Mexico, and he migrated over when he was 14 years old and he always told us the story where he literally had nothing and he only came over with a 3rd grade education and he always told my sisters and I how important an education was, you know always do your best in school and in whatever you do in life, just give it your all. And I never really took them into appreciation until I got older and really understood where he was coming from, I understood more of my history. As Lorena, I really assimilated into the white culture, a lot of influences, you know, did take hold, but as you mature you are able to understand and really appreciate the sacrifices that your parents have made over the years. And my mother she, she came from a small town in Texas with my grandparents, and they migrated to

Oregon back in the early 1990s, or early 80s I think and my, my two parents, my parents they met up at this agricultural farm and basically that's what their world really revolved around, just doing field work and I remember they just going home, just late hours, just tired and they would never really help us with homework, and I could never understand why they would never give back to my sisters and I. You know I would see my friends they're always talking about going on all these trips and actually having quality family time while we're just here at home - my parents didn't get her until 9pm. And then you know, once we were older we were actually able to work alongside them in the fields and actually see what they were going through day after day of every year. And we just have all these inequalities, just like the working conditions and I think that's like when things really opened our eyes. I think it's time for a change, you know, and it just really, I saw like this personality change between my sisters and I where we just wanted more out of life. And so now just really going back and just listening to those stories of when I was growing up it's such a different perspective now. So yeah that's my story.

NV: Thank you for sharing. We're going to take a deep breath *[pause]*. When you're ready.

GC: Okay. So my name is Gina and I'm Hmong which a lot of people don't know about, but we come from Laos and Thailand so we don't really have our own country, but my parents came to the United States like during the Vietnam War when that was happening and so it's also known as the "Secret War" between like Laos and Vietnam, it's like really complex, but yeah so 1975 my parents, that's when that was happening. I had, I have an older brother and he was probably just like a few months old and they had to like cross from Laos to get to Thailand. So like one of the stories that I remember that my parents told me was when they were crossing the Mekong River that divided Laos and Thailand, my dad was the only one who knew how to swim in my family so he had to like, like tie a rope to a tire and like my mom and my uncle was like holding on to the tire and they like crossed the river and my dad told me like, like there would just be like military people shooting in the water, it's just like really, like dramatic stuff and like my dad told me like some families, like didn't have someone to swim so they couldn't cross the river and some of them had like plastic bags, like anything that you could think of that could float, they would like try to get over the river. But luckily my parents made it and then they were in the refugee camps for a while and then the United States, like the Americans, they like made like a deal with Hmong military, like if they help them out fighting, then they would give them like freedom here in the

states, so luckily my parents were able to come to the United States and they have like a, there was like a Christian group that was like sponsoring the Hmong people and so they got a sponsor and then they came to California and went to California, that's where they settled and then, yeah, so they settled in Cali and then my parents moved to Washington and then they moved back to Cali and then in like in 1994 they moved to Oregon and then I was born two years later. And my parents, I have like 7 siblings so there's a lot of us. So we lived in like an apartment, two bedroom apartment and my dad worked like graveyard shifts my mom worked during the day so there would always be one of them home, but I remember just like growing up in a really good family and it was like, we have home videos of just like all of us in one tiny apartment and like just like my brothers and my siblings like sleeping in the living room. But then my parents like saved up enough money and then we moved in to a house, a big house and then from there it was like, from there, I guess it wasn't really like hard growing up because I feel like me being the youngest out of all my siblings, I had it easier because we didn't have problems with money, but like when my other siblings were younger, like my parents struggled with money, like you know, keep spending on everything, but like hearing my parents experiences I feel like it makes me more appreciative and more thankful about they like made a sacrifice to come to the states because not everyone made it. Especially like some of my mom's family, her side, some didn't make and are still struggling like you know, so yeah just makes me appreciate my parents a lot more like whenever I'm feeling like sad I try to remind myself that you know I should be doing this for my parents because they sacrificed so much for me so it's just my way to give back and go to college and get a job and like give them what they've always dreamed of so that's my story (laughs).

[00:16:58]

NV: That's a nice story, thank you for sharing. *[chatter and laughter]* Thank you for sharing, so we're going to take a deep breath *[pause]*. Are you okay, Lupe?

GG: Yeah.

NV: Okay.

GG: What?

NV: You started coughing all of a sudden, so I was like okay *[laughs]*.

GG: Okay, it's just a cough *[laughs]*.

NV: Okay *[laughs]*. So when you're ready?

WW: My name is Warren and just like Gina was saying, my parents came over during the secret war too, but my dad came over by himself. So he was spon, sponsored by a foster family and my mom grew up with her family and eventually they met up in Portland in Oregon, but my dad lived in California at the time so she had to go over to California to see him and eventually they got together. And my sister and my brother were born in California and the rest of us were born in Portland, Oregon. And I don't really know much of the details of their story because I, because I don't remember. It's been a long time since they've told me, but yeah I guess growing up as like a first generation from, from them is like, it's kind of like you get disconnected from your cult, your culture and your beliefs because you don't, you didn't experience them like your parents do, like you're not from the same country they are and you didn't grow up with those same people teaching you the same things and so I remember when I was a child I really use to hate being Hmong just because I didn't know how to speak Hmong and like if you talk to old, like older Hmong people and they follow the beliefs like very strictly. If you go to talk to them, they're very judgmental, so I use to hate being, I use to hate being Hmong just because I didn't feel like I should be looked down upon just because I couldn't speak Hmong. Like I already knew that to myself, it hurt me because I couldn't you know, I couldn't connect with my family and I think as you grow up, you start to mature and you start to realize that you know, they just want the best for you, you know like they grew up in a different culture, a different time and it's just what they believe in and then my dad use to tell me all the time, you know you shouldn't let how other people see you, affect you, but at the same time you should take what they say to heart because it's going to help you grow as a person. And so that's just kind of like the person I've become because the way that my culture has taught me, you know like you, yeah, yeah you don't want to be somebody you're not going to be, you're not, but at the same time you want to be the best that you can be and so my, my growing up I always saw my parents struggle with money and so like I remember in high school I use to work so hard just so I could get a scholarship and go to college, you know, like give back to them and, and just like yeah I feel like you know growing up as a first generation you have to work harder just because your, because you know how your parents struggled and like they're always telling you, you know, education is what's going to get you there, what's going to be able to help you and I know that my parents are, even though they struggle, they started, they still tried to help the family back home and I always asked my mom like, "why do you give them money when you don't have money?" And she says, "because they're struggling more than we are" - and you

know that just makes me realize that, you know coming to the United States is like an opportunity to help, to help not only yourself, but to help your family and to help those you love, yeah. I guess that's just why I'm in college now, trying to get education so I can give back to the people that I care about and I guess that's just really my story right now.

[00:21:03]

NV: Thank you very much for sharing. Okay, we're going to take a deep breath *[pause]*, whenever you're ready, Alejandra.

AM: So similar to probably most of you, my parents talk about how it was hard living in Mexico back then, how'd they have to go take showers "en la presa" - the lakes and rivers, not having toys, playing with just like little rocks, sticks. My mom use to say that eating chicken for them was like one of the best things in the world because they struggled so much with just food and clothing and everything so my dad came when he was 19 and he also migrated back and, migrated back and forth. And my parents got married in 1991 and they moved, my mom stayed there for a while, but then she crossed the border. They settled in [?] in 1990, no they went to California first in 1991 and I was born in 1992 and then they moved to [?]. And I guess I didn't really get to see the struggles as much once they were here. My dad got his papers through Ronald Reagan's, what's it called, when he handed out papers to those who did migrant work, that's how he got his papers and then he helped my mom get hers. I guess in school, how it affected me also was how you, Lorena said [?] I tried assimilating to the, I guess I saw the, that the white students also, always had like the best clothing, they were always so nicely dressed. I always taught of them as really beautiful and I always saw myself as not that beautiful and I, I guess I didn't like my dark skin, dark skin as much, sorry.

NV: That's okay, take your time.

AM: And I guess I was like, I didn't know my identity, I guess I was lost so coming to college was probably one of the best things and that's why now I work with MEChA and that's what drives me and keeps me going so that's a little bit about my story.

NV: Thank you so much for sharing. Let's take one last deep breath *[pause]*. I just want to say thank you to every single one of you for sharing your stories. Right now since we're all taking all the stories in we're going to do a reflection. So with this reflection we

have paper and you can either draw or you can write the similarities, the commonalities of things that you see with these stories, but also any feelings that you're just, any raw feelings that you're feeling right now, put them on paper and we can talk. We'll do that for a good five, ten minutes and then we'll come together and talk about it, so we all. I don't know if there's, what do you have in here? It's a craft cart, you know life crafty things, you can like write and do that. Do you want a table? You can just spread around, do your thing for about five or ten minutes and then we'll come together.

[00:25:16]



Reflection Activity

LA: Yeah.

NV: Okay, good.

LA: I think one thing that I found similar was crossing like a river, like in order to immigrate to the United States, so like that was something that [?]

NV: Do we want to go around, is that easier?

GC: I'm ready.

NV: Okay, cool.

GC: Okay. I think we have a lot in common like, like dreams, like American dream. I wrote dream on mine too, yeah just a dream like coming to the states to have a better life.

NV: Yeah, thank you.

WW: Do I talk about mine or do I talk about?

NV: You can talk about yours.

WW: I drew a tree and I wrote what it symbolizes. I said the older, the older I grow the more mature I feel I've become and there's a shift from how I want to see the world and how the world really is and so my life is like a tree growing constantly with each new experience and it's not until like I'm fully developed that I can give the most back to others. And I put Hmong at the bottom because that's like

LA: The root?

WW: Yeah.

GC: Oh, symbolism.

GG: Damn *[laughs]*

LA: Can I steal it and put it on *[?]* *[laughter and chatter]* For sure.

NV: Not steal it, but borrow it.

LA: Yeah *[laughs]*

NV: Share it, thank you.

GG: Personally like what I see here is a lot of personal growth and just like a lot of stuff describing everyone going through their own journeys. Whether or not we reach that end goal whatever it may be, we are here to share each other stories and just really be here for one another, what really holds us down and just really recognizing where we come from. So this is, this is super dope ya'll.

NV: *[laughs]* Thank you for sharing. Alejandra?

AM: Mine was similar to the tree because I wanted to symbolize also growth and like how I talked a little bit about how I struggled with my identity until now and now that

I have like found, I guess found myself and like I can see all that I can do for others, I want to do that empowerment to others, see that they can do it too.

NV: Thank you. So the first thing that came to mind was appreciation and I put a heart just because it tied back to like our parents, we've been thankful for them, doing all the sacrifices they have gone through and that kind of keeps our blood pumping, keeps us going, it's that empowerment so that's why I put a heart. But also family strength - not only just within our blood family, but even within ourselves. I feel like, we created that bond, that community that otherwise would not be created if we hadn't shared our stories so I'm really appreciative of also having ya'll share those stories with us and then there's also a Mayan saying. I'll just read it out loud, "you are my other me, if I do harm to you I do harm to myself, if I love and respect you, I love and respect myself." And so I feel like with that foundation, of community and dreaming together we've already built that community and for me that word is very strong and it's very rooted also in our identities and how proud we are of who we are so basic, that's basically it. Are there any other, other last thoughts, feelings?

GC: That's a really good heart *[laughs]*

AM: I know it is *[laughs]*

NV: Thank you *[laughs]*

LA: I tried drawing a cat *[laughs]*

GC: I think these are really strong words though, like "unity." I didn't even think of that, but yeah.

NV: Anything else?

LA: Stay true to yourself, you know, like, love yourself. You are beautiful *[laughs]*

NV: Anyone else?

AM: I'm just really glad you did this, I feel like we always need to be sharing our stories, its important, for them to get out there and hopefully inspire others.

GC: Yeah, I think it was nice to hear like your guys' side because I'm not, like I'm so use to the Asian side of things so it's like, it's really cool like work with you guys and hear what you guys have to say.

NV: Ditto, I feel the same.

GC: Yeah

NV: So yeah.

GC: Yeah

LA: Yeah and it was nice to see the similarities in our stories, I mean they're not exactly the same, but we can definitely relate so that was really cool.

NV: Anything else? Okay so I know. First of all I just want to thank you all once again, I am very appreciative of you all being here, taking the time off your day to share your stories. I feel hopefully comfortable with our space to be able to share and I know a lot of our members couldn't make it and not a lot of your, so what we're trying to do is still collect these stories. So if any of our members, any members want to write out their stories and be able to share them, they can write it out, they can do it in any art form that they prefer and they can drop it off at SNELL 231 and we'll be collecting them until next Monday by 5pm so I think we can connect with Mai Xee and make sure that her group knows and so. So if you can think of anyone else who would be perfect to share their story, please let them know, and we can add them to our diary. And once we're done with that we'll share it with you all so you know what the final outcome is. So if that's cool with everyone, I just want to thank everyone for helping. Thank you to Charlene, thank you Natalia for being in this space too, so with that being said, break *[laughs]*.

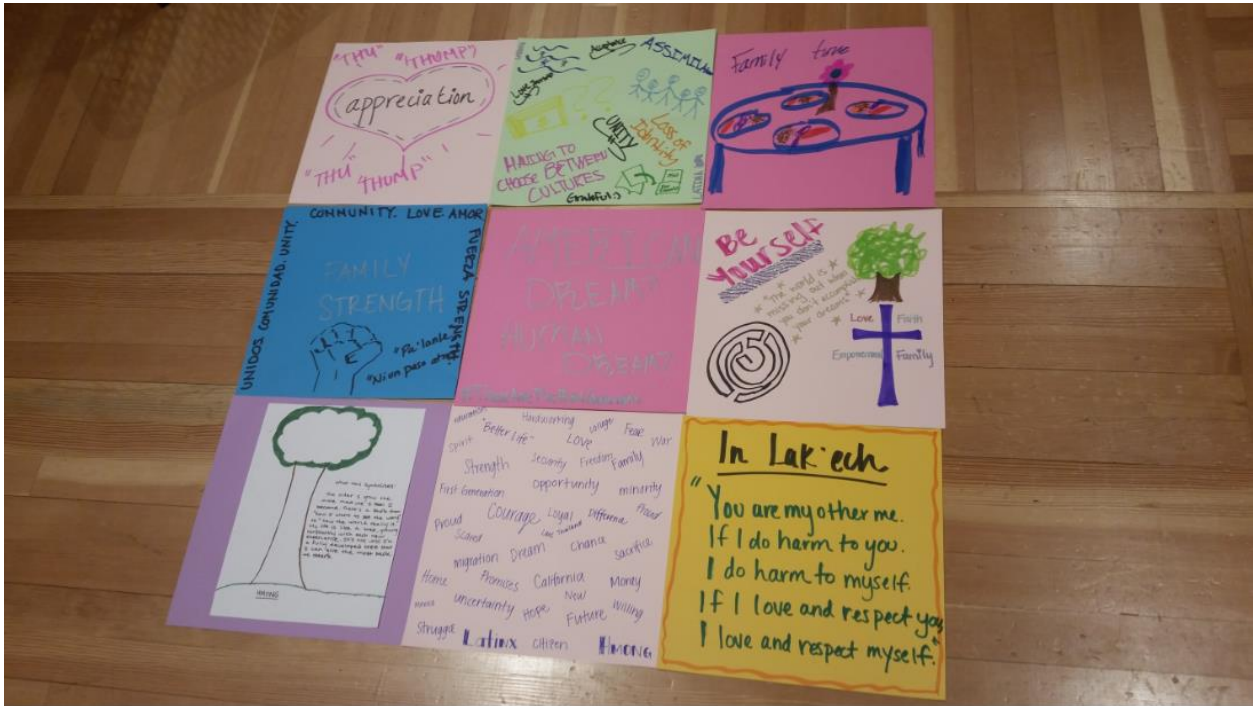
GC: Can I take a picture of this?

NV: Of course! Go for it.

AM: I want one too.

[00:32:02]

Group Reflection and Discussion



Part 2

Date: March 4, 2016

Location: Oregon State University

Length: 00:10:42 (00:32:03 - 00:42:44)

Interviewees: Mai Xee Yang and Natalia Fernández

Interviewer: Mai Xee Yang

Transcriber: Natalia Fernández

MX: Mai Xee Yang

NF: Natalia Fernández

[00:32:03]

MX: Today is March 4th and we're here to continue our little stories section, or storytelling, from February 23rd with me and Nitché's project about uniting our community together which is called "Voices without Borders." And before we begin our story, state your name and then continue on to your stories. So, I will begin now. My name is Mai Xee and today I am going to share a story about why I'm an artist. And being a first generation, coming into the US, my parents went through an event called the Secret War and that's where most of our people were basically murdered. And, during those waring times, it was difficult for my mom, my dad, to survive and to - for them to come to the U.S. it was a little difficult because my mom, my mom hasn't met my dad yet. And my mom came over by kind of like a church to take care of them in a way. And for a time she was good living in the U.S. but my dad, on the other hand, him and his brothers, had to find their own way into the U.S., and they had to leave all their older brothers who had families and couldn't come because they didn't want to sacrifice their families. And so they're still over there now - even my dad's dad which is my grandpa and my grandma and them are still over there. And it's, it's hard to think about the life, the kind of life they have over there because they're, it's still difficult for them to live over there, its still, there's still a lot of combat and conflict in Laos and Thailand. And for my parents to be over here and give us the opportunity to have the life that we have now, and have the shelter we have, the food they provide for us, I realized I'm really, I appreciate all their hard work, and there's not one day where I don't forget where they come from. And so with my pieces, I dedicated three paintings to them; it's a triptych. And one painting has a bamboo basket that they use to carry, just all their vegetables that they harvest; another one is like a farming hoe; and then the third piece is a pot that they boil water in. And I chose those three as the subject matter to represent their life in Laos and Thailand, And I know it's important to them too 'cause they talk about it - they tell their stories about how their life was really easy and simple over there and coming over here it's a lot more work and there's a lot more rules to live by. And sometimes they'll tell me [*alarm sounds*] sometimes they'll tell me that they would rather chose a life other there than over here which is interesting. But with

the life we have now I think I appreciate their hard work more and, and yeah, that's about it to my story there.

[00:37:08]

MX: And now we can go around sharing our stories and we're ready when you are.

NF: My name is Natalia Fernández and I am a Cuban-American. My parents are of the generation born in the late 1950s when Fidel Castro took power and so it was my grandparents, their generation that made the decision to leave Cuba. And my mom left when she was about two or three years old, she was a toddler. She left with her, her aunts and then my parents, my grandparents left afterwards – that was one of the strategies that families used, was sending their children without their parents and then claiming that the children needed their parents so they could reconnect. My father's family, on the other hand, stayed a few more years thinking that Castro would eventually be replaced by someone else, but that did not occur, and so my father didn't leave Cuba until he was about nine or ten and he had two younger sisters, so the family left later than my mom. My dad was raised in Miami, Florida, where many Cubans went to. My mom, on the other hand, her family moved to Puerto Rico. So they were raised in different locations but they both had connections to, to their families and they had some connections to Cuba – some relative stayed in the country. They then met in Florida when they both attended college, they met there and then they were married and soon after had my brother, my older brother and then myself. And I was raised in Tucson, Arizona, so in the Southwest. And my first language was Spanish. And we stayed connected to family; even though the majority of my family is in Florida, we definitely stay connected and have family reunions. And my parents always ensured that I spoke Spanish even though my predominant language is English since that's what I, what I used in school. And with both of them, they were first generation in terms of attending university and they always instilled the importance of education in me, and they shared my grandparents' struggles with me and we talked about their struggles as well and what that was like for them. And now it's really wonderful for me to be in my job which is to curate the Oregon Multicultural Archives at Oregon State University where my position is all about collecting peoples' stories and making them accessible and sharing them. And that's something that it's such a privilege to do, and it's so wonderful to be able to hear peoples' stories and document them and learn about other families, other experiences, and see the connections among families. And so, that's definitely one thing about my job that I love doing and I love sharing that with them

and hearing more about what they have to share and talking to my grandparents about their stories and looking at old photographs and learning what they'd like, what they'd like to share. Something that I hope to do in the future is actually visit Cuba. But unfortunately, my parents are of the generation that have no desire to return. I'd really like to visit with them but my mom doesn't remember much and my dad only remembers a little bit and his memories aren't all that positive, he has some positive memories. But at this point they don't wish to return and we don't really have family there anymore; most were older and they passed away. But I think that would be really wonderful to be able to visit and experience, and experience the country and the culture. And so that's something that I hope to do in the future and I think would be a wonderful experience for me, and maybe share that with my brother if he's interested, and go back to where both sides of my family were originally from a few generations back.

[end 00:42:44]