Susana de León Narrator

Lorena Duarte Interviewer

April 8, 2010 Minneapolis, Minnesota

Susana de León - **SdL** Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: This is Lorena Duarte. I will be conducting the interview today with Susana de León. Today is Thursday, April 8, 2010. We are at Susana de León's offices in South Minneapolis. This is for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project.

First of all, I want to say thank you so much, Susana, for taking the time and for agreeing to be part of this project.

SdL: Thank you, Lorena. I am honored and really looking forward to this conversation.

LD: Excellent. Can you, please, tell us your name?

SdL: My name is Susana de León.

LD: Is there an accent over the o?

SdL: There's an accent over the o

LD: What is your date of birth?

SdL: June 7, 1965.

LD: What is your occupation?

SdL: I am an immigration attorney/advocate/capitán of traditional dance of Mexico.

LD: Excellent. Are you married? Do you have children?

SdL: I am married, and I have two children and two dogs. [Laughter]

LD: And you live in South Minneapolis?

SdL: I live two blocks from my office.

LD: First of all, let's talk a little bit about where you were born and where you grew up.

SdL: I was born in a northern town of Mexico called Torreon, in the State of Coahuila, I grew up there until I was almost nineteen years old, which is the time when I came to the United States.

LD: Tell me about growing up. Tell me about your parents.

SdL: Well, my mom was also born in northern Mexico, in Zacatecas. She basically lived in a rural area and was not educated beyond one year in school, not even a complete year. She was a very strong, determined woman. She is, still. She wanted to have a better life. So she actually moved from her home town, small town, to the city to work as a maid. That's where she met my dad. My dad was a man who was born in the most northern part of Coahuila. He is from Nueva Rosita, which is a border town, you know, with Texas. He came with his family to Torreon, moved there because my grandfather worked in the mines, which were nearby our town. He met my mom because he was the mailman. My dad was a mailman, and my mom worked cleaning for a very rich family. Both my mom and dad were from rural backgrounds. My siblings and I were born in Torreon, but always traveling back to my mom's rural home town.

LD: How many siblings do you have?

SdL: I actually have a whole bunch of brothers and sisters. My dad had four children when he married my mom. Then, my mom and my dad had five kids. Then, my dad had two other kids after he separated from my mom, so we are, what, eleven?

LD: [Laughter] And where are you in that?

SdL: I am the ninth child, I believe, or the eighth child. I grew up, actually, with my older siblings.

LD: Okay

SdL: I don't have a lot of connection with my younger siblings. In my mom and dad's five kids, I'm the fourth.

LD: Tell me about school and what it was like to grow up in Torreon.

SdL: You know I had a really wonderful, fun childhood. My dad comes from a family of educators. His sister and a lot of his cousins were teachers. At that time in Mexico, you could be a teacher just by having completed the sixth grade. My grandmother, my mom's mom, Chonita, was also a teacher. Growing up in that environment meant that you went to school when you were very little. So I started going to school—plus, my mom wanted to get rid of us.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: You can imagine having nine kids running around was a lot. I think I started going to school when I was like two or three. My brothers would just take me to school with them. My aunt was one of the teachers, so, basically, I was there to be baby sat, I guess.

LD: [Chuckles]

SdL: It was *crazy* at the house. We lived right next to the river when I was little. That was very interesting because my grandma, my dad's mom—her name is Isabel—she would take us to the river to play and bathe, all of the kids. There were nine of us and then my uncles had a whole bunch of kids, like seven and my aunt had two others, so you can imagine my grandma with, like, twenty kids going to the river washing up. It was a city, but because we lived by the river and because we came from such rural ways, I think our lives kept on being like that. We just continued to follow cooking outdoors with firewood and getting together with all my uncles and aunts. I remember making *big*, *huge*, tamale batches, not just small, but forty pounds of *maíz*, right?

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: *Lots* of tamales. My grandma, my dad's mom, used to take us to watch wrestling matches.

LD: Ah.

SdL: It was funny, because she would *scream* at the wrestlers, at the *lucha libre*. She would scream at them, so it was fun. That part was very fun. It was a lot of family. Then, later on, when my mom and my dad separated, I actually spent a lot more time with my mom's mom, because we would go back to the *rancho*. When I say *rancho*, a lot of people in the United States think, oh, a ranch. That's not what saying *rancho* in Spanish means.

LD: Right.

SdL: It means, really, a rural community without paved streets, actually without streets. The houses are just scattered. Now, I start riding down one street and you have to turn around because the [unclear] house is in the middle.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: You've got to turn around and clear the house. When I would go to the *rancho* to see my grandma or stay there, life was just simple. We played with dirt. We sat and played *loteria*, Mexican bingo, and we gathered, you know, little dirt mounds and put it on top of the cars and we made necklaces with my cousins out of the little cones that came from the big trees. We would gather them and swing them around. It was fun.

Going to school, I loved school. I just *loved* being in school. I was always, I would say, a little bit too focused. Everything had to be perfect. I was one of the poets. I would participate in poetry matches.

LD: Ah.

SdL: It was fun. When I was in third grade, I had this very important state match, and I would prepare. My mom tells me the story. I remember sitting by myself in a corner and talking to the walls and telling the walls what I was going to do and emphasizing. I had a wonderful teacher who would always support me and my mom would, too.

I was basically raised part time by my mom and part time by my older sister, Patty. My mom worked. She was a seamstress by then. She had very long hours. She would start at the crack of dawn. It sounds so hard, but it was that way. She would get up and start sewing. All the responsibility then would fall on my sister to make sure that we got up, got dressed, got fed, went to school. When we came back from school, we all pitched in on the chores. It was, I think, one of the things that made my sister, my brothers, and I be very close. We knew that we depended on each other, and that my mother needed support, and that she would put food on the table, but it was our job to cook the food, to clean the house, and to just make the family function.

LD: Right, right.

SdL: It was beautiful. It was hard. We had a lot of fun events, but I would say that I was very aware that we were poor and we were struggling. When the neighbor lady came home and she had a lot of bread left over, she would bring it over to our house. Shoes and a lot of hand-me-downs, she would bring over to us. So I knew that there were some things that we didn't have, and, yet, there were all of these other fun things, friends, family. But I knew that we sometimes didn't have food, and I knew that we didn't have shoes. Those are the things that stick with you when you are little.

LD: Yes.

SdL: Especially if you want to go to a state match and you know everybody's going to be looking their best, and maybe your shoes won't fit, and you don't want to say anything because you see that your mom is already struggling. You don't want to burden her with that. That was very clear to me. Nevertheless, I had joy going to the matches and winning sometimes, and sometimes getting stage fright and not being able to say my poetry. It was fun.

LD: You came to the States, you said, when you were about nineteen?

SdL: Yes.

LD: Tell me about that.

SdL: Well, when I was growing up, my mom believed that we needed to get an education. She had one year of education. She was pulled out of school because my grandmother had another child and she was required at the house to take care of my aunt, basically. Then, when she had a chance, she went into the city to go to work as a maid, and while there, she met my dad, and, then, she decided that she wanted to go and learn how to be a seamstress. She would take classes; although, my dad's mom didn't look too kindly on that. She just didn't like that my mom was learning something. She would put my mom down and say, "Oh, you think you're that much better because you're going to school," or something. Yet, my mom knew that the only way out for us was for her to be able to support us. When I was growing up, she would often say that to us, "The only way that you're going to be free, the only way that you are ever going to be your own person is if you can support yourself. If you ever have children, you have got to be able to support your children. Otherwise, you'll always be tied down to a *man*."

That was just big for me.

LD: Right.

SdL: If you don't want to be tied down to a man, you've got to be your own woman and do work. So I started working when I was eleven. My first job was working at a grocery store. I would clean it, sweep it, and mop it. I was going to school and I was doing all kinds of things. I would sell paper. I would sell books, you name it. When I graduated junior high, at that time in Mexico, you could go from junior high to what is called Normal School. Normal School was a school for teachers. I know that here in the United States, in the old days, teacher training also happened at Normal Schools.

LD: Right.

SdL: It was a four-year program. I had said all my life, since I was little, I wanted to be a teacher, but I guess that was because all the women that I saw that worked outside the home were teachers. I'd never had a female doctor. I knew there was a female doctor that attended my birth, My universe was really small.

LD: Sure.

SdL: So I wanted to be a teacher. I really think I do have a passion for teaching, still. But, I also knew that I wanted to be something else besides a teacher. I looked and I thought I wanted to be an agronomist or a lawyer. My mom said to me, "You know, I cannot support your education beyond teaching. I know you want to fly, I'll be able to give that degree, so allow me to help you get your wings."

LD: Oh, wow.

SdL: "Once you get your wings, you can fly as high as you want and you can go anywhere."

LD: That's beautiful.

SdL: Yes. I actually graduated at eighteen as a teacher and had already been working as a teacher covering, basically, teachers who were going on maternity leave and other such things. I went to work as a teacher, and I just knew this was not something that I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I looked around and I saw what other young women were doing. They were having children and willing to stay at home and suddenly beginning that new cycle. That cycle didn't look attractive to me. I grew up with my mom like that. I didn't want to start setting up a house where you would struggle to have a stove or a refrigerator. My mother was not able to buy a refrigerator until I was fifteen.

In Mexico, you don't get houses that have appliances. You had to do everything without them. You don't even have—well, now they do—back in the day, gas that comes to your home. You had to buy cylinders. It just didn't look like the thing I wanted to do. I didn't want to get married. I didn't want to have children. In Mexico, at that time, you had two options. You either were a good daughter and stayed home and lived at home or you went to live at your husband's house or whatever, or you were out on your own and you were not a very good person. You were probably someone who was up to no good.

So I told my mom I didn't want to live in town. I was feeling this oppression. I just wanted to go. She was very sad. The first step was for her to let me go live in Mexico City. That was huge. I went to Mexico City, and I started to test the waters and see what it was like. I went to live with a family that were friends of ours. When I came back from Mexico City for the summer, I said to my mom, "You know, I really don't want to live here anymore." She was very sad.

LD: Sure.

SdL: She did not want me to move.

LD: Of course.

SdL: She was very sad and I am angry. I just said, "I am going to do this with or without your consent." It was huge! I am like eighteen and a half and saying to my mom, "Look, this is what I want. Please, consent. Please let me go because, since I want to do it, I will feel better if I have your blessing." She was, I guess, resigned that I would do it and allowed me to do it.

So I came to the States. I actually made two attempts to come. The first time I tried to come, I was kind of naïve. I met one of my cousins up at the border and I thought I could just come. It didn't work out that way. So the second time, I went back to Mexico City and I was working for a municipality, and they helped me get a visa. The first crossing, I crossed and then I had to cross back because I was not able to get across and the second time, I actually came through. When I arrived, I went to California, because I had family there.

LD: Sure.

SdL: I had family in Texas, too, but I didn't want to go to Texas because I knew that life in Texas was very difficult. Over the years, when I was growing up, my uncle who lived in the valley—everybody says, "El Valle," in the valley—would come and visit us, and actually, at one point, my uncle came and brought his children, and they lived with us for a while, and I learned a lot about Texas through my cousins, whom, at that time, we called *pochos*.

LD: Pochos, yes.

SdL: Right. Now I know a lot more, but, back then, when I was four, five, these were my *pocho* cousins.

LD: [Chuckles]

SdL: They spoke funny Spanish. Through the years, we wrote letters. I liked writing letters to teach them Spanish and they wanted to write and teach me English. So, I didn't want to go live in Texas, because I knew what the life was like. It was really difficult.

On the other hand, my cousin who lived in California—she also was a teacher—she had a different outlook on what we could do. I went there, and it was just such a world-changing experience. When you live in Mexico, you think that the United States is this wonderful place. It's the land of milk and honey.

LD: Yes.

SdL: It's just this other world. I found out that it was not that wonderful. It wasn't that great, and it was very lonely.

LD: Right.

SdL: My very first impression was about the silence, just silence.

When I lived in Mexico City, I missed my family so much; although, I was seeing the family. You know, in the morning, you get up, you turn on the radio. You're staying around and you're talking to people and you know what's going to be cooked for lunch. All these things happen, right? People are closer. There's all of this culture around you.

LD: Yes.

SdL: I used to call my mom every day when I was in Mexico, and say, "What's for lunch today?" She was in Torreon, almost a thousand miles away, and I would say, "Hey, what's for lunch?" She would say, "Ah! Today I'm cooking..." By now, my mom didn't have little kids and all of us got out of the house. We were working and helping, so she had the chance to cook. So she would tell me what she would cook. When I went to

California and I had this feeling of loneliness and this silence that surrounded me, I would call my mom and ask, "What's for lunch?"

She would tell me. It was one of these things where I would feel lonely and cry. I didn't know that phone calls were so expensive. So the first month after I moved, I had this five hundred dollar telephone bill.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

SdL: I'm telling you, this was in 1985. I could not believe it. I didn't know how I was going to pay this bill, so I stopped calling.

My brother, Hugo, had given me—I used to play guitar a lot—a guitar. In Mexico, they had this monthly edition of *Cancióneros*, which is a song writer. The *Cancióneros* comes with all of the different chords to play, so I would sit there, and I'd cry over my guitar and play and play and play. I think that was the best medicine to just play my guitar and try to really find a new community, find a new family, find new ways of relating to the land around me, to the movement, to the rhythm of the new place.

My cousin helped a lot in some ways. I think, in retrospect, she really forced me to speak English. At that time, I resented that. I would go to the store and I would say, "Please, ask about this." She would go, "No, you ask." I would say, "What?" She would go, "Yes. Say it like this, 'How much is this?' Say it. Say it." I would say, "Why doesn't she help me? This is difficult." Yet, now, I think she helped me. She really did, because we were in a place where all the people we were related to were Spanish-speaking people, but when you went out of your community, we had to deal with Anglos.

LD: Right.

SdL: We had to speak English.

LD: Where did you live, by the way?

SdL: When I first came, I lived in Simi Valley. My cousin was married to a man who worked in Germany making the inside of the knob, basically, the lock, for Schlage, which is a German company.

LD: Okay.

SdL: They lived with who would then become my husband later. They worked at the same factory. We shared a house in the Simi Valley in California. During the day, I would be lonely, at the very beginning. Then at night I would go to a community school to try to learn English. Then I quickly became employed, and then it was better, because I could work and go to school. Then my friends at school were my friends that I worked with, and they were people from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Oaxaca, Mexico. They

were teaching me the ropes. They were teaching me about everything, what produce was growing at the time.

LD: [Chuckles]

SdL: My friends from Oaxaca worked the fields, so I would get a lot of produce. It was beautiful. This was another thing that in my mind and the way I thought about the world, I didn't see anything wrong with my friends giving me vegetables. But they thought maybe it wouldn't look too good if I received gifts from men.

LD: Oh.

SdL: So they would come to my house in the wee hours of the morning, like dark still, and leave buckets of vegetables outside. I would come out and find the vegetables and they would never say that it was them who were leaving them, but I knew.

Later on, we did have this discussion, especially with one of them. We became very good friends. My other friends and coworkers that were from El Salvador had a lot of stories to tell. At that time, I did not understand some of the things that they were telling me. They had come to the United States running away from a lot of violence.

LD: Yes.

SdL: Then, after, I think, three years later, I was roommates with one of them, with my friend Martha. She was from El Salvador. She told me part of her life. Now, twenty-five years later, we have reunited.

LD: Wow.

SdL: I said, "Martha, why didn't you tell me all of these other things that I now know?" She said, "It was so painful, I could not even talk about it with you." It's very interesting now to go full circle and to go back to my friends from Simi Valley, California. Most people think about Simi Valley because of the O. J [Simpson] trial.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: Or because all the cops go and live in Simi Valley. I didn't know cops go and live in Simi Valley. I didn't know cops lived in Simi Valley when I lived there. I just knew that it was right in the middle of this valley and that we had access to Thousand Oaks where we worked as nurse assistants, and we had access to Oxnard where you could get to the fields. We could go to Chatsworth where the factories were or you could go to Northridge, which was an upper place to go to the mall. That's about how I related to my environment. Life there was both a learning experience and my first door into life in the United States. I think it was well cushioned by the people that I met, my friends that helped me get a job, that helped me learn the ropes, and deal with this whole new world.

LD: Yes. How long were you there?

SdL: Four and a half years.

LD: Where did you go from there?

SdL: I wanted to go to school and I enrolled in night college. That didn't go too well. [Chuckles]

LD: This was still in California?

SdL: This was still in California. It didn't go too well, you know. It just didn't work too well. I had a really bad experience and I couldn't go back to school. I took classes to become a certified nurse assistant. I also met a lady from Spain who owned a beauty shop. I wasn't too sure about my English and I wasn't too sure about my pronunciation, but she encouraged me and said, "You speak just fine." She gave me a job answering the phone. That was a big deal.

LD: Sure, yes.

SdL: You've got to talk to customers. I struggled. It was difficult. I was so afraid. Sometimes, I wouldn't get names right or phone numbers, but it was a good thing, because then I went to work at a hotel, also answering the phone. For the first time in my life, I had to deal with computers. You know, computers were something that was everywhere.

LD: Yes.

SdL: When I was there, I met another person who was from Minnesota who talked to me about Minnesota and talked to me about how different the Midwest really was. I was at a point in my life when I really needed to, also, make another change. I was unhappy in California. I was divorced from my first husband.

LD: You got married while?

SdL: I got married while I was in California. I also had brought my younger sister to live with me.

LD: In those four and a half years?

SdL: In those four and a half years. I became a mom of my sister. [Chuckles] She was fifteen, and here I am the mom, you know, at nineteen.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

SdL: That was another experience. I learned how school worked in the United States, because I had to enroll my sister in high school. Then she went on to take classes outside of high school, because she had so many credits. She's a smart woman. But then she got married. So she got married; I was divorced. I lived with my Salvadoran roommate and we both rented a house from this Guatemalan lady. It was just all the nationalities there.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: I was working at a Travelodge hotel. I thought, the world has got to be bigger than this. So I moved to Minnesota.

LD: Wow. On your own?

SdL: Not on my own, because, you know, I had a boyfriend [Jeff].

LD: Okay.

SdL: I could have stayed in California, but the boyfriend would have moved there. He said, "I'll move here in a heartbeat."

He really loved the idea about moving out of Minnesota and going to live in California.

LD: Wait. Isn't it the other way around?

SdL: No. That's the way it was. He wanted to move to California.

LD: Oh, he was *from* Minnesota?

SdL: Yes.

LD: I see.

SdL: He was from Minnesota and wanted to move to California. He said, "I want to move here." Me, being the kind of person that I am, I was thinking of not being pinned down, not ever having a way out. I thought, wait, if you move here and things don't go the way they should go, I'm stuck.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: Now, if I move to Minnesota and things don't go the way I want them to go, I'll move.

LD: Right.

SdL: I can always move. I said, "You've got a good job up there." He worked for the 3M Company. I said, "Look, the kind of job that I have, I can get anywhere. I can be a CNA. I can answer the phone at another hotel." I had three jobs at the time.

LD: Wow.

SdL: On my days off, I worked at the beauty salon. During the morning, I worked as a visiting nurse through the Visiting Nurse Association. I had my patients that had Lou Gehrig's Disease or cancer. It was sad, because I had a patient, but then my patient died. Xistory Project Then I went to another patient. In the evenings, I worked at the hotel.

So I came here, and I came here with a whole bunch of boxes.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: I sent myself in pieces from California.

LD: What year was that?

SdL: That was 1989.

LD: First, let me ask, where did you move?

SdL: I came to live in, I think it is Saint Paul, you know, right around by 3M. I think at the very beginning, I went to North Saint Paul, I'm not sure if it was just a few days until the apartment became available. It was basically the North Saint Paul/3M area where I went to live.

LS: What were your first impressions of Minnesota?

SdL: Hmmm, okay. In preparation for my trip, Jeff said to me, "It's really cold here. So make sure that you bring boots, a long coat, and a scarf." I said, "Okay." I went to buy boots, high heels . . . needle . . .

LD: [Laughter] Stilettos?

SdL: Yes.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: Who would know? Rubber soles? Nothing. Stiletto boots. A long coat? *Sure*, very pretty, very thin, silky, shiny, beautiful, what you would wear, probably, for spring. A scarf? A silk scarf. You got it.

LD: You were prepared.

SdL: I was prepared for whatever, you know. I come from the desert. The coldest that you get there is at night and when you get up, it's a little chilly, but in the day, it gets hot. So I'm prepared.

I come to Minnesota and I arrive at Minneapolis/Saint Paul International Airport. I pick up my luggage and Jeff says, "Hold on. Hold on. I want to go get the car so you don't have to walk too far." I'm like, all right. He goes, "Just meet me at the door when the doors open." Sure. Now the doors open. Oh, my god!

LD: What month was this?

SdL: March.

LD: Oh! At least it wasn't December! [Laughter] What was your reaction?

SdL: It was, I think, the coldest day of my life. The doors open. The wind comes gushing in. Snow is flying. I take a first step outside and the stilettos are all over the place. My little coat is flying! My scarf is hitting me in the face! I am just cold. I screamed. Jeff's all worried and picking up my luggage, and I get in the car, and I'm shaking, shaking, shaking. I am just shocked! I wanted to take the first flight *back* to California. California was like seventy when I left. I'm like, am I going to put up with this?

LD: Yes.

SdL: We're driving. It's white. I never had seen so much snow in my life. My idea of snow was go to Big Bear, one of the mountains, and see it there. Even when we went to see it there—a couple of times, I went with my sister—it wasn't like on the street. It was there to enjoy. I never had actually touched it. So it was funny. We went to the people who later would become my in-laws. We went to their house and they were waiting to greet me with a Midwestern meal. I did not know how to eat the food that was eaten here.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: My mother-in-law at the time—she's so beautiful; she's a beautiful person—made her best, I think, roast and dumplings or something. It was just very welcoming. The family was just so welcoming. They let me use a car. They taught me how to drive. Constance Wendy helped me, drew maps, and helped me find jobs, all of that. So the family itself was just very nice to come into.

The climate was horrible. Understanding people's speech was just a struggle for me. I learned in my first day on the job to say, "You betcha." [Laughter] People would say it, and what does that mean? What is you betcha? Things like that, you know?

LD: Sure.

SdL: Very Minnesotan.

LD: Yes.

SdL: Then I made friends. My friend who also was not from the Midwest could share a lot of stuff with me, how do you relate to the Midwest. I did not meet any Mexicans or Chicanos or Latinos when I first came. I was totally surrounded by Anglos who were showing me where to go, how to do things.

LD: That was 1989.

SdL: 1989.

LD: You said that you wanted to go to school. That was another motivation?

SdL: Yes.

LD: Okay. Tell me about that.

SdL: Well, I knew that school was expensive. California really didn't have something for me to go to school. I had tried there and I was unable to afford it. When I came here, I thought, well, first, I have to find a job and get on my feet. Within a couple of years, I was looking at the University of Minnesota. At the time, I think the University put a lot of resources in recruiting. I saw an ad. It was funny, because now, talking to Tina Maria, I said to her, "What did you think of me when I first responded to this ad?" [Chuckles] I was an older woman, an older woman they were recruiting, relatively, right? I was like twenty-two and they were recruiting high schoolers.

So I show up at the University. Actually, it was really cool. She was really supporting. I did all the paper work. I looked into going to school. It was kind of like a year and a half process to do this, but I knew then that there was an opportunity. I was not going to be answering the phone in a hotel for the rest of my life. I also knew I could not be a teacher with my education from Mexico.

LD: Right.

SdL: Here, in a school, I couldn't go and apply. I didn't have the credentials. I learned that in the United States to do anything, you must have a license. If you want to be anything, you've got to have either a trade or a license or permission to do it. It's just the way it is.

LD: Right.

SdL: By then, I was already also using my education in a way, because I was working with developmentally disabled adults. I went through this process to become—it's a horrible name—a qualified mental retardation specialist. That's what it was called, a QMRS, through the State of Minnesota. I worked in programming with adults. But I also

was looking at the way in which services were delivered to people. I was very upset. In my background, you don't separate people because they have a disability. It just was not done. Also, in my background, people who had anything, if people were not looked at as someone who was able to walk or someone who was able to do the work in school, they also were given education. There were both things. I started to look at what used to be the convaleriums, I think, where people would be put back in the 1940s to their death.

LD: Yes, yes.

SdL: Those places became the residential homes for adults with disabilities. It was horrendous. Going there and looking at some of these places, it looked to me like a prison, like a facility. I had by then already, you know, very good relationships with some of the people that I worked with or for, and I decided that I wanted to be a foster mom, because I feel that some of the people that I worked for or with could do much better in a smaller setting.

It was during the time, too, that some of the group homes were springing up all over Minnesota and different living arrangements were being made. So I did that. I became a foster parent for people with developmental disabilities. I also started to look into going to school to become a social worker at that time, so that I could better advocate for people and their rights. Also, during this time, I finally discovered, yes, that there were other Mexicanos around here.

LS: [Chuckles]

SdL: At this time, it was my best time, I think, in Minnesota, because I was also meeting a lot of friends. I had found the West Side.

I *cried* when I first found out there was a West Side. When I went there, I couldn't stay there too long because I was crying so much, you know. I looked at the schools. I looked at the street, Concord Street, and I thought, *yes*, this is my community. I finally found them.

LD: Yes.

SdL: I knew they were here, I just hadn't found them. So I was just overwhelmed, happy that I was finding other Mexicanos, happy that I was also moving on with my life. This was a process of about two years between arriving and then learning about Minnesota.

LD: How old were you when you arrived?

SdL: When I came to the States, I'm not sure if it was the beginning of 1985, so I was going to be nineteen. Then when I came to Minnesota, I was, I think, twenty-two or twenty-three.

LD: Okay. So about twenty-four or twenty-five, this is the span that we're talking about?

SdL: Yes. It took a while, right, to find everything?

LD: Yes.

SdL: I think I probably went to the West Side for the first time a year after I arrived. That's how long it was. At the beginning, it was more like learning, learning, learning. By now, I was involved in working with people with developmental disabilities and learning about the state. In one of my West Side trips, I found the call to apply at the University, and then I applied at the University, and I went through a summer program in, I believe it was, 1992. I only know this because I had my first child in January 1993.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

SdL: I had already gone through the summer program and I think I had gone through the fall at the University, so I must have started with the recruiting either late 1991 or early 1992, something like that. I remember I said to Tina, "Tina, what did you think?" She was like, well, you know, I knew you were expecting a child. I thought it was going to be tough." I said, "That's not what you said." She goes, "No, I told you, 'You can do it! You can do it!" [Laughter]

It was so funny what she said to me. If Tina hadn't said to me that I could do it, I probably wouldn't have done it. She just encouraged me. I had been out of school for five years. I had to start from scratch, you know. I took, again, basic math, basic writing and composition, basic everything.

LD: Yes.

SdL: The University was so big. I met some of the faculty that would be my professors later, and they just made me feel comfortable at a big place. The Chicano Latino Resource Center made me feel I had a place to go to and cry or look for help. There were counselors. There were people willing to take the time and explain to me more slowly. Even though I spoke English, English is my second language. There were a lot of things I needed to process. Then, my universe of Chicanos and Mexicanos expanded so much more. I, for the first time, discovered Chicano Studies. It was great.

If I say that there was an event in my life that was liberating, it was to sit down in my Chicano Studies classes and be able to learn about my history, about all the questions I ever had, learn from the academic world what I had known from living in Mexico, learn why it was that my neighbor, Don Roberto, would come only so many months a year and see his children who lived across the street from us, because he was a *bracero*. I didn't know what a *bracero* was. I was only a child at the time.

LD: Of course.

SdL: It sounded exotic. *Bracero*, you know. [Chuckles] And Don Roberto would come and he had a car. He had money and he had more than everybody else. My uncle in Texas, he was poor, but he had a car. We didn't have a car.

Also, just all of the story of how there was so much English around us. Why were we watching the *Flintstones* when I was growing up? Why were we watching *Bewitched*? The music that came down to my town and the fascination with this new land or the fascination with sports, I began to understand. It was like looking back at my own life and understanding why. Why? Why? Why some of these things? So I was in love. I was in love with school. I just wanted to learn.

LD: That's amazing. So you were married at this point?

SdL: I was married.

LD: Then you were expecting your first child in the middle of this discovery.

SdL: My first child.

LD: This time of your own personal enlightenment . . . And wow

SdL: Yes.

LD: When was your child born?

SdL: My little Alan was born January 7, 1993.

LD: Did you take a break from school or did you just keep on going?

SdL: When he was just born, I think I took a break. Back then the University terms were quarters. I think I took that quarter off and, then, I went back to school. I didn't want Alan to be raised by babysitters. I was a foster mom, too. I had two women living with me. One of them was an adult. The other one was a teenager. Alan was number three. It was kind of a lot of work, because Alan was little, and I had a dog. I love dogs. I needed some help. A lot of people helped me, my family, my friends when I went back to school. I had a very good friend who I'm *comadre* with or co-mother, and she baptized Alan, and I baptized her first child. My co-mother, my *comadre*, she's from my home town. So we did a lot of daycare sharing. She's an engineer and works for the water department. So I had help.

I also knew that I was coming to a point where my life was going to change again. I wanted to go to school. I knew that my life was moving in another direction and I was kind of drifting apart from my husband. I would have study sessions at home and my schoolmates would come from Chicano Studies. We would sit down and have all these wonderful times. I knew that just the life that I wanted, my passions, were not going to

flower in that environment. So it was very difficult, but, you know, my husband and I decided to separate. To this day, we have a very, very good relationship.

I went on. I went on to follow my dreams, which were to go to school, and not only go to school, but continue to move toward fulfilling my intellectual desire but, also, developing into all of the things that I had in me. I was a dancer. I had been a dancer. I had been following dance all my life. For the four years I was in Normal School, I had belonged to the school ballet. I was a runner. I was a bicyclist. I was a weight lifter. I was all these things that I wanted to be. I had found, now, friends that I could dance with. Back in the early 1990s, that's when I met my friends, Lolo and Misi and all the people who were from Mexico, Gerardo and his brother. We even had a group. We were dancing. I wanted to do all of those things. I was pregnant with Alan and I have a picture of dancing at the Church of Guadalupe. I had to put my sash so tight so that the dress, the China Poblana, would fit on me.

LD: [Laughter]

SdL: I have this picture and I have this [unclear] on me and this big belly standing there. So I wanted to do all of those things.

LD: That was kind of like folkloric Mexican dancing?

SdL: Yes, folkloric Mexican dancing. There were not any Matachines that I could find

LD: How do you spell that?

SdL: Matachines.

LD: What are they?

SdL: In the northern part of Mexico where I come from, that's the dance tradition. Even folkloric dancing has what we call, you know, frames or little sets.

LD: Like [unclear]? Different [unclear]?

SdL: Yes, different kinds that incorporate indigenous dancing. So when I was in the *rancho*, Matachines was the thing that you danced for church celebrations, for community celebrations. I did not belong to the Matachines group even though my uncle was a *capitán*, because the skirt was very expensive. If I ever danced, it was on the sidelines. Later on, if my cousins danced—they would let me dance sometimes—they would let me borrow their skirt and I would go in there and dance a little bit. But I didn't belong, because I didn't live there and, also, I didn't have equipment.

When I became part of the ballet, my older sister, who was also a dancer but who is more of a dedicated dancer I think, she talked to my mom. This is my older sister, the very first child of my dad. She's about twenty years older than me. She talked to my mom and said,

"Look, it's expensive. It's a sacrifice, but let her do it, because this will stay with her for her entire life." My sister helped buy me fabric. My mom would make my outfit. Oh, I have beautiful outfits. I still have them.

LD: Wow.

SdL: Some of them, I gave to my sister, like the leather ones, but I have my jalisco dresses that are huge. As part of the dance, we also did what's called Mixteco or we did Matachines. It was more for stage performance than what the dance really is, which is community expressions that go along with community customs.

When I was in California, I looked for a place to dance, and I couldn't find anything in California that I was comfortable with. So I would go to Tijuana and look there, and I found a group in Ensenada to dance with.

I would say that when I moved to California, I was so, so sad, and so heartbroken over leaving my family, that I made my family move to California and they went to Ensenada. My mom was willing to live in this horrible place where they had two rooms and they shared a bathroom. My mom, my sister, and my nieces and my brothers all moved there so they could be close to me.

LD: Wow.

SdL: I would drive almost every weekend from Simi Valley to Ensenada, would leave on Fridays and come back. This was before I had three jobs, right? So in the very beginning when I was so lonely, I made them move. Then, they decided it wasn't working out. My brothers were working. They were welders. It wasn't working out, so they moved back to Torreon. After that, that's when I got the three jobs, because I was sending a lot of money back home, so I stopped dancing.

So when I came here, I really wanted to dance. I met Misi and the whole gang. That was so much fun. I think I started dancing with them in 1990, which was about a year after I came here. We even had performances. [Chuckles] We would go and perform. That's how I went to Stout [University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin], because we went to perform. From there, moving on, that's what we had. Also, after Alan was born in 1993, there were other people interested in learning about indigenous dances, so, you know, my life was moving to all of these directions: school, a child, dance. Our folkloric group kind of was dissolving. We weren't doing a whole lot anymore. I don't know how long more people danced. I know Lolo kept on doing it for a long time. I was moving into other places in my life. My last performance with the folkloric group was, actually, at the University of Minnesota. We performed in September. I was still pregnant with Alan. I don't think I danced folkloric after that. He was born and, then, I took a little breather.

After Alan was born and after I decided to separate and go on with my life, I just took a bigger part of my focus and put it into school and what I wanted to do at school. Alan would come to classes with me.

