## Eloisa Echavez Narrator

# Lorena Duarte Interviewer

# November 8, 2010 Inver Grove Heights, Minnesota

Lorena Duarte: LD Eloisa Echavez: EE

**LD:** I am Lorena Duarte and I will be conducting the interview today. We are at the home of Eloisa Echavez in Inver Grove Heights. Today is Monday, November 8, 2010. And this is for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project. So on behalf of the Historical Society, I want to say thank you. Eloisa, I know that you're very, very busy and we really appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule to give us this interview. Thank you.

**EE:** No, thank you for the opportunity. I really feel honored, especially after having more details about the project.

**LD:** Yes. And if we can just go ahead and start. Can you please give me your name and how to spell it?

EE: Yes. Eloisa Echavez.

**LD:** Okay, great. And can you tell me your date of birth?

**EE:** Yes. January 2, 1963.

**LD:** Okay. And can you tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your family? Your parents, and then if you have siblings.

**EE:** Yes. I was born in Cartagena, Colombia, and—I don't know if I need to spell that for you.

LD: No, no.

**EE:** And that was almost forty-eight years ago. I came from a large family. There is my mom, my dad, and I have four other sisters, so we have five—girls only.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** And then I have another Latino family, we have a standard family, which are actually considered our nuclear family. We have aunts and cousins and grandparents, so it's a large family.

**LD:** Yes. And tell me a little bit about growing up in Cartagena.

**EE:** Well, we were born with a very gifted father. He was very gifted for business. He started out on his farm - his parents had a farm. He kind of grew up on the farms but then he moved to the cities and then he began just starting any kind of business. And the interesting thing is that he never really went to college, but he had this gift for business - any type of businesses he got well into. He began with farming, and he grew coffee and he had carob, but he also had businesses in the city like parking lots, stores, mini grocery stores, and just basically any kind of business. So we kind of grew up with the business mentality, per se.

My mom was a stay-home mom. She never worked outside of the house as we were growing up. I'm told she was very smart, and she went to school to be a kind of administrative assistant. It's like that – to provide a kind of a support, but she never used that. She never went and worked outside. My family grew up Catholic and we went to a Catholic school. I went all my life to Catholic school, and there were only nuns. It was an extremely, extremely strict education. I remember that it was so strict that there were maybe a group of one hundred girls that entered and then only twenty graduated from the school.

LD: Wow.

**EE:** Yes. It was the main goal, I think, in addition to giving you a very strict education, that in that school you graduated as an elementary school teacher.

LD: Oh.

**EE:** And, in addition to that, another goal was to try to see if some of the girls went into the convent.

LD: Ah.

**EE:** So there was a lot of emphasis for the Catholic religion, and it was very strict. That's all I remember in going to that school. And out of all the five sisters, I was the only one who ended up graduating from that school.

**LD:** What did you like in school? Were you a studious kid? Did you like sports or arts?

**EE:** That's a very good question, because I was more into the academics and so I always was a top student. I didn't do many sports, but I was a cheerleader. It's different cheerleading than here. Being a cheerleader there is more like something where you don't put much emphasis on the physical appearance or things like that. It's just cheering your team. [Laughter]

LD: Yes. [Chuckles]

**EE:** So I remember doing that. But I just did very little sports. I think I played a little bit of tennis, a little bit of basketball, but nothing really where I went and became like a professional at it. Not even close to competition. I remember that growing up I had a group of friends, and this is very, very important in my life because most of those friends are *still* my friends after *that* many years. Some of them I met right in elementary school, and some of them in high school. But in fact one of them is a person whom I started first grade with and finished through high school, and we still remain best friends.

LD: Wow.

**EE:** So it's a *lot* of history. It's a group of girls that no matter where we are, we are in touch. Some of them actually ended up coming to the United States—Miami, one of them—and then back to Colombia. But whenever they hear that I'm going back or whatever, they immediately say, "Come and let's get together," and so forth. So that's extremely fun to see, to go back to that.

In terms of my family, my sisters and I are very close. After so many years, we're still very, very close. One of them came to the United States after me. I've been here twenty-two years, so she should be here maybe close to twenty years.

**LD:** Came here to Minnesota?

**EE:** To Minnesota, right. Oh, and by the way, came straight from my hometown to Minnesota.

LD: Oh, wow. Okay, we'll get to that. Where are you in the order of your sisters?

**EE:** I'm the second oldest.

LD: Second oldest, okay.

**EE:** Yes. And the one that came here, she came after me. She went to the University of Minnesota, and that is where she did all of her studies, too. She entered college, did her Master's and Ph.D., and she taught at the University of Minnesota for about seven years, I think.

LD: Oh, wow.

**EE:** And then she has been about seven years at Saint John's University.

LD: Oh, okay.

**EE:** And that's a commute! [Chuckles]

LD: Yes. I bet!

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Well, we're going to get to that in just a moment. But tell me about what happened after you graduated high school.

**EE:** Yes. As I was mentioning before, the high school that I attended, you had to choose the path, and then you graduated as a teacher. When I graduated as an elementary school teacher, I went to teach in an elementary school, and I did that for three years: third, fourth and fifth grades. I taught Spanish and biology. And the interesting thing about that is when I talk to young people here, and I think that when I was nineteen years old I already had graduated as a teacher. I was one of five teachers who founded a school in a rural area - an area where they didn't have any school. The kids had to transport themselves and drive and be bussed for a long time, so we founded that school. When I'm looking at the level of maturity at that certain age, I think back to that time when, at nineteen years old, I was a teacher and a co-founder of a school. That's a lot of responsibility.

**LD:** Yes. That's huge.

**EE:** [Chuckles] Yes, huge. Back then my passion was youth, and I've always been working with youth. I didn't want to do much teaching, really. I thought that I could be utilized better by serving the larger community rather than just being in a classroom.

And so after that, I taught. I went to college there and I studied computer science. And it was actually a technical degree. Would it be called here technical?

LD: Oh, like an Associate's Degree?

**EE:** It was like a community college Associate's Degree. It was two and a half years. And in the meantime, as I was doing that, I was going to an American Institute to study English. It's called Colombo Americano, and it is all through Latin America, I believe. I went and did all the courses that we were required to be graduated as bilingual. It was eighteen months, and it's every day for several hours. At least a couple of hours a day for eighteen months. So when you graduate, well, you *think* you're bilingual. [Laughter] You know a lot of the writing and reading the language. And then the understanding and the speaking, you know, that comes later and with practice. For me to be able to practice, and to master all the aspects of learning a second language, I worked on the weekends with international tourism. In the place where I am from, one of the main sources of income is international tourism.

LD: Oh, okay.

**EE:** Now I believe there is over one million tourists every year.

LD: Wow.

**EE:** They come from all over Europe and the United States, and from Canada, and they come in different ways, shapes and forms. In fact, there are more and more cruise ships going to Cartagena now.

**LD:** Oh, okay.

**EE:** I thought that if I really wanted to be bilingual - I mean really bilingual, and if I wanted to really learn the language - I needed to practice it. And so for me to practice it I worked at different places, like a jewelry shop, and a gallery. I thought, well, I'm bilingual now! [Laughter] And, sure enough, when I came here I felt that I know nothing! [Laughter]

**LD:** So you were working in the tourism industry.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** And then when did you come to the States? Was it shortly thereafter or was there still more time in Colombia?

**EE:** Yes. In Colombia I also worked at the Hilton in the communications department, the Cartagena Hilton Hotel. I was there for maybe three years, so when I came here it was in 1988.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** So if we look from 1963 to 1988, I must have been twenty-four or so years old. And this takes me to a good point, Lorena, because when I look at myself, I totally see myself as a Latina American. I have spent half of my life in my country and half of my life in the United States, here in Minnesota.

I think that has been kind of a blessing. There have been opportunities for me, because when we talked about, you know, the struggles that you go through as an immigrant and all of these things about assimilating, leaving your culture behind and all of that, I haven't done that. I feel so blessed that I haven't had to leave my Latino cultural values, my language, and anything behind to take on a new culture. So I truly feel that I'm bilingual and bicultural. Actually, a cultural competent, as it is called.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Those have been some of the advantages that I have, because when I go back to my family, I have to quickly adjust to the slower pace, you know. By that I mean making time for just about anything. It's so easy for me to just kind of switch. I don't have to be miserable or complaining or uncomfortable because I'm just enjoying both worlds.

**LD:** You feel at home.

**EE:** I feel at home.

**LD:** In both worlds.

**EE:** In both worlds, exactly. And I think that that's really a blessing. So again, when I came here.

**LD:** Can I just interrupt you really quick?

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Why did you come?

**EE:** I came to go to Augsburg College.

**LD:** Okay.

**EE:** And don't ask me why I picked Augsburg College among so many colleges! [Laughter] It's just up north there. I had no idea that it was going to be this cold.

**LD:** [Laughs]

**EE:** I had no idea! I'd never seen snow in my life and I had never been in a cold weather situation ever. I mean, Cartagena is eighty, ninety, sometimes even one hundred degrees, every day of the year.

LD: Wow.

**EE:** It's usually in the high eighties and nineties, low nineties, every day. It's extremely humid. And that is something that I am slower in adjusting to when I go back - the humidity.

But I came to go to Augsburg College, and when I came, I thought, well, I'm bilingual, I'm this and that . And, sure enough, I found out that with as much English as I knew, and as much as I tried to practice it and so forth, I still had some challenges with the language.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** But that didn't stop me, Lorena, because I went straight to college. So I didn't go through English learning or ESL classes. Nothing like that. I went to college with the dictionary in my backpack or whatever I was using, my bag or whatever. I had all my regular books with me, and then I have a dictionary—a big, thick dictionary—next to it. [Laughs] And so I went and I studied. My dictionary was here, my books were here, and I'm going back and forth.

LD: Wow.

**EE:** I'm very dedicated, and I've always been an extremely dedicated student. But still, I thought that it was going to be more challenging. I was a 4.0 in that first semester and subsequently after that. I graduated with honors. And because of that high grade, I was able to have scholarships.

LD: Oh.

**EE:** Yes. Because I came here as a permanent resident.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** And so that was an advantage.

LD: Sure.

**EE:** That's not how everybody that is an immigrant can come here. Remember, Lorena, back then, it was much easier than now.

LD: Yes. Yes.

**EE:** It just really, really has changed, especially after September 11, [2001].

**LD:** Yes. So let me just ask. What did you come to study?

**EE:** Well, I thought that I wanted to study computer science. And that's one of my degrees—computer science. But I'll tell you that, as I was picking a field, I was going for what most young people think is most financially rewarding. And I already had studied computers in my hometown.

LD: Sure.

**EE:** So for me it was just, oh, I'm just a transfer, whatever they take from my credits. That was a good start.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** But then as I was going through the whole four-year program, I realized that my personality is not for a computer scientist! To sit and try to resolve all these issues was something I just didn't have the patience to do. We were learning programming and back then it was really challenging. Do you remember those *big* computers?

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And they used the binary system. You remember?

LD: Yes, yes.

**EE:** And we had to do all the programming in BASIC, COBOL, PASCAL, all of those computer languages. Now you can just buy the program.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Now you just have to start it, and it's so much easier. I just didn't have the patience, and there was one point when I realized that I lost a whole lot of data that it had taken a lot of time to input and collect. And I said, this is not for me. But I was so close to graduating with a degree in computer science that I still kept on with it—that's my major.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** But then, as I was going through the program I could add a couple of classes here and here. So I graduated with minors in business administration and communications. And I use those two more than I use my computer science. When I finished that, then I went for my Master's degree at Augsburg College in education and leadership for administration. That is what they called it. Now they've separated those two, but they used to have the dual Master's. Now it is separated.

**LD:** Yes. This is *great*.

**EE:** [Chuckles]

**LD:** Let me go back though. Why did you want to come to the States?

**EE:** I think not just in Colombia, but most Latin American countries, if you have a degree from the United States and if you are bilingual, that's a huge asset down there.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** I was still very young back then, and I could just come here, do all of that and then come back. And then I would have a good, solid career there.

LD: Sure.

**EE:** Especially with American companies, it is an advantage - having a degree from here, and having mastered the language, and all of that. But as it turns out, it didn't work that way, precisely. You know how things go.

LD: Yes. Oh, yes.

**EE:** A lot of the students come here as international students—I didn't come as an international student because I was a permanent resident. And so I was a regular student, per se. But, they just ended up getting job offers, and they got married, had kids, and they ended up staying here. And that's what happened to me.

LD: Ah.

**EE:** Augsburg College offered me a job. Actually, I started the Latino student services at Augsburg College.

LD: Oh, wow.

**EE:** So that's one of my accomplishments that I could really feel very proud about. When I was a student at Augsburg College I noticed there were hardly any Latinos around. And so here I am, a tiny, puny, little girl setting up a meeting with the president of the college to ask him, why don't we have more Latinos here?

LD: [Chuckles]

**EE:** I went in there and I talked to the secretary or his assistant and I said, "I need to have a meeting with the president." She said, "Why?" And I said, "Because I want a talk to have Latino students here." Well, they gave me the appointment. I'm sitting down there and then I tell him how I feel as a student and I say we need to have a program here for Latinos. There was a black student affairs, and then they had the Native Americans and for the Asian Pacific. And I said, what happened with Latinos? And the president at that time told me, "Well, Latinos are Catholics and we're Lutheran." [Laughter]

LD: Wow.

**EE:** And then I said, and what do you think I am? I'm not even a practicing Catholic anymore. I told him that I went to Catholic school and I was raised Catholic, but I'm not a practicing Catholic anymore. And I told him what my community needs. We just need the support to be able to go and get a higher education.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** So he said, "Okay. Put together a group of leaders in the community that can tell me the same as you. You might be biased because you're a student here."

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And then I said, "I'll do it." I put together a group of—there were like about twenty-eight, as far as I remember—community leaders, to have a meeting with the president. So when the president met with us then, he just said, "This is what Eloisa is saying, what do you guys think?" And everybody was saying the same thing. I said, yes, we just need opportunities for our young people to go—it doesn't matter what kind of college it is. They are not coming here to become priests or become pastors or anything.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** We're just coming here to get a higher school education. And so, after that meeting, it was a big change, because at that time I was working at the State of Minnesota. I skipped that, but I will let you know about that.

**LD:** Okay.

**EE:** I was working for the State of Minnesota at the Chicano/Latino Affairs Council.

LD: Oh, okay.

**EE:** I was the assistant to the director back then. So, basically, Lorena, when I came here I went to college, I was a student full time, and I was working full time.

LD: Oh, wow.

EE: And that's what I tell my young people. Yes, you can. Yes, you can.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** So I was working full time for the Chicano/Latino Affairs Council as assistant to the director, and I had been there almost three years when this happened - the meeting with the president at Augsburg. After that, I got a call from the president or the vice president, and then they said, "Eloisa, you started all of this. Then *you* work on it."

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EE:** And I said, what do you mean? He said, "We want to have the program that you want, but you have to create it and you have to direct it." I said I have a job here at the state. He said, "Well, you created all of this, you are the right person." So I said okay, even though at the time I took a salary cut to move from the state to go there. But then, you know, I would get free tuition as part of my package, so it turned out to be a good situation. And I wanted that to happen at Augsburg. So I resigned from the state and I took the position at Augsburg.

**LD:** Wow. And what was the position?

**EE:** Director of the Latino program - well, I was the one who created it.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EE:** It was a brand new position created by me. It was a Latino student services program, and they're still there. The college started with a grant to create the position, and then the program was so successful that the college after the first year or so made it a permanent position, and it still is there.

**LD:** Wow. Now let me go back.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Your story is very rich, very rich. When you first got here and you said, you know, you thought you were bilingual and you had struggles with the language, etcetera. What was it like? I mean, what were your first impressions of Minnesota and of its people?

**EE:** Yes. Well, Minnesota Nice, you know.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EE:** And Minnesota was a nice place to come to, too, as I was discovering, because when you come here and you are naïve, and people are nice to you, that's a wonderful experience and you feel welcome and all of that. Later on, years then, and you say, hmmm, is that Minnesota Nice just PC [political correctness]? And then you start questioning.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** So that's my experience. And then I started being a little more cautious and a little bit more, like, less naïve about Minnesota Nice.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Having said that, there are wonderful people. And as I said, whether it's positive or not, coming into Minnesota Nice was extremely helpful because I felt welcomed and I felt appreciated and the people are nice, in general. People are nice and polite and all of that. Back then, there were not as many Latinos. Our population was very small, particularly from Central and South America. I believe that about seventy percent of the population back then was Mexican or Mexican-American.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** And I remember that very accurately because I worked on the Chicano/Latino Affairs Council, and we worked directly with the Latino community. A very small percentage of the population was Central or South American. And so back then it was a big, big struggle, which I found to be really kind of amazing. I would see the people from Minnesota being nice, being welcoming, and all of that, and the struggle was among Latinos themselves. With the Mexican-Americans and Chicanos there was this struggle, this rivalry with those who were from Central and South America. When I was working at the Chicano/Latino Affairs Council, that whole controversy revived, it was going on *full* blown.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** So there was a lot going on, and it was kind of a disappointment for me back then because I thought, if the community only unifies, we can be way more powerful. At the time we were still a minority. I mean, right now we are the fastest growing minority population and we are becoming a majority as time passes, but it was sad to see that.

**LD:** Was it rivalry over funds? Was it rivalry over?

**EE:** No, it was just about the values and what was represented. And then a lot of time was spent back then in changing the name, because back then it used to be called Spanish Speaking Affairs Council. It was about a three-year battle to change the name to Chicano Latino Affairs Council, because not all Latinos spoke Spanish.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** That was what was behind that, but it doesn't matter what it is called, in my mind. I can see how it's important for other people, but we just need to direct that energy to work on the agenda of all of us.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And that's what the Chicano/Latino Affairs Council does. We probably lost some energy arguing about a name rather than, you know, the agenda for Latinos in Minnesota. So that was a little bit of a disappointment. But then I started to realize that I had to learn more about the history, so that I knew why all of this was going on.

So I learned and I tried to educate myself on the Chicano Movement, and all of the different struggles. And I began to understand a little bit more as I was learning. Oh, I can see why some of them might feel this way. It took a process of learning. But then again, change back then is the same with anything – it is positives and challenges.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Because back then the positive of having a small community is that it was less spread out, so communication-wise, in getting together for any specific agenda or event or whatever, it was easier. But also, opportunities for the newcomers or immigrants were easier. There were *more* opportunities, too.

LD: Right.

**EE:** Because then you I mean, if there was a need for a bilingual person or professional, job offers were just - my goodness!

**LD:** Everywhere.

**EE:** Everywhere!

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Well, now we have tons of bilingual people, who are Latinos and non-Latinos, too.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** In terms of opportunities—although you can create your own opportunities, too—but in terms of that, I think that that was one of the reasons that I was lucky to have the opportunities that I had back then. I got a job right away with the state, you know. And let me tell you, my English wasn't that great. I could write it and read it better than a native—in fact, a lot of natives tell me, "Oh, you write much better than I do." I was writing proposals and all this back then—but in terms of understanding it was harder, because of a lot of slang that I didn't understand.

LD: Sure, sure.

**EE:** And in speaking, I had a very strong accent—and I still have a strong accent. So that was a challenge. In terms of the language, *that* was the challenge.

**LD:** Yes. When you talk about the changes within the community, etcetera. Well, actually, let me kind of back up, once again. [Laughter] I feel like we need to go a little bit back. So once you started the position over at Augsburg, did you feel more connected with the Latino community? Or what was the difference between the government setting and a student setting?

**EE:** Yes, definitely, because at least in a leadership role I could have an impact, a direct impact on the community. I really try to open doors for other young people. I felt that if I was given those opportunities, I want to open opportunities for those students. That was one of my goals when I came to Augsburg. I was able to secure a scholarship for those students because there was very little opportunity for international students. I had another meeting with the president and I said, okay, here we have them. Now we need to keep them and we need to support them with scholarships. I was lucky that they heard me and they supported me. But in terms of the Latino student services program, back then, the college could only identify about five Latino students.

**LD:** Wow. Out of how many students?

**EE:** Well, back then there was a total of about three thousand.

**LD:** Wow. So five out of three thousand?

**EE:** Five out of three thousand back then. When I started, I remember my first or second year we had about forty-five Latino students. What I said is that I need to bring the community to the college. I need the community to know that we are here and that we are trying to reach out to them.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And so back then I hosted as many Latino events as I could at Augsburg. We had all kinds of groups of people coming to Augsburg with events that I hosted and my program hosted. And then we had campus tours and we started developing all types of collaborations and partnerships. We wanted to let the community know that we were there. And also the other piece to it was to educate the college campus about the Latino community. Because it was . . . is a very white, middle class school. It's a private Lutheran school.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And so what we did is that we had this Latino Week at Augsburg. Every day we had all sorts of activities from lectures and presentations to activities of arts and dancing. And fun activities, too, but also teaching or educating the campus community about the Latino culture. And that was amazing, because everybody in the college said, "So what is your Latino Week for next year?" Everybody was looking with anticipation.

LD: That's great.

**EE:** We were able to secure some of the permanent displays in the college for Latino things. I could put anything that I wanted to put in there, and we had that not just for that week, but throughout the year.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** It just felt like if I could help those students to go through college and to have all the support, to have some financial support, to have all the academic support and so forth, it would increase the numbers, because to me education is one of my top values.

I think that to break the cycle of poverty, education is the key to that. In my professional life, my personal life, and my community involvement, education is at the top of almost anything that I'm involved with. I wanted to be key part of that, and that's why it was very important for me to do that work at Augsburg College.

**LD:** Where do you think that passion came from? I mean, you're talking about, at nineteen, founding a school in a rural community. Most nineteen-year-olds aren't doing that.

**EE:** [Chuckles]

**LD:** Where does that passion come from?

**EE:** Well, I have to tell you, Lorena, that it is one of the things from my dad. He instilled the importance of education for us from very early on. He was an extremely strict person. And we were just . . . it was way too strict. We had no fun, we didn't go to any parties, nothing. It was just school, school, school. Home, school. Home, school. And I think a lot came from that. But also, I remember, and this I'll never forget. Since I was seven years old, and I was just starting

elementary school, but I was playing a teacher in my neighborhood. And so I was a teacher. And I put up some little chairs in there and I called *all* the girls in the neighborhood.

**LD:** [Laughs]

**EE:** And everybody wanted, all the girls and boys, to go and have a class after school. So they went to the class with *me* as the teacher! [Laughter] It was so funny! There I was, seven years old, trying to teach some other kids that are the same age or younger. So it has been since I was seven years old.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EE:** That's how I think it started. That's how I remember it. And for whatever reason, I thought I wanted to be a teacher. I have taught elementary, high school and college, too, because I taught a class at Augsburg College. So I have taught in all of the levels and forms of education, but I don't see myself in a classroom. I see myself more in the community.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Another thing that I did at Augsburg College, Lorena, that I haven't mentioned yet, is to take on a program there that nobody had done anything with. It was the Teachers of Color Program.

When I came to Augsburg, even though it was hard to establish and direct this program, I said, "I'll take it!" I have brochures of it here. It was a program to increase the number of teachers of color in the school system, particularly in the inner city. To me, that was great to have this opportunity. Because somebody had to do this.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** We *need* those teachers. In fact, my thesis was around that when I finished my Master's - the need for teachers of color. But there is preparation that it requires, not just the technique—the education and the technical skills—but the soft skills that we need to have in those teachers. There are wonderful teachers, and they don't have to be minority teachers or teachers of color. But when you have a kid who's struggling that is a student of color, it is usually easier to work with someone that is from your same background, and you identify with them. The chances of identifying with that teacher are stronger than a teacher that you have who doesn't share your same cultural values or your same experiences.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** I don't mean to say that there are not wonderful teachers who are not teachers of color, but there was a tremendous need back then. So I did coordinate that program, too. It was a collaboration, with a partnership between Augsburg College, some of the district schools, and the State Department of Education. The funding came through federal grants and went through the

Department of Education to the districts, and then we collaborated with them. I think that that's the way they worked out back then. But the goal of the program was to develop, recruit, and retain qualified teachers of color. We made it possible by providing a very strong financial aid package. I remember that a full credit course was like one thousand fifty dollars, but the course for them was fifty dollars.

LD: Oh, wow.

**EE:** So that's how affordable it became. And it was also the idea of providing, you know, assistance or at least loans for child care and things like that, to remove barriers so that they could achieve that goal. That was a successful program, and I did that almost as soon as I got to History Profile Augsburg. So that's another piece that I was doing at Augsburg when I was there.

**LD:** So at the same time you were doing the Latino?

**EE:** The Latino program, yes.

**LD:** And then you were doing this as well.

EE: Yes. Yes.

LD: And you were going to school. [Chuckles]

**EE:** Yes. I was doing my Master's back then.

**LD:** Oh, okay. So wait, you were an undergraduate first?

EE: Yes.

LD: So you started as an undergrad in 1988?

**EE:** I started in 1988, yes. That's when I came.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** Well, actually, I didn't start going to Augsburg until 1990, I believe.

LD: Oh, okay.

**EE:** Because I came at the end of 1988.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** I think it was the end of September of 1988. And then by the time that I started Augsburg it was in 1990.

LD: Okay. So you took a year to kind of work and get acclimated.

**EE:** Yes. I was working back then, and I already had applied to all of these colleges. I started applying and all of that and then I started the following year or so, yes.

**LD:** Gotcha. Okay, so from 1990 to 1994 you were an undergrad.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Okay. And then you started your Master's right away?

**EE:** I took a break. I think it was a year or so break, because then I had my son [David Echavez-Valdez]. While I was starting my Master's, my son was a baby. I remember that.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** So that was in between. I was pregnant at the time. And then I went back to school; I went when my baby was a baby. I went to school after I had my baby, so I took a break for that.

**LD:** Okay. So when did you start your Master's, approximately?

**EE:** Well, I finished it in 1999. It took me over two years, so 1996.

**LD:** 1996.

**EE:** Yes, I took over a year break, a year or so break.

**LD:** So from the time you were an undergrad to then, you got married?

**EE:** Yes, and had a baby.

**LD:** Yes. And about how old were you?

**EE:** Oh, my. I had my son when I was thirty. So around that time.

**LD:** Okay. So then when did you? I'm just trying to kind of get the timeline.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** So when did you start working at Augsburg? I mean, approximately.

**EE:** Si [yes], approximately. I've been here [at my current job] for eleven years. So in 1993 I must have started working at Augsburg, I was there for six years.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** Oh, I should have had my resume in front of me.

**LD:** No, no. [Laughter] That's okay. I'm just trying to, but you were in the Master's program and running the Latino student services program?

**EE:** Yes. Now, when I started running the program, I had not yet finished the college at Augsburg.

**LD:** Oh, so you were still an undergrad?

EE: Yes.

LD: Wow.

**EE:** Yes. That's what I was talking about, the opportunities. I had the elementary school and the computer science from my country. And that was about maybe a year before finishing the actual college degree at Augsburg, because I started adding minors.

So, yes, it must have been a year that I had been working at Augsburg. And I actually was an undergraduate student then.

**LD:** Yes, okay. And why did you? So you made the switch from a major in computer science with minors in business, etcetera. Why the switch then to education and administration for your Master's?

**EE:** Oh, yes, but I still ended up with the college degree in computer science, with minors in administration and communications.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And then a Master's in education and administration. Well, by back then, I had realized that I definitely didn't want to go into the computer science field. And I realized that I have loved and enjoy the field of education. Not in a teaching position, but more into an administrative level. I was looking at something that has to do with education administration, which was mostly that degree at Augsburg. So it was a combination of education and they call it leadership, but it's basically administration. It was more geared towards schoolteachers who wanted to become principals, or have a place in the administration of the school system.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** But I still quite didn't see myself going that route.

**EE:** After I had been at Augsburg for six years, I got a call—I didn't apply for the position at La Oportunidad, I got a phone call. Somebody told me that the organization was going through a tough position; they had been thinking about either merging or maybe closing. They were trying to bring in an executive director that would have strong leadership so that the agency could either survive or decide whatever they wanted to do. My name had come up in that process. So I said, okay, tell me more about that. And we started talking. By then I felt it was reaffirmed that this is what I want to do. I'd been thinking that the management of a nonprofit sounds very much like a combination of all of my backgrounds, and what I wanted to do.

LD: Sure.

**EE:** And I actually ended up doing a mini Master's in nonprofit administration at the University of Saint Thomas. They call it Mini Masters in Nonprofit Management at Saint Thomas. So by the time that I began at La Oportunidad, I was doing that mini Master's, because this is what I want to do.

LD: And when was that? When did you start at La Oportunidad?

EE: I have eleven years at La Oportunidad now in November. So I started in November of 1998.

**LD:** 1998, okay.

**EE:** Yes, in November of 1998.

LD: And you had just graduated with your Master's.

**EE:** Yes. I was finishing my Master's then. I started working on my thesis at the same time that I started, so by the time that I finished my courses, I already was done with my thesis. So, yes, it was in my first year at Augsburg, pretty much.

**LD:** Wait. Your first year, you started—and it's a two year program—so you were studying and running it that second year.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**EE:** It's kind of hard to keep track of all of those, because I was doing several things at the same time. [Chuckles]

**LD:** Yes. Where do you get? I'm going to just ask you one more question. And then we can break. But where do you get that energy?

**EE:** [Laughs]

**LD:** Where do you get? I mean, really, it's quite amazing all the things you accomplished. And also, where do you get that courage? Because, you know, not many undergrads would say, "I need a date with the president. I need to talk to the president."

**EE:** [Laughs]

**LD:** You know, you have a lot of spirit.

**EE:** Yes. [Laughs]

**LD:** Where does that come from?

**EE:** Oh, god. That's a very good question. I've always had a really, really big spirit and lots of energy. And I think that when you have a purpose in life, that purpose gives you energy.

To me, when I talk about jobs—I mention jobs because that's the way that we call it—but to me, the jobs that I have had are really a call to serve and to do something at a particular time. My staff tells me the same thing and my board tells me the same thing. People in the community say, "My god, but you always have the same energy."

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Eleven years [at La Oportunidad]. And it has been challenging, especially these few past years with the economy and all of that. But I think when you look at yourself and you say, "I have a purpose in life," that purpose is what gives you energy.

It keeps me going. For example, when I was at Augsburg, I saw students that got there and didn't know what to do with their life. They were struggling. "Oh, I cannot make it, I cannot afford it." And I said, now, yes you can. Yes, you can, and look at all the financial aid that you can get and so forth. When I saw them moving from one year to the next, graduating and all of that, I said, "Yes! *That's* what I'm here for." And the same for—although I do all administration at La Oportunidad—when I see clients coming, I see and I talk to them and I see their attitudes and the way that they feel, all of the youth. And I see them a few months later, and they have a different attitude, they have different ways of looking at life and so forth. Then I say, "*This* is what I'm here for."

**LD:** Yes. That's perfect.

[Recording interruption]

**LD:** Alright. We are starting the interview again. [Chuckles] We just took a little break. Actually, during the break we were just saying that we need to make one small correction about, you were actually born in a different city.

EE: Yes. Right.

**LD:** But kind of did most of your activities in Cartagena.

**EE:** Cartagena, yes.

**LD:** But you were born in?

**EE:** In Santa Marta.

LD: Okay.

**EE:** And then again, my entire family lives in Cartagena.

**LD:** Okay. Gotcha. Alright.

**EE:** So that's kind of the confusion there.

**LD:** Gotcha. So we've got that straight.

**EE:** Great. [Laughter]

**LD:** Okay. So when we kind of ended up, we were talking about you starting to work at La Oportunidad. So first, tell me a little bit about La Oportunidad and how long it's been around and what the mission is.

3014 Project

**EE:** La Oportunidad, has been around for twenty-three years. And the interesting thing about that organization is that it started by serving adult offenders, or ex-offenders. The agency's focus was to help the adult offender to transition back to the community.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** There was programming and services such as a transitional house. And there was training to get them ready for employment, like resume assistance, interviews and so forth. When I was offered the position at the organization, I accepted the challenge to see if we could change the vision and the purpose of the organization. Because when I looked at it, and I saw how many clients that the agency served, and the impact on those clients, and how many had been able to turn around their lives and be, you know, positive members of the community and so forth, the rate was very low.

I always thought that the earlier you can impact and touch the life of a human being, the more chances there are of having a positive impact on that life. So I accepted the position and we agreed on focusing on and refocusing the efforts of the agency on early prevention and intervention. And so we sold the transitional house, which was a huge liability, by the way. There was even a lawsuit pending on that. But that's a long story. In any case, we opened up all

of the other programs that we currently have, and that's not enough. When we were talking about my background, it came perfectly, like a perfect fit, because of my educational background, management background, and nonprofit management. It was a perfect fit because what I focused my energies on was developing new programs.

#### LD: Yes.

**EE:** And so we developed programs, and the majority of our programs and services are provided within the school systems. We work inside of the school system with different districts, mainly in Hennepin County, but we also work with the schools in Robbinsdale. So when we look at that, we are looking at programs that are school-based, year-round, and weekly services. The more contact that you have with an individual, the more of a positive outcome you're going to have. For us, that's what is so unique. Our organization is unique in the sense that we work with many members of the family, with the children, youth, and the parents. But we also work with the other aspects of their life where they spend most of their time, which is at school.

We can work with their teachers or school personnel, whoever has contact with the student. It can be a social worker, or anybody who has contact with student and who also shares the same goal that we have in that we want that student to be successful. We want that student to have academic achievement, social skills, a positive relationship within their school, their family, and their peers in the community. We work with kids who are in elementary, middle, and high school. In that process, we try to take that youth to higher levels of development. For example, we have youth that we have worked with that have some gang involvement, and some of them who are trying to be being recruited.

## **LD:** Recruited by the gangs?

**EE:** By gangs. And some of them who want to get out, but they don't know how to. So we work from that level to the highest level at school, with kids who have a lot of leadership potential, but they need to be given the opportunities to be leaders in their community.

We have an annual peace conference, and it is a group of youth who plan that conference. And you have been part of that, because you have been one of the emcees and also presented and did workshops there. It's an amazing gathering of those youth. When you were asking about where do I get that energy and the passion, it's when you see those youth, those children, those parents in action, and you say, "This is what it's all about." There is nothing more powerful than getting all these youth energized and motivated to channel that energy that they have into a positive path.

### LD: Yes.

**EE:** Basically our goal is to not just the students that are having risk behaviors, helping them to get on a more positive path. Many institutions or people work with them so that they can be successful in school, that they can be positive contributors in their community, and that they can help others, too. We also work with the parents. And with the parents, they mostly are parents

who are new immigrants - parents who only know Spanish, who don't know the different systems. And one of the systems that we really want to help them figure it out and navigate is the school system.

#### LD: Sure.

**EE:** Because if they know how the school system works, if they know how to make the school an ally versus having somebody who they are working against, they will be able to help their kids to be successful in school. If they know how the school system works, they can know how to positively advocate for their kids, and how to get involved in leadership roles within the school. They can help their kids with school homework or at least know how to access the resources, and that's one of the main goals with the parenting program.

Obviously, we want parents to be better parents. Now there are also parents in the program that come because they are referred by child protection for child abuse or child neglect. Some of them have lost custody of their kids. They are parents who don't understand or don't know about how the laws work. And so they might think that, you know, hitting a kid or abusing or leaving a very young kid with a very young baby at home is okay here because it was okay back there. It doesn't work that way.

#### LD: Yes.

**EE:** So we teach them that there are laws here, so that they can follow the laws. And how also to find a network of support because that's one of the most devastating things here, as you may know, Lorena. Once the family or the individual loses that network of support, we have families that have depression and they feel isolated, they feel alone. We want them to get reconnected with people who know what they're going through, and can feel empathy about it, and can support them.

## LD: Yes.

**EE:** So that's kind of a long chat. We also have a domestic violence program. And that's the only old program from the past that remained with us, because that's the only program of its kind that is offered in Minnesota. It is for Spanish speaking offenders both male and female on a weekly basis, and there are several groups a week, so that provides different options for them. It's just really trying to break the cycle of violence, because a lot of organizations work with the victims but not with the abuser.

#### LD: Oh.

**EE:** We strongly believe that we need to work with the abuser in order to break the cycle of violence. Those offenders or abusers are going to go either into another relationship and they're going to continue to abuse, or because of strong family values, they are going to stay in that relationship and they are going to continue with the abuse.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** So we want to break the cycle of violence.

**LD:** Now you've been there, you told me, eleven years. And so you've seen a lot of the changes that have occurred.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Tell me about some of the needs that you saw eleven years ago and the needs now within the community.

**EE:** I think that fundamentally the challenges remain the same. The changes have been mainly in the growing of the population – we have the fastest minority population growth. Immigration continues to be a major issue. Education, housing, those continue to be issues. Healthcare continues to be a major issue. Now, one of the things that I've seen in terms of changes is that the community is more organized now than it used to be in the past. And going back to the, you know, rivalry, per se, for lack of another word, among the different groups in the community, I don't see that much at all nowadays.

I'd say that I believe the community is more united now. There is, as you know, the Ecuadorian population, a tremendous increase in the Ecuadorian population and the South American population, too. So the community is more diverse now, and I think it's more united. But I think that we have a long ways to go, Lorena, because when we talk about being the fastest growing minority population, we're talking about the number of people. But we're not talking about the power of the people.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** I think that if we compare our population with some other populations like the Somali population, it's a much newer population, and they are extremely organized. They have a stronger voice. I think that we need to think about the political power. The fact that we are the larger number doesn't mean that we are the more *powerful* group of people, in terms of the political agenda.

I think that we want to have people in our community being on school boards, being in positions of power, decision making power. I think that that's one important aspect that we need to achieve. Granted, we have more people in those positions now than before, but again, the population growth has just surpassed that. And I think we still have an imbalance in that area.

**LD:** What do you think? I want to talk more about this balance of power and how to increase that. But as you look around, and from when you first came to Minnesota to now, can you talk about kind of the general changes that you've seen? I mean, obviously, the numbers. The number has been tremendous. But in what other ways has the Latino community impacted or contributed to Minnesota?

**EE:** Oh, I think the contribution has been for a long time. I think that it has increased because there's even more people contributing, but I always think that the Latino community has been a contributor to the community in general. Today I think that we have more people being served by Latino organizations. So, hopefully, we are providing services and programs that are providing more self-sufficiency in the community. You see more Latino businesses being developed and you see more on a smaller scale than other groups, but still, there are more positions of decision making power. Like, you know, we have a Latino Superintendent in the Saint Paul Public Schools. I think that that's a very powerful position there. We have Sandy Vargas at the Minneapolis Foundation. And she was at the Hennepin County, the Hennepin County Administrator before that position. And so we see that. But we still have a long way to go, because we're still among the largest rates for teen pregnancy, and for graduation rates.

**LD:** Dropout rates?

**EE:** Dropout rates and graduation rates are low. Lower compared to others. And so, again, I still think that although we have achieved and made improvements in those different areas, I think that we have a long way to go.

**LD:** So let's talk a little bit about that. What do you think? Because education is one of your fields.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Let's talk about some of those education gaps. What are some of the barriers that Latinos in Minnesota face?

**EE:** I talked briefly about that, and I think that one of the key elements to close the poverty cycle is achieving higher levels of education.

I think that one of the challenges that we're encountering with families is that there is the value of education, but there is the value of work, too. They have expectations from parents that the kid will go work to help. And so, again, the financial situation that a lot of our families are being faced with then forces kids to say, "I'd better go to work and I cannot go to school. You know, I need to help put some food on the table."

Again, it's a socioeconomic situation, because you have young people being faced with choices—which are no choices, really—between going into the workforce or going to college. I think that that's one of them. The other one is that we've seen especially in kids who are missing a lot of school is that there are expectations from some of the parents that they, the young person, stays at home helping with the younger kids, taking care of them. And so that youth is missing school and then he's labeled wrongly at school. Then we find out and talk to them about what's going on, and find that the kid wants to be at school but he or she needs to help at home with the younger siblings because the parents can't take care of the kid at the time or something was going on. And so, again, everything is tied to the economic situation. But I always encourage

young people that there are situations where you can work and make some money and still go to school. There are situations, too, where there is way more financial aid than kids or young people think that there is available.

I remember when I was at Augsburg College and when I was trying to recruit students, they'd say, "Oh, I would never even dream about going to Augsburg. It's a private school, extremely expensive." And I said, no, let me show you all the financial aid that is available compared to other kids. Now one advice that I gave to many of my students too is, why don't you do your first two years at the community college and then transfer to Augsburg and still get your Augsburg degree. Then you can compare financial aid packages and then you can save a lot of money by doing it that way.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And so, again, I think that it's to provide opportunities for young people so that they are not being forced to choose between going to school or college in this case, or missing high school and achieving a higher education.

**LD:** You say that the community, you feel, is more united, and there have been gains. Let's talk specifically about some of those gains and some of the contributions and the evolution of the community.

**EE:** I think that maybe technology is playing a big part of that. I mean, it's easier to communicate, it's easier to put people together, to get together in a meeting or to communicate via email, and back and forth. So technology has been a great help in that area. I've seen organizations in the past that could not even dream of working together with that other organization, but then for different reasons, for financial reasons, you know, each can be more effective with the use of resources by working together. So I have seen more collaborations going on, and that's one of the things that I'm really pleased to see - more collaborations.

I have seen, too, the reinventing of the wheel. We're always kind of thinking about, well, who's already doing something? Again, it is about the more effective use of resources. I run into that, and it's very often that I get, "Oh, we're going to be starting this or we're going to . . ." And I say, hey, do you know that so and so church is already doing that? "Oh!" So it's this connection of, not reinventing the wheel, but just working collaboratively without having to duplicate efforts. I think that's going on in the community a lot, and it makes the work more effective and allows you to serve more people or more clients, for lack of another word. I've seen that happening. The other thing, too, is that people are, I think more understanding or tolerant of having different political views, having different experiences or backgrounds when you come. And again, when I talked back then many years ago about, you know, Mexican-Americans versus others.

**LD:** South Americans?

**EE:** South Americans. So I see that, you know, there is not much of that anymore. It's just, let's work together. And there has been a lot also across cultures, too. You know, I see they are not just working collaboratively Latinos with Latinos, but with other organizations.

LD: Oh.

**EE:** And then you look at like nonprofits working more collaboratively with corporate organizations. It happens with La Oportunidad, too. We have very strong collaborations with big corporations. So we are going across fields or sectors, I have seen a lot of that and I think it's been a big achievement. There is more support for coordinated efforts, and I think it makes us more effective to clients. You know, if we do have a client and we can cross-refer that client to other services that we don't have, that's a wonderful thing for that client. So there is a lot of that going on.

**LD:** You talked just a second ago about kind of doing cross-cultural work. Talk to me about how you think—or if you think—the Latino community has impacted Minnesota culture.

**EE:** Ah. That's a good question. Well, the fact that you are doing this is one example, you know. We more and more see mainstream institutions where you can see Latino culture, say it's at the Science Museum of Minnesota.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** You can see more. There's still a lot of work to be done, don't take me wrong, but you can see more of the diversity among some institutions. As I said, you see museums, you see schools and the library system. Still, I would like to see a much higher level of improvement in those areas, but I think it's going in the right direction. Again, it's just, to me, it's just like the decision making power. That's where we need to be.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** A few things change here and there, you know, little things like in the library system. Maybe we can have a book reading, a Spanish book reading once a week, for example. That's good. But we need more.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** I say that's the kind of things that I think it's taking us a long time to achieve alot of what we should.

**LD:** So you're really talking about more kind of fundamental changes.

EE: Yes. Yes.

**LD:** And why do you think? I mean, comparing it to say, for example, you talked about the Somali community. What do you think has held us back?

**EE:** Ah. I think, in a sense, once we get here, a lot of people—not all of us—but a lot of people go on their own with their own lives.

LD: I see.

**EE:** And I see a small part of the population being the ones out there in the community trying to make changes or to have impact. It can often be all the same people on boards, and the task forces, and the committees. And by the way, that's something that I also run into. I mean, you get burnt out from being the same people doing the same work all the time.

LD: Sure.

**EE:** I know that there have been some efforts out there to develop new leadership in our community. Because we're getting older, we're going to retire. Most likely, we're going to move out of cold Minnesota for at least part time of the year, right?

LD: [Chuckles] Yes.

**EE:** And so who's going to be following in those footsteps, you know?

LD: Yes.

**EE:** You know, like I see your dad, Mario. He's just everywhere, impacting just about everything. He's still making a big impact on the community, and I'm sure he's involved in so many other efforts out there. I think that we have to develop the leadership in our young people and our future generations. That's one of the things that we're doing a lot through La Oportunidad. I think that that's one of the things - it's just the same people, trying to make some changes, trying to do some things. I have many times had to say no to, "Please be on here, this board, this task force," I think it's extremely important, but I say that I just don't have the time.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** I just don't have the time. There's just so much going on and I just don't have the time. And so, in that situation, we just need to have more people involved and to develop the leadership of young people.

**LD:** Let me switch gears here just for a second. You're kind of talking about the kids that you're working with, developing their leadership. What is their sense—I guess you can't speak for all of them—but the general sense of them as Latinos and as Minnesotans? Do they feel a part of the community in Minnesota?

**EE:** Well, I don't work directly with them. But what I hear and sense is that it's part of what you need to instill in them. Again, as part of our curriculum, it's also the leadership piece and being involved in the community. Because it's for us to help them know that they are part of the community, and that whatever they do, it will impact that community, whether positively or negatively. And so we try to give as many opportunities as we can for them to be involved in the community on different projects, from, you know, painting murals in the neighborhood to cleaning to going to different places. Then they can feel, "Oh, I did this part. And because of me, this place looks better, it looks cleaner, I made some people happier because I did this volunteer work with them," and so forth.

For example, I remember one case—because I love to hear success stories, I read them and so forth, with the youth. There was a group of kids. There were a couple of kids who were angry about things going on in the school, and they were not allowed to do this or that and so forth. And the program coordinator said, "Why don't you get involved in the student council? That way you can take a leadership role and that way you can take part in that decision process within the things that are happening." And the students ended up taking leadership positions when there, and now they were part of it, and the change was just *dramatic*. Because then they thought, "Oh yes, we can make a difference! We just need to have a leadership role in it."

LD: Yes, right.

**EE:** And that's some of the things that we're trying to do with the parents, too – like going to leadership positions in the schools, being part of the Parent-Teacher Association. We teach them to volunteer at the schools and get to know and be involved. And so, yes, I think that they pretty much know in general that they are part of this community and that they want to be good contributors to the community.

**LD:** Let me change tacks just once again, and it's kind of going back to something that you said much earlier, and your own sense of being Latina American.

EE: Yes.

**LD:** And tell me, after having lived, I guess, for pretty much half your life here in Minnesota, what is your own sense of what it means to be an American, what it means to be a Minnesotan, and what it means to be a Latina Minnesotan?

**EE:** Oh, that's a good question. And that's when I talked about cultural competency.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** Because it's really about understanding the values of a culture and understanding that difference is not wrong or bad, it's just different.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And if you can use those differences and make it a positive thing. One of the major things that we have is, you know, being a people culture versus a task culture.

When we look at the fundamental value of a people versus a task culture, then we look at the value of time and then we're looking at the value of proximity with other people and how you relate and so forth. I think that once you understand the differences of a culture and how different it is from your own culture or the other culture that you have, then you can see what are the positives of each one, or what can you do that will make it a positive outcome. Then you actually—it's like being bilingual, because then you are using two languages and you have double the amount of opportunities.

So, for example, if I'm dealing with or having a relationship with somebody, whether it is business or so forth, I always keep in mind, where is that person coming from. Is that person going to be appreciating that I talk about, oh, how are you doing today, how was your weekend, how's your family doing, and so forth, or prefer that I just jump into business.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** I think that as long as you are respectful and as long as you can check with the person. I mean, say, "Oh, I know that we have been talking about business or whatever, but I really want to know how you're doing!"

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And it's for sure that the person is not going to feel offended by that.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** And, you know, it is about the use of time, too. I mean I think that here, the great thing is you can just plan your day, plan your week, plan your month, and then everything is just time. And if something goes wrong, then you know that you have a backup plan and so forth. But it's good to be able to relax, too.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** You know, to be able to relax and to be able to talk to people without saying, I have a *minute* to talk to you.

**LD:** Right. This is really interesting. Do you think that the people-oriented versus task-oriented culture is one the great kind of culture shocks that happens for Latinos?

EE: Yes.

**LD:** Because we come from a more people-oriented culture and here it's more task culture.

**EE:** And let me tell you when I came here, Lorena, I was here all by myself, no family members, nobody. No friends, nothing. I was still young, and people would ask, "Oh, how are you doing?" One of the things I still say, and I have said over and over, is to forget about the language, forget about the food, forget about the difference in the educational system - for me it was not being able to hug somebody!

LD: Oh.

**EE:** It was like when I was going, oh, how are you? And I'd feel this wall *pushing* me back. It was just the most *devastating* thing. Now I laugh about it.

So that's one of the things that I personally had to adjust to and I had to understand. And now I understand that, well, here people need their space. And it's not a matter that they don't like me, they don't want me to be close or whatever, it's that I'm intruding into their space.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And so what I do is that I never assume that because you're Latino then I'm going to give you a hug, because maybe you don't like that either. If I really feel like it I might say, is it good if I just give you a hug?

**LD:** [Laughs]

**EE:** You know, once I get to a point and a comfort level with the person, I get to know the person better and so forth. If I just met the person, no way that I'm even going to dream about doing that. But that was one of the areas where I just had this shock. Also, if I needed to talk to somebody and I'd call and I'd only say hi. And the person would say, "Oh hi, I only have a minute!" I learned this, and so the first thing that I do now when I call somebody—and I've been doing that for many years now—is to say, "Oh hi, this is Eloisa, is this a good time to talk?"

LD: Yes.

**EE:** And that puts me in a position where I give the person the opportunity to let me know when it's a good time. The person doesn't feel rude because he's not calling me, and it gives me the opportunity to feel good and not really being rejected.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** It's not that I'm not important to this person, or this person doesn't want to talk, it's just not a good time for that person.

LD: Right.

**EE:** And so they say, "Oh, I'm in the middle of whatever. Can you call me tonight?" Oh, good. Then I'll call. What time? Give me a time more or less, so I'm not going to be calling when it's

dinner or time or something or if they have kids, whatever. So I say to them, what time, more or less, would be like a really good time? "Call me around seven." Okay, I'll call you around seven. And so those are the ways that I have learned those things, because, again, my first times were just *devastating*.

**LD:** It's just different.

**EE:** Task-oriented. It's different. And then I do appreciate that part of the culture, too.

**LD:** The task-oriented?

**EE:** The task oriented, too. I appreciate both parts of the culture. I appreciate both. I'm just saying that we just need to understand and we just need to know how to effectively handle that. So it's good for both.

**LD:** Right.

**EE:** That's pretty much what I've been able to do with that part. But it was hard! [Laughter] Yes. And time, which is another very important aspect of the culture. Time, it was so important for me as a Latina. That didn't take me much to adjust, because I was on time, I'm always, I mean, if I'm running late, I would be calling, "I'm running a few minutes late, something came up . . ." And at least I give the person a notice of what is happening. You know, you get used to those things. Sometimes when I'm just joking, I'll say, are we talking about Latino time?"

**LD:** [Laughs]

**EE:** And then the person will say, "Oh yes, yes." Okay. So really tell me when it's a good time for me to show up. Do you really want me there at four p.m. or should I arrive at four fifteen or four thirty? "Oh, come at four thirty." Oh, okay.

**LD:** [Laughs]

**EE:** So you kind of, in a joking way, you kind of learn how to handle that.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** That's pretty much the way I handled that. But I think it's just really the same with any culture. With any culture we're just different, it's not better or worse, it's just different. And then you adjust to it and you become assertive in handling the differences between cultures.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** I go back to my home every year, and I get there and we have plans to go to the Navy Club, for example—my sister is married to a naval commander—and we say we are going to leave at nine in the morning and at noon we are still at home.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**EE:** And I sometimes I miss, you know, being able to know what time we are really going. I mean, if it's only fifteen minutes or half an hour I can handle that. So what I do is to say, "Okay, I'm going to be on the computer working on some stuff. When you guys are ready, let me know." So instead of getting frustrated, upset, and just leaving without them and whatever, I'll just say that I'll do other stuff in the meantime, and I do something productive while they are doing their thing. [Laughter]

**LD:** So you really are like Minnesotan Colombian. [Laughs]

**EE:** Exactly. [Laughs] Yes, pretty much.

**LD:** So to kind of wrap up, I'd love to know, you've done so much in your life and you've affected the lives of many people. What are some of your hopes? First, for the community, and then also for yourself. So let's start with the community. What are some of your hopes for the community?

**EE:** My goals for the community have always been the same, they haven't changed: a unified community. That they share the same voice; and that makes us stronger in developing and implementing our agenda for the community. Education continues to be extremely important to me. Not just the formal education, because not every kid wants to go to college, but what I mean is developing lifelong skills so that they can become self-sufficient and can be positive contributors to the community.

Then I'll say, well, for me personally, I have a sixteen-year-old boy who is and remains the love of my life, and also my husband [Jon Mills]. Both are a very, very important part of my life. For my son to just follow his heart. He has a beautiful heart. He's an extremely bright kid, very gifted academically and emotionally. He's very emotionally talented. I see signs in him that he wants to make a big change in the community. So I want for his heart to stay the same, his soul to be intact, to not change. and to continue to develop. So, you know, seeing my son growing and being a leader in the community; that would be a personal goal I have.

**LD:** Well, he'd have a strong role model to follow. [Laughter]

**EE:** Oh, I hope so, yes. He says he has written several papers and said, "My mom is my hero."

**LD:** Wow. That's really great!

**EE:** He really writes beautifully and it's just a joy. He's just a wonderful human being. I'm hoping he stays that way, you know, and he'll just be a good man.

**LD:** Yes. Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

**EE:** Actually, I think that in terms of my family, my mom has been a tremendous role model, too. And I have a very blessed family, my sisters and my nieces and nephews. And my husband is just the most terrific human being. I just, I really feel blessed.

I'm really, really blessed that I can come to work and be completely focused because I have such a loving home. I mean, like when I talk to my son and he'll say, "How is your day going mom?" He calls me up when he gets from school. And I say it's been very stressful but good. And he'll say, "Mom, just think about the two loves of your life that will be waiting for you at home." [Chuckles]

LD: Wow.

**EE:** He's referring to him and my husband. And so I can just focus all of my energy at work, because I know that I have my two loves waiting for me at home. That really is great. [Chuckles]

LD: Yes.

**EE:** It really helps a lot to be able to focus now. I just feel blessed with the people that I have worked with in the community, the chances to meet people like you and your dad and a lot of other people in the community. It really keeps you going.

LD: Yes.

**EE:** It really keeps you going. So thank you for the opportunity!

**LD:** Oh, thank you. Really, on behalf of the Historical Society and for me, personally, it's really inspiring to hear a strong Latina woman with so much passion. And it's really wonderful that you can share your story with everyone now.

EE: Oh, thank you.

LD: So, thank you, once again.