

Martha A. Noyola
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

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Martha Noyola - **MN**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today is Tuesday, December 28, 2010. I'm Lorena Duarte. I'll be conducting the interview today for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project. I'm here with Martha Noyola at her office at Saint Cloud State University.

First of all, I want to say on behalf of the Historical Society, thank you so much for taking time out of your schedule to do this. We really appreciate being able to capture your story.

MN: Thank you for inviting me to be part of this project. I'm really excited. I'm honored.

LD: First of all, could you start off by telling me your name and how to spell it?

MN: My name is Martha Alicia Noyola.

LD: Great. Could you give me your date of birth and your occupation?

MN: July 13, 1979. I am multicultural academic advisor.

LD: I'd love to start off with where you were born and a little bit about your family, your parents' names and if you have siblings.

MN: I was born in Houston, Texas. My mom is Emma Perez. My dad is Manuel Noyola. I have a total of seven siblings. There were five men in the family and there are three women. The five men are Miguel, Raul, Jaime, and Manuel. There were two Jaimes. One passed away when he was a baby. For my sisters, it's Yolanda and Rebecca.

LD: Tell me a little bit about growing up. What kind of kid were you? Were you a studious kid, athletic? Did you like certain kinds of activities?

MN: The way my life started: My parents were migrants, actually. They were immigrants to this country. My dad was a bracer - he was part of the Bracero Program.

He came in as the last wave of braceros that came in. So my family was very, very lucky to have come in through the Bracero Program, because my dad became documented by sponsorship of his boss when he came in as a bracer. Four people out of my eight siblings were actually born in Mexico, and, then, the rest of us were born in the U.S. When we came to the U.S. as a family, we were a migrant family. We were all over the place.

I was born in Houston, Texas. My dad decided, “I can’t afford to support the whole family here, so I’m going to send my wife”—which is my mom—“with five children”—at that time—“to Mexico.” And he stayed up here with my older siblings to work. We did that. I was born here. I actually didn’t know I was born here, because I started school in Mexico. My first language was Spanish. My whole first experience of being conscious of my surroundings was in Mexico. I was Mexican all the way.

What happened was that my dad decided, okay, it was time for them to come back and go to school here. I was in, I believe, fourth or fifth grade when I came into the U.S. I remember a story which I think is funny. My mom had a store in Mexico, and we weren’t well off at all. We just had a little tiny store. It was in a small town, in San Luis Potosi, Mexico. It’s very, very tiny. I guess for Americans, it’s considered like a village, because it’s really, really small. We had a little store, and I remember that those were the gathering places for people. Most people would come and talk about their own histories. Everybody talked about the United States, because that’s what we did. People were very, very poor in that area, so a lot of the men in the families were coming to the United States, so the moms or the wives, or even the men if they came back, were talking about their experience crossing the border illegally. That was always such a sad, sad story about going through the desert or going through the river. I didn’t know that I was documented to come to the United States. So my only experience with the United States was that my dad lived over there, and that he sent money, but, then, on the other side crossing the border was such a horrific story every single time.

I remember when my mom said, “Okay, we’re going to close the store, because we’re moving to the United States.” I was in a panic. I was always very introverted. I was never very talkative as a child. I was a thinker. I really thought a lot about everything. I was kind of part of the second wave of children and, at that point, I was the middle child, so I think I was kind of left alone a lot, which was kind of good for the type of personality that I had. I wasn’t neglected. My mom was worried about my older sister because she was in the teenage years. I guess she started to date and stuff like that. Then there was my little brother - he was the baby, and he was a boy. So that was the other thing that my mom paid so much attention to them. I wasn’t a wild kid or anything like that, and I tended to kind of stay to myself. I was a thinker and never really was a talker. So when this whole situation came that we were going move, I was panicking inside, thinking that, oh, my God, I’ve heard of stories where people drown and people have seen them drown in the river and people die in the desert. I remember that this whole time. We left at five o’clock in the morning. Before that, we needed to pack. Of course, I’m being very strategic thinking if I have to swim across the river, I can’t take very much. I had this one little plastic bag. I had it in a plastic bag because I wanted to make sure my stuff didn’t

get wet. I'm in fourth grade and really my thoughts are, oh, my God, I'm going to drown. I don't know how to swim.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

MN: We had to leave at five o'clock, so, of course, the night before I didn't sleep, because I was panicking about this whole thing. I didn't talk to anybody. Nobody was asking me questions. Martha is such an introvert that, I didn't really say much. I remember I was in such a panic I didn't sleep the night before. We left at five o'clock and it probably was, at that point, maybe about an eight- or a nine-hour drive from my little town in Mexico to the border, and I fell asleep somewhere in between.

I remember that I woke up and it was my introduction to Wal-Mart, which was a crazy way to start your life in the U.S.

LD: [laughter]

MN: I wake up and I'm at Wal-Mart in the parking lot. I tried to figure out what's going on. I was half asleep when I walked into Wal-Mart, and I honestly thought that it was a city. It was so huge to me. I thought Wal-Mart itself was a city. So, of course, this whole time, I'm like, "What happened? I missed it. Who carried me across? What happened?" I had this huge panic and it didn't make any sense. Finally, I asked my mom, "Who carried me across the river?" Of course she looks at me and said, "What are you talking about? You're crazy. We drove through the [unclear in Spanish] of the border, I guess. We drove through." I'm like how did we drive through? People drown in the river. Of course, my mom, she's busy. She has so many kids and everybody is making so much noise that she looked at me like you're crazy. What are you asking me? It was a very interesting experience for me crossing.

Then, of course, it was moving all over the place. Every year, at least three times, we would go back to Mexico for a short period of time, and, then, we would come back looking for work. We lived in Mississippi. We lived in Texas, various parts of Texas. We lived in Michigan and various parts of California. We were all over the place. From the moment I walked into the United States until I was in seventh grade, I probably went to more than twelve schools. It was an interesting experience for me, I think. There were times where we were homeless, because we would just move to random places, so we would end up living in our van for a month or two, or in churches. All of those things, to me, they were an adventure. They really were an adventure. As tough as I think it was as an adult now, I can't even imagine what my parents were dealing with at that point - having their children not being stable anywhere. To me, it was an adventure. It was really a learning experience. I got to meet so many people and to go to so many places.

There were schools that I absolutely hated because of how I felt. I felt very isolated, especially not speaking the language. Then, there were other places that I absolutely loved. People were so caring. Every time that I think of my elementary experience in the United States, my favorite, my absolute favorite school was in Mississippi. It was very

interesting because we were the only two Latino kids. There was a young, white little girl and there was us two, my little brother and I, and everybody else was black, African American. It was just the coolest experience in the world. I really felt special. They really made me feel that way. The worst possible experience for me was in Texas where the majority of the people there were Latinos, which was really strange to me.

LD: That's very interesting.

MN: It was a bad experience; it really was. The language was the problem. I think that I learned so much more Mississippi in this tiny town than I did in Texas. It was in Plainview, Texas. It was interesting, because I think that, after a while, I tended to create different personalities. I think I became a little schizophrenic in moving around so much. I really tried to do different things. By the end of those twelve schools, or after that experience, I ended up not really knowing who I was.

LD: Sure.

MN: I was in seventh grade, and I really didn't know who I was. I think that I was pretty clear when I walked into the United States, but, as we moved around, and I tried to be the smart kid, and I tried to be the bully, and I tried to be the nice kid and the quiet kid... When we finally stayed in one place, which was something completely unexpected to me, it was in Salinas, California. I was in seventh grade. I remember that I struggled a lot in trying to figure out who I was. For the most part, I was a pretty smart kid. Part of the problem was how much I complicated my own life. It was so complex for me to try to figure out who I really was. All of those things were part of me, but it wasn't really who I was.

Then, I came to seventh grade, and things became a lot more stable in terms of the academic aspect, but, in terms of the family situation, things were up and down. My parents were not doing so well in their marriage. I think what happened was that I put so much emphasis and focus onto my education because I didn't really want to deal with what was going on at home, in terms of my parents' relationship.

When I think of home in the United States, I think I probably would consider California my home. I pretty much grew up there. I finished middle school, went to high school and, then, I went to UC-Berkeley [University of California-Berkeley] when I graduated from high school. I lived in Oakland after I graduated from college.

A lot of the work that I do has to do with social justice. I work a lot with nonprofit organizations. My first official job after graduating was with the National Latino Health Organization. I remember it was a great experience. It was a tough experience, because you walk into a nonprofit environment, and, you know the pay isn't great, and it's a lot of work, a lot of hours, but it was so rewarding. It was totally what I wanted to do.

I was working with United Farm Workers when I was in high school. I volunteered all the time. My parents were field workers. When we actually stayed in California, they

were field workers. My dad was a tractor driver, which was a huge accomplishment for my family, because he got a steady job, and we weren't moving very much, and he got paid well in comparison to what he was getting paid before. We stopped being a migrant family, so we became more established there. I always wanted to help people who were in the same situation as we were. I'm thirty-one years old now, and I think that's really what shaped who I am and what I want to do with my life. I really want to help.

So, I've gotten to work in higher education through a huge range of experiences in the professional field. I came to the conclusion that this is exactly where I want to be—maybe not Saint Cloud State for the rest of my life, because Saint Cloud, the city, is not the easiest place to live in for a Latina who is politically active, who has a Chicano artist as a husband [Steven Corralejo]. It's not an easy place to live in, especially coming from California. I think, for now, it feels like I'm exactly where I need to be.

LD: Let me kind of go back a little bit to your college years. What got you there? Working in the education field, you know the dropout rates for high school.

MN: Right.

LD: You know the dropout rates in college. What made you decide, yes, I'm going to college? What got you there and what kept you there?

MN: For me, it was really the struggle that my family dealt with. When I was in high school, like I said, there were so many issues going on at home that I really put a lot of my attention to school, and it came easy to me. It wasn't very complicated for me to do well in school. I went from being an ESL [English as a Second Language] student to a GATE [Gifted and Talented Education] student within one year. It wasn't very hard for me to do well academically. I am the first in my family to go to college. I'm not the first in my family to graduate from high school. There were two siblings from the beginning, but the rest dropped out before they could graduate from high school. So graduating from high school was an accomplishment for me.

I grew up in Salinas, and Salinas, California, is a rough place to grow up in.

LD: Where is it?

MN: Salinas, California, is maybe about forty minutes south of San Jose. In terms of violence, like gang violence we're talking about, there was more gang violence there than there is in L.A. [Los Angeles]. By the time I graduated from high school, four of my friends classmates had been shot by gang violence. It was such a normal thing. That's only just my friends, but there were other people who were getting shot from my high school.

I remember the first day I walked into middle school. The person who gave me the tour of the middle school, they usually tend to be the nerdy kids.

LD: Yes.

MN: Well, it was interesting. She probably was a nerdy kid, but she did ask me, “So what do you claim?” I remember it very clearly, because it shocked me. I was like, what are the options?

LD: [laughter]

MN: I don’t know what to claim. I just moved here. I don’t know. I remember that it was very clear that as you walked into middle school, you had to make one choice or the other. Whether or not you were in a gang, you kind of had to affiliate yourself with one or the other. You couldn’t just be a neutral. I remember that my affiliation was because of the people that I hung out with, my friends, and I ended up leaning towards the Sureños group, which was interesting. I remember that everything was about safety, at that point. It was all about not wearing the wrong colors, making sure that you don’t attract attention, making sure that you don’t stare at anybody too long. It was scary. I guess I was paranoid the whole time.

I remember that I set off to go to college not because I was committed or anything. I think it really had to do with me feeling like I had to prove something. It wasn’t for the right reasons. It wasn’t because I wanted to get a better life for myself. It was really because I wanted to prove something. I think, especially for me, it had to do with the gender roles in my family, how women are perceived, and what the expectations were of women in comparison to men. So, to me, I think that was really what pushed me more than anything else to get out of high school and not to do what I was supposed to do or what all of the young women my age were doing, which was to get married or get pregnant or get a job at McDonald’s, that kind of stuff. It was really that I had something to prove to my family. My relationship to my mom was really complicated, at that point, because you’re a teenager. You think you know better. Because of her experience with my dad and the marriage issue, I know that there were certain things that she took as the norm in terms of gender roles and interactions between men and women. I remember that when I decided to go to college, it wasn’t to get a better life. It was to prove to them that I could do it.

LD: When you’re talking about the gender roles, tell me just a little bit more about that. Was it kind of unexpected for a young woman to want to go to college, to move away from her family?

MN: In my family, we never really talked about college, because it wasn’t expected. Nobody else had gone to college other than the oldest one who went for a year and, then, quit, the male. But nobody else had talked about college, so there was no expectation of Martha going to college. That conversation never came up.

In terms of the gender roles, just in the everyday life, you know, you’re a woman so you’re supposed to be cooking. You’re supposed to be doing all of these things. I remember very clearly that when gender roles became such a huge issue for me is when I

had homework to do. It doesn't matter how much homework you have to do or what projects you have to do, you need to warm up tortillas for your dad or for your brothers, because that's what you do. So, yes, you have to do something, and that's kind of extra, but *your* responsibility is to make sure that you serve their food. People who are younger than me, my little brother—I just have a huge issue with the whole gender role—who could have done it himself, but the world had to stop to make sure that they were taken care of. You need to iron their clothes. You need to make sure that they're taken care of before you can do anything else. In terms of those gender roles for me, that was really hard to understand. Why are we catering to these men all the time? They're very much as capable as I am to do everything. I'm doing something important; I'm doing homework. You stop me from doing homework to go and warm up tortillas for my brother. Those types of things were difficult for me.

In terms of going to college, that was never a conversation, because there was no expectation. My family didn't know what was going on with me in school. They, honestly, did not have a clue. I won Top Hundred Scholar of California at one point in my freshman year in high school. There was a ceremony and there was an award, and I didn't go because I didn't want to get any attention. That was the other thing: for me being that middle child - it was really convenient for me not to take any attention. I didn't want any attention, because then I would build expectations. I was afraid what they would tell me and kind of shatter my dreams in a sense to just graduate.

My family wasn't aware what I was doing until—I remember very, very clearly—I was going to graduate on June 17th from high school. I told my mom—I think it was a mistake to tell her so early—two weeks before I graduated that I was going to go to college. I seriously did so many things to get my parents income tax forms. I stole them. I did all of these things to make sure that I would get financial aid and get all this stuff. I got help from a teacher from high school. She was the one who would encourage me, “You need to go to college.” Because we were low income, they gave me fee waivers for applications and also to take the SATs [Scholastic Aptitude Test]. I remember my counselor—seriously, another reason I wanted to go to college is I wanted to take her job away from her.

LD: [chuckles]

MN: It was interesting. I remember her very, very clearly. Her name was Mrs. Hoover. We had to turn in all our application material to our counselors before they sent it out. She called me to her office and she said to me, “Do you really want to waste one of your waivers in applying to UC-Berkeley?” I remember I had this huge attitude. It's my fee waiver, so if I waste it, who cares? She sat there and laughed. She said, “*Honey*, if my kids couldn't get into UC-Berkeley, you're not going to get into UC-Berkeley. I would go for something like, say, Fresno State.” I remember that. It didn't cost me any money. I actually believed her. I really truly believed, you're right. If your kids couldn't get in with you working in education, of course, I'm not going to get in. I walked out of there with a huge attitude because that's who I was.

LD: [chuckles]

MN: That's my fee waiver, so why do you care? Who cares?

I got into every school that I applied, including Berkeley, which was crazy. Of course, I wasn't planning to go to Berkeley at all, because I wasn't expecting to get in. I didn't like the campus either. I went to look at the campus before I applied, because she had told me not to. So I applied, but I didn't like the campus. It was so different than what I was used to. I remember I was going to go to UC-Santa Cruz, because my best friend was going to go there, but everybody was saying, "How are you going to say no to Berkeley for UC-Santa Cruz?" I was, like, I don't like Berkeley. It's dirty. I walked through Telegraph [Avenue] and there's a bunch of homeless people asking for money. It wasn't exactly what I expected college to look like. So it was not for me, at that point. The more I thought about it, the more people encouraged me. It's Berkeley. How do you say no to Berkeley? I really didn't know what was the big deal with Berkeley? It's just a school. I got into UC-Santa Cruz. How come nobody says anything about that? But the more I looked into it, I realized, wow, that's a pretty big accomplishment to get into Berkeley.

I got in to Berkeley in 1998, which was right after Affirmative Action had been taken out from the State of California. I remember one of the reasons it was such a big deal is because we were the first wave of kids who got in without Affirmative Action. When someone would ask, "How does it feel to get into UC-Berkeley after knowing that Affirmative Action is gone?" I don't understand your question. I worked my ass off when I was in high school to be able to be successful. I don't understand your question. I think the more that happened, the more I felt like I had to prove something, especially to somebody like Hoover, who said, "You can't get in."

LD: Yes.

MN: I told my mom. It was probably the beginning of June when I told her I was going to go to college. She said, "You're not. You're not leaving."

LD: Wow.

MN: She didn't speak to me for two weeks after that. For two weeks, she didn't talk to me. I remember that when I told her, I told my dad, too. My dad said, "Well, if you decide to college, then leave but don't expect any support from us whatsoever." That was, I think, in a sense, their way of negotiating me staying at home.

LD: Why was it so important for you to stay?

MN: I don't know if it was because I shocked them by letting them know I was moving out of the household, or if it was the idea that their eighteen-year-old daughter was going to be moving away from home. There's a word that my dad used, which I found to be interesting. He said, "If you're going to go and experience "libertinaje"—which is like going out there and partying and having a good time—"I'm not going to support you in

that.” The other thing is culturally, I think at least for my family, they think that getting an education or becoming mainstream—in their minds going to college is mainstream—really means that you are selling out, and if you’re selling out, you’re buying into the ideas of the American culture. Of course, their only ideas of what college looks like for college girls is what the media portrays and, of course, the media portrays wild parties and all these things. I think in my parents’ mind part of it was “You’re betraying your culture. You’re betraying your family by selling out.” They never stated that - this is my own perspective on how they viewed things. So my dad wasn’t very happy, but he spoke to me. My mom didn’t speak to me.

I remember the day that they went to drop me off to go to school. My brother convinced my mom to come. My brother was the one who drove me. My mom barely said, “Bye,” to me. It was such a crazy experience for me. I didn’t know what to expect at all.

LD: Yes

MN: [pause] [Martha begins to cry]

[break in the interview]

LD: As I was saying, I just really thank you for sharing what is not an easy story. It’s important for people to know that the road to college is a very complicated one for many Latinos, and, especially young Latina women. It’s really powerful to hear your story.

You had all these obstacles from your guidance counselor telling you, “*Honey*, you’re not going to get in,” to the struggles with your family. Once you got to college, what was that experience like?

MN: Ohhh, I was lost. I actually was lucky to come in through the Bridge Program. It’s a summer program that started on July 1. I graduated on June 17, and on July 1, I was in college. It was really a program for underrepresented students to get introduced to the college environment and the college life. I remember that it was the best of times and it was the worst of times for me. My mom still wasn’t talking to me, so that was tough. I didn’t have that support. We weren’t the type of family that was emotionally supportive - where they would tell you, “You’re going to be fine. You’re going to do well,” I couldn’t even talk to her. Period.

I remember feeling lost. I actually remember the first day my family dropped me off and, then they left and I felt *so* lonely. I really did. I was sitting in my dorm thinking what am I doing? This is stupid. What was I thinking? I don’t belong here. This is not for me. It wasn’t until my roommate walked in and I remember that her parents were educated. She was so *comfortable* in the environment, and she knew exactly what she needed to do and she knew exactly what needed to happen next. I was in awe of that. I felt like, I wish I knew. I wish I could do that.

I remember that there was this other young woman. Her name was Maria Isabel. She was a student who—very similar story to me—walked in that day. She was a lot less shy than I was. She was from East L.A. She actually grew up in the projects. It was a success story for her, but she was feeling exactly the same way as me. I walked out of my dorm, and I went into the restroom, and as I was walking in, she walked in. She had this *smile* on her face and so did I, because there is another Latina. I was so happy to see her—my roommate was actually African American—and she said, “Hi.” And I said, “Hi.” She asked, “Have you had dinner yet?” I had no idea where the dining commons were, so I said, “No, I haven’t.” She said, “Do you want to go?” I’m, like, “I don’t know if I’ll know how to get back to the dorm.”

LD: [laughter]

MN: She said, “I have a map.” It was interesting. I remember that we went to eat. We weren’t saying much. I think we were both really, really nervous about the whole thing. We got there that day, and the next day we were supposed to go to class. I missed the tour to take you to where your classes were. We ate and went back to the dorms. Then, she said, “Come, so you can see where I’m at.” So I went to see her dorm. We sat there in her dorm. Then, she closed the door and I started crying. Then, she started crying, too. [sigh] I absolutely loved this woman the first moment I saw her, because I seriously felt so alone until I met her. I didn’t know what I was doing there. She’s feeling exactly the same way. She’s, like, “We belong here.” I think she was trying to make me feel better, and I was doing the same to her. We were, basically, talking to ourselves saying, “You do belong here. You’re supposed to be here. It’s not very complicated how to figure things out,” which was the hard part.

LD: Yes.

MN: It would have been a lot easier for somebody to just tell you, “College is going to be okay.” It wasn’t like that for us. It was so complicated just *applying* to college that *getting* to college and trying to figure out where to get your books, where you’re supposed to go, what time classes begin, where class is located, oh, man, that was so difficult. That was so difficult. I remember that first week was rough. It was *really* rough.

The nicest part about that is that I started to meet people as I went to class. Oh, she looks Latina. I should go talk to her. He looks Latino. I need to go talk to him. So at the end of the week, although it was very, very rough to get through that first week, we had a support group, almost, for all of us. There were maybe seven Latinos over all. It was a pretty big program with about 300 students. But there were seven Latinos who got together and decided, okay, we’re going to help each other through this. It was a five-week program. There was a week off and, then, I think you started classes right after that. I’m still friends with some of those students. We still talk at random times. If it wasn’t for those friends, I would have not gotten through.

Throughout my experience in college, beyond the Bridge Program, beyond my first year in school—it’s a very competitive school—it was very, very difficult. I had to have a job.

At one point, I seriously was working three jobs. Now I talk to students as an advisor, and I tell them, “You know, I understand that there are a lot of things that you need to be focusing on, but a social life, you can have, but you need to limit yourself.” I think that, for me, there was a period, probably in my sophomore year in college, when I was working over forty hours a week. Some of it was under the table, because you couldn’t work that many hours. I was working in a hotel, and I was an interpreter for a psychiatrist, and I was also working as a shipping clerk at a shipping spot, *and* I was having a social life. I would go and party with my friends and try to do homework. So when I talk to students about academics, I say, “I could have had a way higher GPA [Grade Point Average] if I would have just focused on my academics and not be all over the place.” Financially, I couldn’t afford to not have the jobs that I did. Socially, I would have gone crazy in Berkeley all by myself if I didn’t have that social aspect of my education, my academics. It was tough. It was very competitive.

I used to volunteer, also, because that’s what we do. I remember that there was this young woman. We were in a study session for a class, and there was this young white woman talking to another friend of hers, and she was saying, “Oh, my God, how did you get this done? How did you get this project done? I can’t even believe...because you don’t really have very much time. You’re volunteering six hours a week and you’re supposed to get all this done. How did you do it?” I remember sitting there feeling *so* bitter, so, so bitter thinking, seriously, you’re complaining about volunteering? She had to. She didn’t want to; she had to volunteer six hours a week. You’re seriously complaining about volunteering six hours a week? I was working about forty-five hours, plus volunteering an hour a day at an elementary school. How can you complain? I remember feeling really, really bitter. I actually walked out of class feeling like I don’t belong here. I shouldn’t be in an environment where people’s concerns are that they’re spending six hours out of their week volunteering. Of course, they’re talking about what they’re going to do for the spring break. Spring break was coming. One of them was going to go Italy. They were going to do all these things that required a huge amount of money. Of course, I’m going to stay here at UC-Berkeley and work. I wasn’t going anywhere.

Part of the difficulty wasn’t in the academics. I loved to learn. I loved education. I really loved what I was doing. I did a Chicano Studies major, which was my passion. I loved everything about my academic life. The whole financial aspect and the competition, that was the difficult component of college. But, I absolutely loved my experience in college. The friends that I met there, they’re still my friends now. They’re lifelong friends, and that was because most of those friends went through the same experiences I did.

I became a member of MEChA when I was in college. I was actually a MEChA member when I was in high school and that’s how I became so involved in the UFW [United Farm Workers] and doing all these things.

LD: Can you just tell us what MEChA stands for?

MN: Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán. It’s a politically inclined group. At least from my experience, we were all about social change. We were involved in

volunteering in projects to help other Latinos to get into college and to work with Latinos who were in college, to be a support system. It was an awesome program. I used to teach a Chicano studies class in high school because of MEChA. It was really, really fun. You were having fun while you were doing something good for your own people.

LD: Did your family's attitude change during your time in college?

MN: It changed to the point where it wasn't very helpful. There were huge expectations. They felt like, she got into college and now, she has to become rich out of this.

LS: Yes, yes.

MN: You have to graduate and be rich. That, in itself, was another stressor for me. It was really difficult. I was doing Chicano Studies as a major. I was doing social work, working in the schools, working with community. The idea that I was going to make money just never crossed my mind. That wasn't really my goal. My goal was to help. Once I decided that I wanted to go to school and I decided that I wanted to work with people, I knew that it wasn't going to be about money at all. But the expectation that was built in my family's mind was that she's either going to be a doctor or an attorney, and she's going to be rich. That was really, really hard. I think that the idea that I was going to disappoint my family was really tough for me. When I decided on my major, it was hidden for the longest time, because people would say, "What are you doing in college?" I was, like, "Oh, I don't know. I'm still not sure what I want to do," even though I was half way through my major at that point.

It was really tough. Even when I was about to graduate, I still kept thinking, I need to apply to law school. I need to apply to law school. I didn't want to go to law school. I worked with an attorney and I did *not* like what she did. She made a lot of money, but I did *not* like what she did. It was not for me. It wasn't about helping people at all. I graduated and I took the LSAT [Law School Admission Test], and I started the process to apply. It's funny - I still have all of that paperwork, because I still feel like I need to accomplish that, which is crazy, because I *don't* want to go to law school. I've never wanted to be an attorney. I *said* that I wanted to be an attorney, but I really didn't want to. It was really to please my family. I remember that once Martha graduated and she started working for a nonprofit, it was such a huge disappointment for them. You spent four years going to such an expensive school for nothing? Seriously, in their mind, it was nothing. I still have to convince them that what I did was good for me. It's so many years ago that I graduated and I remember that every single time it comes up, Martha still isn't as successful as she needed to be in order to please my family's expectations. It's very strange. I do exactly what I like to do. It changed and people were supportive, but it was with those expectations.

I think that one of the great things that happened with me going to college was—a couple of my nephews have told me this since I'm one of the younger ones. In the whole generation there's a lot of nephews. My niece, the first one to go to college, the oldest one, she said, "Man, Martha, you made it so difficult for us not to be able to go to

college,” like if Martha can do it, anybody can, which I think is not the nicest comment in the world. [chuckles]

But I appreciate that I really set this trend within my family. Now there’s an expectation. My oldest niece went to college, and the next one went to college, and the third one went to college, and the fourth one just started, and the fifth one is talking about going to college. He doesn’t have the greatest grades but he’s already talking about it. “Okay, so Martha, what do I do? If I don’t have the best grades, what can I do so I can still go to college?” Now, it’s not a conversation about what are you going to do after you graduate from high school? It’s more like what kind of school are you thinking about? Are you going to go to school? How can we get you there?

LD: Yes.

MN: I think that’s an accomplishment for me.

LD: Absolutely.

MN: It’s a huge accomplishment for me to be able to set that trend. If nothing else, they can see that it wasn’t complicated. I mean it’s complicated, but it wasn’t so complicated that it couldn’t happen.

LD: Right.

MN: Especially with somebody like me - my parents don’t speak English. Even just that process was so complicated. For them, their parents speak English. As much as they don’t know about going to college, they know where to go to get resources and they can speak for themselves, as opposed to my parents who didn’t have a clue about that.

LD: Once you graduated, you said you went into nonprofit work. Tell me a little about those years afterwards

MN: I graduated from Berkeley in 2003. It took me four and a half years, which was a disappointment to everybody and to me, also. It took a semester longer than I should have. Of course, that’s not the norm, but, at that point, I was expected graduate in four years.

Once I graduated, I had already volunteered in different nonprofits in the Bay Area. Then, there was this job available at the National Latino Health Organization Program. It was as an administrative assistant. I just thought I need a job at this point, a full time job. I applied and I was so excited, I got the job. I started working there as an administrative assistant, and I quickly caught on. I was already doing nonprofit work for a very long time. I was very active. I was very committed. I was very passionate about the work that I was doing, and the more passionate you are, the more you’re willing to work and spend hours and hours of your life. I seriously ended up working more than sixty hours a week at times.

LD: Wow.

MN: Because I liked it, not because it was required or anything like that. I just loved what I did.

Actually, they promoted me to be project coordinator, and I started to coordinate a project. The project was to eradicate violence against women and to make the Latino males more conscious of domestic violence and the impact it has on the women and on the family as a whole. I remember I started to organize community gatherings. I did a lot of community organizing, which was seriously my passion. I loved exactly what I was doing. It was exactly what I wanted to do, but it wasn't paying very well. I really, really liked that experience. I worked for them for over a year, and then, the organization started to have some financial issues, so there was a choice to be made at one point.

My sister, who lives in Minnesota now, had some health issues. She has rheumatoid arthritis. She had not been diagnosed. She lived in Sartell [Minnesota]. Her significant other, his family lives here. He's from Michoacán. She lived in California and they met there. He was, also, one of the people who moved around a lot. They ended up living in Sartell.

So as I said, I graduated from college and went into the nonprofit sector. I started working at the nonprofit and they had some financial issues, so they were trying really hard to keep all their employees. What they said was, "Okay, you have two options. One is that you stay on as part time until we figure this out. It should be quick. Or two is we can lay you off so that you can collect unemployment." It's really tough to live in the Bay Area on a part time salary. So because my sister was having some issues, I thought, well, maybe, I can go to Minnesota.

Around that time, my brother passed away in Mexico. He had epilepsy, and he had an epileptic attack and he drowned.

LD: Oh, I'm so sorry.

MN: At that point, with my whole life, I almost became a little selfish. It was all about me. I kept my family at a distance, because they affected me emotionally so much. I was a disappointment to them. I didn't graduate and do exactly what they wanted. As much as I loved them and talked to them and I told them that I loved them, it was really like this is my life. I don't want you to come and mess it up for me. When my brother passed away, I realized I'm being very selfish. You know this is not how I was raised. This is not what I'm about.

I kind of went into this panic mode when they told me, "You could be laid off." I said, "Okay, lay me off so I can get unemployment." Then, when I went on unemployment, I decided to go to Texas and live in Texas, because my mom was living there. My parents separated, so she finally, moved to Texas. My mom was living there and also two of my

siblings. Their families are living in Houston. I said, "Okay, I want to come and live in Texas and I want to live close enough to my family so that I can see them often. I've already established good relationships with the people here [Northern California], but I don't want to live in Houston, because that's too close. So I ended up going to Harlingen, which is in the south. It's the Rio Grande Valley area in Texas, which is the poorest part of the country. I don't know if you know this, but it's the poorest part of the country. So, of course, looking for a job there was impossible. It was really, really hard to find a job, but I had six months of unemployment, and I kept looking for a job, and I couldn't find it. I created good relationships with my family in Houston. I would go up and see them every weekend since I wasn't working. My unemployment was good enough for me to live well in South Texas. But my plan was to go back to California if I couldn't find a job there. At least I tried to make a good relationship with my siblings. I had a lot of guilt when my brother passed away. I didn't have a good relationship with him, so I panicked and I thought, oh, my God, if somebody else dies or if I die, I don't want anybody to have this guilt. I was planning to move back to California.

My sister was undiagnosed here in Sartell, Minnesota and said, "I need help." She had three children that were very young at the time. She said, "Come and help me." It was supposed to be a short visit and I was going to come and help. As I started to live in Minnesota, I realized I needed a job to move back to California, because it's such an expensive thing to do. I started to work at a credit card company, and I made a *huge* amount of money. I was working in corporate America, but I *hated* my job. I absolutely hated my job. But it was a way for me to save money so I could move back to California.

LD: I'm sorry. She was living in Sartell, Minnesota. Where is that?

MN: It is about ten minutes from Saint Cloud. It's a small, small town.

LD: Okay. About when was this?

MN: This was in 2005.

LD: So the plan was to go back to California.

Let me step back really quick. What was your impression of Minnesota?

MN: Oh, I hated it.

LD: [laughter]

MN: It was horrific.

LD: When did you come?

MN: I came to visit her in 2004 for maybe two weeks. The first impression that I have of Minnesota is when we walked into Perkins and went to eat, and seriously, everybody

turned around to look at us. We're Latino. What do we have? I came from the Bay Area where you don't think about it. There is institutional racism and all these things that you talk about, especially coming from a field like the nonprofit sector, but you don't talk about interactive racism. You don't talk about A and B interactions where it's very blatantly stated that they don't like you or they don't necessarily want to have interaction with you, because of who you are. So I remember walking in and everybody turned around. They had this funny look to them. They were just watching us the whole time we were there. It was so uncomfortable. I remember telling my sister, "What are you doing here? These people are crazy. This is crazy. Why are you in Minnesota? It doesn't seem like it's a very friendly place." Of course, the more I talked to her, the more she talked about some of the issues within the community and how some people are very blatantly racist and make statements or how she was having difficulties with the school district that her kids were in. So the more I heard these things, the more I questioned why she was here; one, because of the winter, and, two, because of the environment.

Then I realized, okay, for the work that I want to do, there are Latinos here. At that point, there weren't as many, but there were still Latinos here. For the type of work that I want to do, I have this privilege that a lot of the Latinos live in Central Minnesota don't, and, that is that I speak the language. That's one huge privilege that they didn't have. The other one is that I understand the system. I've been part of the system long enough. I'm very familiar with the system. I've had the privilege to go to college and have that experience firsthand.

I remember as I was working at the credit card place, I was making a huge amount of money, but I hated my life. At that point, my partner moved here with me. He was just my boyfriend at the time. He started working and I started working. We were making enough money. We were saving. We were going to move back to California.

Then, Catholic Charities was hiring for somebody to coordinate a program for the new immigrants, which were primarily Somali immigrants. I thought, oh, my God, the nonprofit sector again. I remember when I decided to take that job—I interviewed and I got the job—my salary went down like \$20,000. [chuckles]

It was an interesting experience. Then, of course, financially, it created this huge shock. We were still making a good money for both of us, because we didn't have any responsibilities other than ourselves. You can live fairly well with a very small salary compared to what I was paying in the Bay Area. The salary changed drastically, but the feeling of working there and dealing with families and dealing with kids made all the difference in the world. I mean it was night and day for me. I hated the credit card job. When I started working at the nonprofit, I was making \$20,000 less, but it was so worth it. I absolutely loved my job.

LD: Was that here or in the Twin Cities?

MN: Here in Saint Cloud.

LD: Did you have a lot of contact then with the Latino community, or it was primarily the Somali community?

MN: At that point, it was primarily the Somali community.

I was trying to network a lot. That was such a huge learning experience for me, working in Central Minnesota, the only Latina. I'm five feet tall, kind of chubby, and when I smile, I have dimples. So I'm not a very threatening person at all. But I tended to speak up a lot. That's how you function. I work in a nonprofit sector. I'm a Chicano from a Chicano studies background. That's what you do; you speak up. I remember that I did kind of develop a reputation in Central Minnesota as being the little angry Mexican who goes around and questions everything that people are doing. So I remember that it taught me so much about being strategic, about seriously creating this whole other person. I was very good at that when I was in elementary school, but I had forgotten how to do that. I became a professional, especially working in Central Minnesota. Working in a nonprofit in Central Minnesota was very, very different than working in a nonprofit in California in the Bay Area. I remember there were times when I was like fighting a monster with a stick here in Central Minnesota. The communities were being disrespected everywhere, in the schools and in every environment that they needed. That was really the beginning of me becoming connected to the Latino community. I really thought that Catholic Charities, because it's new immigrants, would have a lot more Latinos, but there were probably two families that lived in the place that I was running. They weren't very engaged because it was predominantly a Somali community that we were working with.

LD: As you were beginning to network and connect with the Latino community, what were the monsters that you were fighting with sticks? What were those challenges? How were they being disrespected?

MN: The school districts had what they called diversity coordinators. I don't even know exactly what it meant, but any time they had any difficulties with a student of color, whether it would be that they got into a fight or whatever, they tended to just hand this off to this diversity coordinator. When I met this person, they weren't the best person to work in this type of environment. People were blatantly racist to students, so the kids were fighting. They were feeling like they were being oppressed, and, of course, they reacted negatively.

What ended up happening is that a lot of the students, Latinos and Somalis, were being suspended for ridiculous amounts of time, because of this. It wasn't ever dealt with by the school as a whole like they were supposed to be dealing with it. I remember feeling so frustrated with some of the things that were happening in the school district, because some of the parents were coming and saying, "My kid, they called him a wetback." Of course, he reacted negatively to the other kid and told the teacher and the teacher said, "No big deal. Stop the fighting," and completely disregarded the fact this kid had just been disrespected. Especially for Latino and Somali kids, the sense of pride is huge culturally. When these things are happening and they were just handing these at risk kids to the diversity coordinator, he wasn't really very good at what he was doing. He couldn't

communicate with the families. There were always issues with interpreters. It was such a complicated situation. The parents didn't feel like they were being heard, but they really didn't have any other option. Their jobs were here, working primarily in the Gold'n Plump [Poultry, Inc] - the chicken factory. They didn't have a choice. We either have a job and eat or we don't have a job and I complain about how the education system is not being fair to my children.

I got connected with the Somali community to figure out some of the issues there. Then, I got connected with the Latinos and figured out that there were some of the same issues. There wasn't any leadership in the Latino community in Central Minnesota. There wasn't anybody that you could go to and say, "How can we work on this? What can we do?"

I met a couple of other women just by chance. One of them is Mayuli Bales and the other one is Monica Segura. I remember that we would really mostly gather to complain. I met other Latinos and it was really exciting to meet other Latinos. It was more like a way for us to vent, because we were working in the same environments, dealing with the same institutions and organizations that were not being respectful to communities. We were also, dealing with personal experiences and being discriminated against - somebody mistreating you just because of the way you look, or not expecting for you to speak English and so saying things that you weren't supposed to understand. You were walking around Saint Cloud with a chip on your shoulder. The more that we came together, we said, "This isn't right. Something needs to happen." The Latino community is growing. In the last five years, I have seen a *huge*, huge number of families come into the Central Minnesota area and it keeps increasing. I mean it's incredible. I remember driving around when I came here and you did not see a Latino. It was rare to see a Latino. Now, I don't think I go anywhere without seeing other Latinos.

LD: What an incredible change.

MN: It's huge. It's huge. There was an organization called United Migrant Opportunity Services. It's a Latino organization that was primarily for migrant workers, but the migrant population was decreasing significantly. Most people were either staying or moving, but it wasn't the back and forth situation as it used to be. So that organization wasn't as strong and it wasn't really anything that I felt was going to be helpful to me. But, he was a Latino, the person who was running the organization. He was the well-known Latino in Central Minnesota, Lalo [Heladio] Zavala.

LD: Oh, right.

MN: It was through him that I was connected to become part of different things.

LD: I interviewed him.

MN: Okay.

It was interesting, because we didn't have anything, so these three women, initially, started talking about the need to do something. How about we create some type of support system? Through our jobs, we were able to do different things. We were really speaking for our positions within our jobs, and we were also speaking for some of the other people that weren't being served by any organization. We were all working in different organizations at the time, but we figured out that nobody was actually serving the Latino community directly. We had conversations with Centra Care [Medical Center], because some of the people were feeling like they were being mistreated when they walked in to get health services. We were talking to the county because the county wasn't able to serve the Latino community well either. We were talking to the hospital. We were talking about the interpreting companies that are here and how they lacked some skills at that time. We were talking about higher education and how we're not targeting Latinos at all. There is a Latino population here. We were talking to the school districts about they were not treating these families well.

We were so involved that we decided why don't we just start a nonprofit? Why don't we start a nonprofit of Latinos for Latinos? So we did! We actually started Perserverancia, which is the first all-Latina, female, nonprofit, and we decided that our mission was going to be Latinas strengthening Latino communities through advocacy, art, and education. We also figured out that a lot of our youth here are starting to lose their identity, and we know that the only way to really maintain it beyond family oral history is through art. I'm a huge art lover. I married an artist because he was an artist, primarily. It's a huge component of my family's history. It's a huge component of anything that we do, so I realized, well, why not utilize art to get kids more connected to their culture. It's to build that pride again.

It's been an ongoing process. All the people who are the founders and who are board members are full time employees everywhere, so we don't have the time commitment that we would like to have. But the people who are part of the board are very, very well committed to doing this work. If nothing else, what we really started was a bridge for Latinos who are experiencing something to different resources in the community. I think that we have made an impact in terms of how Latinos are viewed. Unfortunately, we are the example of what Latinos are. I walk around not just being Martha; it's Martha, the Latina who gets to be noticed in smaller towns—I'm pretty well known here—who is known as the representation of Latinos, which I think is unfair, but I do think that it is my responsibility, since I do have access to these people, to make sure that they understand that you can't assume that all Latinos are coming from the same background. I mean, you just can't make that assumption.

LD: When did you start it?

MN: I think it was in 2009. I think it was February 2009 we became established as an official nonprofit. We started talking since I moved here, but we were never an official organization until last year.

LD: How long were you at Catholic Charities?

MN: I was there about a year and a half.

LD: Then, afterwards, what did you do?

MN: I met Steve [Stephen] Casanova, who was a Chicano Studies professor here at Saint Cloud State. He was seriously a father figure here for any Chicano who moved into the Central Minnesota area. We became very, very good friends and he insisted that I apply to Saint Cloud State University. I kept telling him, "No, I have my nonprofit work. I am not going to go work for an institution." He kept insisting and insisting, and I finally said, "You know what? To please you, I'm going to go and apply," because there was a position as a student of color recruiter for admissions. He insisted and insisted, so, finally, I said, "You know what? I am going to apply, but I'm not guaranteeing that if they offer me the job I'm going to take it." He was like, "Just apply." He convinced me. I applied at Saint Cloud State, and I got the offer. He called me again and said, "Okay. So they offered you the job. Think about it. If nothing else, you're going to be a state employee and it will be good if you want to work at trying to make a difference."

It's true. I was really working in the nonprofit sector you work a lot with immediate needs, a lot of things that are absolutely necessary in that instant, but you're not really making a bigger impact in terms of future generations. One thing that he taught me is that if you really want to make an impact with Latinos or any communities of color in Central Minnesota, the impact needs to be made from the beginning. That includes getting an education, because in that way you're not the only one working towards creating change for the families. So you really need to get them to college. I had worked at college access programs as a college student, but I had never really talked or even thought, oh, I'm going to work in a higher education environment. He insisted. He really did make a good argument. He was right. I can't really make an impact unless we get more people of color educated. It's not going to happen. There are a lot of people working in the nonprofit sector already doing the immediate needs. So I should really maybe consider taking the job.

So I did. I took the job. I started working as a student of color recruiter, and about three months later, I got a promotion from just being a counselor to an assistant director of admissions of student of color recruitment. That was a learning experience for me. I went from not having any money whatsoever in the nonprofit sector to having a budget, which is crazy. [chuckles]

It was the funnest part of my life. I established a couple of recruitment strategies that they still use at the Admissions Office here. One of them was to really connect to the - communities of color through the grassroots component, and not just to assume that the traditional models of recruitment were going to function. I did a lot of family/community events. I did the normal stuff like going to fairs and all these things, but I spent a lot of my time going to health fairs. Where mostly nonprofits were gathering, there was Martha with Saint Cloud State University trying to make that connection. I really built community.

I think Saint Cloud State, as much as it's located in Central Minnesota, is better now, but it's not the friendliest place in the world. It was known as White Cloud. We have been able to establish ourselves with the community, and we do have good programs here. I wasn't just recruiting because it was my job. I really truly believe that the cost is good in terms of what people can afford. It's a state institution. We have really good programs. So I don't think that a reputation that the school established ten, fourteen, fifteen years ago as being not very friendly to communities of color - especially when you have people like me working in the institution - should limit the options for students, especially for students who live in Central Minnesota. This was before I had children, and I put so much time and effort into making sure that we established these relationships with communities of color as a whole, but especially with the Latino community, because we didn't have any relationship with the Latino community at that point.

Then, I had my first daughter, who was born in 2008, and I decided I couldn't travel as much as I could before. The Mexican traditional mom kicked in.

LD: [laughter]

MN: I'm a mom before anything else. I couldn't even think of leaving my kid for overnight because I had to travel for my job. I just couldn't do it.

An opportunity came about with Multicultural Student Services. They were creating this new position where they were going to have an academic advisor working with Multicultural Students Services, because mainstream advising doesn't work for our students of color. There's a huge range of reasons. One of them is navigating the system. So we need to actually go and reach out to where they are, as opposed to waiting for them to come and meet with me. I got really excited about the idea of working with nonprofit like programs again, but working specifically with students of color in the institution. I was very successful at bringing them in through the Admissions Office, but in terms of our retention numbers, we weren't doing so well. That was really hard for me, because I felt I was out there telling families, "Send your student to school. If I could do it, they can do it, too," and, then, we're bringing them into college and we're not being able to provide the support that they need to be successful here. So when I got that, it hit me. I don't want to do recruitment without any follow through. I was doing some advising, unofficial advising, as admissions counselor, but it really wasn't my job. It wasn't something that I could do all the time. When this opportunity became available, it was a temporary position. It was a one-year contract. It's really nice, because you can take a leave of absence from one job and go into another. I needed a full time job—I was a mom—especially now that I had a responsibility to my child. So I did take a leave of absence from my admissions work, and decided to work for Multicultural Student Services for a year.

Actually, a little before that year ran out, I became pregnant again, so I have a second child. Right when I went on maternity leave, my year was going to be up and the Academic Advising Center had an opening. I negotiated, along with my supervisor at

Multicultural Student Services, so that that advising position, which was a permanent position, became a liaison position between the Multicultural Student Services and the Advising Center. Multicultural Student Services didn't have to have a position because, financially, it's very tough for Multicultural Student Services to have a budget for that. But, there was a position for advising students, and because they're students, I'm still doing my job as an advisor.

LD: Right.

MN: But I'm specifically focusing a lot of my efforts onto my students of color.

The Advising Center agreed, so I applied and I got the job, which is really, really cool. I didn't move offices. This is one of Multicultural Student Services offices. I do advising very differently than mainstream advising. I do a lot of what they call intrusive advising. I'm really all in people's business.

LD: [laughter]

MN: Like why aren't you doing what you're supposed to be doing? I try really hard. I guess one of the advantages to being first generation and being a person of color and being the first one to go to college is that you have a very clear understanding of what that experience is. For some of the students that walk in here there's no understanding of how to navigate the system, I'm very clear on what I need to do to help, as opposed to making assumptions about what the student should know once they go to college. I really, really like what I do. I'm currently working on getting a master's degree in higher education administration, because I want to get paid more. [chuckles] But I really, really like what I do. It's exactly what I want to be doing at this point.

LD: We've talked a lot about kind of the needs of the Latino community here in Central Minnesota. What are some of the things that the Latino community has contributed to Central Minnesota?

MN: There's a huge range of things the Latino community has contributed. One of the things that we do very often or that is done in Central Minnesota is that we talk about diversity, so it's this *thing* out there. I don't think that there is really an understanding of what that means. When we say diversity, there is really no understanding of what that means. I know that for some people, at least in my experience of people here in Central Minnesota, when they say, "Oh, I'm so glad that you live here because of the diversity that you bring," they really don't understand. They probably just mean my skin color and the difference in terms of what people look like. But I think in terms of, like, values, it's been very interesting. I've worked with a lot of little areas in Central Minnesota.

Religiously, for example. There is a Catholic church that caters to the Latino community here. Even in that sense, I know that the other people who are part of the congregation who are not Latino can see the sense of community, and I don't think there is really an understanding of really what community is until you come to a *Día de la Virgen de*

Guadalupe (the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe) event on December 12. I think that in itself is a *huge* contribution. People didn't really understand what that was. I think that there are these stereotypes, these ideas, of what Mexican immigrants are like and what they're here to do. But I think that once you take a look at a community in its own environment and doing exactly what it wants to do, it is a huge example of where the rest of us should be.

The same goes for Day of the Dead. The impact that it has on death and dying in Central Minnesota for young children, is really interesting to see. You don't, at least in my experience in the American culture, tend to see a lot of children at funerals. You don't really talk about death, people dying. You say they went to heaven and that's as far as it goes. The Day of the Dead gives an opportunity to celebrate that.

I think from seeing children grow up in the school districts, you can see that it makes a huge difference in the way people perceive each other, beyond what those particular events are. It's really how you perceive each other. There is a huge impact. In the older generations there is not so much, because they're kind of set in their ways and they still think of Latinos as this immigrant population that is coming and bringing violence and drugs and all these things. But, I think for the younger populations, we are making a huge impact in making sure that they view Latinos as what we are instead of how we are showed in the media. We often see very negative images of who we are in the media. I guess that's really the biggest impact.

Personally—I'm a little selfish in this sense—having other Latinos around has made it so much easier to live in Central Minnesota. It really has.

LD: Yes.

MN: There are still a lot of things that you can't get here in Central Minnesota, which is interesting. I remember talking to one of the faculty members here and said, "You're going to have to order stuff online to be able to cook a meal because I don't want to drive all the way to the Twin Cities to buy something." It's funny, because I do end up going to Mercado Central all the time.

LD: [chuckles]

MN: Oh, we need this and this and this. Make a list. We have to go and buy stuff. That's one of the inconveniences.

The other thing is that my two daughters, both Chicanos, are going to grow up in an environment where their identity is not very well known. When I'm asked, "So where are you from? What are you?" I always say, "Mexican, Mexican American," because I don't want to go into this explanation of what Chicanismo is.

LD: Yes.

MN: I feel that because such a huge part of my identity is very well established with me, it's not a problem. I think it's problematic for my daughters. My husband identifies as Chicano. I identify as Chicano. That's their culture. To not be able to have access to that is really tough. As much as there is this huge impact that Latinos have made, there's very different generations of Latinos in Central Minnesota. There's not a lot of Chicanos. That's the tough part about living in Central Minnesota.

I love my environment. I love the academic world, and this is where I'm going to make a huge distinction here. People of color struggle in the school districts when you have issues of communication, or where you have problems with time and trying to be involved in their children's experience. But if you're a type of parent who has time and who has the commitment to go and say, "You can't be treating my kids like that. I'm watching you," it makes a huge difference. I hate the fact that's the case, that you have to make sure that you establish yourselves with them as parents to make sure that your children are not mistreated.

I think, in that sense, my kids would have a good experience in academics. My husband and I talk about that. He's from L.A., from the San Fernando Valley, and I'm from Salinas. We both had crazy experiences in school. We keep thinking we have to go back to California. We have to go back for the culture and the people, but then we remember. I remember that four people died when I was about to graduate from high school because of gang violence. It hasn't changed very much. His experience is very similar. As much as I don't like the fact that there is not a lot of culture here, one of the things that I appreciate and I know that other Latinos appreciate, because we've had that exposure to other environments, is that it's not something that we worry about so much here in Central Minnesota. If my kids went to high school, I'm not going to be so concerned that they're going to join a gang as much as I would be if they grew up in Salinas. I think that some of us make choices just based on what we were dealing with. So many of my friends, they were fully involved in gangs and that was their lifestyle. To even consider that that would be what my kids would deal with, it just doesn't sound like something I want to do.

I feel privileged to be able to make that choice, that conscious choice. I do consider myself very privileged. I think that privilege came with a significant amount of struggle, but I don't feel like a victim. I think that a lot of people... we tend to internalize things to the point where we're like, ohhh, I did it by the boot straps, whatever that saying is. To me, that wasn't the case. There was one of my professors—his name was Professor John U. Ogbu—who was an anthropologist. My favorite quote in the world is, "I didn't succeed in spite of. I succeeded because of." It still stays with me so many years later. It wasn't like poor Martha; she was struggling and she made it. It was more like because of the situation that I was dealing with, I did what I had to do to make things better for myself, but also for everybody in my community to make things better.

It's been an interesting ride. Moving from the Bay Area to Central Minnesota has been culture shock to me.

LD: [laughter] I can only imagine.

MN: There are certain things that you take for granted when you live in an environment like the Bay Area. We're like, oh, do you want to go see a play. Go see a play on Wednesday night. Living in Central Minnesota, there's not a lot happening, especially for somebody who is like my husband. He's an artist, a Chicano artist, who has a very specific type of art. He has had a hard time. We weren't married at that point, so I said to him, "I *completely* understand. If you want to just break it off and go back home, I completely understand that" He was pretty well established in southern California, so it's been a struggle for him to be up here. I think that, for him, family is more than anything else. So he stayed, and he's here, and he's still doing his thing. He works here and there. He's getting more connected to the metro area. A lot of his work he does online. He creates logos and fliers and that kind of thing. I know it's not to the potential that it could have been for him. I'm very grateful that he stays with me.

I don't expect to live here the rest of my life. Of course, now I'm a mom, all about being a mom. When I consider the option for my girls, it's hard for me to make that choice to say, well, I'm going to take them back because I want to be around culture. The other thing is there are always summers and I can send them back to California to visit my family or to Texas or to Mexico, wherever they would like to be. Part of the tradition in my family is that every December you go and spend Christmas and New Year's in Mexico. Now, we didn't this year, because my mom was paranoid about the violence in Mexico at this point. I know that they're going to be connected to their culture in that sense, but I wish it was more often and not so limited.

LD: As you look forward, what are some of your hopes for yourself personally, your family, but then, also, for the community, for the Latino community in Central Minnesota or in Minnesota in general?

MN: For me, I'm doing my higher education administration master's and I'm starting to work on my thesis. This past semester is when I had to decide on a topic. I already had a topic in mind. I'm going to do some research on students of color going into higher education. It's the type of work that I do, and it's very interesting to me. It was interesting because my mom was visiting for the holidays. My master's program is on the weekends. It's Friday from five to nine and, then, Saturday, also, all day long. I told my mom, "Oh, by the way. On Friday, I'm not coming and my husband is staying home with the girls." My mom says, "You're leaving your poor husband"—of course, he's a male, not supposed to do these things—"to take care of the girls all day and by the time you come back, they may be sleeping, so you're not going to see them all day." It's like a question, what kind of mother are you? What kind of Mexican mother are you?

I have this idea of what I want to do as my thesis topic. As I'm walking out, it was very interesting to me. It struck me, because, of course, as a professional—I think that any ethnicity deals with this—and as a female, you're always kind of struggling with the idea that you're not spending enough time with your kids because you are spending so much time at work. So you're already dealing with a little bit of guilt, and, then, there's the

cultural aspect of that where I'm supposed to be the go-to person and my kids are more attached to my husband than they are to me. That's hard to swallow. Then, of course, here's your mother who is a traditional Mexican woman telling you, "What are you doing? You're not doing what you're supposed to be doing." As I'm walking out, of course I stop. I don't even think that it was for her; I think it was more for me. Out loud, I said, "Mom, I think about the impact that it's going to make for my girls. I'm the first in my family to go to college. I'm a female. I'm a Latina. I'm a Mexican woman graduating from college and now going to get my master's degree. Now, forget that aspect. Think about the relationship they're going to build with the men in their lives later on. They're with their father who cares for them. In my experience, my dad was very distant. He was the person who earned money to make sure that we had food on the table, but we really didn't have a very close relationship. Just think of the impact that's going to make to my girls. Their mother is the first in their family to graduate from college and get a master's degree, and then for their father to be so involved in their lives." I really didn't say it for her, because she looked at me like what are you talking about?

[chuckles]

MN: It was more for me to say it out loud, to say "I'm not doing anything wrong. I really am doing the best that I can for my family." It really is, outside of my own professional goals, an opportunity for them to see what they can accomplish. If it was a struggle for me, it shouldn't be a struggle for them, because I'm very aware of the system, especially working in higher education. I'm very aware of how this works. What an accomplishment for them to see their mother—forget that it's Martha—this woman who came from the environment that she did going to get a bachelor's degree and, now, a master's degree, and possibly an EDD [Doctor of Education].

As I'm walking out, I completely scratch out my topic, and I said, "I'm not going to do that." I actually want to really find out about that experience *in* Central Minnesota. So my thesis topic is going to be about Latinas working in higher ed. as faculty, academics, staff, or administrators, to talk about that experience in terms of the impact of culture in their lives. One of the things I have found for myself is that you still have that cultural schizophrenia going on, where you are one persona in the academic environment and you're somebody completely different at home. But it's a requirement, especially in Central Minnesota, where just being me makes a statement. I'm the stereotype of a Mexican woman, if you look at me. Seriously, I'm short, chubby, dark, have long black hair. It's interesting, because you're conscious of what statement you're making at all times. You know that you're already making a statement without even opening your mouth just by the way you look, especially in Central Minnesota. You're conscious even about the way you dress. I have a tendency to wear Rebozo all the time. Of course, when I put on my Rebozo and walk out, and as I'm walking into the institution, I realize, "Do I look too ethnic today?"

LD: Yes.

MN: It's an interesting thing, because I don't want to be the token. I don't want to be this walking token or stereotype of a Mexican woman, but I also don't want to give up something that's important to me and that I feel that I shouldn't have to explain.

LD: Right.

MN: It's been a struggle working in higher education. It's a very interesting experience in itself, because you have academics who believe themselves to be very open. So when people make comments about how beautiful your shawl is, or how colorful you look, it's just something you have to deal with. You have to be able to deal with it appropriately in a way where you're not just saying, "Sure, it's okay for you to stereotype me," but also not to burn bridges with the people that you work with. It's an interesting struggle. I'm very curious about that. In a sense, I guess that bridge isn't too different for the community as a whole.

I know there's Latinos here. I know that we tend to be very invisible, unfortunately, within Central Minnesota. [sigh] I think it's a normal thing throughout the nation, but in Central Minnesota we have so many different statuses, like immigration statuses within our families. You know one family can have a citizen, a resident, and an undocumented person. We try not to attract too much attention. I think it's important that we establish that we are here and that we need recognition beyond Latinos recognizing that there are other Latinos. There's got to be a recognition over all. I think the only way that's going to happen is if the Latino community is willing to speak up. I don't mean, you know, as much as I would like to protest, but to me it's through doing things like art and having families be more involved in mainstream programs that are available to them without it being a tense situation for anybody - without them attracting attention to themselves if they're concerned about somebody's immigration status here.

I'm closely working with Casa Guadalupe. Perseverancia and Casa Guadalupe are two nonprofits that serve Latino families where we are trying very, very hard to create programming for youth and create programming for mothers and for families as a whole. We're trying to make sure that they're aware of what resources are here, but, also, to be able to help those youth create that confidence in themselves saying, "You can be successful. Look at us. We're not any better than you *at all*. If anything, some of us struggled even more than you did and we're here. All you have to do is ask for help." We have people working in the immigration field. We have somebody who works in the legal system. I work in higher ed. So the resources are here. Beyond ourselves, we have connections to resources that are mainstream resources. Establishing that culture hasn't been easy. It's still a work in progress, but I do feel that you do start building community through art and through education and we're in that process.

So I'm very, very hopeful in terms of what this community will look like in the future. The population of Latinos I think is expected to grow over 100 percent in the next five years, and I know that it's not going to be just limited to the Twin Cities. I know for a fact that the population is going to increase even more in this environment, especially in higher ed., and I know that with Latinos coming to college, it also attracts families to

come to Central Minnesota. We're really trying very hard to make it a welcoming environment, and I think that we've made some impact. I don't know that we're exactly where we would like to be, but we're working toward that. It's an ongoing battle. It's busy. I think it's busy for anybody who is like me, a professional going to school full time—well, part time—having a nonprofit, and being a mom.

LD: Yes. That's incredibly busy.

MN: It is, but it's all worth it. It's fun. I love what I do. I absolutely adore my kids, and I think that anything that I do that's good for our society is good for them. In a sense I'm being a good mom just by doing the type of work that I do inside of my job. I like what I do.

LD: Is there anything else—we've kind of covered the gamut—that you'd like to share either about your experiences personally or in your work or in higher education or in the community? Is there anything else that you'd like to leave us with?

MN: I can't think of anything specific. I guess in terms of the values that we have as families, as much as it was a struggle for me, it almost sounded kind of negative. I love my family to death. Actually, my family just left right now after Christmas. Yesterday, I was moping around. I'm so lonely. I miss that. As much as it was a struggle for me to leave my household once I went to college, I think any experience that I had before when we were moving around, and we were homeless at times and struggling, at the same time, those are the best memories that I have of my family. We would get together and we would take care of each other. We were very, very close at that point. I think it's when you get into the style or the routine that you build in the United States that things get a little more difficult. Parents are working so much and they don't really have time to be with you or to deal with you. So, of course, you're making some choices that may not be the best choices, because you have that freedom to make those choices.

Family is such a huge aspect of it and, I guess, for me, one of the things that I'm trying to find is a way to bridge all of those things to make sure that we understand that parents and families have to work. There's nothing you can do about that. But we need to find ways to do it so the children aren't left kind of hanging because the parents don't have the option to be able to guide the students in a certain manner. It's a struggle that we're dealing with.

Even personally, like I said, I'm working all over the place, so I don't spend enough time with my family. Again, I go back to privilege. I'm privileged to be able to have the job that I do so that my husband can spend more time with my children. Right now, we don't have daycare. Financially, it's not the best option, because, of course, we're not rich. We made the conscious choice. You know, you do art so you can potentially work from home a little.

LD: Yes.

MN: And we're choosing not to send our kids to daycare, because they need to have the home values.

I am also very aware that that's not a possibility for everybody. I'm trying to find a way to assist in that process. At the nonprofit that I'm a part of we're trying to find ways to maintain those values. There are cultural aspects that sometimes we don't consider to be crucial for somebody's development, but we know that they're important in making sure that they're successful as people. They become better people.

I guess I'm very, very happy with the way that I've done things. It's been primarily influenced by culture and family. I wouldn't be who I am without my family and I wouldn't be who I am without my culture. It really is kind of a guiding principle for me. Everything that I do is because of those values that I learned and that I hope we are able to maintain within our families. We're all about community, I think—at least that has been my perception since I was born. We really need to work towards making sure that we maintain that. It's not very easy in an environment like Central Minnesota where you don't have that readily available to you at all times, and where you still have parents working so much. But, I think it's one of the biggest things. It's like a guiding principle. I think it should be a guiding principle for our community as a whole.

LD: Well, your story is really powerful and inspiring. I thank you personally for sharing it, and, also, on behalf of the Historical Society. As I said, I think it's really important to hear those struggles and to help inspire people in your own family and, then, all the people that you're helping here, the students and families. So, really, you're a very, very busy woman, and I thank you for taking the time and sharing your story.

MN: Thank you so much. Again, I'm honored for being part of this process, being invited to be part of this process. I'm excited to know that people like you and I who have similar experiences, that those voices are being heard, especially in Minnesota. In the Midwest you don't hear very often about that experience.

LD: Yes.

MN: It's probably because people assume that there's not very many of us here, but there are.

LD: Exactly. That's why this project... I'm very honored to be a part of it, as well. I'm all about getting voices who aren't heard, heard. So thank you for sharing your story.

MN: Thank you.