Carmen Robles
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

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Saint Paul, Minnesota

Carmen Robles **- CR**
Lorena Duarte **- LD**

LD: Today is Saturday, February 5, 2011, and I'm Lorena Duarte. I'll be conducting the interview today here in Saint Paul in the home of Carmen Robles.

First of all, I just want to say thank you on behalf of the Minnesota Historical Society and me, personally. I'm so happy to be here…

CR: Me, too.

LD: And to be recording your story. It's just a real thrill. We've known each other for a long, long time. To be here on the other side of the table hearing your story is just a joy and a privilege. So thank you very much.

CR: Thank you. The honor is mine.

LD: This is for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project.

I'm so excited to be here. If we could start with your name.

CR: My name is Carmen Robles.

LD: And your date of birth, please?

CR: March 26 1949.

LD: Can you tell me your occupation?

CR: I'm a program director for the non-profit agency by the name of Association for Nonsmokers-Minnesota. Its acronym is ANSR. ANSR is the lead agency in tobacco health and prevention in the Twin Cities areas. My charge is Latino outreach. I developed an outreach program based on the youth apprenticeship system of combining academics with hands-on-experiences through community service activities. The program is called Jóvenes de Salud, which translates to Youth Community Health Workers.

LD: Excellent. We're going to get into your career and your work in the community a little bit later.

But, first, I just want to start with where you were born and a little bit about your family. Tell us your parent's names and, then, siblings, etcetera.

CR: Wonderful. I was born on the *beautiful* island of Brooklyn, New York.

[laughter]

CR: My father is Luis Mario Robles. My mother is Maria Ascención Trinidad. I have nine siblings. There are three of us from the same mother and father myself, Maria Luisa and Luis Mario, Jr. Robles; I have two other siblings on my father's side Samuel and Sandra Robles and another five on my mother's side Elizabeth Cruz, Peachy, Maria Evelyn (aka/Tata), Roberto Jr. and Migdalia Camacho.

The story has it that they were both from the pueblo of Ciales in Puerto Rico. My mother was a cook at the governor's house, Muñoz Marin, and my father was a delivery boy for a local laundry, he rode a bicycle for his deliveries. They were married in the mountains of Cialis. Their first child Maria Luisa aka Lisa Marie was born in Puerto Rico in 1946. My parents came to the United States in 1947. During a fifteen-year research on my mother's background I learned her flight to the United States was so horrendous that she never again boarded a plane. Never again went back to Puerto Rico. My father came on a ship in April 1947, my mother followed on an American Airline flight in November of the same year. My brother Luis Mario Robles, Jr. was born in 1950.

When I was two and Luisa five years old, my father took us from our mother to buy us a pair of shoes and we never came back.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: I'm very sorry. [Carmen pauses]

LD: Oh, no, that's okay.

CR: My father abandoned my mother in Brooklyn and fled with us to Manhattan where his mistress became our 'mother'. My stepmother was the one who raised us. She and my father had two children Samuel and Sandra Robles.

My home life was full of violence and short of love. When I was a teen, my sister Luisa knew that she wanted to get out of our house and at 17 she went to live with a *tia* [aunt] in Queens, my father's older sister. Luisa was anxious to leave our home and embrace the American culture. But I loved living in New York and I loved sneaking out to explore the city. We grew up Pentecostal so we were a very, very, very religious household. At our

house there was never any laughter and you couldn't do a whole lot of things, but the things you could do, I really enjoyed –like staying at church all day long and doing group activities at church with lots of music. I used to get punished a lot, often having to pray for long periods of time in the front of the pulpit. I used those times to imagine and to just go off in my head and dream. My sister dealt with our reality, but I didn't I really enjoyed my youth and *las maldades* [mischievous things] that I could do. Those little things.

At fourteen my father drove me to Brooklyn to meet my biological mother. That's when I learned my true identity. At that fateful reunion I met a boy my age and 'fell in love'. Not fully grasping the craziness around me, my attention settled on the boy. I became even more daring and would skip going to church to sneak off to Brooklyn. It wasn't long before my father figured out what I was doing. One day, my father tells me, "That's enough. That's all I can stand. I can't stand no more." And it wasn't long before he altered the path of my life by putting me on a bus and sending me to Neillsville Wisconsin to live with his younger sister. I was fifteen years old.

For many years, I thought I had been sent away because I had a boyfriend and I would sneak away, but we were just kids, and it wasn't really anything serious as you could consider by today's standards. The reality was that my father and stepmother were planning to move to Puerto Rico and my step mother did not want an unruly teenager around.

In Neillsville, Wisconsin my father's sister was married to a Turkish man, a doctor in this small mid-western town. They had six young children and I was sent there to help out. Two years later, when I had graduated from high school, I went right back to New York to look for you know who. Luckily, I didn't find him…

[laughter]

CR: Whew. That's was a close one. And I came running back to the Midwest because in New York I was no longer able to maneuver as I had before.

In Neillsville, Wisconsin, I was forced to learn how to read and I was forced to learn how to write, the family valued education.

LD: You hadn't learned up to that point?

CR: Not academics. School was something that never interested me and my whole household was Spanish, so English was really a means to an end. It really didn't hold that much importance to me. I liked it because I could sing to the songs, and I could understand things. But I always liked Spanish. That's always been my number one language. I could never spell right though, my two worlds were always colliding. I think that's why I work with kids today, because I know exactly how living in two worlds can be, with that bilingual thing and, then, I had an older sister who excelled in everything…

LD: Sure.

CR: I did excel in being able to fabricate lots of stories.

[laughter]

LD: So you had a very rich kind of internal life, a very rich imagination.

CR: Yes. Yes.

When I graduated from high school, I came to Minnesota I attended court reporting I found that school. When I finished there and actually went to look for a job in court reporting, I hated that vocation because I couldn't spell. I just focused on the administrative end of my career. In those times it was secretarial, administrative, data entry kind of things.

By the time I was twenty-one, my family was saying things like *porque tú no estás casada?* [Why aren't you married?]

LD: [chuckles]

CR: They would tell me you should marry a nice educated, *gringo* guy, though they never used those words. It was very clear in my Wisconsin household that it was important to assimilate. It was very important. My uncle in Wisconsin was from Turkey, and my *titi* [affectionate term for aunt] was from Puerto Rico, so it was a real multicultural household with all these Turkey-Ricans running around.

LD: Turkey-Ricans? [chuckles]

CR: Yes, that's what I call my cousins. The household was one where it was important to assimilate. Then, I also had to assimilate into the religious aspect of that life I grew up Pentecostal but in Neillsville, I had to go to a Catholic church.

LD: They were Catholic?

CR: Yes. I had that internal struggle, Pentecostals believed that you didn't go and pray to statues and that the Catholic Church was really like the devil's den that will lure you in there and sap your soul away or something like that. In my *titi's* household, you had to go to church. It was Catholicism; I had an internal struggle with that. When I did get married—I got married in Wisconsin—and got married at the Catholic Church. I remember taking lots of Catholic-type classes that really didn't help in the end.

LD: ¿Entonces que más paso? [Then, what else happened?]

CR: I was in the Midwest from the age of fifteen, and then I got married and still lived in Minnesota, because this is where I went to school and it was close to Neillsville.

I had my first child, Lisa Jo Wewerka, in 1972 and when I was pregnant with my second child, Benjamin Thomas Wewerka, my *titi* Carmen in New York passed away, and that's my father's sister. She was a positive strong female role model for me. I had her name, I always felt I was special to her. When she passed away and I went to New York, my *abuela* [grandmother] would try to communicate with me in Spanish, I could understand what she was saying, but I couldn't speak Spanish to her. So my grandmother would just cry, she had lost a daughter to an early death and a granddaughter to the Mid West. When I was younger she would always comb my hair—maybe that was in my head, but those are my memories. She just cried saying that they shouldn't have sent me away, and that now I couldn't speak Spanish. I came back from that funeral a different person. I came back totally Latina, seeking my roots, needing to have it, like that episode in *Star Trek* where Spock needs to mate and they have *get* the ship to Vulcan

LD: [laughter]

CR: And Jim breaks all the rules to get him there! It was just like that.

[laughter]

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: Of course, that confused my husband to death, because he had a whole different background. His father was from Czechoslovakia and his mother was from Sicily. Like me he was first generation, so he also had his own baggage to carry. It was a difficult thing to fuse, all of a sudden, this thing I didn't realize that I had been searching for. I think that helped deteriorate our relationship and helped break up our home.

LD: How old were you?

CR: I was in my early to mid twenties.

Of course, it was the time of the modern woman and no fault divorce, and you can do it on your own, *baby*. So that's what I did. Immediately after the divorce, I realized I had nothing. All of a sudden, I didn't have a home. All of a sudden, I had no job. All of a sudden, I had the realization that while it sounded easy and good, the reality of it was that it was a very difficult road to travel in a multicultural, joint custody household, with the kids going back and forth.

Needing to support myself, and the kids, I had to get back into the work force fast! I got a part time job in Minneapolis. The gentleman there—it was a small structural firm and it was family-owned—had heard of Centro Cultural Chicano which had just started in a warehouse in this creepy neighborhood - a tacky, dark-looking warehouse. That was where Centro Cultural Chicano started. I was happy to go into that building which was supported by United Way. Centro Cultural Chicano housed many little offices in these little tiny cubicles.

In one of those offices was the Puerto Rican Civic and Social Association. The Puerto Rican Civic and Social Association was made up of two or three families: the Ortega's, the Vega's, the Perez's, and then various young people who came to go to Macalester College or to attend the colleges here. Through them, I got connected back to my Puerto Rican roots. It took a long time. I think I was just twenty-nine when I finally connected to that missing Puerto Rican piece.

It was exhilarating, but economically and financially I was destitute. At that time the Spanish Speaking Affairs Council came into existence and was directed by José Trejo. José hired as his assistant Elsa Vega Perez.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: Elsa Vega Perez asked me if I would help at this first Latino conference in registration. For me it was an opportunity to connect to resources, because I needed resources. I had nothing. I was living on people's couches and hauling around two kids. I went to that conference with the intention of making a few dollars, and being able to get to those registration tables for food stamps and the registration table for housing and the registration table for medical stuff. But, by the second day, it was obvious to me I'd never get close to those registration tables because there were so many people. But, at the other end of the row, there was this small booth, and it was always empty. On that last day, Saturday, I decided to go to that small booth. It was the Latino Republicans [laughter] who also happened to be the Latino business owners. That was on a Saturday, and by Monday, I was working. I had a part time job with Fermin Aragon and his company, IMPACT. He was doing outsourcing for a big corporation on data entry. By Monday, I was doing data entry. Within, I think, three months, IMPACT secured an entry-level position on a temporary basis with Honeywell Corporation. I stayed there for seven years. I started at Honeywell as a procurement file clerk for I think it was fifteen buyers. When I left, I was at their executive corporate offices as what was called a floater administrator. I would be able to do temporary assignments with high-level executives, like the CEO. At that point, it exposed me to a lot of initiatives that the corporations were doing in that era. That was in the very early 1980s.

One of the initiatives that was taking place building trade fairs with major corporations so that Latino, African-American, Indian-owned businesses, and woman-owned businesses would be able to know how corporations do their purchasing. How does Honeywell buy toilet paper? How does 3M buy light bulbs? What is the process? I've had wonderful mentors throughout my life: Emil Torres, who passed away he was a Honeywell executive, Mona Capiz, Richard Aguilar. These trade shows really took hold and created an environment where I wanted to put my attention to working within the Latino community. I came to a place at Honeywell where I really wasn't going to get to do anything that I felt was significant. Maybe I should have paid more attention and just paid my bills.

Instead, I was out looking for something. I do remember those early days when people would call me a zealot—I never knew what that meant—because I was always into the

Latino issues. A wonderful counselor once told me, "Gee, it's just that you're a little bit too Hispanic." She was like, "Just tone it down." I think I understood what she meant now when I look back. At that time it meant to me, "Don't be who you are," which is how I felt when I went to Wisconsin, so I didn't want to do that. I always found myself fighting with everybody. I was always told, at the very beginning of my career, "Don't burn any bridges." But I found myself blowing up bridges, just like no! [Carmen makes the sound of something blowing up] [chuckles] And then having to create another road to go back to what I wanted to do.

I've had wonderful experiences. I helped write the first Hispanic Chamber of Commerce grant and helped with the administrative decisions there in the very first few years of the chamber. From there…

LD: I'm sorry. This was after Honeywell?

CR: Yes.

LD: So after Honeywell, were you working independently?

CR: Yes. I worked independently, mostly because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had a year where I could go back to Honeywell. But I wanted to work in the community. I liked the entrepreneurial aspects of my independence. My father owned a couple of business when I was young—well, it was my stepmother. It was a grocery store and a candy store. I've always been exposed to entrepreneurial activity. We've never been the eight to five sort of people. Even my uncle in Wisconsin as a doctor, was on call twenty-four hours a day. That was the rhythm that I could easily get into.

LD: Sure.

CR: Then, of course, you have the financial end. That's when I would do face painting and do different things to generate some extra dollars to be able to pay for things. We were doing a lot of bartering also. That was another way to survive.

After Honeywell, I worked in the community. I did work with the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce. I did work with Centro Cultural Chicano. I ran a woman's program there called Nosotras. That position really taught me the plight of Latina women.

LD: When was this, roughly?

CR: That must have been in the late 1980s.

LD: Okay. Tell me about that work, what it taught you and what the community was like at that time.

CR: In the late 1970s, early 1980s, it was the explosion of Chicanos. I *loved* the Chicanos. I loved Cento Cultural Chicano. I know they changed their name, to Centro, but that's okay, old timers remember.

LD: [chuckles]

CR: I love the Chicano Venceranes. They forged everything that's here in Minnesota. This prestigious interview right here, that was forged by the Chicano Leaders by our pioneers like Marcella Trujillo**,** Irene Gomez-Bethke, Maria Silva the women that I looked up to, the women that helped mold me, like Sandra Vargas. I've been in very prestigious company here.

The woman's program at Centro Cultural Chicano was to help give women resources. You know, it is different for American women, when we have a household. Even with me, when you separate from your husband you go learn a trade and life goes on. But with the Latina household, the new immigrants or those very Latino households that stay true to the form of the cultural aspects of their lives that really isn't a choice. Family is first and foremost. Your husband comes home. He's drunk. He beats you. He goes out with his girlfriend every other Saturday. Recommending resources that will eliminate the man from the household is not a good solution for a Latina woman. Perhaps, bringing in a spiritual component might be a better fit for that family or a counselor that can talk to the family in the home. While it was a woman's program, it had an open door policy for the men. If I had a woman come in who was under a violent situation, just because we were able to talk about him, I noticed that the man would change. They were under stress. They didn't have a job. They were being stopped by the police, and worse, immigration. They're out there being kicked and then they come home and they kick the next one. It's that violent cycle. That position really taught me the importance of trying to nourish a family, and not just see a single woman with fifteen kids and a husband who's in Mexico again, or El Salvador or Puerto Rico, but to see them as a family unit. We used to try and get them together with other families, so if it was a Mexican family, then it was another Mexican family, or a Puerto Rican with a Puerto Rican family, so that there would be some commonalities and chances to talk openly and without fear. We did that through a lot of picnics and gatherings and art, just anything that created family, around a meal, even it was just bananas and juice.

As a Latino, that says a lot with the meal, and it just like brings that tempo down. We're a community that's always in crisis. People would come to me not because they were losing their apartment. They had lost their apartment. They weren't losing it. They lost it. Their electricity had been shut off for weeks. It wasn't like the electricity would be shut off next week. It was immediate crisis all the time. We tried to implement something that was like prevention and just being prepared. As Latinos, we're not a whole lot into prevention and being prepared. We'll find and spend a ton of money on a Quinceañera. I don't know if it's a priority. I'm not quite sure of those dynamics. I never had a Quinceañera, so I didn't have to deal with the emotional, cultural aspect of this ritual.

LD: [chuckles]

CR: But the kids that I work with, I always tell them in our group, "I don't do quinceañeras and I don't do baby showers, and I don't do marriage things either." But we're doing scholarships and we're doing empowerment for parents.

I got that foundation at Centro Cultural Chicano. I've met women who *walked* from Guatemala to Minneapolis.

LD: Oh, my God.

CR: Yes. They were on their way to Canada, because in Canada they didn't need papers. There was an underground Minnesota movement at that time. So my sad story of a wicked old stepmother and my mean old daddy who put me on the *bus* was nothing, nothing compared to what these women faced and went through. Once they cross that river [Rio Grande River], they're beaten. They're raped. It's just a horrific story. So it humbled me. Yes, I always felt that played a very important part in helping me balance my feeling of having been exiled.

I remember that Sunday when my papi put me on that bus. I told him, "I'm going to *tell* everybody what you *did* to me. I'm going to *write* about it." So, it's funny with this interview…

LD: [chuckles]

CR: I called my sister, Luisa, "I'm going to rat you out!" And she's been so wonderful and supportive. You know, I'm Latina. I have to be a pain in the neck.

LD: [laughter]

CR: It's part of my nature.

LD: It's your story.

CR: And it's my story.

LD: Exactly.

CR: My cousin, Norma, said just recently, after forty years of not seeing each other, "I never knew that you didn't want to go to Wisconsin." I said, "I was punished! It wasn't a choice!" She said, "*Punished*?" [chuckles] "What are you talking about? Look at what a wonderful life you've had." I never saw it that way.

LD: Sure.

CR: I saw it as being discarded, geez, it was my family and nobody came looking for me. So you better not come for me now, because I don't want you. My poor stepfather,

who had also contributed to the bus trip, was scared to see me many, many years later. When I saw him, I embraced him and thanked him for his part on putting me on that bus! I bought him all kinds of stuff so he could see that it was a good decision and I was in a good place. They may not have done it for the right reasons, but in the long run it turned out to be perfect. I wouldn't know you… [chuckles]

LD: Exactly, and you wouldn't have been able to help those women.

CR: Actually, they helped me. That's another thing. An old friend of mine, Judy de Jesus, another wonderful colleague—she passed away—she was one of the first Latina nurses here, Puerto Rican nurses, and her mother always told me, "Don't worry about the kids. It's okay to have that temporary custody. Just keep on going and the day's going to come when they're going to need you and you're going to be solid. Don't worry, mi'ja. No te apures. [Don't worry, my daughter.] Everything will be okay." Okay!

[laughter]

CR: Sure enough, that's exactly what happened. My first thoughts had been REVENGE! I needed revenge! Get me a lawyer. Ten thousand dollars for a lawyer? Darn! Get me a bat instead!

[laughter]

CR: I finally had to let it go. I had to surrender to it. Judy's mother always used to tell me "Whenever you feel bad, bad, bad, bad, really bad, do something good for somebody else, and don't tell anybody. Don't go around saying, 'Hey, you know what I did? Boy, am I ever good.'" I always subscribed to that, and it made me feel better. When you plant a positive seed into your psyche that will always grow. Even if it's in your imagination, it's okay. It's *your* imagination. No one else can penetrate that. During that time, by helping others, that gave me my foundation, my balance, and my strength.

Going back to that line at the first Latino conference. I had gotten to the shortest line, which were the Republicans. I was Pentecostal. We never did anything political. We were never exposed to politics. We were out there saving souls…

LD: [chuckles]

CR: And singing songs, "Let's see the world burn, so I can go to heaven." Manda el fuego, Señor, manda el fuego. [Send the fire, Lord, send the fire.]

LD: Oh, my gosh

CR: Yes, those were very powerful. I loved it.

I didn't expect anything to come out of the conference but to get resources, but because I had worked with the Republicans I was suddenly thrust into the political arena. There was this quiet, mousy guy running for governor.

[chuckles]

CR: This guy was an auditor for the state —everybody loved him and the Latino Republicans supported his candidacy — and he needed lots of help stuffing envelopes. You know, nobody wants to help the Republicans, so they only had me. I was like the stuffer extraordinaire. I could label, stuff, and lick an envelope in two seconds. The Republican folks used to tell me, "Carmen, if we get our Arne Carlson in there, I know that he's committed to the Latinos, and we're going to make sure that we have Latino appointments. You're going to be one of them." I always wondered why me and not you? It was because they all had their own businesses and didn't need a nine to five. [laughter]

LD: Yes.

CR: So nobody was interested in an appointment.

LD: Right.

CR: But I was! I would say, "Yes, yes, yes!" Sure enough, he won by the skin of his chinny-chin-chin in such a close race. Then, a year later, when appointments were really getting off, I had the great privilege and opportunity to be appointed to the Department of Labor and Industry under John Lennes [Junior], commissioner. In that position I also served as liaison to the Governor's Office for Latino related experience, information, and resources. That put me at a wonderful level to just learn so much. When I was at Labor and Industry, they wanted me to lobby at the Capitol. I thought I would just sit around in the lobby.

LD: [laughter]

CR: I didn't quite understand exactly what lobbying meant. I had been in resources and crisis management. So this was a whole different arena for me.

I had wonderful, wonderful teachers and mentors who just took me by the hand. You could see the pain in their eyes. Still they were so willing to teach and to give. In Labor and Industry, I really enjoyed apprenticeship. I like that model. When I was in high school, back in the 1960s, your high school was like a trade school. So once you graduated junior high school, with your cap and gown, you picked a high school to essentially learn a trade. Judy de Jesus went to nursing school. My sister went to secretarial school, so that's where I went. I had friends who went to dance school, or to art school. Once you go through the high school, it was like getting an associate's degree so you're prepared to enter the workforce. That was the apprenticeship model and I liked that. I like the fact that if a kid can do hands on at school, he or she is more likely to learn something than if you just go through academics in paperwork, and then you are prepared

to enter the workforce, especially for learners like myself. I attract a lot of learners like me. I think I'm more the norm. I think you and my sister are exceptions to the rule and I think we need those. But statistics point to the dropout rates and that's because those other learners are ones that the school is not able to influence, and so we fall through the cracks. It's easy to do.

LD: Right.

CR: Also, when you're a teenager, you want to fall through the cracks. The last thing you want to do is go to school. This isn't that it's the school's fault or the teacher's fault or the parent's fault. It's really a combination of that perfect storm, that village concept.

LD: Tell me more about working under Governor Carlson.

CR: The apprenticeship model. I was selected to participate on a special study tour to Denmark and Germany on apprenticeships - youth apprenticeships. Those countries have an apprenticeship program in everything. Even hotel workers, everybody goes through an apprenticeship program. Wherever you go in Europe, in Germany and Denmark especially, it doesn't matter what you're going to do, chances are that they've gone through an apprenticeship program, so they're very well trained. I like that concept. When I came back to the states, the Department was working on youth apprenticeship standards. I participated a little bit in that. The project was handed down to someone else, but that's an internal thing. What it did was to open my mind to that hands-on experience.

I stayed with the Department two years after Arne Carlson left. When, Jesse Ventura was elected. I was at my office looking around one day and, all of a sudden, I had an anxiety attack.

I could just see myself being there forever. Previously, not so long before that, a gentleman in my office was retiring and he went for a stress test and died that day. It happened to be my birthday.

LD: Oh, my gosh

CR: I got his job, got a raise did a variety of things, and one day I just quit.

My daughter got me a ticket to Italy and I backpacked through Italy and France. I left my itinerary behind, so when I got to Italy I didn't know where I was going, or what I was doing.

LD: When was this?

CR: That must have been in 1999, 2000. I spent the first three days crying. **"**What will I do?" Then, after that, I found this little place, a bed and breakfast, nestled in the city, not far from the train station. I was all over Europe after that and really enjoyed it. I had just finished reading *Women who Run with the Wolves* [by Clarissa Pinkola Estés]. It just

opened me up. It's like everything I had been feeling, all that llorona que soy, at times [the crier that I am, at times] and that vengeance that I have of just wanting to help someone. I'm immovable. My father used to say, "*Tú eres robles. El palo que dobla y no se parte*." [You are an oak tree. Wood that bends and does not break.]

LD: Robles means oak, right?

CR: Oak tree. So you bend and you never break. Never, ever! It sounds like I'm never going to break.

It gave me a great opportunity. I couldn't talk to anybody because everybody spoke Italian or French, but I loved it. I loved the fact that my head was forced to change its course, to adapt to where I was and what I was doing. That was like a breath of fresh air. It felt like I was released. I wrote some stories on it. I remember one of the stories I wrote was about throwing my worries and my what-ifs and only's into the Mediterranean Sea, into that beautiful sea. There's no sand there it's just rocks. How I wanted every single one of those rocks. They were so beautiful. The more you dug in the rocks, the more beautiful they were. I just found this sea of rocks. [chuckles] It mellowed me out, and gave me peace and tranquility.

Then I came home and I thought, you know what, I'm going to find out about my mother, because a few years earlier in Neillsville, Wisconsin, my auntie had called me up and said, "*Mira* (Look), your *tío* [uncle] is here from Puerto Rico. I want you to meet him." So I drove two and a half hours to Neillsville, Wisconsin, to meet this uncle. The first thing that he said when he saw me was, "Oh, my God, you look like your mother. God *bless* her, what a wonderful woman! That brother of mine, that stupid so and so!" I had never heard that part of the story.

LD: Ohhh.

CR: I had only heard that my father had really saved my sister and myself because my mother was, whatever. I never got "the what" she was, but thank God that he was there to save us. He had to leave the boy because the boy was still breast feeding. But he had to 'save' his daughters. That's what he had so nobly done, and I should be so ever grateful for that. So here I had finally accepted it, and I was forty years old. Who cares? My parents were both gone.

LD: They were both dead?

CR: By then, they passed away, yes.

My uncle started, "Your father was a gambler, a womanizer, a drunk." My daddy. [chuckles] I love him though. My aunt went nuts. "What are you talking about? All this family dynamics just coming out of nowhere! I was, like, wow, I've got to find out about this.

When I was sent away, my father and stepmother had been building a house in Puerto Rico, where they could move to with their two children, Sammy and Sandra. My sister Luisa was gone with an aunt and there was just me that they didn't know what to do with, fourteen years old. What do you do with her? I was like destroying all these plans that they had. Once they finally got rid of me, then they could go on and live happily ever after. Unfortunately, my stepmother went on ahead. My father stayed in New York fixing whatever he had to fix (getting rid of me) and he got to Puerto Rico early to surprise her, only he was surprised to find that she already had someone in the house.

LD: [gasp] Oh, my gosh. It's like a *telenovela* [Soap opera].

CR: Una telenovela tremenda. [A tremendous soap opera.] Yes.

So, then, he was destroyed. He started drinking—and came back to the United States to New York.

In the meantime, my mother was taking care of him because he's dying. He eventually died of cirrhosis of the liver.

LD: Your stepmother?

CR: No, my biological mother, the woman he had deserted, taken her two daughters and abandoned her with a young son. In the meantime, in her life, she had had other children. She was now with Roberto Camacho, her current husband, who was seeing her nurse her first husband. I always felt that contributed to my stepfather taking off. Her children by my stepfather say, "No, that's not what happened," but that's my assessment after all this time.

LD: Had you had any contact with your mother all that time?

CR: Well, I met her just before I was sent away, when I was probably thirteen. My father told my sister and I, "We're going to go for a ride. Get dressed." We went in a station wagon. I remember it vividly because we were singing in the car and my stepmother wasn't there. When she wasn't around, we were able to sing and dance. My father pulled up to this brownstone building and there was this little woman with these green eyes, a white-skinned woman, she had kids all around her and she was crying.

LD: Wow.

CR: I still didn't understand what was happening.

LD: Yes, yes.

CR: I was always in my own little world anyway. I didn't put together what that meant - that's your mother. My brother, the one that my father left behind Luisito, I had seen him before, he would come summers to help work at the store that my dad owned, but again I

didn't realize the connection. When I saw Louie there among the kids surrounding the woman, I immediately went to him and we hung out. I went to meet all of Louie's friends and that's where I met the boy that I liked, Hugo Rivera. He was my brother's friend's cousin. I was thirteen. He must have been fourteen.

LD: Sure.

CR: Yes. That's all I remember - whoa, I was overwhelmed. This kid is playing basketball. I'm hanging out. Hurray! This woman is crying. That guy is screaming. Who cares?

When I was a teen I would sneak away, by then I was living in Manhattan. When my father left my mother, he left Brooklyn. Actually, we moved to many places, like the Bronx and Manhattan. My sister Luisa says that every time my mother found us, my father would relocate. By then, though, we were in Manhattan, so I would tell my father, "I'm going to church," and I would take off to Brooklyn to my mother's neighborhood. I wouldn't go to see my mother or my brother, but I would go and hang out with Hugo. One time when I was late from church, my father asked me, "Where have you been?" I said, "I was with my mother." So he drove me all the way to Brooklyn beating me the whole way. I had long hair. He would grab me by my hair. He threw me into the house and told my mother, "Was she here with you today?" My mother very meekly says, "Nooo." When she said that, then I realized, hey, I'm by myself.

So I never really sought her out. I spoke to her various times. At the World's Fair—I think I was thirteen or fourteen—they had all these futuristic phones, and I only knew her number. We didn't have a phone. So I would call her from all these phones. I think that's the only time that I really had a long conversation with her was when I was at the World's Fair and spent half a day, probably, on the phone with her.

LD: Wow.

CR: When my kids were born, I always wanted to bring her out, but she didn't want to come. It wasn't until after she died that, all of a sudden, I was so curious as to her life's circumstances.

LD: Sure.

CR: I would see all my brothers and sisters and think, wait a minute. I'm all confused. Who are you? Did she have any family? No, she didn't have any family. She was an only child.

When I came back from Europe, I wanted to follow up. So I went to Puerto Rico, and I went to my stepmother's house. It had been a fifteen-year period since I had gone to Puerto Rico and called around searching to see if I could find my mother's family. I finally identified an uncle who's really a cousin—I don't know—in Miami. They gave

me a name of this town. I went to the town and there they gave me some other name. I remember just being so frustrated.

It was after I came back from Europe, I remember because I had the boots that I wore in Europe hiking, and I was hiking all over Puerto Rico. During one of my trips I came across two drug addicts, a man and a woman, who had approached me to give them money to eat. I said, "There's a Church's Chicken place over there. I'll buy you a sandwich." As we started to walk toward the Church's Chicken, a police car suddenly came up with the sirens blaring. The couple ran. I was very upset, because I was in Puerto Rico and my people are starving. God, you pig! You, you, the establishment! The police officer told me, "Hey, you know what? *Esta gente está loca, estos son tecatos*. [These people are crazy, they are drug addicts.]" They would have taken you over there. They would have robbed you. They could have killed you. What are you doing over here?" I told him, "I'm looking for my family."

LD: [chuckles]

CR: He says, "Tell me what was your family's name?" I said, "Trinidad" and he goes, "You know, our chief of police—he just retired—he's a Trinidad. Let me give him a call." He called this Pedro Trinidad. Was it Pedro? No. I've forgotten his first name already. Lo and behold, this is my cousin. He was the first person I met who resembled my mother!

[break in the interview]

CR: My sister used to call me a professional spic.

LD: Why is that?

CR: Well, because I had to be nuts to pursue a career within the Latino community; After all, I left Honeywell. What kind of a *loca* [crazy woman] is that?

LD: Right.

CR: She was right! That's *loca*. Okay? Honeywell, at that time, was the best company to be with. You had everything in there. You had internal training - an Ace Program. That internal Ace Program, you could virtually get a master's degree taking all the internal education and hands on experiences about semi-conductors, and the systems of procurement. I left there with a great deal of knowledge and hands-on experience and exposure. It was an incredible time to be at Honeywell. I'm sure my family thought I was crazy. And I left a marriage. The guy didn't beat me. Why did I leave?

Did he beat you? No. What's the problem? [chuckles] And then to leave a job, why? Because you want to go work with Latinos. Why?

Then, when I got appointed to state government that was really a big joke, too, because I was always saying things like, "Puerto Rico libre! America get out of Vieques!"

[laughter]

CR: Then, all of a sudden, did I love America? You betcha! I'm a Republican.

My family, I've come to see that they really just don't have any imagination and don't have a fluid life. You have to have fluidity. You just have to change and change.

I've been at my present position now, I think, seven years, and I'm surprised I'm still there, because I always get an itch to move, like every five or six years.

LD: [chuckles] Let's go back really quick to after you came back from Europe. You went to Puerto Rico. Then, did you come back to Minnesota?

CR: Yes.

LD: What did you do then? This would have been what year? Around 2000?

CR: Yes, 2001, 2002, and 2003. In 2004, I started at ANSR.

LD: Okay.

CR: During that time, I did a lot of things. I did policy development. I did a lot of internal structures and consulting. I couldn't get a full time job. Every time I went to interview for a job, I didn't want it. I had worked for a governor and commissioner. I had worked for the CEO of Honeywell. Really, everybody else was pretty boring.

LD: [chuckles]

CR: It's tough. You went to Harvard.

LD: Yes.

CR: After you've been in those intensive classes, if you go to any other school, it's like pfft, going to fall asleep here. Let me teach the class. I have that personality anyway. I'm an Aries, so I'm fire and I walk in and I know everything. I have that bigger than life personality, so with a little bit of knowledge, it even goes higher.

CR: My family all live in small towns in the Midwest of America. They like where they're at, which is great. I like where I'm at, so I feel that we're all at the right place. I'm totally connected to the Latino vein. I *must* have it. I always tell everybody that my whole life is Latino until I walk out that door. The minute I walk out that door, then I have to put on this different persona. If you see my artwork, it's all Latino.

LD: Yes. Yes.

CR: It's just something in me. I tried for many years to, you know, to tone it down or to fix it, but it's not clay. I can't do that. So now, as I get older, I go with it. I feel that it's okay to be the way I am.

That gave me the opportunity to kind of figure out what am I going to do next.

LD: Yes, so this is 2000. Actually, let me kind of backup a little bit. I want to hear a little bit about your artwork. But first, in 2000, when you came back, until about 2003, that's when the really big migration of Latinos to Minnesota, to the Twin Cities started. I remember that at that point, all of a sudden, you looked around and it was like, oh, there's Latinos in Minneapolis. Did you see that?

CR: Yes.

LD: Tell me a little bit about the changes that you saw in the Latino community.

CR: Had I known it was going to be this exciting, I would have been right there in the front. I didn't know what we were doing. I remember when I got married and moved to Saint Paul and everybody telling me, "You don't want to go to the West Side. Don't go to the West Side. That's where those Mexicans are. You don't want to go to the West Side." I lived in South Saint Paul and I never went to the West Side, because you couldn't go. That's not a good place to go to.

LD: Oh, my gosh. That's funny.

CR: Once I was on my own and back to my quest, I lived on the West Side for twenty-two years. Oh, my gosh what a rich cultural place. I remember Guadalupe of Radio Rey…

LD: Yes.

CR: Here was this guy hauling around what looked like a little lunch pail, wearing a big hat who would walk around with his little microphone and everybody would say, "*Ese es un loco*." [He is a crazy man.] There he would go interviewing people in the street recording their responses, and then he'd drive all the way to Wisconsin and put it on the radio. Wow! And then there was Mario Duarte with the newspaper La Prensa de Minnesota, who let me write columns. I had the "American Corner." American, the last four words are r-i-c-a-n. It was the "Ame-RICAN Corner."

LD: [laughter]

CR: I didn't realize that was the frontier. There was only one paper, Visiones de La Raza which was wonderful and everything, but it wasn't until *La Prensa* came into existence that news print really kicked butt. Yes, we have lots of papers now. Some of them are

really nasty. I hate to look at them. It degrades our young girls. They'll never be the caliber of media the way *La Prensa* was. It's so exciting to have been a part of that. It's so exciting to have marched with César Chávez during the Green Giant boycott.

Oh, my gosh! I didn't even realize what it was. I'm from New York. I'm from Brooklyn and I'm from the 1960s. I'm from the era of protest. Attica! I want to burn it. I want to crush it. I want to destroy it. He really taught about peace. He taught me how to just mellow down. That totally molded who I am. I always had a very explosive personality. I don't know if it's from the violence in my household, but I had *ese fuego debajo de mí*, too. *Ese fuego.* [I had that fire in me, also. That fire.] I didn't know that César Chávez would be our Martin Luther King. Today, when I work with the kids, we talk about him. Use him as our example of Latino 'hero'.

LD: When was this that you?

CR: That must have been in the late 1970s, like 1979, 1978.

LD: How did you get involved with that?

CR: Again, through the Spanish Speaking Affairs Council.

LD: Oh, okay. Wow.

CR: Yes. I didn't realize what a voice the council was, and that it was historic in its concept - the first one.

Lake Street in Minneapolis was a trash can back then, and now it's Latino influence is all over. It has million dollar condos in what once were vacant buildings.

LD: Yes. In 2000, when you came back, you really started to see all of this?

CR: Yes. That's when the plaza in Minneapolis started up.

LD: Mercado Central.

CR: Mercado Central, yes. I did a lot of training there with the board. We come from our Latino explosive countries where the democratic process is "because I said so."

LD: Yes.

CR: The democratic process is; who's the loudest one and who's the one that's going to make the biggest noise. So I felt compelled to teach new immigrants what policy really is and how everybody does have a voice and how it isn't run by one person or by intimidation, but by consensus and discussions. I really enjoyed doing things like that. I would notice that the people who didn't want to empower others were the ones who

would keep that information and use the *Robert's Rules* more as a tool to control rather than as a tool to educate.

In my program that I have with the kids, I use the apprenticeship system and the model of democratic system. The program is in four high schools. The kids create their own name for their group. We have elections. That's gotten kind of crazy lately, but I like to see how the leadership rises. It never fails. They get to that same point, that one-up-man-ship, that screaming. I like to talk about the importance of policy and how the world is run by those who show up to the meetings. They'll oftentimes say, "I was supposed to go, but I didn't go because . . . whatever." That's too bad. By you not going, that gives somebody else the power.

LD: Right.

CR: We talk about things like that. I'm *amazed* that I'm actually creating a legislative group of kids – a savvy group of kids. These are kids that would have just fallen through the cracks. I've never liked the legislative system, because of working at the Capitol and seeing how everything is so unfair. You have all these people sitting behind a table and half of them are sleeping or don't even give you the courtesy to look at you while you talk. I was very disillusioned with the process. It's not what you know; it's who you know.

But then an excitement started coming through me with the grassroots end of the legislative process. It is how you get that person who sits behind the desk to actually sit up and pay attention to you. It is by your voice and being an involved constituent, getting the neighborhood people to sign petitions and to make phone calls. That's been exciting in giving voice to our young people.

LD: I want to hear about from 2003 to now and the kids, but, first, I want to go back to your artwork. We're sitting here in your apartment, and we're sitting at a table that's beautifully decorated with beautiful artwork all over it and on top of it and to the side and all over. You alluded to it before so tell me about that part of you. You kind of mentioned that as a child you lived in your own head and had a very rich imagination. Tell me about your art and what that's meant to you and what you do.

CR: I've always doodled, drawing flowers when I'm bored, just doodling. When I came back from Europe, I decided I was going to go back to school, so I went to [the College of] Saint Catherine's. I got a job at Saint Catherine's and, then, as part of my benefits, I was able to take classes. I decided I was going to be a *pastor*, a minister. Yes, that would be it.

LD: [giggles]

CR: Oh, hallelujah. I took a couple of classes. I *loved* my professor Ed Sellner because he made me feel and think through my emotions. This interview that we're having, I'm able to not fall apart every two seconds, because I had to do that at my class. I had to

share my story and keep a journal. I was looking for it so you could read it, but I don't know what I did with it. I was ready for a new adventure, a new challenge. Yes, a Latina pastor. Oh, my gosh. I could just see it. What will I wear?

LD: [laughter]

CR: I continued taking classes but when a required class was filled I found myself signing up for a pottery class. It was taught by Sister Celine Charpentier who was retiring that year. That was 2002, I think. She was like a female Willie Nelson with a bandana around her head and two long braids on either side. She had hurt her leg and was on crutches. The class was *filled* with young people. I became crazed with the clay and would *beat* it and *beat* it. Suddenly she would appear and hit my chair with her crutches.

LD: [laughter]

CR: "What are you doing!" she'd yell. "Don't hit the clay! The clay is alive." I found myself in that pottery room day and night. My goddaughter, Maria Isa, Elsa's daughter, was having a Quinceañera and she wanted me to make fifteen little pinch pots. By the fifteenth one, wow! I was getting good. Then, I started creating those pieces in the class. You had to do pieces that represented your life and I loved that, because it's all about *me*! Me!

LD: Those pieces over there that you're pointing at?

CR: Yes. For example…

LD: That's beautiful.

CR: This one is called *Boxed In*. Like the sort of boxed in feeling I would have whenever I had to fill out a form, are you black or white or other…

I always had to do "other." Then, it was black, white, Hispanic, I think, and they never had Puerto Rican. It used to just drive me crazy.

LD: Yes.

CR: When we had to do an example of something personal, I chose this: *Boxed In*. I'm boxed in with a Puerto Rican flag. I'm boxed in with a Taino Indian, with the Robles tree and there are dominoes, because we love dominoes.

LD: I love that effect on the domino, the black. That's beautiful.

CR: Yes, and it's all through stain. That was an example.

In Professor Charpentier's class, we would always talk about clay from Mexico, clay from Africa, clay from Asia. I would always ask, "What about Puerto Rico?" "You tell

me." She said, "You're a full grown woman. You've had a great career. What's the matter with you? Do you want to learn about clay from Puerto Rico? Then go learn it. Go to Puerto Rico. Go find out." I thought, yes! I'm going to Puerto Rico.

LD: So that was part of the Puerto Rico trip, as well?

CR: Yes, but this was after my initial research for my mother's family. This was a trip to connect the artist in me.

LD: Learning the artwork.

CR: Yes, that was after the research. This time when I went to Puerto Rico I told my uncle, the one I had met in Wisconsin, *"Tío, me voy pa' las montañas de Jayuya* because I found out *que allí están los indios.* [Uncle, I am going to the mountains of Jayuya because I found out there is where the Indians live.] He seemed confused, *"¿Indios? Aquí no hay indios. ¿Tú estás loca?"* [Indians? There are no Indians here. Are you crazy?] After convincing him that I am an American girl and can fend for myself, I went to the mountains and found a beautiful, mystical museum. The museum was built after a mudslide had unearthed an Indian playground, The Batey**.** The community built this beautiful museum that resembled a Cemi at the museum I noticed there was **a kiln.** So I asked somebody, "Who uses the kiln." "Oh, the artists around here." **"**Oh, so where are they?"

LD: [chuckles]

CR: They gave me directions, *"Mira, hay una señora, tú sigue por allí, por allí, pora allí, y cuando tú veas el gallo, entonces, tú vas por allá."* [Look, there is a lady… you go that way, that way, that way, and when you see the rooster, then, you go that way.] which means nothing. So I did. I started driving this way and asking strangers. "Hi, do you know this artist lady?" That's the GPS [global positioning system] in Puerto Rico.

LD: [laughter]

CR: "*Mira!* [Look!] Do you know this lady?" Sure enough I found the lady. She and her mother invited me in. They taught me how to play with the clay, and how to manipulate it *que 'tá vivo.* [that it is alive.] It's good to have a plan for your design, but it's better to just let the clay tell your hands what it wants. I left there with such self *¿Este, como de dice?* [How do you say it?], when you feel confident.

LD: Self esteem or?

CR: Yes. This was my first sculpture that I made when I came back. Look how perfect it is. This is all handmade.

LD: It's beautiful.

CR: This is *La Mujer de Caguas*. [The Woman of Caguas.]

LD: This is a pinch pot?

CR: Yes.

LD: Wow! *La Mujer de Caguas?* Who is she?

CR: She represents fertility.

LD: That's beautiful, Carmen.

CR: I know. I couldn't believe it.

LD: *Está linda!* [It is beautiful!]

CR: I couldn't believe it. All of a sudden, I'm doing art. Now, this one I just cracked. I have to fix it.

LD: Know what? If we could get pictures of these…

CR: Oh, I can send them to you.

LD: That would be fantastic.

CR: I would love to.

This one belonged to your dad [Mario Duarte] and I needed it for a show. I asked him, "Can I borrow it?" He got so mad at me. He said, "Take it back!" I said, *"No, no, 'tá bien, yo no la quiero más.* [No, no, it's ok, I do not want it anymore.]

It was a show at the [*Saint Paul*] *Pioneer Press*. It was a big deal. I went back to give it to him, and he wouldn't take it. I still have it.

LD: [laughter]

CR: *Nada malo*. [Nothing bad.] This one is a *personal* portrait. It begins with my name the *robles* [oak] tree *el palo que dobla y no se parte* [the tree that bends and does not break], the roots go to Spain, which are my Spaniard roots and are represented by El Morro, the roots continue to wrap around the piece and touch onto my African roots represented by a mask, and to my Taino roots represented by a Cemi.

LD: I love the 3-D aspect of it.

CR: It's called 'relief' I just love this stuff. Then, the roots connect to my New York where I was born and raised and is represented by the twin towers.

LD: Oh, my.

CR: These roots continue and they connect to this piece here which represents the Capitol where I worked for nine years. Then, inside the Capitol, the roots turn into a star. The star is representative of 'reaching for the stars to make your dreams come true. If you don't have a dream, how are you going to make a dream come true? So you have to reach for the stars to make your dream come true. This is my personal profile, I received an A+.

[laughter]

CR: Now, I'm working with glass mosaic.

LD: Glass?

CR: Yes, I'm doing glass mosaics.

LD: I see that. That's beautiful Mosaic work.

CR: Gracias! Mosaic work, yes. My dream is to do an art piece with Juanito Acosta.

LD: Who is he?

CR: John Acosta is one of our master artists. He's done a lot of the murals on the West Side and in other neighborhoods. His name is well known all over town. And, now, I'm working with him on glass mosaic. Here's a piece.

LD: That's beautiful.

CR: All the apartments have the same window. I wanted to do something with the windowsill, and so I created a mosaic piece and now I'm making them for people in the building.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: Yes, I'll have to get you a picture of that. That's what I do with my art. These pieces are ready to be fired. I have a small kiln.

LD: Oh, my gosh! You have a kiln in the closet!

CR: A kiln in the closet.

LD: [laughter]

CR: Yes. I really totally enjoy it. I do *capias*, which are wedding favors. I do just about everything. Give me a glue gun…

LD: And you're all set? [chuckles]

CR: Yes. Yes.

LD: Now, I kind of want to go back to the work that you're doing now. You've been there, you said, six years.

CR: Six years.

LD: You started off telling me a little bit about the work, but just kind of fill in a little bit more.

CR: Sure. When I came back from my trips to Europe, and Puerto Rico, I ran out of money, and I needed a job. But nothing seemed to suit me. There was no challenge to the positions I was applying for.

Then one day, I ran across this obscure part time job about tobacco prevention. I've always hated cigarette smoke so I felt this would be a good fit for me. I had been a smoker for many years. My husband was a very heavy smoker. When my son, Ben, was about 3 or 4 years old he found my last few cigarettes I had cleverly hidden up high in the closet. With his towel wrapped around his neck and posing as a Super Hero, he yelled "AHA!" and proceeded to break my cigarettes. My first reaction was to teach him not to touch mommy's important things. It was his tears that made me realize the control cigarettes had over me. I never touched another one after that. Once I quit smoking, I hated it even more, and it seemed everybody around me smoked. I was always complaining about the smoke until finally I was no longer invited anywhere because I was the smoking Nazi. Lo and behold, if this wasn't the perfect job to be an official smoking Nazi.

LD: [laughter]

CR: I went and applied for the position at the office on University and Raymond Avenues in Saint Paul, in this old building. I had just come from the Capitol, where I had the keys to the Capitol. It's hard "to keep the girl on the farm after she's seen Paris," you know. I went in for the interview and the director [Jeanne Weigum] is a woman who has spent her life doing volunteer work. One of her passions—she has many passions—is public health and clean air. In 1972, she started working on tobacco prevention causes, like no smoking on airplanes. Today ANSR is one of the top agencies on tobacco policy, in the nation. The agency had received a small grant from the Minnesota Department of Health and he was looking for someone to do health education outreach in the Latino community. I asked her, "Do you want me to do it your way or do you want me to do it my way?" When she said to do it my way, I got very excited, and I thought, "I want to do this!" It was very difficult because it was just a few hours a week, and it wasn't the

environment I was used to. But it was *so* exciting, because I could conduct outreach activities however I wanted. More important, I found working with Jeanne Wiegum as rewarding as when I worked for the governor, commissioner and CEO's of Honeywell.

This was especially appealing to me because I have always wanted to work with our teenagers. Everybody hates teenagers. Everybody loves the little kids, the kindergartners. Oh! They love that third grader. Once they're in that ninth grade, oh, boy, nobody wants them. I thought, yes, that's who I want to work with – teenagers!

At Honeywell, when I worked in procurement as a secretary or as the office go-for, I was in the bathroom one day, and the top secretaries was talking about how they *hated* working for this executive. He makes me get his coffee! So the company could never find a secretary that would stay with this executive. They had to outsource. Honeywell was very internal, and they only went outside if there was nothing else in this world to do. So I took that opportunity, and I said, "I'll serve the coffee." I got the job and the executive called me 'Carla' for three years.

LD: [laughter]

CR: But I was one of the highest paid administrative staffers and I didn't care what he called me. The check said, 'Carmen" that's all that mattered to me. I've never gotten caught up with that kind of stuff, ever.

I thought if I could do whatever I wanted—I really had a wish bucket here—I would like to use kids to take information home, because most Latino parents are burnt out. They've got two or three jobs. They've got immigration issues. They've got English language issues. They depend on their children bringing home information and resources.

So how do you keep the kids engaged? I thought, well, I'm going to create a peer youth community health worker program, Jóvenes de Salud, and will use the apprenticeship model of combining academics with hands on experiences through community service activities. On border towns, they use the system of training community people on health issues such as diabetes and other health education. This information is taken to them in the fields because the people in the field do not have the time to come to meetings. We use that same concept in promoting health in the community. I didn't want to work with adults, however. Adults are a pain in the neck. They've got nothing but complaints and have lost their imagination. I just didn't want to deal with that. I wanted to work with the kids.

I went to schools because I wanted to connect academics to the program. The schools really needed help with the Latino explosion in all our schools. I was talking, giving this big speech at a community event about how I want to work with kids—and a teacher said, "Hey! do you really want to work with kids? Come to my school." It was Robert Hanson over at Henry Sibley High School. I said, "Yes, I'd love to." He said, "When can you come?" I said, "When do you want me?" I was there on the following Tuesday, I think. He brought me into this room with sixty Latino loco kids, hanging from the

rafters! We've been program partners ever since. Mr. Hanson is the programs academic advisor. He has been nominated four times as Minnesota Teacher of Year and continues to be our teacher of the century!

LD: [laughter]

CR: Oh, my God. I didn't know what the heck to do when I walked into that classroom. I came prepared. I had all my curriculum material, and I showed it to them, including a video on Cholos in California, and how they quit smoking. The kids thought it was lame. It was stupid. It was dumb. I challenged them. "What do you think? Can you do better?" A couple of them said, "Yes, I can." They broke up into groups. One started writing lyrics. Another one started to get a beat, and pretty soon we actually had a jingle, "No Fumanos". We still use it. It is an award winning jingle. It has been presented nationally and twice in Puerto Rico where it was highlighted at conferences.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: That's how we get Latino kids involved. Let 'em do it!

I have only a very few rules. My biggest rule is respect. Everybody respects everybody. If you have to ask about it, you better think about it again, because we all know what that entails. Then, my biggest second rule was that if you did not go to school, you could not come to the group. I had kids who would just show up at two-thirty to come to the group and they hadn't been going to school for days. Once they started going to school, then I became really tough on things like being late to school. I don't really care what your grades are. If you got an F, to me that's fabulous because there's no place to go but up. I'd rather start with an F and work my way up, than have an A and plummet and not be able to get back up because of my ego. *Ganas* is a big thing to us. We have the *Ganas* Award. If you don't have *ganas* - that's the only thing you cannot purchase, borrow, test out for - then you have no place being here in my group.

LD: *Ganas* is desire.

CR: That desire, that innate desire, yes. If you do not have *ganas*, please, do not come to the group.

Latinos, we're at the bottom. I always tell them Latinos have the highest dropout rates next to Native Americans. We have babies at the youngest age and we live the longest. They just came out with a report. And just to mix it up a bit, I like to tell them I'm a Republican and I do not like taxes. For those who anxious to have babies I let them know I do not like having you put your kid in school while you're sitting over there goofing off. No. Those are my taxes. Get your grandmother to take care of the kid, Talk to your *abuela*. They're very much in *shock* when I make remarks like that. They look at me dumbfounded, because they're used to everybody being so wonderful and "Aye Mija your second (third, fourth) child. That's okay, honey. Do you want to bring them over to daycare? Would you like to do something after school? Did you want some time for

yourself?" Well, I've got bad news for you. No! You've got no time for yourself. The child is yours. Don't bring the child to my classroom I'll get stuck watching him, because his young mother isn't paying attention. I'm very, very rigid about this and it was very hard, because most of the kids that came to group had kids. To me, that's a whole different venue and one that I just don't want to deal with. I've had kids who've had .8 GPA [grade point average] go up to 2.3 within like a three or four-month period.

LD: Wow.

CR: I know it's because I hit a nerve with our Latino youth. The program is very effective. On the evaluations that I do with kids, one kid wrote down that the reason he comes to group is "because the lady says, 'Hi,' to me." Our kids—I don't mean just Latino kids; I mean all kids—they need the basics, like a warm "Hello." "How was your day today? "Tell me the best part of the day." Sometimes, they can't think of a best part. Then, somebody will say something, and they will copy. We try and have that positive influence. I'll have a brand new group of kids come in and you can hear the language changing. I go to the schools because there are already policies in place. So if you cannot bring a gun to school you cannot bring it to my group"—which they have, by the way.

LD: Wow.

CR: Yes, without bullets, but, nevertheless, there it was. "If you cannot come to school with your butt hanging out, you can't come to group that way either. Even if you come to school with your butt hanging out, you can't come to group in that state. If so and so's mother comes and sees that her daughter is hanging out with a boy who has his butt hanging out, I have lots of explaining to do." You know how Latina parents are. They're the worst. The last person you want to talk to is a Latina mother.

LD: [chuckles]

CR: We build that *familia* concept into the program.

Now, at Harding High School, there used to be a lot of gang activity. Last year, I graduated my biggest class, fifteen kids. Almost all fifteen of them were very iffy for various reasons: immigration, violence in the home, moving, just such a variety of reasons for them to all fail. Within that group of fifteen I had a group of three kids who were more like three little cholos (gangsters). Now, all three of them are going to technical college together. Two of them are going to be police, the third a graphic artist. A lot of the kids I work with are going to be suspended. They need to do community hours, and so they do community hours with me.

I think that kids need that adult, that caring adult. They don't need an adult to be a friend. I'm into mentoring I was featured in a Peabody Award Mentoring Champaign. Part of recognition came from working with youth and being a positive influence. That doesn't mean mentoring is giving them money and giving them your car; although, they would love that.

At work, they wanted me to do more legislative work, and I didn't want to do it. I hate legislative work. It can be a no-win situation. I'd rather do clay and I'd rather do fun things.

But the kids said that they wanted to do it. So now we're lobbying for a reduction of interior window signage. The kids have been before the director of signs and safety [Safety and Inspections, City of Saint Paul], Ricardo Cervantes. They've been before District 1. They invited Kathy Lantry, the president of the Saint Paul City Council, to Harding where they hosted a forum with about forty-eight kids. That was right on the heels of the shooting of the Congress woman [Gabrielle Giffords] in Arizona, so the ROTC [Reserve Officer Training Corps] students, wanted to escort Miss Lantry with an ROTC guard.

LD: Wow.

CR: Yes. Very impressive

LD: They did this for reduction of signs?

CR: Yes, reduction of the interior signs that cover windows. What happens is that in these businesses you really can't see in, and if you're inside, you really can't see out. It's a safety issue and it also brings the neighborhood down. You go to the businesses on Grand Avenue and you can see inside, on Snelling Avenue too. You can see everything. But if you go to the East Side, to Payne Avenue, it looks like a war zone over there with all the signs. So the kids have been addressing that, and they really like addressing the councils and talking about it. They really like doing the presentations. They *love* getting the questions. You think they'd be shy, but no, they're not shy at all. They are proud to be representing their neighborhood.

The youth stopped the tobacco industry from giving Cinco de Mayo $9,000 for coupon distribution last year. Fifteen kids went and met with Cinco de Mayo coordinators. I think that folks were a little nervous when they saw fifteen humongous Latino kids, because we're big, you know—go up the shaky steps with such eloquence and determination. I always tell them, "Hey, I marched with César Chávez, so we're about peace now, and that's what we are representing." What we want to do is be that positive influence and be *algo de orgullo* [something to be proud of]. We're at Cinco de Mayo every year for the past six years. Our first year, we had nine marchers with a cardboard box, Jóvenes de Salud, in the rain. Last year, we had about sixty marchers.

LD: Wow.

CR: Yes. One year we had a low rider. Another year, one of the students made a float. I think there were five schools that participated that year.

LD: How many schools are in the program?

CR: Four schools, I'm at Harding, Johnson, South Saint Paul, and Henry Sibley High School. So I'm in a school every single day. Then, we also mentor Austin High School [Austin, Minnesota]. They have Jóvenes de Valor over there.

It's all tied into community service. We go clean tobacco litter. We volunteer to work with younger kids during spring break. We really have a well-trained group of youth advocates. I, with great pride, would send them anywhere. I've been with these kids going on seven years now. My purse is always open, I've always have stuff laying around and yet I've never had anything taken from me - and I mean never. The kids always rise to the occasion. I think it's because that's what I expect.

I always greet every kid. We shake hands. Now, they want to hug me, even those big kids, the boys. We always greet. We always say, "Hello." We always write holiday cards to our troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. I always have the kids write holiday cards, and thank you cards to our supporters and sponsors. If there's a teacher a student can't stand, I have them write that teacher a note. I tell the kids you're going to say "thank you" for something. So figure it out. You can say, "Thank you for hating me"

LD: [chuckles]

CR: Every time they do that, they come back and say, "Wow, you know Miss So and So cried." "Mr. Blah Blah has been nice to me since I gave him the card." I remind them, this is one teacher who has eight-five million zillion kids. So you always think that the person is so mean to you, but, really, who is taking care of that poor teacher? I want them to have that sense of trying to make other people feel better.

In all my classes, every single Latino kid I've had, they've always told me the same thing, "It's not fair." "There's discrimination." "They're racist." It doesn't matter what the conversation is. Wow, it sure is cloudy out. It's not fair! They're racist. So the way I've been able to defuse that is to have them spell those words. "Can you, please, spell discrimination?" By the time they figure that one out, it's *defused* all that hatred. We play a lot of Hangman to get them to spell. They'll be all happy because they wrote a paper in Spanish and they got an A, but I'm not at all impressed. I'm like my father, who always said that English is the language of money. That's the one that you have to be able to articulate in, so you better get it right. I now have a karaoke machine, so that the kids will articulate their names. They've got three, four, five sometimes six names. They swallow every single name and, then, they get *mad* when somebody doesn't know their name. They say, "That's racist." "That's 'cause I'm Mexican." "That's 'cause I'm black." No, that's 'cause you're not articulating! So I'm trying to get them away from those negative thoughts and sayings.

With music, I try and have just Latino music, Latino-based music. At Harding, we partner now with the African American group, which is a big deal, because these two groups were ready to kill each other. Now, we're working together and it's just so satisfying and beautiful to see. Our kids are learning that the African American kids have their story,

too. The African-American students are learning about the plight of Latinos and immigration.

LD: Right.

CR: I always tell the kids, "Latinos we're like the blessed people." I'm at a time in my life where I'm an elder, but I can call my *titi* in Puerto Rico, who's even older, and the minute she hears my voice, she says, *"La nena! Robert, Robert es la nena."* ["The baby/child! Robert, Robert it's the baby/child!"]

LD: [laughter]

CR: Right?

LD: Yes.

CR: Who else gets that? Nobody else gets that. We get that. Then, the kids understand.

I always tell them, "One of the reasons I don't go to Burlington Coat Factory anymore is because there's Latino kids swinging over every shirt in that place. I hate it. I won't go in there anymore, because *you* reflect me. I'm a Latina. So, wherever I go, I reflect all of you. *Yo soy el espejo de la comunidad. Usted es el espejo de la comunidad. Y si usted va a ser como un animal,* [I am the mirror of the community. You are the mirror of the community. If you are going to be like and animal,] I don't want to deal with you. We've got special people who *love* to deal with people like you. They l*ove* it. They study that kind of behavior. They become Ph.D.s. and they make it their life's work. Not for me. I don't care for that. *Creo que es poca verguenza.* [I believe that is lack of shame.] *Yo creo* [I believe] it's something you choose. I don't go there. I'm a person that has high, high values, high, high, high morals. If you can't respect yourself, there's no way you're going to respect me. That's the bottom line." Some kids get it and some kids don't. The parents love it. They encourage me to do that.

Sometimes I make the kids go to church. I call their parents. "*Ese nene tiene que ir pa' la iglesia.*" ["That child has to go to church."] Grandmothers especially like that! I praise the youth. We celebrate everything. We have a lot of celebrations including birthdays. I like to bring in guests so that they can meet other people, other role models.

I like to instill that in kids and tell them to have a great time. I encourage graduating from high school, not so they can go on to college. To me college is really quite useless. I know more people with degrees who cannot tap into their potential because they are so connected to their 'degree'. I like trade school. Learn a trade. Learn a technical trade, whether it's hairdressing or in the building trades. I can spend two hundred bucks getting my hair done. I'd gladly give it to you. Be a plumber. I need a plumber too. It's going to cost me another few hundred bucks to come and fix my drain pipe. To me, the reason you want to graduate from high school is because you want to come back to your reunion.

The jock, who never paid attention to you, will be the ugliest, fattest, baldest guy there. The girl you longed to be like is a shadow of who she was.

[laughter]

CR: So we make it fun. Last year was our biggest graduation, fifteen. Oh, my gosh.

LD: Working with these youth and seeing where they're at and what they're challenges are, what do you think that Latino kids need, in particular, in Minnesota to succeed?

CR: I think one of the biggest things they need is to see role models, and they really need to see *men*. Wherever we go there's Latina women everywhere. But, the *men*, aye I'd like to see more of the male role model. One of the reasons I love Frank Fernandez so much is because he's such a wonderful role model. I always say that I knew him when he was working in the mailroom, and now he's an executive.

LD: Vice president [of Government Programs, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Minnesota].

CR: Yes, he's really up there. When he meets the kids, he's just like them. The kids gravitate towards that. I think he took them to see where he parks at the Blue Cross Blue Shield corporate offices. They were so impressed, because it was inside. Kids need to see that. I remember the first time he came to visit the students, they thought he was a nark.

I showed them my portfolio of my time with the governor's office. They're in shock, you know. Is that you? They need to see that there's a lot of richness in following our dreams, and you don't have to be a Ph.D. You don't have to be a brain surgeon. You can just be a community advocate and want to work in a school with kids and make that change. They'll all ask me, "What did you do to get that job?" "What did you go to school for?" I always respond, "I just went to school for what I liked to go to school for and for how it helped me at a particular job in my career." I continue to encourage the entrepreneurial spirit. I like that entrepreneurial thing. Wherever you can make a dollar, do it.

LD: We've kind of talked about what they need. Maybe not necessarily just the youth, but the Latino community in general, what do you think we've contributed to Minnesota?

CR: I think we've contributed great neighborhoods. We've taken depressed areas and turned them into ethnic communities where people from all over come to visit and enjoy. This used to be someplace where I would pick up a couple of tamales rom the trucka parked in the back of the church, and, now all of a sudden it's a "Latino" megamall. I think of El Burrito when it was just a little closet, and whatever you wanted, the Silvas would get for you in the next month or two, whenever they got to Chicago. [chuckles] Now, there's the El Burrito Mexican megamall.

I think of the culture that we contributed. The Cinco de Mayo Fiesta, for example, is, I think, one of the biggest ones celebrations. It's all Latino based, and it's not just Mexican

it's a plethora of our Latino home countries. We carry all the flags. When we do our parades, the ROTC lends us the American flag and the Minnesota State flag, and, then, we get a Mexican flag. Then, the kids who are marching all carry their home country bandana flag and everybody is represented. I think that's just such a beautiful example to bring anywhere, but especially to the Midwest. The art, music and of course food is another example of our influence in Minnesota. I know when you were growing up, Minnesota didn't have that much to offer. You were probably the only fly in the milk out there.

LD: Oh, yes!

CR: Yes, because you went to South Saint Paul, right?

LD: I did and I was one of the very, very, very, few Latinos, and certainly the only one in my IB [International Baccalaureate] classes and certainly the only Salvadoran that I knew.

CR: Yes, and who was connected to her roots.

LD: Yes.

CR: One of my biggest classes is at South Saint Paul. Yesterday, I had twenty-eight kids.

LD: Wow, that's amazing.

CR: In South Saint Paul, at one of the first parent meetings, we had one parent. People claimed that it was because it was raining, but Latinas go anywhere. It was because the outreach wasn't there. Now, we have fifty, sixty parents. Well, you know, that is because *ahora* [now], the word is out. They feel comfortable.

I'm always asked about social networking with Latinos. Oh! The social networking is that you call Radio Rey between, I think, two and five and you say, "*Mira, estoy buscando una niñera, llama here*" [Look, I am looking for a daycare, call here.] We don't social network like our mainstream neighbors. Our social networking is totally different it is done in churches *en la bodega.* [the store.] *En Radio Rey. En la quinceañera. En la boda.* [Through Radio Rey. At the quinceañera. At the wedding.]

LD: Right.

CR: It's still *la tía* [the aunt] that rules and, it's still *mami* [mommy] who call the shots in the Latino household. When dealing with kids I've had to speak with their family in Mexico or Puerto Rico or El Salvador or whatever home country the youth is from. I'll find myself in the middle of a conversation with a relative, *Una tía: Venga pa' 'cá señora. Habla aquí. Explica lo que estás haciendo.* [An aunt: come here lady. Speak here. Explain what you are doing.] **"**Hello?" I say.

LD: [laughter]

CR: *¿Con quién hablo? O, en Mexico, ¿como están las cosas*? [With whom am I speaking? Or, in Mexico, how are things?]

You have to gain that trust. The first year at my job, I spent the whole year just building trust with families, youth and schools. I think that's why I have solid resources today, because I had to take that time. It's a garden and if you're going to grow a garden, you're going to have to find a pot of soil, clean it out and toil with it. After a while, it gets easier. The flowers finally bloom, but not in the beginning. It's a constant, twenty-four hour a day job.

Our kids have *serious* issues. I had a group of kids whose parents were picked up by immigration at one of the schools.

LD: Oh, my gosh

CR: Families just ripped apart and kids sleeping in cars or at a friend's, homeless and still going to school.

LD: Wow.

CR: Yes. I think of the kids I know at Johnson High School, and the challenges that they face. One kid, I don't even know how he gets to school every day. They come from a long way. A lot of times, they don't have bus money, so they have to walk and it's cold. I always tell them, *eso son la ganas* [that is with drive/enthusiasm] and that's exactly what's going to make them that successful adult.

One kid was just sharing with me how he graduates this year, but he has to go back to Mexico, because he doesn't have papers. I was telling him he's going back to Mexico with a high school education. That means he knows English. "You're going to be fine in Mexico. You're going to get a job. You're going to be fine. You're going to help out. You've got that entrepreneurial spirit. You've got it. Use what you've got. Don't worry about what you don't have or that it's not fair."

Unfortunately, I can almost always tell who's got papers and who doesn't, because the kids without papers, honest to gosh, *le meten más ganas a todo.* [They try harder at everything.] They're the ones with that 3.9 grade point. They are the ones that are there for everything, wanting to join everything. Then, I see the kids that just don't care. After a while, it's easy to recognize it.

But, seriously, we're in a crisis here. Latinos are the largest growing population. That means we're going to have the most needs. We can't get healthcare, so we need to be in prevention mode. But how can you be in prevention if you're eating *manteca* [lard/fat]? I

tell the kids, it's up to you. You're the ones that need to educate your families, the community.

Now, after all this time the kids are getting more and more recognition - they've been getting lots of recognition lately. The governor recognized several students during Hispanic Heritage month. They had the opportunity to go to the Capitol and meet with the governor personally. When they go testify, you see that they all walk together. Now, it's getting better. At Harding High School, the kids really have taken to testifying and presenting. We walked into a council room recently—there were eleven of us—and the room suddenly came to a standstill as the youth came in one orderly file and sat quietly for 90 minutes. A record for sure, and evidence of the importance in attending church services.

We're also General Mills Healthy Champions we've got a small grant to help in nutrition and physical activity. That allows me to give them healthy foods, which they enjoy very, very much. It also helped us develop a soccer team.

LD: Is there anything else that you want to cover, contribute, share?

CR: I've been thinking a lot about that. I thought, gosh, if this goes into a record, what's the legacy? What's the thought? I guess my feeling now is that all roads lead here, my spirit, my essence would still be me whether my father put me on that bus or not. I call them defining moments. The students that are older now, they'll come back and say, "Oh, I remember you told me about choices and defining moments." While we may not have choices we do have those defining moments yet I really believe that all roads lead here, and it's what you put out there and the intention behind what you put out there that defines our path in life. If your intention is what's in it for me, then it's not going to go far. It's not going to hold. It's just going to fall down. If your intention is that you really want to help the kids and you really just want to do the interview, or you want to put that story out there, then it takes on a life of its own and it just expands.

I was sharing with the kids how exciting this is to think that there's going to be a book in the school that's going to be talking about this Puerto Rican girl from Brooklyn who wound up in the Midwest, and how I wish I had a book like that when I was going to school, because there was nothing. I thought, gosh, I guess I would want either a little boy or a little girl, or a mom and dad, to see that it's really, *el deseo que uno tiene* [the desire that one has] and your standards, your values that determine the outcome of your life.

That day that I went to the Republican table, I guess I could have stayed longer at the other tables and filled out more forms. I just found them intimidating intrusive and long. I felt like somebody was probing into my personal life, and all of that just to get housing and something to eat. Whereas over here on the other side, I could type a bunch of data and labels into a machine and receive a check.

Mario Duarte was another person who was very good at helping others. He connected me with Al McFarlen of INSIGHT NEWS where I learned tele-typing. I forgot what it was called. That just increased my skills. Once my skills were increased, then I could command more money. Every mentor that has given me the opportunity to help *them* in their business, really what it did was to give *me* life's tools.

I always tell the youth I work with, "Do the unexpected." One time at Harding, somebody had spilled—it wasn't us—ice cream in the classroom, and there was this sticky nasty mess. All the kids were waiting for the janitor to come and clean it up. I said, "No, let's us do it." There was a lot of, "Nah, it's not my job." "I didn't do it!" We talk a lot about just doing the right thing. Why do we have to wait for someone else? I remember right after we cleaned the mess, the kids were always on top of things. Even to this day, I see that they put the tables back and sweep the floor. We have this rule not to sit on the desktops. It ruins the tables.

LD: [laughter]

CR: If you sit there, tomorrow when somebody lays their head down, they will sniff and inhale your [word spoken in Spanish]. So the last thing you want to do is that.

We try to use humor. I always believe in humor. Humor, to me, is the best medicine there is. I've had people ask me, "Why are you so happy? What's going on?" which is, to me, very humorous. You think, heck, I don't know. I learned years ago that the only thing I could control—I couldn't control anything—was my feeling and reaction to things. I could control my imagination. I could control how I reacted to somebody connecting with me. I could do it in a negative mode or a positive one. So I chose the positive one and put my energy in those things I could control. That's what, I guess, I would like to share with other folks.

Once I was in college, in theology class, and we had a test. I was so frozen that I couldn't remember my name. I just sat there and I wrote down, "I am frozen. I think I'm having an anxiety attack." I couldn't even spell anxiety. I remember crossing it and re-spelling. The minute two or three people handed in their work, I got up. I signed it, dated it, handed it in, and walked out. Two days later my professor called me. He said, "This is the best thing that's ever happened. I never had a paper like this. Thanks for telling me the truth!" I could have made another a choice. I could have walked out. I could have blamed somebody else.

I've got students who don't have money for books. One of my girls at Saint Paul Technical College had to take a test. She went for a whole semester without her books. She would borrow books from people in her class. I told her, "*Mira*, this is *ganas*. There's no way you're going to fail. We've got people with books that care and you're working twice as hard without the book." Things like that just make them feel like they can succeed! She did take her test and passed it!

I have another student who for *months* worked on her final paper. It was due at midnight, and she just wanted it *perfect*, so she had a teacher come and look at it. The teacher pressed a button, a wrong button. The whole thing was gone. *I* would have gotten her a lawyer!

LD: [chuckles]

CR: "What the heck, perfect example of discrimination, right here. Racist." You know what she did? She sat down and redid the whole thing and sent it in before the deadline—*and* it was accepted. I told her, "These are those winning tools. You could have been bellyaching. You could have had your mother talk to the teacher, bring the principal, get the school board, get the superintendent, get the governor here." But, no, instead she swallowed her tears. To me, she handled it much better than I think I would have. That's a solid foundation. She can build anything on that foundation. It's going to hold, because those values are there.

What I'd like to share is the values. We don't have to go with the norm. Just because everybody is sitting on the table, doesn't mean you have to sit on the table. At home they tell you what they want you to do. Inside here, somewhere, you know what you want to do. You're just scared to tell somebody. Every time I told somebody what I wanted to do, they would laugh at me and tell me *tú estás loca. Tú eres bruta. Tú no puedes hacer eso. Mira, esta nena quiere hacer...* [you are crazy. You are dumb. You cannot do that. Look, this child wants to do…] Your self-image just goes lower and lower.

I have girls and boys who don't like to have their pictures taken. I do nothing but take pictures. I've got nothing but pictures of all these kids. Now, I notice, after the first or second year, they're so happy that I took those pictures, because then they see the difference and they can't believe that they used to look so sad. We need to see that. We need to have that measurement stick. We need to see not only how far we've come, but where we're going. Because we're fluid, it's okay. We can take those turns. We can go to South Africa. What the heck?

LD: [laughter] [Lorena Duarte is moving to South Africa shortly]

CR: Because we're fluid, we don't have to have just that one path.

I guess that I imagine my little book in the hands of the children, and I want to say to them, "Hurray, that you picked up a book to read! This is your number one step to success."

I have the kids read out loud. That's what they did to me, and I would cry. I hated my aunt. But today I'm so happy, because if it wasn't for having to stand up to my aunt and read, I never would have learned it, and I never would have been able to control it and use it to my advantage.

LD: I think that's pretty good advice - to look for the positive and move forward.

CR: You must, because there's nothing but negative.

LD: Yes.

CR: The reason I did face painting a while back wasn't because I enjoyed because being around children and having my hand all swollen up. It was because I needed to make money. I've always loved the entrepreneurial spirit. I think Latinos are very entrepreneurial. The kids love fund raisers. For Jóvenes du Salud, we're going to be having a scholarship fund for our kids. I'd like it to be targeted for the kids that don't have papers, but I don't think it can be that specific. I'm excited that I'm going to be part of a legacy to leave something.

LD: So you think we need to build our own philanthropic culture?

CR: Yes! I always tell my kids, "I've got no problem of giving to you, but you *must* always give back."

LD: Yes.

CR: I think what we did wrong in the 1980s, when we were doing all these scholarships funds with Saint Catherine and Saint Thomas—it was exciting, exciting days—was that we didn't *demand* that that graduate give back. It was like, "Go be successful." Then, what about giving back? Now, there's very little.

LD: Right.

CR: We've got kids with beautiful promising futures who can't afford a book. So because they can't afford a book and there's no place, there's no Latino Books R Us. If we can give to a church or give to our families, we can certainly give to the scholarship fund. I'm giving it in my mother's name. It's just something small. I talked to my boss and we're a non-profit, so she liked the idea. She thought that would be good. One of my biggest regrets is that we don't have that in place.

LD: More infrastructure?

CR: Yes, shame on us really, seriously. It's like we passed the baton. Well, what was the baton? What did we pass?

LD: Right, right.

CR: I look at your father and Patricia Torres Ray: I remember when I was at the governor's office and she came to meet me. She wanted so much to be part of the political system and I couldn't understand *why*! Why in the world would you want to do that? Why don't you just want to stay home and have your babies? She said, "Hey, I can do both." And she did.

LD: That's right.

CR: Yes. It was like, wow. You go girl.

[laughter]

CR: She made it. You see people like that. They share a little bit of their desire, but you don't really imagine that one day she's going to be a Minnesota State senator. *Que cosa* [What a thing] it's beautiful, and *da orgullo* [gives you pride] to see that. I would just like to see more of that. I'd like to see more of us give back to the community.

LD: Absolutely.

CR: Pure and simple.

LD: I think that's a pretty good place to finish. Once again, on behalf of the Historical Society and me, personally, thank you so much.

CR: Well, thank you.

LD: I know you're very busy.

CR: It's been wonderful.

LD: It's a wonderful thing to have you sharing.

CR: Thanks, I just got nominated for Grandmother of the Year. UCare nominated me, for Women's Month in March.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: So my baby granddaughter Avery Kate Wewerka, age 16 months, is coming, because, you know, she's the queen. You'll be out of town, so you'll miss her entrance.

LD: I will.

CR: I see kids that I worked with and, now they're full grown adults. For them to have warm feelings about me is the greatest joy. Your own kids say, oh, mom is such a pain. Then, you see kids that you knew when they were little and they're grown men and women. I've got kids who bring their kids to see me.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

CR: Yes. It's just fabulous. It gives me joy.

I knew I'd be in the history books because of that, but I didn't know I'd be in the Historical Society.

[chuckles]

CR: This little girl from Brooklyn put on a greyhound bus!

LD: You've come a long way, baby. Thank you so very much!

CR: Adios. Gracias.