Lourdez Ortega Schwab Narrator

Ruth Trevino Interviewer

Willmar, Minnesota May 10, 2009

Lourdez Schwab – LS Ruth Trevino – RT

RT: This is Lourdez Schwab and Ruth Trevino, May 30, 2009. We are meeting at LuLu Beans, in Willmar, Minnesota. We will just go ahead and start out with some of the basics, your name, where you were born, and things like that.

LS: My name is Lourdez Schwab. Lourdez Ortega is my maiden name. I was born in El Paso, Texas.

RT: How long were you there? How long did you live in El Paso?

LS: Just my early years. We moved around in Texas before moving to Minnesota.

RT: How old were you when you moved to Minnesota?

LS: I was eleven years old

RT: You were eleven?

LS: Yes.

RT: So it was you and your parents? Do you have any siblings?

LS: It was me, my parents, and three older and one younger brothers.

RT: You were the only girl. How was that growing up?

LS: I didn't know any other life. [laughing] It was a rough boyish life. I remember hiding under my bed to play with my dolls so that my brothers wouldn't make fun of me. I remember also having fun playing with matchbox cars with my brothers. [laughing] As I look back now, we would use the cars to fantasize going to a mall and going to a fast food restaurant. We never went to any of those places growing up. The only time I can remember getting food at a restaurant was about once or twice a year at Kentucky Fried Chicken, and even then we would eat the food at the park. It was only in our

imaginations and with matchbox cars purchased at garage sales that we would go to a burger joint, and for me, of course, shopping at a mall.

RT: So, you moved to Minnesota when you were eleven. Did you more here to the Willmar area, or was there a lot of moving around before you eventually landed in Willmar?

LS: There was no moving around. My parents had a mission to move to Minnesota based on positive experiences from their migrant friends.

RT: That is where you stayed. What drew your family to Willmar?

LS: Many factors influenced our move. We had nowhere to go but up. My father had just been laid off from a fertilizer seed company, and my two older brothers were in high school in a community with many bad influences, including gangs. One of my brothers was into sports, and at the same time the expense of a sport was a barrier to our family and caused a lot of tension. I could remember feeling the pressure in the home when my parents were struggling to make ends meet. Then, suddenly we were packing our belongings in big sacks my mom sewed together, and we loaded our truck with a camper and we drove up North like the stereotypical migrant family. When we arrived in Willmar, Minnesota, we began working in the farm fields.

RT: What kind of field work were you doing?

LS: We started with rock picking, then weeding the sugar beets and soy beans. It was very different from the field work in Texas. There we worked planting bundles of onions. We had little stocks of onions which were half the size in length and the bundle was approximately 20 times bigger than a bundle of green onions you buy in the grocery store. We were pros at planting them. I started doing that at the age of eight, and my mom would only allow me one row. The pros would plant two rows on each side. I knew I was good (not a pro) when my mom allowed me to take two rows. We also worked tomato picking and potato cleaning. Potatoes were the worst. We had to pick out the rotted potatoes from huge stacks and sack them. Disgusting, but that's what we did to survive in Texas in the summer. Minnesota field work was nicer even though it was tough labor. In Minnesota, from the ages of eleven through fourteen, my parents gave me four rows. I didn't think it was as cool to be a pro then. My brother, who was one year older than me, was smart. He would go slow so that he would only be allowed to take two rows. At that time I called him lazy, but now I realize he was smart!

RT: When you moved to Willmar, did you move directly to Willmar or did your family live in smaller towns nearby?

LS: The family that we came to Willmar with had been coming to Willmar for many years in the spring, and would return to Texas in August. We followed them directly to Willmar, and stayed in a dirty yet cheap hotel for a few weeks until we found an apartment. We found a basement, two bedroom apartment within the same month that

was willing to rent to a family of seven. We were now going to a new school. We picked rock after school and then went home, did our homework, and did it all over again the next day. The way a family of seven lives in a two bedroom apartment is easy. We slept on mattresses on the floor, and the leaned them up against the wall every morning. My parents really liked the quality of life in Willmar, and we decided to stay. That summer, my father and oldest brother returned to Texas and brought back the remainder of our belongings that were worth bringing. We never returned other than to go to Mexico to visit our family.

RT: Here you are. Did you like Minnesota when you first moved here?

LS: It was very different.

RT: What was so different about it?

LS: I never felt that I left my friends and my school behind. Willmar was the first place that I felt I was home. Maybe that was because my parents felt the same way. School was different, yet better. In Texas, we never had a phone and I never had a social life outside of school. In northern Texas, where we lived, if you were learning English or had a heavy accent, you were different. Our entire family lived in Mexico, and so as children we never really socialized other than with my parents' friends. In Willmar, I noticed very few Hispanics, yet we all leaned on each other. Most Hispanics came from Southern Texas, and we all spoke English and we all were in Willmar for the same reason.

RT: You say the lifestyle was different. What do you remember about Willmar, Minnesota being so different than Texas?

LS: When I came to Willmar I realized, "I am a Hispanic person." It was like I went from being Mexican in Texas to being Hispanic in Minnesota. In Texas schools there were some Hispanics that were fourth or fifth generation and did not speak any Spanish. If you spoke Spanish it wasn't an asset; it meant that you were Mexican. Coming to Willmar schools, it was a comforting thing to be able to speak Spanish and it felt as if I belonged here. That is maybe why I felt at home almost immediately.

RT: Do you remember what year that was?

LS: It was in 1989 – 1990.

RT: So there were just a few Latinos in town?

LS: You probably could count the Hispanic students on both hands, and we were all from Texas. When September came around, kids would start school and then go home to Texas within weeks. It was really sad to know you wouldn't see them all year until March or April. Very few stayed. We were one of the few families that did.

RT: Who did you hang out with? Who were your friends when your Texas friends left?

LS: With the few others who stayed, and with my brother Gerardo (Gera). We were in the same grade and we were always together.

RT: Did you do any extra-curricular activities? Any plays, or athletics?

LS: No. I wanted to so much, but I knew that I couldn't add that financial burden to my parents. Really, what I knew would never happen was the ability for them to pick me up from school after practice or after games. I always had that competitive spirit, but the only outlet for me to release that was into my academics. I guess I remember how my older brother still got into sports, and I saw how my mom would struggle just to buy his shoes, so I didn't have the heart to add to that stress. As I got into high school and my older brothers were done with school, I saw more of a possibility for joining a sport – but by then I was not experienced enough to make the teams. I tried out for several sports, dance, and cheerleading, but never made it in.

RT: Which one did you enjoy the most?

LS: Well, I just tried out. I never really made it past the tryouts. [laughing] It was fun trying out all of them. I can see that same ambition in my daughter now. She is ten years old and wants to try everything. I let her try, if she commits, and she needs to fulfill her commitments through the end of the season. I allow her to make the choice of whether or not she wants to try out again for the next season. In fifth grade there are no tryouts, so once she's in she can't let her team down.

RT: That's funny. You say you have a daughter, so do you have any other children?

LS: I have three awesome children. Isaak is thirteen, Skyra is ten, and Ethan is five.

RT: Ok. So you are married also?

LS: Yes.

RT: How long have you been married?

LS: I have been married to Jason for six years now.

RT: How did you and Jason meet?

LS: It was ten years ago, and I was working at Willmar Housing and Redevelopment Authority. He came in to do some construction work. I noticed that he would come into the office daily, and we'd chat a little, but I never thought he was flirting. Isaak was three years old, and Skyra was only months old, so I was too busy to think of anyone being interested in me. It wasn't until the day he had some in to inform me aht his job was done, and he lingered around and I wondered what else he wanted. He made small talk about movies, and paged through the newspaper, and that was it. He was gone. The

girls came out of their offices like ants and told me he was definitely flirting. I got his number from his work file and called him that evening and invited him out to dance. I had no clue where we would go dancing in Willmar, but that's what I said and still teases me about that to this day. I had made a decision after a very unpleasant breakup, and with a new child, that I would concentrate on myself and my children at least until they were both in school. For some reason, the magic number in my head was when Skyra would be seven years old.

RT: So, what was it about your husband that changed your mind?

LS: He was a really nice guy, and the peer pressure of my co-workers made me cave. I gave it a shot. I was living with my mom, and she thought I was crazy and that a white man was not going to love a woman with two small children. When my mom and children met him a couple of months later, they really liked each other. That was the real draw – that he immediately accepted my children and appreciated how I raised them.

RT: Do you still have contact with your first husband?

LS: Yes It is really important to me to not allow children to see unhealthy relationships between the adults that they love. I have an ex-husband because we married right out of high school, and when we grew up we grew apart. It's important that kids see healthy relationships no matter what the circumstances are, because it will influence them in how they are in a relationship later on. It is nice for everyone when you can communicate well and get along, because otherwise the family would always be on edge.

RT: Jason Schwab is your husband. He is not Latino?

LS: No – he is Austrian/Norwegian.

RT: No. Was he well received in your family? Was it a big deal for you to marry someone that was not Latino?

LS: It wasn't a big deal. It was probably a relief for my parents. [laughing]

RT: How so? [laughing]

LS: As I said before, he is a nice person and when they met him they saw his genuine kindness. A commonality that we had right off the bat was that he is also a first generation Austrian born in the United States. His maternal Norwegian side goes further back in the U. S. His father, my father-in-law, was born in Austria and his family immigrated to Texas during World War II. The little that I know of their story is that, while his grandfather was in the war, the family had to flee their home for what they thought would only be a few days until the Russians went through their village. Jason's grandmother and older uncles buried all their valuables in the garden, never to return. My father-in-law was two years old and his father traveled from village to village to find his family and move to the United States. From Texas they moved to Sioux Falls with

the help of a church, and my husband's 95-year old grandmother still lives there and is tough as nails. She, like my parents, still speaks to her friends in German, but unlike my parents also speaks fluent English. But they are all immigrants.

RT: Absolutely. Let's talk about what you do now. What do you do now as a job?

LS: I continue to build relationships in the Latino community. I believe that whether you work in the nonprofit industry or the sales world, relationships are the key. I work now at Heritage Bank, and I am a personal banker. My position at the bank is designed to be on the forefront with the endless opportunities that are to come with our diverse population. Most of the Latinos in our area are new immigrants, meaning that they come from their native country to begin a new life in Willmar, Minnesota, because they have some connection here, and ultimately a job.

I have found myself educating and being educated by our customers and our community. I have found that many Latinos do not trust the banking system. My father had most of his money invested in Mexican banks, and when they went bankrupt, he lost his money. Also, in Mexico as in most other South American and Central American countries, bank accounts are handled similar to our stock market, and in the bank's favor. If a person invests money, and the interest rate goes down, the customer loses money, and if the interest rate goes up, the customer does not make money. Many of our customers in the Latino community understand only that. We find ourselves educating at every transaction, and we spend more time with new customers without overwhelming them because there is so much to learn. As a result of this education, rather than just seeing their bank as a check-cashing facility, we are now seeing customers invest their money in CDs and IRA's, buying homes, and opening business with money they have borrowed.

RT: You had mentioned that you worked at Housing Redevelopment Authority. Was that your first job with benefits and whatnot?

LS: Yes.

RT: It was. What exactly is the Housing Redevelopment Authority?

LS: The Housing and Redevelopment Authority (called HRA) is a federal agency that is found in most cities to provide affordable housing to anybody who meets the income criteria. To me, the HRA was a stepping stone to give people a jump start into a better financial life, but is also provides sage and sanitary living conditions to low income individuals,

RT: How did you go from working with housing redevelopment authority to being...are you a personal banker?

LS: It all began with HRA giving me the opportunity and seeing my potential. I started out as a secretary, and then almost immediately began managing two federal programs. The need in this community has always been educating newcomers from other countries

about how the process of life happens in the United States. I saw that people who did want to do better for themselves really did use HRA as a stepping stone and moved on to purchase homes. Throughout this process I became a housing counselor for another nonprofit organization, Heartland Community Action Agency. There I worked with people to prepare them to purchase homes as well as helping people get out of a foreclosure situation. At Heartland Community Action Agency I provided workshops in English and Spanish to first time homebuyers and prepared people in building and repairing their credit ratings so that they could meet the standards required by financial institutions before they walked in to fill out an application. I would assist Spanish speaking individuals with translation services with the realtor, banker, inspector and closing agent. That led me into getting my real estate license to assist this niche market, using my skills from both HRA and Heartland Community to educate them as I worked with them on the purchase of their first home.

RT: Working with that, you decided to become a banker?

LS: I needed more structure, and most importantly I needed to be home more, and that is what the bank provided for me. When I leave work at five, I leave work at five. When I was selling real estate it was a part time job that was sometimes almost full time – but I was also working full time at the West Central Integration Collaborative where I worked with the same families. Charly Leuze at the West Central Collaborative helped me start this – to help parents I was working with become more active in the education of their children.

The different roles and jobs I had in the community had one thing in common – the relationships with the Latino community. With the West Central Integration Collaborative I helped start projects that that had gone away, such as the folkloric dancers. I would see similarities in the survival mode that most new immigrant parents were in, which kept them from being active in their children's education. That is why I began after school activities through the West Central Collaborative – to give young girls and youth an opportunity to feel good about themselves through a nontraditional extracurricular activity. I went into the Alternative Learning Center where at risk youth attended school, and began a fitness program in conjunction with another employee of the West Central Collaborative who was giving the youth guitar lessons. The West Central Collaborative focused on education, health, and economic development. Therefore, as the office manager, I was dealing with all the issues at once.

Then came an idea that flourished in our downtown community. A group of people got together and felt there was a need for a Mercado – a multicultural market. Charly Leuze asked if it was something that I'd be interested in coordinating through the West Central Collaborative. It was a dream at that point, but enough key leaders in our communities believed in it. Mercados were a big part of our lives in the Mexican culture, and there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted a part in creating it.

RT: What is it about the mercado, from your childhood, what was it about the mercado that was the big thing?

LS: When we traveled to Mexico, the mercado is where my entire family – grandmother, mother, cousins, aunts, uncles – went to purchase everything from food to party supplies to cassette tapes. (There weren't any CDs at that time.) After we moved to Minnesota, we'd pack our family in a truck and make the trip to Minneapolis, on Lake Street, to purchase our tamale supplies. This was a trip we made only about once every two years. Our normal yearly supplies purchase would be when we traveled to Mexico. My parents would bring big sacks of the supplies for tamales, and those of us that traveled in the back of the truck smelled of red peppers. We had stacks of 50 pound bags of masa (ground corn), and also corn husks that would last an entire year. This is how my parents survived. My mom sold tamales in the underground market in Willmar. She also baked bread, and we would go door to door selling until she built up enough clientele that people would just know when she was making tamales and/or bread, and they would put in their order and pick it up at our home.

RT: So, the trip to Minneapolis would be for purchasing food products that weren't available around here, like the brand names. Like the tamarindo, the masa for the corn tortillas, as well as the tamales.

LS: Yes. It was for everything that was a comfort food and that was rare to find in Willmar.

RT: How often did you go?

LS: About once every two years. Most of the time they would place orders with friends that were going there, and when we would travel to Mexico we'd buy enough to last about a year. It's something that is not as common today, because there are businesses now that sell the same products, and people do not have to buy in bulk. The Mercado was created with the idea to educate people that were doing what my mom was doing, and also to create something like a business incubator for people to test their business and see how it might work. For example, we were helping a business customer who was selling bread from home just as my mom did. They came to use and asked what they needed to do to make their businesses legitimate. They had people getting off the early morning shift from Jennie O Turkey store and walking into their home and leaving with brown sacks. The neighbors were concerned, and called law enforcement. The police did a stake out, but the bread makers knew their customers, and so when a strange Anglo police officer came in street clothes, they knew it was a police officer. They discontinued their sales and began the process of opening a business. I took them out to view commercial sites of old bakeries, and also provided education on what they needed to do to start a business. My experience from Heartland Community Action came into play when we found that they needed to clean up some credit to get a loan. In this case, one person was able to provide services that – had I not had the training – would have taken three different agencies to deal with.

RT: It was a learning process?

LS: It will always continue to be a learning process. New immigrants are buying their first homes and starting their first American businesses. It's got nowhere to go but up.

RT: This Mercado, is it comparable to what you remember in your childhood? What is this Mercado about?

LS: It's a project that meets the needs and wants of our diverse community. If we were able to do what we envisioned, it would be a \$3 million project. It was not feasible in our current economy to do that at this time. We took a step back and measured the work we had done. When we began developing this idea we had about then ethnic-owned businesses, and it had grown in a matter of four years to over thirty ethnic-owned businesses. We revisited out strategy along with all the players at the table, which included the Willmar Economic Development Center, Southwest Initiative Foundation, Small Business Development Center, Ridgewater College, Heartland Community Action Agency, HRA, the Chamber of Commerce, the City of Willmar, the Design Center, banks, attorneys, churches and many more key organizations that work with new immigrants and business development. We discussed the fact that we had a Mercado in Willmar, but that it was not in one centralized building. We focused on technical assistance and maintaining and growing the more than thirty businesses in the community. In the meantime, the organization became a stand alone nonprofit organization.

RT: Do you think that this Mercado is one way to get the community, the Latino community, to interact more with the predominantly white community here in the area? Do you see a lot of interaction between the two communities?

LS: It's getting there. We noticed that many Latino businesses had a niche market, and they did well with their Latino or Somali customer base. We discussed working with the current businesses in thinking through an idea from the Chamber of Commerce and the Willmar Design Center to help business owners understand that by making their store fronts more welcoming to all, it would increase their business. My husband is now able to go into a Mexican grocery store and buy whatever product I need to make tamales or any ethnic dish without feeling as if he is in another country. However, there is still work to do.

RT: Let's change directions just a little bit. The Latino community is well known for being a particularly religious community. Growing up, was there opportunity for that? Did your family go to church? Was there an opportunity for your parents to feel comfortable in a church when they first got here?

LS: That is one of the first things we did. My parents are Catholic, and there was Spanish Mass in Willmar at that time. It was a very small group of people, but the fact that I was in Spanish is what drew my family in. However, my parents would have gone to Mass in English regardless. There was no language barrier when it came to Mass.

RT: Do you still continue to attend church at the same place that your parents do?

LS: No. My husband is not Catholic, so we found a place that we are both comfortable with for our family to attend.

RT: You moved here with your parents, when you were eleven. Are they still around town? Are they still in the Willmar area?

LS: No. My parents went back closer to their roots after they raised five successful children in Minnesota. My father actually had lived and worked in Minnesota before ever meeting my mother. When he was in his twenties, he worked on the ships and boats in Minneapolis loading and unloading the imported and exported products. My father is originally from Chihuahua, which is a northern part of Mexico. My mother is from Durango, which is a more central part of Mexico.

When my father was in his late thirties he began working for my grandfather in Juarez, where both my paternal and maternal family migrated to – similar to migrating to Minnesota. My father made adobe bricks, built adobe houses, and fixed cars with my grandfather. I understood what they did when I would see my grandfather spraying the bricks every day in the hot sun. My father was the youngest of three children, and my mother was the second oldest of twelve kids. Needless to say, she never went to school. She was a provider for the household. Her grandfather used to sell groceries, and she talks about how he was an entrepreneur. She remembers seeing guns and animals circulate through their home, because that is how they got paid.

My mother and father met while he worked for my grandfather. My father was sixteen years older than my mother, but he stole her when she was twenty five years old, and they eloped to the United States. My mother had her visa at the time because she would cross the border daily into El Paso and work as a nanny and housekeeper for people. My father did not have documentation, so he would cross illegally. When my mother's visa expired, they stayed in Texas in a small town called Silverton in the Texas panhandle. They would always move around so that they wouldn't get caught by immigration. They always seemed to find odd farm jobs to survive until the next move. In the meantime, my oldest brother, Raul, was born. They were then deported to Juarez, Mexico, and m mom would cross the border every month to make her prenatal appointments in El Paso. They would go to a clinic that would charge them fifty dollars per visit. To save money, my mother missed her last prenatal appointment and when she went to deliver the baby, they sent her in an ambulance back to Juarez. My brother Pedro was born en route to Mexico. Technically he was born in El Paso, but registered in Juarez.

RT: Is he a Mexican citizen or is he a U.S. citizen, or does he have dual citizenship?

LS: They are all now U. S. citizens. My parents worked hard and were deported many times before finally going through the amnesty in the Reagan era of 1986 or so. They were very proud to become U. S. citizens. That is the year that our entire family was finally able to breathe and live, rather than just survive. For many years I remember going to a house with a huge tree growing through the roof. Those were some of their

legal immigration appointments. When we moved to Minnesota, my parents and my brother received their U. S. citizenship status. At the time that my parents were deported and returned and were deported again, laws were different and you could still apply for a visa without a penalty. Things are different now, and if you are deported it can take up to two years before you are able to acquire a visa to return to your family.

There was a time when my grandmother came with us for one year to live in Minnesota. Many undocumented families gravitate and settle in the border towns because you have to pass another immigration checkpoint about two to three hours into the U. s. My grandmother was with us, and since we always brought home big sacks of food, they let us through. My grandmother was so tiny that her blanket-covered body looked like another pillow. I do remember feeling bad for her, because I thought we were suffocating her. It was really neat to have our grandmother living with use. I was born in El Paso, and the reason I have a "z" in my name is because the doctor misspelled it. I was supposed to be named Maria de Lourdes (my complete first name), and the doctor just replaced the "s" in Lourdes with a "z." My name was Maria up until I turned eleven, and my parents were having difficulties with my school records because my birth certificate stated Lourdez, and my baptism certificate stated Maria de Lourdes. My parents thought that since we wee moving it was a good time to change my name to match the legal documents. My other two brothers, Gera and Jesse, were born in the U.S. also. I think my little brother was the result of the joy my parents had when amnesty passed. I always wondered why they waited eight years to have their last child.

RT: Really. How was that experience of having your Grandmother with you for a year?

LS: It was wonderful to have my grandmother with us. I would never have imagined that my grandmother would ever come to the U. S. We loved being able to take her to places like the lake or a park that she had never experienced before in her life. She was very cold in Minnesota, however. I had never met my grandmother until I was eight years old. That was how long it was after I was born before my parents received amnesty and their green cards. I do remember my parents writing to their families in Mexico during the first eight years of my life. I never knew how precious grandmothers were until I was eight and discovered that my mom also had a mom.

RT: Do you remember it being a difference between you and some of your friends whose families are from here? They might say, "I am going to go see my grandma?"

LS: Not a large difference. I don't remember ever talking about or thinking of that. What was strange was when my paternal grandmother passed away and my father left our family for the first time by himself to attend her funeral. It was strange not to have our father around.

RT: To have your dad gone?

LS: To have my dad gone was strange. He took us everywhere. My mother never drove.

RT: The relationship was there, but maybe not the closeness? With your paternal grandmother?

LS: Right. She was very ill, and we never got to know her when she was healthy. The relationship with my maternal grandmother was closer.

RT: She is the one that came to visit?

LS: Yes.

RT: One good memory that you have from that visit?

LS: The storytelling. I was pregnant with my oldest son, and she was staying in my old bedroom. It was very comforting to visit, and she would be cutting remnants to sew together patterns for blankets. She would talk about her life as a young girl, and when she started her family of twelve at the age of fourteen. Even though they were very, very poor, I never got that impression in her stories. They were poor financially, but rich with love. It was fund to see the mother-daughter interaction between her and my mother. My mom always overfeeds everyone, especially her pregnant daughter at that time. There was a time when my mom was mixing up her concoction for pregnant women, which consisted of whole milk, raw egg, banana, strawberries, and other fruit with ice. My grandmother's eyes opened wide when she served it to me in a container the size of a pitcher, and told me to drink it for the baby. My grandmother told my mom she was crazy and was going to make me fat. It was funny watching them go back and forth with each other. I enjoyed having them both spoil me.

RT: Did you have any other family come visit you?

LS: My uncle and aunt on my father's side. He was my dad's only surviving brother at that time. They came to visit for a few months. That was strange also, to have family from Mexico in Minnesota, in our home. My uncle loved to go fishing, and he caught a walleye. He has always been a great chef, and he baked the walleye, gourmet style, and I couldn't wait for it to be done. It never occurred to me that he intended to eat the entire fish all by himself. I stared at him as he ate and ate and ate.

RT: Did he share?

LS: Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to me.

RT: How was it?

LS: Delicious!

RT: Your uncle went fishing...have you ever gone fishing for fun? Here in Minnesota?

LS: Yes. I had gone fishing with my father, and we did not realize that carp is dirty fish here, and also that the bigger the carp, the dirtier. I caught the biggest carp ever, and I was so proud of myself. My parents were taking pictures of it before my mother fried the fish for supper. My mom got going on skinning the fish. She didn't fillet the fish; she used every single edible part of it and wasted nothing. It was then that we realized that all the photos we had taken on the 35mm camera were taken without any film in the camera.

RT: You took pictures but there was no film. [laughing] Now it is just one of those great memories.

LS: Exactly.

RT: Any differences that you see in the community now versus when you first moved here?

LS: There is a lot of difference because the Latino community has grown. When we first moved here we were the interpreters for our parents. They took us along to all their appointments, even medical appointments. Now, most places hire people on staff that are bilingual.

RT: When you say we, you mean?

LS: My and my siblings. Primarily it was me and my oldest brothers. I hated it. Hate is a strong word, but it is how I felt about interpreting at the age of twelve.

RT: Why was it so bad?

LS: It was very intimidating for me to translate what a doctor was telling my parents about their health. I'm sure plenty of information was lost in translation. It was the same thing at a bank or any place my parents possibly had to go. Our community now has bilingual staff at almost any place of business. That experience I believe is what encouraged my parents to take adult basic education English classes. That made us children happy to know that they were learning the basic skills to get by without us.

Education had always been important to our parents. I attended elementary school in Texas in the days of corporal punishment. In first grade I got paddled three times for not lining up at the whistle at recess. In sixth grade I got paddled three times for forgetting my math homework. Like it was yesterday, I remember that in first grade I dug my face in my arms on my desk afterwards. In sixth grade I got the privilege of signing the paddle, which I chose not to do. I'll tell you something, though. I was always in line at the whistle after that, and never ever forgot my homework again. Even better, in sixth grade we had the choice to get the paddling, or to send a letter home for our parents to sign – and you'd better believe I took the three paddles. The consequences at home would have been much worse. We could not disrespect our teachers by going home and

telling our parents that the teachers did not like us. That was not even in our vocabulary. E respected them and could never complain.

RT: Most businesses no longer have children translating for their parents.

LS: Even about eight years ago in Willmar, however, I remember going to a home purchase closing as a housing counselor for Heartland Community Action Agency. The buyer brought her sister, and adult professional, and was not able to translate the correct information for the purchase of a home. Here is a person making the largest financial transaction of their life, and being relayed the most basic information and in reality signing without knowing the details, just completely based on trust. It was very scary, but today, eight years later, there is a professional in pretty much every field that is bilingual, or at the very least there is someone on staff that can relay the correct information thoroughly.

RT: Do you think your jobs have been more out of a passion or a desire to make sure that there is clear understanding of what is going on?

LS: I believe the job itself is a skill that can be taught to anyone. I have grown as a person because of the relationships I have built with the community as a whole. The emerging market is growing fast in our community, and there is a lot of opportunity for anyone who understands that at this point it is the time to build relationships with this market. If you are not passionate and genuine, you are not building the key relationships that will make our economy thrive. That goes the same for the Anglo community. The networks you build are what will make the collaborations and integrations a much smoother process. I've been in the new immigrant's shoes, and I understand the lifestyle and what newcomers are going through. If there is no passion for the job you are doing, you are just going through the motions and not really doing a good service to anyone. So to answer your question, whatever job it is I do, I give it may all and do it with passion.

RT: What do you see for yourself and your children here in the Willmar area coming up in the future? What are some things you would like to change or some things you would like to stay the same? Anything that you would like to effect change with?

LS: It is a great community and I love raising my children here. It is not the big city, but it has all of the amenities of the big city in the comfort of a small town. It's a good feeling knowing that if my kids are walking home from school our neighbors are always on the lookout. The quality of the education my family receives in Willmar is outstanding, and I would not change that. There is always room to grow, and my philosophy is that we never stop learning. I would like to continue building the relationships in the community and just share what I know by taking advantage of the opportunities available to me. Helping others find avenues to also take advantage of the endless opportunities. A goal in life that most parents share in common is to give our children a great life, by being active in our community, and we are teaching them to also be positive role models.

RT: Earlier you mentioned traditions and values. What are some traditions and values that you grew up with that you hold really near and dear to your heart?

LS: Working hard and being a loyal person. Growing up I saw my family surviving. They worked hard at it and did what needed to be done to raise a healthy family. Everything from selling snow cones, tamales, bread, sewing, work as a mechanic – all of it was done to survive. My parents would take garage sale items by the truck loads to Mexico and sell everything. When you work hard, you can be and do what you want.

RT: Sounds like you are trying to impart some of those things to your children. As you said earlier, make sure your daughter honors her commitment to whatever it was she was going to try out for.

LS: Yes. It is a lesson for everyone. In sports you learn so many things. I learned that from my family. My thirteen year old learned quickly that if you commit to something, you don't let them down. In sports you learn discipline and how to be a team player, and especially when others are counting on you to be there for them and for yourself. As a society we need to do a better job of understanding each other. That skill will take you far in life. I come up with the strangest analogies, but in the end it makes sense. For example, I tell my kids that just because a banana has a black spot on it, you don't throw it away. You cut that piece out, and eat the rest. Another one I use is that life has its pot holes, but you can go around them and get to where you are going, or you can allow them to bust your tire and end up on the side of the road waiting for someone else to fix your tire. I agree the analogies can sound ridiculous, but they are effective.

RT: Are there any specific traditions that you hold from your parents that you would like to pass on to your children?

LS: As humans, there's something about food that brings us all together. My mother told me that if I learned how to cook and sew, I will always have money. I have learned how to make the traditional tamales for Christmas, and some years that's what we give to people as gifts. Food is how I keep our traditions alive. Even when we visit my husband's family during the holidays, I always bring something Mexican. In Mexico my family celebrated Christmas with food. We did not open gifts until El Dia de Los Reyes," on January 6th of the new year. I wouldn't mind instilling that tradition, especially since everything is on clearance in the stores after Christmas. We do still have big celebrations when any of our family members receive a sacrament, like getting baptized, their first communion, confirmation, and also the grand Quinceañera for the girls' fifteenth birthday.

RT: Did you have a Quinceanera?

LS: Yes.

RT: How was that?

LS: It was a simple church ceremony and a big meal, family only. My mother made my dress, just like I requested – salmon colored and designed by me. There was no dance or reception for the public. My parents were very strict; in fact the first time I went to a dance was for prom I in senior year in high school.

RT: Would you like to have a big huge wedding type Quinceanera for your daughter?

LS: If she wishes, yes. My daughter spent a whole summer month with my parents in New Mexico on year, and she was able to experience that lifestyle in Mexico. She came home speaking fluent Spanish. It was a wonderful experience for here, and at this point in her life she's too young to decide – but it's not that big a deal to her. The way I explained it to my husband was that a Quinceañera is a glorified Sweet Sixteen party. We have the wedding-like experience for them so that they get it out of their system and not marry so young. Then he gave me many examples that contradicted my theory, so that was out the window.

RT: Why did you join the Navy Reserve?

LS: I think it was the raw egg milk shakes that my mom made me drink when I was growing up. Actually, I joined three years ago for so many reasons. The military was something I was going to do since I was nineteen years old. At that time, I had Isak, and in order to join the Army I had to give up my parental rights. I walked out and didn't return, but it never left me. My brother is a Marine infantryman, and he was injured in Iraq in 2004. That made a significant impact on my decision. My husband, my parents and I stayed at Bethesda Naval Hospital for the entire duration of his recovery. One year later I did my research and walked into the Navy recruiting office. I was fully aware of the journey our family was about to embark on. It has been a great experience, and it is something that is hard for anyone to understand. I could not do it without the support of my entire family.

RT: At this time you were working with the West Central Immigration Collaborative?

LS: Yes I was, and my employer was very supportive throughout the time that my brother was in the hospital, as well as when I went to basic training. Upon returning from the hospital experience I realized that had my husband and I not been there with my parents, it would have been too much for them to handle, and so much would have been lost in the process. Everything from benefits for my brother to future health concerns, to the time after recovery in Minneapolis when returning home was very overwhelming. I wanted to learn more about that to work with other families that are experiencing the same thing. When speaking to elected officials in my community, they made it seem that in order to do something like that, and get paid for it, I had to have a military background. That was the final push for me. In other words, in order to do a good job at that I had to walk in their shoes and know the military life first hand.

RT: You have to be a veteran.

LS: I could do the job without the military experience, but it was something that I wanted to do for a long time anyway, and if I was going to do a good job whether I got paid or not, I would do it better by having the experience. My father used to say that it was in our blood. His father was martyred for his religion and beliefs when he was two years old, and many of our Mexican family members were also in the Mexican military. He stated one day that he was very proud to have three children that belonged to the government. He felt it was the least he could do for all that this country gave to them. My brother Pedro is a Minnesota State Trooper in St. Paul, and my little brother jesse is a Marine. It means a lot to have a supportive family and proud children.

RT: How is your brother now?

LS: At this point he is an inpatient at the Minneapolis VA. It will be something he will be recovering from for the rest of his life. He recovers in stages, and he has come to accept that fact. He is very motivational and inspires me in so many ways.

RT: You have one brother who is a State Trooper, one who was in the Marines, and you are in the Navy Reserve. What does your other siblings do so that they belong to the government?

LS: They do not. They are the rebels. [laughing] Raul, who is the oldest, owns a small business in Denver, Colorado, and Gerardo lives in St. Cloud and works for a cable company. They are very different from the rest of us but that is completely okay.

RT: They have associations with the government. [laughing]

LS: Someone has to send the girl scout cookies to the troops. It would have been too odd for all five of us to have joined, but not unusual. Growing up with the morals and values instilled in us made it a natural fit to be part of something bigger, something that is not for everyone. Being in the service is a nice fit, and something to be able to build on.

RT: Any last thoughts about life as a Latina in Willmar?

LS: Our talents do not go unnoticed in this community, but we need to our part as well and be outstanding citizens. Change is inevitable, and, yes, there are times I would like to grab my flip flops, shorts, and a T-shirt and take my family to a faraway place where we don't have to think much – but that's what we call a vacation, right? It's all in how we see ourselves that will reflect in what we accomplish. I want to make my community a better place for myself and my family, so I become a part of it rather than sitting back, going to work, going home, and just doing it all over again every day. Stand up and work hard, have fun, and share what we know. Let's not be selfish. This country is made of the most courageous people in the world, who all came here for one common goal – a better life.

RT: Thank you once again. We will end on that note.