

Maria Cristina Tavera
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

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Maria Cristina "Tina" Tavera - **MT**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today is Saturday, the 8th of January 2011. My name is Lorena Duarte. I'll be conducting the interview today for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project. I am here with Tina Tavera in her home in South Minneapolis.

First of all, I want to say thank you.

MT: Thank you, Lorena.

LD: I know you're very busy, so I really appreciate your taking the time to give us your oral history.

Could you start off with giving us your name and how to spell it?

MT: My full name is Maria Cristina Tavera.

LD: Great. Can you tell us where you were born and a little bit about your family, the names of your parents and siblings?

MT: I was born here in Minneapolis, Minnesota. My parents met in Mexico. My mother was Maria Garcia Morales (Now, Estela Ligia O'Brien). She's from Michoacán, Mexico. My father is from Saint Paul, Minnesota. He's Patrick James O'Brien.

I have two siblings. I have a younger sister who is Sylvia Elizabeth Taylor, now (maiden name Sylvia Elizabeth O'Brien). My brother is James Terence O'Brien.

LD: How did your parents meet?

MT: My father was living in Mexico and lived close by to my mother's house, so he would go to visit. She says he would pretend to be visiting her brothers, but was continually looking for her [laughter] in those times it wasn't appropriate, so he hung out with her brothers a lot.

LD: How did they decide to come to Minnesota? He was from here, you said.

MT: Yes, he's from Saint Paul. My family told me once that he actually brought my mother here in *May* to show her what Minnesota was like. They went back to Mexico and they married in June. She said she had no idea how cold it could actually get in the winter. She imagined it could get cold. She talks about how she was kind of surprised, and how different it was.

The other funny thing was—she had studied English, I'm sure, a little bit—she said when she got here she realized she really didn't speak any English.

[chuckles]

LD: Where did you grow up? Did you grow up in Minneapolis?

MT: I actually grew up in Stillwater, Minnesota. We were part of a very, very small Latino community there. My father, when I was very young, was employed by the Stillwater State Prison to work with the Latino prisoners. That was his specialty since he's bilingual. He worked there until recently. He just retired.

LD: Oh, wow.

Tell me about that small Latino community in Stillwater, but, then, also, what was that like growing up? What was Stillwater like?

MT: You know, it's interesting, because my father spoke Spanish. They actually spoke Spanish at home, and since I was the oldest, I think it was probably a little bit different for me than it was for my siblings. Stillwater used to be a really small town. I remember that there would even be animals, sometimes, that would come through the yard from the farms, so it was very rural at that time. It grew fast; it grew very quickly.

When we were growing up, there were two families that were from Colombia, so we spent a lot of time with them. As I recall, I think the women, the mothers of those families, didn't speak English as well, so it was an easy thing for us, especially during certain holidays that we would want to spend together. But my father's family was here, as well.

LD: Growing up, did you have a sense of being Latina? Did you have a sense of being different?

MT: I think I probably translated a lot for my mother. Right now, my husband [Xavier] makes fun of me because, he says, when I tell stories that my mother said, I'll tell them in English, but she and I speak in Spanish. So he said, "You're automatically translating for her." There was a time when I was younger that I remember her sending me to the store to buy things. She wasn't very comfortable because she was so different. I think that she felt, probably, a little bit ostracized being so far away from her family.

LD: What kind of a kid were you? Did you like academics? Did you like sports? Studious? Shy? Outgoing?

MT: I think I was very outgoing. To be honest, I think it was probably easier for me because I was fair skinned in Stillwater. My siblings are much darker skinned. I always make fun of that. My sister probably had a little bit harder time dealing with her Mexican ancestry, because the kids probably treated her a little bit differently.

But, to me, I've always flourished. My mother is the only one of her family that lives in the United States, so we were continually going back and forth, or her siblings would come and sometimes they'd stay as long as a year. Sometimes my cousins would come and stay for a year. We've always been very, very close to the family in Mexico, and I always thrived in that environment. I love to travel. I remember saving my money, and I think I was as young as sixteen the first time I went to Mexico City by myself. So I was always looking to figure out ways to go back and forth and really was drawn always to my Mexican culture.

LD: Generally, what was growing up in Stillwater like at the time as a small rural community?

MT: It could be small town minded, but it also had benefits for a kid. I grew up skiing, downhill skiing, and skating, all those activities that are accessible to you here in Minnesota. For the most part, people were average income or higher income, so there definitely wasn't as much hardship, probably, as other communities in Minnesota. It was good. There are a lot of students. The kids would come from everywhere to go to school there. I think I was pretty social always.

LD: I forgot to ask you your date of birth.

MT: Oh, it is June 26, 1965.

LD: You said you were sixteen the first time you went to Mexico?

MT: By myself, yes.

LD: Before that you had traveled with your family?

MT: Yes. Whenever we could afford it, we would go regularly to Mexico. Since I was a baby, we would go. Sometimes, we would even go for the whole summer and spend the summer in Mexico City.

I kind of grew up going back and forth for a while. I always make jokes. One time I said to my mother, "Mother, do you remember when we went to Mexico City in the Gremlin?" She said, "Callate, Tina!" Which means "Don't mention that Tina!"

[laughter]

MT: She didn't even want to recall that experience.

There were even times that we drove from here to Mexico. I remember one time we went as far as Acapulco in a station wagon. We had some crazy trips trying to get there. I also remember fondly going through – driving through the country. It's a totally different experience. Really, I have so many memories. Sometimes, we would drive to the border and, then, we'd take a train. I really loved those trips. I was really drawn to those travels. Then, once in Mexico City, I've always been really close to my relatives. My mother is the oldest of nine, and it's a long line of artisans, artists, designers, and musicians in the family. So I think that was another reason why I always loved being there. I just felt like I was always overwhelmed with so much art and so much artistic talent.

LD: Tell me a little bit about high school and what you did after that.

MT: That's a long time ago. [laughter] High school? I think I was a good student. I was probably a B student. I was active. I did the yearbook and things like that. I was homecoming queen.

LD: Ohhh.

MT: Things like that. I think I kind of went between so many different groups of people. I kind of felt because I'd grown up traveling between two countries like I could mix and match with a lot of different groups of students in high school.

Then I went to college in Wisconsin for a couple of years, but was very unhappy there. I went to the University of Wisconsin at La Crosse. To me, it seemed a little stifling because of the lack of culture, at that time, and the lack of cultural events. So I ended up transferring to the University of Minnesota. There I kind of found my community, the Latino community, and became director of La Raza. I was director of La Raza for a couple of years.

LD: What is La Raza?

MT: La Raza Student Cultural Center was created in, probably, the 1960s at the U. The students in that organization are Latinos from all different backgrounds. It was really interesting for me, because, at that time, there were more Puerto Ricans that were involved and so that kind of opened me up to a lot of other Latino cultures as well. I was able to learn about the other cultures, and would love to create programming.

I started doing cultural programming during that time, which is in the 1980s. We were working to get a permanent location for the Cultural Center at that time. I believe it still exists, but is being threatened. We also did a lot of cultural programming. I know during that time, I started the Intercambio, which was a program that met once a week where the students could practice their Spanish. It encouraged non-Latinos to come mix with the

Latino students. So it was a really great way to meet. We'd usually have a speaker. I believe that program lasted from 1989 to last year. It kept going, and that was good. It's kind of where I started doing more cultural programming.

LD: What were you majoring in?

MT: Spanish and Latin American Studies. I ended up going to Costa Rica to study at the University in San José during that time—or maybe that was before, actually. I think I went there first.

LD: Wisconsin and, then, there and, then, Minnesota?

MT: I went to Wisconsin, the U of M, and, then, to Central America for a year, and, then, came back.

LD: When did you graduate?

MT: Officially?

[laughter]

LD: When did you finish your term at the U of M?

[laughter]

MT: I had the paper turned in, and then realized that the professor hadn't turned in the grade for some reason. Luckily, I caught it. It was, oh, my gosh, probably 1990, I think.

LD: What did you do after that?

MT: I went from the Cultural Center—it was a student position so I could no longer work there—and began working with the Chicano Latino Resource Center, which specifically did more of the academic assistance to Latino students at the U. I was like one day a week in that office. Then, for the rest of the week, I was recruiting Latino students for the U of M. It was an interesting job, because at that time there weren't as many Latinos in Minnesota, so I actually was traveling to areas in the United States that had more Latino students, like Chicago. I spent a lot of time recruiting in Chicago and El Paso, Texas. They'd kind of send me out to do college fairs to try to recruit Latinos to come to Minnesota. It's interesting. There are students that are still here that I brought from other areas. I guess they're not students anymore. [chuckles]

LD: How long did you stay at that job?

MT: I stayed a couple of years, but I realized that a lot of the students, a lot of the Latino students, would have really good grades but they hadn't done what they needed to do to get into college. They hadn't prepared for school, and that became a big concern of mine.

So I started working with TRIO Programs. I don't know if you're familiar with that. They're federally funded programs. I worked with Upward Bound. It works with low income, first generation students of color to help them prepare for college. I've actually worked for TRIO programs for, I don't even know, fifteen years on and off and, sometimes, part time. At that time, I was really interested in trying to help students reach their potential. It was really frustrating for me to see a lot of people in the community not being able to advance, or their kids not being able to get into school.

LD: What did you do with them?

MT: I actually worked with Upward Bound and, then, worked with Talent Search through Saint Olaf [College, Northfield, Minnesota]. It's college prep curriculum where you're helping the students prepare to take tests to get into college or apply and write their essays or raise their grades, so it's educational programming. I still do it today. I'm still working with TRIO.

LD: After that, what did you do?

MT: I've kind of always continued with an interest in the arts at the same time in the cultural programming. So even when I was working with TRIO, at the same time I was active with CreArte, when CreArte was just starting up. As an artist I did an installation during the second or third year that they did Day of the Dead. I really was excited about suddenly exploring doing large-scale artistic projects. I'd always done artwork in high school for myself, but this was like the first time that I got really excited about doing cultural events and artistic events.

LD: Tell me a little bit more about that. Tell me about your development as an artist. What were you doing in high school?

MT: In high school, I was mostly drawing. It was funny because they had this little tiny gallery space which was like a window, and I just remember walking by and seeing somebody's work there, and I thought I want to do that! [laughter] By the time I graduated, I remember I had a drawing exhibition in there. I really was kind of self taught. Then, in college as well, I took a class here and there. In Costa Rica, when I was studying there, I had started actually to get more into photography, I think because it was such a different world for me. Of course it was the 1980s in Costa Rica. From there, I went a couple times to Nicaragua and Guatemala. Those were very turbulent times in countries in Central America. My interest in photography was documenting the indigenous cultures and what that situation was in those countries. I was continually, as a student, doing more photography at that time, but had never really had an exhibit since that little window in high school.

LD: What got you back into it? What got you involved with CreArte?

MT: Somebody, she's Claudia Fuentes from the Latino community on the West Side [Saint Paul, Minnesota], and we've been really good friends. She used to be director of La Raza, as well, and we've known each other for many, many years. We're still really close. She, at that time said, "Look. There's this call for artists." I said, "Oh, my gosh, that looks like a lot of work." [laughter] But she said, "You should do it." It was suddenly like, why not? At the time, I was pregnant actually with my son, Marcos Xavier Giossi. I think they accepted my proposal – the piece was ten feet by ten feet - and they accepted it. Armando Gutiérrez accepted the proposal in August, and my son was born the fifteenth.

[laughter]

LD: Wait, wait. August?

MT: It was 1996.

LD: And your son was born?

MT: While I was working on the installation during August 15. I think I went to Chicago looking for Day of the Dead items to put in the piece—or maybe it was afterwards. I don't even remember, but I just remember that he was born, and then I had to carry him in his car seat. He was such a good sleeper. Then, I built this huge *ofrenda* while he was sleeping every day. It was really exciting and it was inspiring for me. At that time, I met Gustavo Lira, who is an artist still in the community. He also had a young daughter. I think she was like six months older. I still work with him, as well. It was just kind of an eye opening experience to me that there were other people that I could start to do more artistic things with, and all these opportunities.

LD: It was an installation?

MT: Yes, it was a huge installation. They give you ten by ten feet. I think it had references to the Zapatistas, and then to the different generations. It was kind of inspired by the fact that when you're in downtown Mexico City you can actually see where they dug up the ruins when they were building the subway. Then, on top of that, they have the churches that are reflected in these really modern buildings. So it was kind of making references to how these generations are so different, and yet they're still visibly on top of one another.

LD: So it was for Day of the Dead?

MT: Yes, it was for Day of the Dead.

LD: I know that you've done a lot of work around Day of the Dead. We'll get to that. Where was it exhibited?

MT: At that time, CreArte was working out of Intermedia Arts, so they were sharing the space. They had an office there, and then they would be allowed to use the gallery space for certain events.

LD: Tell me a little bit about CreArte itself

MT: I don't know, historically, if it had actually started somewhere else before that. That's when I first came in contact and I think that was the second or third Day of the Dead that they had. Initially, they were, as I said, inside Intermedia Arts, and then expanded to have a separate location, and began the idea of doing a charter school combined with the arts gallery center. Eventually it went into hiatus.

LD: Do you know how it started? Who were the founding folks? Or what was the mission or purpose behind it?

MT: Armando Gutiérrez was the director at that time, but I'm not quite sure who exactly, Juan Linares I think was one of them, but I'm not quite sure who else was involved.

LD: Okay. Why did they start it?

MT: I think because of the interest in doing more Latino art events. Earlier, I know the Mexican museum [National Museum of Mexican Art] in Chicago had established a space. What I understand is they had started it maybe in somebody's garage. Eventually, it got in a permanent location. They already were up and running. I think it was kind of the idea—I don't really know, to be honest—of having Minneapolis do something similar. There was this idea of doing Day of the Dead. Of course, like in Mexico, Day of the Dead is always done in a cemetery or in the home. You build an altar. I think there's been this shift to where art museums and galleries are exploring having Day of the Dead *ofrendas*, altars, built in celebration.

LD: Tell me a little bit about the significance of Day of the Dead in Mexico as compared to here.

MT: I think in Mexico it's more common and in other parts of Latin America, as well. Typically, it's the first and the second, I understand that the first is dedicated to accident victims and children, because they need an extra day to come back, and, then, the second...

LD: Of November?

MT: Of November, yes. Thank you. It's believed that the dead come back to visit. The altars are built with hopes that the family members will return, and so there are many items that the family member was drawn to in their lifetime. Sometimes even vices, like cigarettes or tequila, are put out to entice them or their favorite foods. Then, it is believed

that they will come visit. There are a lot of traditional items, like marigolds that are sometimes used because they are heavily scented.

LD: So the scent lures them?

MT: Draws them. Yes, it does. And sugar skulls. Those are some traditional items.

LD: So that was kind of your first foray into exhibiting your own work. Tell me where it went from there.

MT: I have to think. [chuckles] That was when Marcos was born. Through CreArte and also another organization that was called the Latino Artists Group - they might have started after CreArte went into hiatus - I became more and more acquainted with more and more artists here. I think sometimes, it was just ideas, like people would just have an idea for an exhibition, and then we would organize and put work together. I remember doing one show at the Resource Center of the Americas, for instance. We would just have a theme, usually a Latino-based theme, and then draw the artists in together to do exhibitions.

LD: Were you working full time, or were you working kind of many different jobs like many artists do?

MT: Yes. I've worked a lot for TRIO programs, because I'm a strong believer in what they do. I worked with the high school programs, and then I progressed to work with the TRIO Student Support Services at Augsburg that helps the students get through college, and, currently, I'm working with TRIO McNair Programs which helps students work toward getting a doctorate degree. They're enrolled at Augsburg, but I'm actually helping them get admitted into graduate school. Simultaneously, I've always maintained doing the arts, so it's been a little crazy in that sense. I definitely work better when I have a deadline, because then I have to work towards that and get things done in time. For a while I was working with Student Support Services half time, and then I ran a gallery at El Colegio after CreArte went into hiatus, and I ran Mira Gallery for two years. I was so excited to get access to that gallery space that I did ten exhibitions in two years and did a theater piece, and then a Latino film festival, which was a little overwhelming, considering that that was my part time position.

[laughter]

MT: I would be working, and then, during lunch, I would run to an artist's house and pick out pieces for an exhibition and run back to work. I was trying to juggle both at the same time—well, I did. I think it went really well, considering I had such little funding. I had a grant from the McKnight Foundation, which has always been really supportive, and was able to do these events. They were mostly Latino events, but I did do a couple of other shows.

LD: The Mira Gallery was part of El Colegio?

MT: CreArte originally had the idea that it would start a gallery where there were artists that were working and exhibiting in the gallery, and, at the same time, there would be a charter school that focused on the arts so students would be incorporated into that artistic space as well. I'm not quite sure what happened, or where it started to unravel and the focus became more on education. Maybe that happened because of funding.

LD: Sure.

MT: It's usually easier to get funding for education. Also, it's hard to keep momentum going. You always have to be thinking of new ideas. It must be challenging with just one person.

LD: Mira Gallery was part of El Colegio, and El Colegio is the Latino arts charter school that came out of CreArte?

MT: Yes. When CreArte went into hiatus, David Greenberg was the director of El Colegio. I'd been teaching art classes part time with the Latino students, and it was going really well. We did a lot of different projects, and I also ran a girls group there that I started, Cambios, which just ended last year. He said, "Since you're interested in the arts would you be interested in doing some artistic events in the gallery?" He allowed me to use that space, he and George Sand, and so then I started doing some cultural events there for a short period of time.

LD: Just for those two years?

MT: Yes.

LD: What was it that drove you that hard to do ten exhibitions *and* a theater piece *and* a film festival?

MT: Part of it was that I was excited. It was a little crazy. Xavier Tavera, my husband, helped a lot with installing shows and doing the lights, which was a little exhausting sometimes. I had to do the mailings and I had to do picking the shows. I had some ideas that were brewing that I really wanted to do. I also had good solid connections with Latino artists. There were artists like Patricia Mendoza who had ideas of what she wanted to see happen, so I tried to incorporate a lot of other people's ideas as well, and allow them to share in the artistic planning. I worked with Xavier Tavera and Douglas Padilla at Grupo Soap del Corazon so that they'd pick artists and come up with ideas. They were in charge of Day of the Dead one year. I think that helped to kind of incorporate other people and allow them to bring ideas and to organize so you're not the only person and it's not just your ideas. It does definitely bring in a lot more enthusiasm and larger audiences, too, if they are really invested in it.

LD: Right.

MT: When there's a lack of funding, they also have to partake in hanging and whatever else - distributing, publicity or promoting the event, so I found it really helpful.

LD: Tell me a little bit about the exhibitions that you curated. Tell me about the artists and maybe some themes and what you were trying to accomplish.

MT: Let's see, I'll go with my favorites. I did one that was [words spoken in Spanish], The Ritual of the Animal. It was kind of about people's spirituality, because I find that in the Latino community we come from different countries. We come from different backgrounds and you're coordinating with a lot of different Latino artists here in Minnesota. It was really exciting for me to come up with this idea that people could share their religious or their spiritual beliefs. So I had different artists, Lico Dos Santos. I had an artist from Cuba that painted about Santería. I had different people talking. There was Catholicism and there was natural *curanderismo* beliefs. There was a group of about six or seven artists expressing their beliefs, their spiritual beliefs. That was one exhibition. I believe that one was even on Channel 11 [KARE 11-TV] or something like that.

With Grupo Soap del Corazon we did one [Ni Una Mas] for the women in Juárez. That one was dedicated to the women in Juárez by having twelve artists, mostly Latinos, not all, do a piece dedicated to women in Juárez, or representing the women in Juárez. Then Xavier Tavera, my husband, did photographs of feet between each of the images of the women. In the center of the piece, it was like a community *ofrenda* that year. We had over 300 pairs of shoes with candles and flowers.

LD: This is for the disappeared women of Juárez, Mexico, right?

MT: Yes, it was dedicated as a community *ofrenda* for Day of the Dead. The numbers are so high. I think, at that time, there were probably around 400 estimated to be missing in Juárez, but now the number are I don't even know how high. So it still continues. It was to kind of bring awareness of the situation in Mexico.

A lot of the shows were in reference to either cultural traditions from Latin America, or people who are artists here that are longing for their country and expressing their feelings of what it means to be between Minnesota and their own country.

I did another piece, too, that was on kind of more traditional. That was called Ex-Voto, on the *retablos* in Mexico that they do. When you experience a miracle, you paint on a piece of tin, which is usually about twelve inches wide. I think I had pieces that were, I want to say, five by seven inches or so. They were small. I distributed those to fifty Minnesota artists, the majority Latino. Then each person painted a miracle that had happened to them.

Traditionally, you are praying to one particular saint, and you're hoping that if it's an illness or something that you will be cured. This is really interesting because everyone had different miracles. There were even arguments between people about it – "That's not a miracle that your dog got run over and he's still alive."

[laughter]

MT: I loved that part about it, people's ideas. There were some really strong stories about crossing the border or surviving some kind of horrible illness or ailment and things like that. I thought it was a powerful show as well, to just see all the different stories that were being told.

LD: This was a two-year period. About when did you finish that?

MT: I actually was awarded a Bush Leadership Fellowship, I think primarily because of my work in the gallery and in education, helping students that are low income and first generation. They require that you are not employed, so that was a really hard decision for me to leave the gallery, because I felt like it was just barely getting off the ground. I was really upset—actually argumentative with them. [laughter] I feel bad, sometimes, when I think about how argumentative I was. That was a requirement of the grant, so I had to make a really tough decision. They awarded me funding, complete funding, a really generous amount of funding to go back to school to get my master's degree and to study.

I decided to go to the Humphrey Institute at the University of Minnesota because the focus was on leadership. Most of the people who got awards, especially that particular year, went to the Kennedy School [Harvard], but I had two children here and really wanted to stay in Minnesota. So I went to the Humphrey Institute for my master's degree and was really excited that they allowed me the flexibility to take some leadership classes, which were on grant writing and non-profit management and such. But, at the same time, I could pick classes from any department. I chose classes in art history. I was able to take an exhibition design class from the Design School. I took a material culture class on which I ended up publishing my final paper. I was able to take kind of a mix and match combination of what I really wanted to study, which was focused on Latino arts organizations.

As part of the fellowship, too, I also was awarded a travel component to the funding. That allowed me, as well, to travel to different places in the United States to look at other Latino arts organizations. I went to Chicago, and then I went to Los Angeles and worked with a commercial Latino gallery to install the Gronk exhibition.

I had other grants. [laughter] It was incredible just to have that freedom to kind of focus on my studies.

LD: When was this?

MT: That was 2005, I think.

I also received a Smithsonian [Institution] grant, which was separate. I went there for a month and studied. There's a program there called the Smithsonian Latino Museum Studies Program. They actually focus on studying Latino art. It was a really incredible

experience for me to meet so many people that were nationally involved in studying the representation of Latino art in museums and galleries.

LD: When was the Smithsonian grant? Around the same time?

MT: Yes.

LD: During this whole time, were you still creating your own art and exhibiting and doing all that?

MT: Yes. There were some exhibitions that I participated in, like the Ex-Voto. When my daughter [Paloma] was little, she had a near death experience with appendicitis, so I did a painting about that. Sometimes I was with a group - that was group show with fifty artists. Sometimes I would do an exhibition outside that somebody else organized. It's a small community of Latino artists in Minnesota. It's probably growing quickly, but at that time we were close, so somebody else would organize a show and invite you to participate.

LD: Let's talk a little bit about that. Let's talk a little bit about how the community has grown and changed from when you first came to the U of M and it was mostly a Puerto Rican community, etcetera, to now. Back in the day, there were no Latinos in Minneapolis—or that's what people said. Now, here we are in Powderhorn [Park Neighborhood, Minneapolis] and you're surrounded by Latino neighbors, I'm sure, and businesses, etcetera. Talk to me a little bit about that and your reflections on it.

MT: When I was little, we used to go to the West Side. We'd go to Mass there at Our Lady of Guadalupe Church. We would go to buy the foods that my mother needed. We'd have to drive to go buy them in Saint Paul. Then, the community was mostly concentrated in that area. Like I said when I was at the U and was recruiting, the idea was to go out of state, and I don't believe they do that anymore. I think they quit a long time ago, because there's a larger pool now in Minnesota. Now, living in Powderhorn which has a large percentage of Latinos - I have no idea what percent - but there's a large percentage of Latinos living in this area. They are primarily, I believe, Mexican and Ecuadoran.

There's been a growth of over 200, maybe 250 stores just on Lake Street within the last ten years. So it's really fun to think about. There's an artist that came to the Walker [Art Center], I believe, in the 1990s, Guillermo Gómez Peña, and when he came back to present at the U of M, I had the opportunity to spend a couple of days with him. It was so fun to watch him, because he wanted us to take him around Lake Street. He was just screaming, "How can this be? How could it have changed this much?" We were in a Mexican grocery store, I don't know. It's so foreign to him, and he lives in San Francisco. It was so impressive when people have been gone, especially, and then come back. I think they probably feel it or can see the difference a lot more. There have been moments where we'll take the family to Lake Street for a celebration, like Independence Day, and I'll look around and I'll say, "This can't be possible." You feel like you're

transported, and there's music and there's street vendors and there's performances, and it's just packed with people that are barely able to fit in this small area. You look around, and you say, "This is incredible." It's exciting...the stores and how they've flourished, and the businesses. I'm hoping with the economy that they're still doing well. I know it's a lot harder right now. It's incredible that they're able to come and do so much.

My mother is an avid reader. Now, she probably speaks English better than I do. [laughter] She worked for Centro Legal for about twelve years with immigration issues, helping mostly translate documents and doing adoptions on the side for bringing children from Latin America to Minnesota. Especially with her, I would make jokes about her coming here, how adventurous she was, and she said, "Adventurous? I just think I was stupid."

[laughter]

MT: She just means because of the weather. She always said, "I wasn't adventurous." There are so many stories. I would help her doing translations when I was younger. You'd just hear so many stories about the struggles that people had to get here and what they go through. They arrive and I've even had a few calls here that there are families sleeping in the back of a pickup, and they don't know what to do. Where can they go? They've come from another city or whatever, but it's just incredible that they can come, and they can figure out their way around, and they can figure out how to start a business, even if they weren't able to pursue their education when they were younger. To me, those stories are so mind blowing. They're just incredible, you know.

LD: Have you worked with many immigrant artists?

MT: Yes. There's quite a few. It's interesting to me because it's like there were different waves. When I was younger, probably in college, there were a lot of people involved at the University of Minnesota that were from the West Side that, like I said, I'm still really close friends with, as well. To me, I find it really interesting about the immigrant communities that are here now and how they've come about. The artists are the same. Like I said, when I did the Mira Gallery, they would talk a lot about how they wanted to express references to their culture. I think that with some of those cultural events, that's kind of what it's about, to celebrate and to continue to assure those customs will be able to flourish.

Day of the Dead, we did one year with Grupo Soap del Corazon and we did steamroller prints where each of us cut a board that was about four by eight feet. There was about twelve of us that are artists. The first year we did Day of the Dead in Northfield [Minnesota]. The steamrollers are a contemporary form of art to express imagery regarding Day of the Dead. The community in Northfield is primarily from Vera Cruz, Mexico, and they had never celebrated Day of the Dead. This wasn't that long ago. I want to say it was—oh, my gosh—2006, I think. We were able to bring music. There was a band. ArtOrg helped organize it. They're located in Northfield. They actually worked

with Grupo Soap del Corazon, and Xavier Tavera and Douglas Padilla worked really hard to get the community there involved and participate.

When my husband, Xavier, and I built an *ofrenda* together, there was a group of young immigrants from Veracruz (Mexico), and they said, “We’ve never done this.” They do a painting with saw dust. Basically, they dye the saw dust. It’s almost like a sand painting. Then, they do, like, an image. It’s almost like a carpet with colors. So for the *ofrenda*, we helped them, and they did that whole component themselves. It was so wonderful, because one of them said, “I’ve never done it, but my aunt used to do it when I was little.” I know that a lot of them have been here and they work in the factories, industrial factories, meat packaging plants, or whatever, in that area, and they rarely go out. They tend to be extremely Catholic and live a restricted lifestyle sometimes because of the lack of resources or whatever. Here, they were able to celebrate and help in the cooking and the preparation of food and with the *ofrendas* and such. So it was really fun and really exciting. What we understand is that they assembled the altar again next year.

LD: Oh – great!

MT: We left everything, so they even did it again the next year and recreated something similar.

LD: Do you think that the Latino artists in Minnesota have been integrated into Minnesota’s larger artistic community?

MT: That’s interesting. It depends. There’s such a wide variety of people. Some have gone through academia. They’ve studied art. They have been here for a long time. They’re completely bilingual. Then, there’s other artists that are creating as a form of expression and work in smaller grassroots kind of exhibitions. It’s a large variety. I don’t know if I answered your question.

LD: First of all, I guess it’s a multi-layered question. [chuckles] Do you think that there’s been significant penetration? Are we seeing Latino artists in the galleries? Are we seeing Latino artists in Minnesota museums? Are Minnesota collectors purchasing Latino works?

MT: It’s interesting. In the last decade or so, I’ve worked with different levels of art or different institutions, I should say. One was the Frida Kahlo Exhibition at the Walker where I worked on the exhibition catalog. There it was kind of like a blockbuster hit. Of the Latino artists, she’s probably one of the most well-known, especially in mainstream communities. So it was exciting for me that the Walker was bringing the show here. I think there were some people that were skeptical in the art world. They said things like, “Oh, please, Frida Kahlo. We’ve all seen her work.” But, then, when the show actually arrived, the same people were saying, “Wow. In real life, it’s a totally different experience than to see them in a catalog.” I think it was so important for the Latino community, as well, to have such an important exhibition come here and to feel that they’re part of the museum community. Some of the immigrants, like the more recent

immigrants, weren't even familiar with Kahlo. Becky George from the Mercado Central and I got a grant to get two school buses for two totally different days and, literally, just park them on Lake Street and said, "Come on. *Vamonos* ("let's go" in Spanish).

LD: [laughter]

MT: Just because there are other people going that they knew, there was this momentum to get on the bus and go, too. So trying to get people from the community to go to such a large, intimidating institution was important. They say like over 110,000 people visited that show. To me, that was so exciting. It was one of the largest audiences that they've had for an exhibition, and that was exciting to me. A lot of people weren't familiar with her work or were just so excited to finally be able to see so many pieces in one location.

I think it is just as important to have opportunities in the neighborhood, in the community, to help artists. You know, when I would do exhibitions I would try to incorporate artists that were better established, that had a lot more experience, that were very reliable, but then always taking an artist or two that had less exhibition experience that would fit the theme. Even at El Colegio, although I didn't have the students work in the show, unless there were some times, like with the fifty artists that did Ex-Voto, when I actually could incorporate some of the younger students if they did the work, if they followed the instructions for the piece and fulfilled the requirements. I would try to encourage artists that were less experienced, similar to me, and give them an opportunity to show work as well. Again, it's important for people to go and to get to these places and feel comfortable to go see an exhibition or have a reason to go see the exhibition because they know someone.

LD: Has Minnesota's artistic community embraced Latino artists?

MT: Yes, I think they're trying. This year [October 13-16, 2010], they did a conference for the Mid America Print Council Conference. I was on the committee to organize it, like, three years ago. The focus was on Latino artists, and they were open and they were excited to try to get people from the community to go to the University of Minnesota. Macalester College did an exhibition to bring Artemio Rodriguez. They were willing to buy two pieces. I helped organize that show, and they just left, like, two weeks ago. They bought two pieces for their collection. I was trying to get the artwork out. To bring artists (Uri and Melissa) from Latin America here is really difficult, because of the lack of funding. I had to kind of maneuver between many different sources of funding. Like, Camarenawas generous enough to let them stay at his house, so then there wasn't a fee for lodging. You have to go to the University, and Artemio, the artist, had to do some kind of workshops there because they had a grant. That was a public art grant. So you had to kind of piecemeal together the funding. It's a lot harder to bring artists here.

The museums are making an effort, I think, to try to incorporate them. We've done events at the Weisman [Art Museum, Minneapolis]. They brought the Chicano Visions show, the collection of Cheech Marin. Then, they also had the steamroller prints exhibited there, and they purchased a set. They had a donor who donated the funding. So one of the sets,

the one from Northfield actually, are in the Weisman Museum. Then, we did a similar exhibition, kind of steamroller printing, outside at Fargo at the Plains Art Museum. The director Colleen Sheely arranged to buy a set as part of the agreement. So those are in their actual permanent collections. That means that any museum in the United States, if they were interested, could check out and rent a piece or the collection. Ideally, they'll be exhibited more.

LD: I guess this is in two questions. First, what do you think that Minnesota's Latino community has contributed to Minnesota arts—or how?

MT: I think there has been big success with something like Day of the Dead, which I think is beautiful, because more and more different communities are doing that particular event. So, for instance, it will be in the West Side of Saint Paul and the El Colegio Charter School. The Mercado Central continues, even though CreArté isn't there anymore, to do a Day of the Dead, an elaborate event with a procession and such, and activities for children. The Minnesota Historical Society is now doing a Day of the Dead *ofrenda* highlighting a Minnesota Latino artist each year. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts had a call for artists for many years to do an *ofrenda*. Also, the last couple years, I've been working with El Colegio Charter School students to do something there.

Then, of course, there is the grassroots or the other the events that have been going on. I think it's really wonderful that it's kind of popping up all over the place. My husband always says, "Good! Let's just inundate like the whole state with the Day of the Dead and have Day of the Dead everywhere." I think that's exciting. There are more people that are kind of aware of this cultural tradition. I think there's a lot of interest in learning about the culture, because it's worshipping those that have passed on. Who can't relate to that? Who can't relate to wanting somebody to come back or wanting to remember them and honoring them? There is Memorial Day, but there isn't really anything that people can do at that time. So now more and more people are building their own altars in their homes, and they're really drawn to that. They're mimicking something similar. I know that they said the sales of sugar skulls have gone crazy on Lake Street.

I feel like it's reviving this cultural tradition in the Latino families, and it's also being kind of, what is the word? Even the non-Latino communities, there's this beautiful thing happening. When people can identify with that, it makes others more human. I think that it leads to kind of a better cultural understanding. It's not as mystical and strange. Initially, I used to always say, "At Halloween, you're scared of the dead. With Day of the Dead, you celebrate it." So, then, people could understand. There's always the cultural difference of how those days are viewed. To me, that's intriguing, but I think it, also, can be a very beautiful way to break that barrier between cultures. When people don't understand each other or can't relate or might even take a political stance against the Latino community, I think things like sharing food, sharing cultural traditions, sharing music is really important. Then there's this better understanding and there's this yearning to maybe even learn more. I think that's crucial if it's the language or whatever.

LD: Stepping kind of back from kind of the arts, what do you think that the Latino community has contributed to Minnesota in general?

MT: In general? One obvious thing, being a Powderhorn resident, is just this area. Lake Street was pretty much abandoned, and the Latino businesses came and they set up and they turned it all around. There was a lot of support from the city, I understand, but a lot of it was just their own efforts to get things up and going that led to things like the Sears Building being remodeled for Midtown Global Market. Suddenly, the mainstream community says, "Wait, I want in on this. This is working. This is definitely something we should do." So, then, you have this huge building and it contributes to the Abbott Hospital and other places, too, as well the YMCA that's located on Lake Street. These businesses are flourishing, and the clientele includes a lot of Latinos. I think that's one basic...

The parks can sometimes have their issues. I think just having so many people playing soccer in the parks is wonderful. We just love going there, because it's such a beautiful mix of people, the residents that have been here for a very long time and the Latinos, and slowly, they're becoming more and more active. They don't have necessarily that mentality of ownership of public spaces, but I think, slowly, they're becoming more orientated to that and getting more involved. So you'll see them ice skating and such.

In general, I think there's been a movement toward, for instance, my children, Paloma Victoria Giossi and Marcos Xavier Giossi, study from Kindergarten, Marcos till eighth grade, and Paloma till sixth grade, at Emerson Elementary where my sister Sylvia Elizabeth Taylor has been a bilingual teacher for probably twenty-five years. That would be just a guess. [laughter] That whole movement toward bilingual education, which I don't think is necessarily just for Latinos, is so crucial in this world that's becoming smaller and smaller with the Internet. We need to have a more international mentality in Minnesota, and the language is just one step. Knowing two languages is minimal. It's so important because there's a need. Students might arrive and need to learn to read and write in Spanish first. It's also very important for English speakers, too. There are a lot of students that benefit from being in these immersion programs and learning both languages. I think education is benefitting.

I know at the Humphrey Institute we talked about changing immigration policies so there would be accelerated permanent residency for those that take on jobs that nobody else wants, whether it's in the industries like meat packaging or such, but, also, just simply farming. There's a lot of Latino farmers. As people are moving away from these jobs that are difficult and exhausting and tedious, basic things like farming are actually drawing Latinos to that kind of life style or they're coming from that life style and wanting to continue it. I think that's all really interesting here in Minnesota. The reality is that there are troubles, too, in the small towns.

LD: Yes.

MT: People immigrating to these smaller towns can actually benefit the community. The Latino community, if you look at census data, is very young. There are a lot of young people. I think that's important for smaller communities, which maybe are growing older and people move away to look for careers or such. They're actually being populated by the Latino community, like in Willmar and Northfield and those smaller towns outside of the Twin Cities.

LD: You mentioned the Humphrey Institute and I just want to go back to that. When did you finish up that program?

MT: I finished in 2008.

LD: To wrap up, what do you hope for personally? Where do you hope to go with your career, family, with your involvement with education and with the arts? Where do you see yourself? Where do you hope to go?

MT: That's a hard question today, Lorena. [laughter] You know I'm struggling with that right now, actually. When I went to the Humphrey, I really wanted to establish a permanent cultural center, and I still do. It's just that 2008 was when the economy kind of sunk. It just crashed. So then I kind of felt set back.

I've been working full time in education and I really love the McNair Scholars Program [Augsburg College, Minneapolis] and have been doing some art events on the side. I would like to always continue to do that. I've been working to bring Artemio Rodriguez here, and trying to look for places where there's something lacking. I want to make sure that there's a continual movement in the Latino arts in Minnesota. To me, it's very important. One, I think that's it's important to bring artists like Artemio and Carlos Amorales, who is at Highpoint Center for Printmaking in Minneapolis. I also think it's important to help the artists that are here and create opportunities and organize exhibitions. At the same time, to pay rent is not a necessity. Just like they've built up Lake Street, the artists have been able to find places on Lake Street to exhibit, like the Mercado Central or the basement of the Resource Center of the Americas. Sometimes that can be really liberating to not have the woes of running a place, as well, and to focus on the artwork and to have a new location which opens things up to new audiences. So whether it's at an established museum or whether it's just a grassroots place, I enjoy both. It's hard for me to say. Right now, I'm not fixated on any particular path, I guess, but always looking for that kind of growth and opportunity.

LD: Stepping into a broader perspective, what do you hope for Minnesota's Latino community? What are the challenges that we need to face and where do you hope we go?

MT: Well, I've kind of grown up - because my father worked at the prison and my mother worked with Centro Legal and my sister is in education - looking at all those different issues that are confronting the community right now. Some are devastating, like the Dream Act not passing. I really worry. I see students that are even enrolled in college wondering what they're going to do with their education when they're done. I always say,

“You’ll always have your education, and nobody can ever take it away from you.” There are definitely some issues with the economy, with the businesses, with immigration, and there needs to be some enlightenment about the contributions that the community is providing and how can we better the community. I think there’s also, at the same time, a lot of talent.

I think there’s a lot of artistic talent that needs to be untapped. There needs to be other ways to get opportunities where they can have a call-for-artists or something that can bring more people forward or, maybe, inspire them to take that risk to do something and have the opportunity to show their work or share their culture. I’m hoping that there are other things that will turn around with our economy or in Minnesota with the Legacy Funding or other types of programming, grants and such so that there can be more people that have access to those opportunities.

LD: What are some of your satisfactions of the work that you’ve done, the things that you’ve seen, that the community has accomplished?

MT: You know when I went to the Smithsonian, I actually presented the Minnesota based Latino artists’ work there. I felt really proud. I think that what the artists have done here is really incredible. Even having traveled to other locations, I think the amount of artwork that’s been produced and that the artists have been able to accomplish, sometimes, with very limited funding and resources, has been driven by people’s energy and what they want to see happen. That’s really exciting. I think that there’s a lot more potential, and I think there’s more potential to get attention for Minnesota. There’s a need for artists here to be recognized for what they’ve done in the bigger picture in the Latino art world in the United States.

LD: Is there anything else that you’d like to share either insights or stories or anything else that you’d like to add to this?

MT: I don’t know.

LD: I know we’ve covered a lot. [chuckles]

MT: I think that, because of immigration, there is the importance of passing these things on. Similarly, your father [Mario Duarte] is always very active in the community and, then, so are you. Having grown up in Stillwater where there were fewer Latinos... I’m hoping that with a larger community my children will grow up and know where their ancestors came from. There are a lot of immigrants that can’t return, that can’t go back to their countries. I just hope that they have that ability to pass on those traditions and to pass on the culture and the language. I think that’s the most threatening is that things like this will be lost.

LD: Well, by you sharing your story, you’re ensuring that this becomes part of Minnesota history. I really thank you.

MT: Thank you.

LD: Anything else?

MT: No, I think that's it.

LD: Once again, on behalf of the Historical Society, thank you. For me, personally, it's been a great joy to just kind of sit here and chat and hear your pretty incredible story.

MT: Thank you, Lorena.

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