Patricia Torres Ray
Narrator

Lorena Duarte
Interviewer

December 17, 2010
Minneapolis, Minnesota

Patricia Torres Ray - **PT**
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

LD: Today is Friday December 17th and my name is Lorena Duarte. I'll be conducting the interview today for the Minnesota Historical Society's Latino Oral History Project. I am with Senator Patricia Torres Ray in her home in South Minneapolis. And first of all, on behalf of the Historical Society, I just want to thank you. I know you're a very busy woman and it's really an honor to be speaking with you today and for you to have taken this time to share your story with the people of Minnesota. So thank you.

PT: Thank you, Lorena. I'm delighted to do this, especially with you.

LD: [Chuckles] It is a very big honor for me as well, so first of all, if I could just get your name and how to spell it please.

PT: My name is Patricia Torres Ray.

LD: And your date of birth please.

PT: I was born on March 25, 1964.

LD: Let's first start off with your childhood, where you were born, and your parents—just their names, a little bit about them, and siblings if you had any.

PT: Well, I come from a very large family. I was born in Colombia in a small town in the south of Colombia called Pasto. So it's a very small town and the kind of [unclear – speaks phrase in Spanish], it's the last city that you pass to cross to the border with Ecuador.

It is very high, ten thousand feet high, with lots of mountains. I am the eighth of nine brothers and sisters. I have five brothers and three sisters, and one of my brothers died when he was eighteen years old. So I kind of grew up with a group of seven siblings. I was part of a very large family, you know. My mother's family was very involved in our lives, and so my aunts and my uncles and my grandparents were there and I always counted them as my family.

LD: Sure.

PT: Because they were always with us. My mother came from a very large family, and we lived in the same town and we spent a lot of time with them.

LD: And what did your parents do?

PT: My father was a mechanical engineer - kind of a frustrated mechanical engineer, because he never finished his degree. But he was a wonderful person who liked to make inventions. He was always inventing something new and was very intrigued with the technology in the United States.

LD: Oh.

PT: He was fascinated by the progress in technology in the U.S., especially mechanical engineering, so he always was paying attention to new toys that were created in the U.S. and he tried to create these toys over there. My mother was a stay-home mom – she was always taking care of kids.

LD: Sure.

PT: Since there were so many of us. [Laughter] And so my mother was really at home all the time, you know, just taking care of us and the home.

LD: And tell me, what kind of kid were you? Did you like school? What subjects did you like? Did you like sports, the arts? What were you like as a kid?

PT: You know, I never had time to really reflect about my childhood until now, until I got elected to office, because a lot of people have asked me that question. I think that I was an introvert. I was a child that really liked to do projects and was very good about creating projects. When I grew up I went to a Catholic school and we had two days a week when we had an arts class - what would be called here an arts class, but we always had to do crafts. I was just talking to my mother recently about all of the projects that I did every year, and how elaborate they were and how good they were, you know, like embroidery and things like that.

LD: Yes.

PT: I think I was fascinated by the idea of creating something that was artful and beautiful. And I remember the connections, because I grew up in a small town, so there was a real connection with the kids in the neighborhood. I remember spending a *lot* of time playing with kids on my block – that was a big deal in my life. But I also grew up in a school where all of us were girls. And so we were very connected from the time when I was in kindergarten to the time I graduated. In all of these families, we knew each other, and their parents knew us. My mother went to school with some of the mothers from my classmates.

LD: Ah.

PT: It was a very small community where we knew families. Families knew each other, and so it was a very safe environment. They were people that we knew, people that we trusted. We spent a lot of time with these friends, with these families, with people in the neighborhood. Part of what was, I think, difficult for me when I came to the U.S. is that I came from this very homogenous society. It was a place where a lot of the people just kind of looked like me. I don't remember ever having an African-American classmate. I never interacted with a friend that was black, who was of African descent. I had more connection with some people who had an indigenous background, but pretty much all of us, you know, have some indigenous background. It was kind of the Mestizo type.

LD: Sure.

PT: It was more a Mestizo-European background. So I grew up not knowing a lot of the outside world and not needing to know the background of people because pretty much everybody knew each other and had similar backgrounds.

LD: Yes.

PT: It was people that were born in the same town generation after generation, and they kind of stayed there. So it was a very simple life, very safe, and not exposed to a lot of outside influences or cultures, which in a way, you know, it was easier for a kid, growing up that way.

LD: Sure.

PT: I didn't know that then, but I know that now. [Chuckles] My kids are going to school, and I see how fascinating it is. You know that my boys have on their soccer team a lot of kids from Latin America and Africa, and then, in some of the other activities, there are children from other kinds of backgrounds. I never had that opportunity.

As a child I was growing up with girls, and there was a lot of contact with the school and religious activities. My family was incredibly religious, my mother in particular. I was a very good reader. I could read quite well ever since I was very young. I remember at church the first time when the nuns asked me as a child to do some of the readings at mass, and they discovered that I was such a good reader. And after that I became the child that was always reading up front.

LD: Ah. That was doing the presenting.

PT: Yes, yes. You know, I was doing some of the psalms, and reading some of the readings during the mass. And that was *so* good for me, for my self-esteem and really my desire to read more and be involved in church. I thought I was going to be a nun. I really was so fascinated with these women who were so highly educated and doing a lot of work. The church that I went to was part of a hospital, Saint Peter Hospital, and we went there every holiday and every Sunday for mass. And then I became very involved in some of the activities that they did in the

hospital and doing a lot of reading and taking communion to people in the hospital. I don't know why I was so fascinated with that.

My mother always tells me that, you know, when I remember those times [laughs] when I did all of these things.

LD: When you wanted to be a nun. [Chuckles]

PT: Yes, when I really wanted to be a nun. That lasted for several years. I think I was in fifth grade, around fifth and sixth grade. And that continued on until I was about, I don't know, almost until I graduated from high school.

LD: Wow.

PT: I was very involved in that and very fascinated by that life.

LD: What was high school like?

PT: High school was very rigorous, and we had very little time to socialize. I went to school every day from seven in the morning to five p.m. And we had a break in the middle of the day. We actually went home for lunch. So my life was very much involved in academics and doing school activities. I was never in sports; I was not engaged in sports. And you know there was lots of studying. I think I was a responsible kid in a way.

When I was in perhaps eleventh and twelfth grade, I became much more social and had groups of friends that were more gender mixed. In my hometown there were about four schools that were the Catholic schools, and they were always playing games and were rivals and all of that. Today those schools have both boys and girls, they are mixed, but when I was growing up they were not, they were just only girls and only boys. We went to a lot of parties with the boys. The schools always had these cultural activities and games that we participated in, but it was very structured. You know, it was just like *la semana de los* [unclear – speaks Spanish word or phrase] was just Monday to Sunday days of games, you know, that the different schools were playing; parties, exhibits, these kinds of things. And we went to some of that. That was really big. That was ongoing for some of the schools, you know, and we always had them in different months of the year. But I was not - I had very good friends that I spent a lot of time with, but I was not . . .

LD: Like a social butterfly.

PT: Yes. Yes. No, I don't think I was.

LD: Yes. And it's very different, I'm sure, from what your boys, I'm not sure how old they are, but . . .

PT: Yes, Tomas is sixteen, and Patrick is fourteen years old.

LD: So there it goes – a very different teenage experience!

PT: Total social butterflies! [Laughter]

LD: So, after high school, what did you do then?

PT: I went to law school—in Colombia you go directly to the program.

LD: Right.

PT: It's not like you have undergraduate studies, and so I went directly to law school. I applied, got accepted, and began studying immediately.

LD: In the same town?

PT: In the same town. I had the idea that I wanted to explore something different. And in fact, out of all of my friends, probably only a couple of friends that were close friends stayed home. Everybody left, particularly because in my hometown at the time we had a couple of universities that were big enough, but it was a very small town with not a lot of opportunities. Although all of my friends left, and I had the idea that I really wanted to leave, my parents didn't have the money to send me to a university in a bigger city. So I had to explore something locally, and I did. I got accepted to a good university and so I stayed.

LD: And how long was the program?

PT: The program is seven years, and so in essence it's the same time that you will study here with an undergraduate degree and then going into graduate school. It's about the same.

LD: But you started right away.

PT: The difference is that you start with the program right away. And so, you know, it's really a more intense instruction in the field. You do a year of practice, which is like when you do a year of residency when you study medicine.

LD: Yes.

PT: The same thing is true in Colombia for pretty much every career, especially careers like law and medicine and dentistry where you do a year of residency. I got married when I was completing the first half of my fifth year, which is all of the academic work. I got married, so I didn't complete my year of residency and my last semester of exams. And, as a result of it, I never got my degree.

LD: Because is that when you moved up here?

PT: That's when I moved up here.

LD: Okay.

PT: Yes.

LD: And we'll get into that. I just want to make sure I have the timeline straight.

PT: Yes. That's when I moved. And I recently got an honorary degree from my university, actually.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

PT: This year I went back and . . .

LD: Congratulations!

PT: Yes, yes. Thank you. After all of these years.

LD: I want to, obviously, delve into when you came to Minnesota. But just really quick, what drew you to the law? What drew you to that profession?

PT: Well, I think several things. I had this idea of oral presentation and debate that I was always fascinated with, and from early in my life I was very good about oral presentation and oral argument and thoughtful argument. And I thought that being a lawyer really represented that for me.

LD: Sure.

PT: And then there is also the respect that the career had at the time and how I viewed that. I had an uncle that was a judge and friends whose parents were lawyers and judges, and so I had the view of this field as a career that was an honorable thing to do, and an intellectual thing to do. I was fascinated by that.

And then I was also limited with what was available to me in my town. I didn't have so many options that I could explore with, you know, in terms of good careers and reputable colleges.

LD: Right.

PT: I had very few options and I wanted to pick the best of those options, and so I ended up doing law.

LD: So now tell me about how you came to be here. [Chuckles] What's that story?

PT: That's a crazy story.

Well, one of my brothers, one of my older brothers was living in Bogotá, the capital of Colombia. He was working with a large foundation called Fundación Social that until today is one of the largest foundations really working to provide capacity and training to low income communities, and to help low income individuals figure out how they can position themselves to influence government, to influence companies, and to create economic growth for their communities. It's a wonderful thing. They do not give money to people, but they create capacity. They involve people in training, and exploring markets and those kinds of things.

LD: Yes.

PT: Fundación Social was part of a large group of the Jesuit community in Colombia; it still is. One of the largest private universities in Colombia, Universidad Javeriana, had a partnership with the University of Minnesota to do exchange programs in the 1980s, and Jack, my husband, [Jackson Ray] was in anthropology. He was very fascinated with exploring Colombian culture. There was very little written about Colombian culture and explored from an anthropological perspective. He had a professor who had done some work in Colombia, and he wanted to go, so when this program became available to do the exchange program, he ended up in Bogotá at Universidad Javeriana. He wanted to work with small farmers, peasants that owned their land, and just get to know the lifestyle of people who live in absolute poverty but own their land.

LD: Sure.

PT: So that was what he wanted to study, and he went to Colombia and he ended up in Bogotá. Bogotá is a *very* large city with a lot of poverty that is not necessarily the type of poverty that he wanted to explore. So they introduced him to my brother, who was working with small peasants, forming these co-ops and trying to bring people together to sell their products in cooperatives in the south of Colombia, which is where I'm from.

LD: Yes.

PT: And so when Jack was introduced to my brother, my brother said, "Well, we have a program and training that we're going to do in my hometown, and if you want to come and see, that's where the *campesinos* [farmers] live. And this is where you really need go to see if you want to explore and see if you want to go there."

So he came to us, and of course my brother brought him to our house and he said, "You know, I have this gringo who is coming to do this work.."

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: "And we're going to have this workshop for three months with the campesinos, so I'm going to take him to these small towns. And after this training is done, if he wants to stay, you need to help him find a house and just figure out if he can stay." That was a Friday and then on Sunday my brother left this guy at home, and he barely could speak Spanish.

[Laughter] And everybody was saying, "What are we going to do with this guy?" [Laughter]

So my mother said, "You know, we have some room." My father had an accident before Jack came, about seven years before Jack came, and he became paraplegic and he lost the movement of his legs. He had this big room that was his office where he could go in his wheelchair. But my father no longer used that, and so my mother said to Jack, "You can stay in this room and utilize whatever you want." They put a bed into that room, and Jack just put all of his gadgets there. Like a good gringo, he came with a lot of gadgets. [Laughter] Tape recorders, you know, he was going to do a year project in anthropology. So he put all of his antennas and all of his things and he stayed in my house for a year.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: He never asked to leave to go anywhere; my mother never told him that he had to leave. [Chuckles] He became kind of a member of the family and he began to do his work and travel, but he was in my house, you know.

LD: Yes.

PT: And he always says that I became his project [laughter] after he met me. He always says, "And then *she* became my project." [Laughs] So he was living in my house for about eleven months. And I was going to school. We went out for a few months and then we decided to get married. Well he was kind of a - he was kind of a brother! [Chuckles]

LD: That's a very sweet story. [Chuckles] And when was that? What year?

PT: 1987.

LD: 1987. And then you decided to come back up here.

PT: Right. So we got married.

LD: In?

PT: In August.

LD: In Colombia?

PT: We got married in Colombia.

LD: Okay.

PT: And we traveled a little bit and we came here in October. And it was . . .

LD: October of 1987?

PT: Yes. It was a very tough year for me.

LD: What were your first impressions of Minnesota?

PT: Well, you know, I was as I stated to you, a kind of a small town girl who just never left home. This was my first time anyplace. [Chuckles] It was not just a different city, it was a different country.

LD: Yes.

PT: You know, this was the first time away from home for me. And I found Minnesota, Minneapolis, to be a very lonely place. I came here towards the end of October, and soon the winter came in. I remember when we just arrived we were living in Prospect Park near the University of Minnesota, because Jack had to go back to school and finish his degree. Some of the neighbors were getting their gardens prepared, and I saw a few people. But it was just this feeling like you never see anybody here, when you went through the streets. Now on the streets you see a lot of people, but when I came here twenty-three years ago it was very lonely. You didn't see Latinos. We walk, you know, and a lot of us don't have cars and we are used to walking in the streets. And right now Lake Street is a very busy street and in Saint Paul there is a large Latino community. That was the culture I knew, but twenty-three years ago we didn't have these neighborhoods populated with our community, and so it was very quiet and very lonely and then the winter came. And it was just like, oh, my god! Everybody disappeared!

LD: [Laughs]

PT: You didn't see anybody. *Ever*. And that, to me, was the most depressing part of it. You know, I could deal with the dark days and cold and everything, but the idea of not being able to see people and being able to interact with people, and not knowing who was next door. It was just very foreign to me, especially because I didn't speak English. And so I just had, I felt very vulnerable about being by myself, not being able to ask a question, and not being able to interact.

LD: Yes.

PT: And for me that was so important, because I was very verbal. [Chuckles] That was very important. The idea of communicating was so important to me, and so being in a foreign place and not being able to speak was very hard for me.

LD: So what did you do? Did you go to school? Did you work?

PT: You know, I was very lost for some time. I just really didn't know what to do. It was my inability to communicate, and feeling like all of a sudden I was just like a child, and that I sounded like I was a person that didn't know anything.

It was very debilitating to me. We needed money - Jack was a student and he was working a little bit for the university. I thought I needed to find a job where I really don't have to speak; where I could, you know, just make money and get healthcare. So I began to look for that, and I found a job in a factory where they printed these bottles, these plastic bottles. And they paid quite well, actually. It was about twelve dollars an hour and they had benefits. It was the afternoon shift, so it started at three and it went until about eleven thirty or midnight. And I thought that was ideal. You know, that I just went there and I didn't have to speak to anybody and I was just printing these bottles. And I didn't have to interact with anybody but just these bottles and these machines.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: I did that for some time. But what was good about it was that I really wanted to go to school, because I really was just desperate to speak. And I really wanted to learn how to speak English. At the time there was this large wave of refugees and people who came here from Laos, predominantly, and Vietnam. So the schools were very good, and there were schools everywhere in Minneapolis and Saint Paul. At the time there was a program in the Pratt Building, and they had English as a second language for adults all day, and you could go through various levels. I lived very close to that school, about four blocks, in Prospect Park. So when I discovered that I could go there, it was a very good thing. I went there every day and was there all day until it was time for me to go to work. That was very good for me. It was close, you know, and I could go and do my homework, and the teachers were very good. I spent all my days, every day in that school, and then went to work in the afternoon. That was very important to me. Being part of the school community was very good. It forced me to really learn. There were about six hundred people in that school, at all levels. And there were only two of us who were Latinas.

LD: Oh, my gosh.

PT: Yes. A woman that I will never forget—Isabelle—she was Mexican, and myself.

LD: That seems incredible to me.

PT: There was nobody there who could speak Spanish. There were only a few people who were Russian, and then everybody else was Laotian and Vietnamese. Everybody else.

LD: So you *really* had to learn.

PT: I had to learn, because there was just no way. Obviously, for Laotian people and Vietnamese it was much more difficult. A lot of the people who came were not very young, or at least the people who were in that school with me. I was one of the youngest people. I was able to advance very quickly on my own because the classes I had to take, they were either very advanced, which I could not take, or very limited. But the school was very flexible, and I had opportunities to really jump levels very quickly and do work on my own, too. The teachers were very accommodating, and the programs in those years were very strong.

LD: Yes.

PT: There was a lot of funding, and I remember we had very good books and parents had child care available. And it was very well structured. So I did a lot of that. And then it was really through church that I was able to meet a woman who actually helped me figure out how to connect with the community.

LD: What church was that?

PT: Saint Frances Cabrini [in Minneapolis, Minnesota].

LD: Oh.

PT: At Cabrini I met actually a woman who was Angel Passay [sp?] who was at the time directing a child care program that was part of this school. She was the first person I met that spoke Spanish, and I began to talk to her about the community and explore the idea of working with the community. But actually it was Carmen Robles who was the person who pulled me completely into working with the community.

LD: Oh, my gosh. Carmen.

PT: Carmen Robles.

LD: I know her, I've known her for years.

PT: Yes, Carmen Robles. I remember my first meeting with Carmen Robles like it was yesterday, because somehow somebody told me about her, and I called her. She said, "I want to meet with you, and I want you to come to the West Side. We're going to go to this little restaurant called El Amanecer," which was across the street from El Burrito. I went to meet this woman, and she kind of interviewed me and said, "So what did you do and where do you come from?" and everything. And I said, you know, I went to law school. She was the first person who actually explored who I was in my own language, right. So she was the first person who got to know who I was.

LD: Yes.

PT: She was the first person that I communicated with in Spanish here, and I told her what I was doing. And she said, "No, no *mija*, how can you be working in a factory printing bottles? Hell no!" [Laughter] "You have to come and work with us! And really devote some of your time and your talent to the community. You really have to get out of there. You have to get a decent job; you just can't be working in a factory." And I thought that was very intriguing, you know. So then trhough her I learned about the guardian ad litem program in Hennepin County.

LD: I'm sorry, what was that again?

PT: It was the guardian ad litem program, which is a volunteer program that offers opportunity to volunteers to represent children in court.

LD: Oh.

PT: You can be a volunteer and go to the county and say, that you want to speak for a child. You want to get to know that child. These are children who are in a child protection case. And you get to know the child and then they assign you a case. And you know the family, you know the case, and then you go to court and you speak for the child from your own perspective.

So I went to the training, and it was very difficult because it was in English and the terminology was something I didn't know. But it was *so good*. It was just like, finally I was doing something meaningful and really something that was intellectually challenging and in so many ways attractive to me. So I did a lot of that. I spent a lot of time in court and learning about the guardian ad litem program and children in child protection. And I met a lot of women, Latinas, who were working on policy issues to protect children that were taken away from their homes. At the time there was a large wave of placements of children that were predominantly African-American, but there were also a few Latinos that were just coming to the state, and some children were removed from their homes on allegations of child protection and they were placed in white homes.

This movement of Carmen Robles was part of it, and Judy DeJesus was another social worker (she passed away), and Jackie Smith, a black worker (she passed away), who were part of this movement. These women were really trying to be a voice for children and demand that the system be monitored. I began to volunteer for them and to go to everything they went to, all the meetings. [Chuckles] I had time, you know, during the day, because I was working at this factory. And it was just wonderful. It was a wonderful experience for me. And that's how I began to do this work and be very involved with the community and children's issues.

LD: So from there, just kind of take me through your professional career. From there, what was your next step?

PT: Well, you know, this experience with Carmen Robles and these women who were predominantly social workers in the movement, really talking about child poverty and monitoring disparities of children in systems like child protection - that really defined my future in Minnesota. I knew that that was what I wanted to do, that I really wanted to explore a career working on behalf of children and advocating for children. And so, with these women, I began to learn the work that they were doing at the time. These women were trying to influence the legislature to pass legislation. There was a national movement and a local movement to create the ethnic heritage act. The Ethnic Heritage Act was intended to really push the county agencies and the states at the national level to look at recruiting families that were of the same ethnic and cultural background of the children who needed placement, and to look for opportunities to place those children within these communities and these families. The family preservation movement and the ethnic preservation movement was very big.

LD: Okay. So your work with Carmen Robles really defined your direction. And roughly, when was this, like what year?

PT: I think this was about 1989.

LD: Okay.

PT: It was 1989, yes – at the end of the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s. So this was quite a long period of time. I became very involved in some of the work that they were doing – promoting and trying to advance these ideas at the legislature, and pushing Hennepin County to do more work with African-American families. This was a group of women – it was all women - and they were African American and Latinas. It was such a great opportunity for me as a young woman to be with this group of women, being mentored and just doing some very, very exciting things. Very few people were involved in this, really pushing for legislation at that time, and I was part of this group. It was such a great opportunity in terms of the challenge for me to really learn the language and learn the system. The idea of advancing children's rights put me in a place where I stopped feeling sorry for myself. You know, before, I was *so* feeling sorry for myself.

LD: Sure, yes.

PT: I was sorry that I was in this place, that it was so cold, that I couldn't speak English, and that I couldn't work in my career. A lot of things were not happening for me. And then all of a sudden this opportunity presents itself. I was seeing these families that are struggling, losing their kids, and a lot of problems with the system that was serving the kids. It just gave me this perspective of, you know, I'm doing so well. [Chuckles] I can go to college, I don't have kids, I have all of this time to do all of this work, and there is just no reason for me to be feeling sorry for myself.

LD: Right.

PT: I have to do this. It was great, and I had the time to really do it, you know. I was a young woman with no children. Jack was very busy doing his schoolwork, and so I had all the time to do this. Interestingly, these women were able to really advance *a lot of* things at that time. They were able to change some policies in Hennepin County and Ramsey County, where they were able to advance some very strategic decisions at the legislative level and they were able to create an office called the Office of Ombudsperson for Families. That office was supposed to monitor, because there were a lot of laws in place that protected these children, but they were not being enforced. So the argument they made was that the state needed to have an office in place that would monitor the compliance with this legislation, and that agencies needed to be accountable.

LD: Yes.

PT: Somebody needed to monitor that. So they were able to put that in the books and that became a law. They got money to put this office in place, and it was a very high level office. It

was just such a wonderful accomplishment, but when we were done, the Legislature gave very little money. The groups wanted to split the money so that each group, the Asian community, the African-American, the Indian community, and the Latino community would get a little bit of money to hire a person. And that meant that that person had to work with the councils of color because there was no money for a space, and that that person could only work for twenty hours a week, and for very little money. And so they made that choice—that rather than having one person they should have four—and that the councils were going to house this office. Then a lot of people began to apply, because this was a very kind of high level office monitoring Hennepin County and Ramsey County. But there was little time to do it, and so the people who began to apply for these jobs were people who had a lot of credentials but they had other jobs, because nobody was going to take this job for such little money.

LD: Right.

PT: They were just kind of doing this, and so these women began to question how were they going to do all of the work that was needed. It was at that time that they looked at me and said, "You should apply for this job." And I thought I couldn't possibly do this job! [Chuckles] This is just like way up there. They said, "But you worked on figuring out how to do this and you know what is needed." I knew everything about it because we worked for two years on trying to push that legislation. And so Elena Zaksones [sp?], who was very instrumental in doing this—she's a child protection worker in Hennepin County—she said, "You should apply and compete for it. And we'll see. There will be a group of people that will interview you, and you should not exclude yourself. You should compete for it and if you get it, you get it." And I did. That was my first real job. That's the first one that I count anyway! [Chuckles]

LD: Wow.

PT: So they gave me that opportunity. It was an amazing thing, because my English was still pretty broken, and I just didn't feel like I was prepared to it.

LD: So you were representing the Latino community?

PT: I was the ombudsperson for Latino families.

LD: And this was in 1989, still?

PT: I think this was 1990, I don't remember, It was 1991 perhaps by the time I was formally hired and began to work. And the money was available to the office, so it probably was 1990 or 1991.

LD: And so what did the work entail?

PT: I was in the council, in the Chicano Latino Affairs Council, which at the time was called the Spanish Speaking Affairs Council. They gave me a small office, and basically what I had to do was to let the community know that my office was in existence and that people could call and

place a complaint, or call the office to let me know that they knew about a case involving a child where the social worker was just not doing the work or the county was not providing the service. It was a lot of community outreach, a lot of training, a lot of letting people know that you're here if they have a complaint or they have a reason to call you for help.

LD: Yes.

PT: That worked out very well. It was a great opportunity for me because it was really doing outreach to the Latino community. It gave me this great opportunity to really get to know who the community was at a very high level - a very professional level. Until then it was just more voluntary, you know, getting to know the people that I could, but then it became a formal assignment and I really needed to go out and figure out who these people were. That was just a great thing for me. Again, it was giving me that opportunity to find other people like me that were out there; to find other Latinos, other advocates, other families that were here and struggling with their kids. That really provided a foundation for me to connect in very significant ways with the community.

I did a lot of work with the organizations that were here. Centro Cultural Chicano was here, and CLUES [*Comunidades Latinas Unidas En Servicio*] was here, so we had some organizations. I really had to work very closely with them and ask for advice on how we could do this, and partner with them. After a few years of that, I discovered that I was working full time but not getting paid full time. I proposed to the board that this office needed to be full time, and that we needed more people, and that all of us needed to work collectively to get full time people. We also needed to be an independent office, because the councils were giving us resources that belonged to them, and that was just not fair.

LD: Right.

PT: I couldn't travel because I didn't have money, and the council couldn't give me their money because they had very little money, so all of these struggles began to really limit my ability to do the work that I really wanted to do. With the board's support, I went to the legislature and asked for more funding. I began to kind of do a lot of legislative work because of that, and got very connected with some senators and representatives. And I was able to accomplish that. We were able to get the money and got the office out of the council in a formal way and created an independent office at the state level.

That was clarified in the legislation, and the office became an independent office and we were full time. After almost a year of that, the Department of Human Services [DHS] noticed the work that I was trying to do. They offered me a position to come and do something very similar internally in DHS, to begin to connect with counties and the reservations, and to develop some tools to train social workers about cultural competency. A lot of the work that I was doing externally I was now doing within DHS, so that they could be more instrumental in helping workers and helping the courts and helping all of the people who were involved with children to be more responsive to the cultural needs of kids. They created what is called the Children of Color Outreach Initiative, and they offered me that position and I became a program manager for

DHS. I resigned from the ombudsperson's office and went to DHS and worked there for seven years doing very similar work, but only for DHS. Again, I was working with eighty-seven counties and the reservations and nonprofit organizations, but it was internal. I was on DHS's staff.

LD: And when did you start there?

PT: Oh, let's see . . .

LD: Roughly. [Chuckles]

PT: Yes. You know, I'll have to look at my resume to see the dates. But I think I came to them in 1998, probably.

LD: So you would have been there until about 2005 or so?

PT: Around 2005, yes, because 2005 was when I began to think about leaving, and then in 2006 I ran for office. Actually, it was in 2005 when I ran, because I was campaigning for about a year.

LD: And I definitely want to get into that.

PT: Yes.

LD: But first, you know, you're working with the community, first as a volunteer at a very grass roots level, and then kind of part time, and then in these different positions.

PT: Yes.

LD: What were the changes that you saw? Because right in 1991 is when we started to see massive influxes of Latinos to Minneapolis, etcetera. I always tell people, when I came to Minnesota as a little girl there were no Latinos in Minneapolis.

PT: Right, right.

LD: And so that time, to me, is very, very interesting.

PT: Yes.

LD: And as someone who was working on the ground with these communities, what was that like? What were those years like between 1991 and 2005? What were the changes that you saw and what was the community facing?

PT: You know that our community will always have these different communities within the community.

LD: Sure. Yes.

PT: And your perspective or my perspective was pretty dictated by that experience of being part of this wave of new immigrants. I was a new immigrant.

LD: Yes.

PT: The community I knew was kind of, I don't want to call it divided because it has a negative connotation, and I don't mean to say that. But it was like there were two communities. There was this new community that was coming in, and I was part of that. But there was the established community. There were a lot of Latinos who were here, who were established communities, particularly in the West Side. There were leaders who were in very prominent positions that I never got to connect with in a very significant way. Perhaps the reason was that, like you articulated, a lot of things were happening - lots of things. If that growth, that expansion of the community had not been so exponential, then I would have had time to explore those connections with established leaders.

LD: Sure.

PT: But my work with the office of ombudsperson and DHS became so much about the newcomers and this growth that the counties were experiencing. All of the social workers in Willmar, Minnesota, and Moorhead, and Ramsey County, and Hennepin County, were tormented by this feeling that, "Oh my god, now I have two cases involving children that were Latinos and I have to interact with four parents that don't know how to speak English." [Chuckles] It was a big deal for them. It was just this new thing that was happening to them and it was so foreign and so complicated. That took my entire day and energy - trying to figure out how to work with these workers. And then that kept multiplying, you know. Then there were cases everywhere, and there were families with very complicated cases and lots of kids, and so for most of my professional experience I have been dealing with the new wave, with the newcomers, and not being able to really look at what was there before.

I was in the middle of that. I remember, for instance, one of the reasons I really wanted to make the office of ombudsperson independent from the councils was the political fights that were taking place in the community. I remember so well when the council was located on the corner of Rice Street and University Avenue. There was a group of Chicanos who actually were successful in changing the name of the council. The council at that time was called Spanish Speaking Affairs Council.

LD: Yes.

PT: And this group said, "You know, many of us don't speak Spanish and we're Latinos, we're Chicanos. This council belongs to us. The people who are struggling in this country are people who are second and third generation and they're still living in poverty and they have still not been able to live the American dream. They are the ones who need these resources." So they went to the legislature and actually changed the name of the council. And that battle was *bad*.

You know, they really got rid of the director; Raul De Anda [sp?], who was the associate director of the council, had to leave. The council was locked many times because there were threats by these advocates against the council board, and I was in the middle of it trying to do the ombudsman work. [Chuckles]

LD: Yes, yes.

PT: And so I thought, I don't want to be part of this. I just want to continue do my work. And the women who were working with me didn't want to be part of this. They just wanted to advance the cause on behalf of children. So that time was controversial. There was this fight, with the recognition that the Chicano movement was dying and that the Chicano people were just kind of struggling to keep it alive. And then this wave that was coming and there was just no way to stop it. For those of us who just didn't know either of the two, it was just like, the Chicano movement, who knew? And then the wave, who knew about it? [Chuckles] But we knew that we were in the middle of it. We were just kind of living and learning, but really not knowing much of the history and not knowing what to expect for the future.

LD: So you were living in South Minneapolis this whole time, basically.

PT: All of this time.

LD: And as we're seeing this, it was like a juggernaut, this huge influx of Latinos coming into South Minneapolis. What was that like? What were some of the changes that you saw in your own neighborhood, and also on Lake Street and other corridors, what was that like?

PT: Because I had a job that was so statewide, I was experiencing this in many directions. I was seeing it. I was seeing the growth in many places. That was a very interesting experience for me in terms of what I was seeing kind of the West Side. The West Side was always the place I went to church, to Our Lady of Guadalupe, because there was no place else for me to go.

LD: Sure.

PT: To, you know, to be able to do things….

LD: In Spanish.

PT: In Spanish. And so the West Side was the place where I went to church and I went to [unclear a supermarket, maybe?] and *really* explored what to buy, food that was just right, you know. It was the heart of the cultural place where you went to find your people and your culture. For me as a Colombian, of course, everything was Mexican but it was very close. And Minneapolis didn't have that. It took a while for Minneapolis, but little by little things began. And then there was this explosion in the 1990s, really in the mid-1990s.

LD: Yes.

PT: From there on it has been just exponential growth. But even so, I don't know that Minneapolis has the culture of the West Side. The two cities are just so different, and the Latino culture is represented in the culture of the cities as well. The Saint Paul culture is kind of the historic town, the traditional town, the old town. And I think, I see the Latino community that way, too. It is kind of the old community.

LD: Sure.

PT: It is the established community, the Lady of Guadalupe community, the murals, and there is a lot of history in there, a lot of connection with years of tradition. Minneapolis is not like that. Minneapolis is everything, you know. All of South America, all types of restaurants, a combination of restaurants, Caribbean restaurants, Puerto Rican culture, and the Mexican too. And all of it combined in one. I think in Minneapolis we cater to a more diverse Latino population. We want *all* the Latino population to find a place in Minneapolis. So you find these combinations of restaurants and colors and flavors that are, I don't know how to articulate this, but it's just not very - I don't want to say it's not authentic to one place, but it's just not so restricted by feeling that this is the Mexican dish and it has to be cooked this way because this is the tradition. We will experiment, and if we have to put black beans in a tortilla that's just fine. [Laughter] Because people appreciate it and they love it, and who cares that the black beans are Caribbean? If they go with a tortilla, that's just good. Minneapolis is more experimental in terms of blending cultures.

LD: Yes.

PT: I see the West Side as more traditional. Kind of, no, we're not going to mix these recipes because we know how the recipe works! [Laughter] You know, we're not going to compromise this authenticity.

LD: I want to delve now into, well, first, I want to delve into your decision to run for political office, but in the meantime there, I just want to dip back in just a little bit into your personal life. I know you had a couple of kids in there.

PT: Yes. Yes.

LD: In all of this time.

PT: Yes.

LD: And just wondering what that was like as kind of a mixed family. You know, Latina mom and gringo dad, and what that was like for you?

PT: It's interesting, I think, because of my situation. Jack met me in my own house, and in my own territory. And when I came to this country, I think he saw the change and the transformation and what he saw as a having *lost* a lot of things.

I think Jack wanted to help me figure out how I can become successful, and really embrace this culture and be part of this culture and be who I was in Colombia. And as a result of it, Jack has done an extraordinary job of taking care of things for me so that I can *be* that.

From early on, you know, there was the idea that I could spend a lot of time outside and exploring. Jack was absolutely great and that he pushed me to do more of that. And then when I got pregnant, the two of us kind of looked at what we were doing and Jack said, "No, you have a better job and you are doing many things that are much more interesting than I am. And if you leave your job to take care of Tomas, you know, this is a loss. But if I leave my job, it's different. I'm not making a lot of money and I am not necessarily sure that I'm very happy with what I'm doing. So I'm going to be a stay-home dad." And he decided to stay with Tomas.

LD: Wow.

PT: And shortly after that we had Patrick, because they are just two years apart, so that really became a decision that was more long term for him - staying home with the kids. He wanted to do that; I think he wanted to make sure that I continued to have those opportunities. He knew that I loved what I was doing and that I was progressing in my career. I think he didn't want me to have to come back home and stop doing what I was doing. And he loved being a dad. So it was a good thing for us.

LD: Yes.

PT: So he stayed home with our two boys for a long time, practically until Patrick went to kindergarten. And that just *really* gave me time, you know, Jack took my boys to the office for nursing. I nursed my boys for a year.

LD: Wow.

PT: Jack took care of that. You know, the boys went to visit me all the time. Jack really accommodated me in so many ways. And when we travel, you know, Jack will travel with the boys with me and we will go together. He took care of the boys and I was with them, but he was always trying to figure out ways to accommodate my life, really, so that I could continue to do this. He accommodated our personal life into my professional life, and all of this time it has been like this.

LD: Wow.

PT: Really. Yes.

LD: And, I mean, that's a great insight, too. You know, there's that saying, behind every powerful man there's a woman. And it's very wonderful to see that the opposite is true; that, you know, those gender roles are slowly changing.

PT: Yes. Yes.

LD: That dynamic can be just as powerful the other way around.

PT: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

LD: So let's talk about now, so in 2005 you decided to run for public office. Why? What was it that pushed you?

PT: You know, it was really the Pawlenty administration. It was this governor. Remember, until then my entire life was really about figuring out how to influence government, how to speak on behalf of the community, and how to organize the community to advance the rights of children. And it was very successful, really. Personally I felt that we advanced a tremendous amount. And then, all of a sudden, I see a governor that comes in that not only doesn't want to pay attention to these issues at all, but clearly is trying to cut funding to very basic programs, and I knew that would cause a lot of problems for low income families.

I began to see the decline in terms of investment. And so I was torn, because I knew that there was this exponential growth and that we were having more families coming and more kids coming and greater needs. But we had an administration that was going in the exact opposite direction, and we were not investing. I struggled to go to work every day - trying to figure out what was going to happen next, what program they were going to eliminate next, or what position. That was happening every day, and it was so draining. It was just like, all of a sudden, I felt like I don't want to do this anymore. And I was conflicted by that, because this was my passion and I *loved* doing that and I thought, how can it be that now I don't want to do it? I'd really wanted to do it.

LD: Yes.

PT: I decided, "This man is not going to push me out of it!" [Laughter] *This* administration is not going to push me out of it. Maybe what I have to do is just leave this office. I don't have to leave the entire movement; I don't have to leave the cause.

LD: Yes.

PT: It took me a while to really get that it was not my job, it was not the place, but it was what was happening there and what was being done by this administration. So I thought, maybe I should go to a foundation and figure out what to do there. I began to put my resume together and apply for jobs. I was in the process of being interviewed for a job at the McKnight Foundation, and the senator who represented this area [Wes Skoglund] announced that he was leaving. The senator that was representing this area prior to him, Julie Sabo, who is congressman [Martin] Sabo's daughter, was a person that really impressed me. You know, when I was living here I visited her a couple of times and she was just great, doing a lot of work for children. She kind of caught my attention in terms of the work that she was doing for children. And then this senator, because of redistricting, took this office. She ran for lieutenant governor and they lost, and so this guy took the office for a few years and then he decided to retire. He was in the House for

many, many years. I said to Jack it would be very interesting to run for that office. And he said, "You know, you said that when Julie Sabo was the senator. And I think you should do it. And before you change your mind, we should go register in the county." [Chuckles] And we did!

LD: [Laughter] Wow!

PT: We did! He said, "Let's go register." And we went to the county and I filled out the form and we paid a hundred dollars and there I was. I put my name . . .

LD: [Laughs]

PT: And then Jack said, "Now we have to figure it out. You have to go to all of the district meetings . . ." And I thought, "Oh, my god! [Laughs] What have I done? I don't even know where to start with this." So it was really an act of frustration in a way, and a desire to continue to do what I was doing from a different arena. And it was great. Clearly I didn't know the political process and I didn't know the political insiders, but a lot of the people that I worked with for seventeen years knew me. And a lot of people lived here. A lot of people knew my office in the Latino community and around the neighborhood. I got very excited, and I prepared for the convention to get the endorsement, and put a letter out indicating the reasons I wanted to run for office. I think that letter was a very powerful letter. It was well received, and I got the endorsement, which was key for my election.

LD: And what was that like? I can only imagine it was something like a baptism by fire.

PT: It really was.

LD: A very steep learning curve. [Chuckles] I mean, however you want to phrase it. But I imagine that it was. It must have been daunting.

PT: It was very, very hard. And it was interesting, because when I decided to run for office I went to my boss and I said, "I have made this decision and I would like to ask for your support. I would like to get a leave of absence and explore this endorsing process." He said to me, "I think you will be fantastic. And of course I will give you a leave of absence and take whatever time you can. Just write a letter and fill out the paperwork and good luck." And so I did all of that.

After I turned in my letter and I did the registration and all of that, and was going to the formal announcement at the Humphrey Institute, he called me and he said, "Patricia, I am very sorry, but I have bad news for you. We cannot grant you a leave of absence from your work because your job is paid with federal money and the Hatch Act applies to you, and you cannot run for office and continue to be employed. So you either have to suspend your campaign and come back to work, or resign and continue your campaign." All of a sudden I realized that *really* now I don't have a job. If I want to pursue this and if it doesn't work, I'm just not going to be able to go back to work. It was hard because I was the full time person. I mean, I was the person who was working and my husband was staying home. We made the decision that we were going to do it, and that we were going to work hard to get elected because I had no choice but to be elected.

[Laughter] So I said to my boss that I was going to resign and that I had to leave and do this. It was very scary.

LD: Yes, I bet! Well, it strikes me . . . it's very similar to how you *had* to learn English. You were kind of in the situation [chuckles] and you're like, okay.

PT: Yes.

LD: You had to go for it.

PT: Yes.

LD: So take me through that process. I mean, obviously [chuckles] we could be here for another seven hours talking just about that. But what was it like as a political newcomer? And maybe take me through up to the moment that you won. What was that whole journey like?

PT: Yes. You know, it was a very scary, it was a scary journey. But I had this strong desire to try this and to really get to this place where I could see myself as a senator. But not knowing the political culture and the system and the machine was a very scary thought. Especially because in the political process people put so much emphasis into really knowing what are the insides of the political process, and if you don't know it, you just don't know the rules of the game.

LD: Yes.

PT: Once I made this decision, I felt competent to compete at every level in terms of my experience; in terms of comparing my background with the backgrounds of people who were in office before. With my passion and my work I felt that I had all the elements that were needed to compete in a professional field.

LD: Yes.

PT: Yet the political machine was something that I just had no idea of how to penetrate and where to start, and so that was a very intimidating thing - especially after I went to my first meeting with the district. I remember the first day when I introduced myself and said that I was running for office at that meeting I realized I haven't been here before. How can I pretend to be credible to these people? Somehow I believed very strongly that all of the work that I've done for the community and all of this advocacy work and policy work was enough until I got to the meeting and I saw all of these people that I have never met before who are dedicated volunteers, who do this and have done it for years. And I didn't know any of them. But then I realized, you know, I do know advocacy. I care very deeply about the community. I've done all of this work, but I haven't done *this*.

LD: Yes.

PT: I haven't been here. And that was very, very difficult for me. That was a very intimidating thing, and I thought, now I have to kind of make up for that. I made this decision and I have this work and this takes time. I felt like I didn't have the time to demonstrate to this circle that was so important and is so important to me today that I was credible, that I really wanted to run for office because I care very deeply about this community and I wanted to make a difference. They didn't know that. So I decided to create a plan for myself, basically to demonstrate to these individuals that I was serious and that I've done my work and that I could be a good senator. So I decided that that would be door knocking and letting people know who I was.

LD: Wow.

PT: They didn't know who I was, and so I went out every single day. Every day I went out door knocking. And many people said, "You know, during the day you are not going to find anybody." I went anyway. I went to visit the people that will do the endorsement – and that's not every house. This is about two thousand people who actually will go to the convention, and they're the ones who will vote for the Democrat who will represent them. I went to visit them every day until I found every single one of them. And I introduced myself, I gave them my literature, and I tried really hard to convince them that I was the person. And I think that really paid off. But it was a challenge that I put for myself in a way, because I wanted to be credible, I wanted to somehow, because I hadn't done my work with them before, I felt like, you know, I had this very short period of time to go out and get to know them and let them know that I was serious.

LD: Yes.

PT: That actually worked. That actually paid off. And it was a lot of work. [Chuckles] But it was worth it. Because clearly, when I came to the convention, pretty much everybody in that room had met me in one way or another. They knew that I went to their home. And that was incredibly helpful.

LD: And so you got the endorsement at the convention.

PT: Yes.

LD: And then what? [Chuckles]

PT: You know, even to the day of the convention, my campaign manager, who was a neighbor, a professor at the university, said that at the convention you need someone to nominate you. And what happened to me was that there were so many people running for the endorsement—and these were, you know, council members, former council members, people who had political presence that no one really wanted to nominate. People were saying, "You were very nice, you know, you will be fine." I called [former Minneapolis Mayor] Sharon Sayles Belton - you know, people that I have known and worked with for years, but they just didn't want to touch this. So I was trying to find a person of a political stature to nominate me on the floor, so that I could tell people that I was connected to to political people and I had worked with political people. I called

Senator Mee Moua, and Senator Mee Moua had just had her baby; she was in bed, she was in the hospital. I called Senator [Jane] Ranum and she couldn't make it. I called a lot of people that I have worked with for many years and they said no.

So the night before the convention I was feeling that, you know, if I cannot convince someone to nominate me, I don't think people are going to see that I have any connection with these people. And I was feeling like that was so unfair, because I'd worked with these people for so many years on many, many very critical things. But no one was willing to nominate me and upset the other people who were running against me. And my campaign manager, Julia Nerbonne, decided to call Peter McLoughlin one more time, and said to him, "You know, she really needs this and she's feeling like she's not going to make it because of this, and we don't think that's correct. But, you know, it gets in your psyche. And she needs to feel good tomorrow and we need your help." And he said, "I'll nominate her."

LD: Wow.

PT: To me that was so incredibly important. When he said that, you know, my energy went up and it was just like, oh, my god. I have Peter with me. [Chuckles] And that was critical, too, because for him to do that, it was a political risk, clearly. It was so amazing that he agreed to it. He's such a strong person in this district that his nomination was very important. It moved a lot of votes. But to me, personally, to have that the night before was just a relief. I have somebody who's willing. I have a political figure who is willing to support me and say that they believe in me. And that gave me this, you know I don't know how to explain, but it's just . . .

LD: Confidence.

PT: Yes, this confidence. You know, that, yes, I have somebody! [Laughter]

LD: Someone has my back!

PT: Yes, right.

LD: I mean, this is like a novel! [Laughter] So let's just go to election night, knowing that really, truly, we could spend seven hours right in the middle. But what was election night like?

PT: You know, part of what happens in districts like District 62 is that the *big* day is the convention. Because once you get the DFL endorsement, because the ratio of Democratic votes here is so high, it is very likely that with that Democratic endorsement you just get the election. At the convention I knew that I was competing against seven people who were very good, grounded, with political history. We've done everything we possibly can do. I had great people working with me; I had two outstanding individuals who are Puerto Rican, Javier Morillo and his partner, working with me, managing the floor - high energy, very professional. We've done everything we could possibly do. Yet I was really a person who just emerged, and I didn't know what was going to happen. So I prepared my speech and I worked for days on my speech, yet I never prepared a speech thinking that I may win.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: I never, I couldn't put my head into thinking that I was going to win. So I never put any time into preparing a speech.

LD: [Laughs]

PT: From the first ballot, you know, I was first. There was the first ballot and I was at the top. And then it was by elimination of the bottom. And then the first one got out, the first two got out, and then the other two got out, and I was staying at the top all of this time.

LD: [Laughs]

PT: And so then Javier and everybody was saying, "She has to prepare her speech!" And I said, "I can't prepare a speech right now! [Laughter] I just can't think.' All of this time I was talking to people on the floor, asking for their support and asking them for their vote. So whenever a person is out of the process, you go to their people and say, "Can I get your support?" I was walking around asking for support, and then clearly my campaign was seeing the numbers and they were seeing that I was going to move and it was going to be between Matt Gladue and myself. They began to worry - is she prepared to say whatever it is that she wants to say at the end of this and to accept this endorsement. And I just couldn't, I just couldn't think about anything I wanted to say. I was so into the process of getting the endorsement and getting the people who lost their candidate to endorse me.

I remember when this ended. Matt Gladue had to go to the front and say that he was stepping out and that clearly I was the winner. When he did that, I knew that I had to come to the front and say thank you. And I did say, "I never prepared a speech." [Laughter] "Because I just . . . you know, I don't know what to tell you, but I just never prepared for this moment. But I want to thank you for getting me here." A lot of people remember that, you know - that I went and I said I didn't prepare a speech for this moment. They thought that I was very humble not to have been prepared for that moment. It was a great moment, and clearly none of our plans included that victory.

LD: [Laughs]

PT: I saw myself, you know, *being* a senator. I wanted this so badly, but I never prepared the party for the victory. I never prepared the speech for the victory.

LD: [Laughs]

PT: I never prepared these victory things that are required in this process because I just didn't dare *think* that I was going to be there.

LD: Sure.

PT: So we never put money aside, we never thought of a restaurant that we could go to, you know. The simple logistics - you got the endorsement, you're going to be the senator of this district, and what is your plan. I don't have a plan. [Laughter] So my campaign had to put something together, and they said, "We're going to meet in the rotunda." They announced it quickly, but we never did a formal announcement in the front, so people didn't know where I was going. But that kind of shows that I was not very politically [laughing] seasoned in a way and hadn't experienced this. Although I was motivated to run to win and have this victory, I wasn't prepared. So we put together this quickly and called the restaurant and made a reservation, and so the closest friends just went there. And I was in shock all of this time.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: It was such a beautiful thing. And then all of a sudden there was this wave of attention because I was the first Latina elected to the Senate. *Nobody* knew who I was. I mean, nobody had a clue of what I came from—who is this woman?—because I've never been in the political arena. So it was just like, who the heck is this woman, and where did we find her, and where is her information, and where does she work, and what has she done? It was *very* sudden.

That was really, for me, the time at which my life became very exposed. All of a sudden, I realized that it was not only being a senator, but being the first Latina, and a lot of people wanted to talk to me. I was just not emotionally or mentally or intellectually prepared to do all of these interviews and to really respond to that kind of demand and get all of that attention. It has taken me all of these years, actually, for me to feel comfortable with talking about myself. You know, like I said to you originally, I never thought about growing up as a child and what happened to me and my mom and the nuns. I never knew that people would ask me, "When you grew up—?"

LD: Right.

PT: You know it, but you don't talk about that very often.

LD: So talk to me then about what that process has been like. Obviously, it is a learning process. What has it been like being the first Latina in the Senate? Do you feel like Minnesota's political culture is becoming more attuned to the needs of the Latino community? Do you think that Minnesota's political community is more amenable to listening to the Latino community or not?

PT: You know, it's hard to measure that. I really don't know. I really don't know if my presence in the Senate has created that kind of opportunity for the community. And I say this because I don't think that people have seen this as an opportunity to open doors for others. At the beginning it was very much - and continues to be – "Now that we have a Latina, she can come and speak about that experience."

LD: Yes.

PT: At least we have somebody who can speak about that. So I do feel that that has not translated. I said this in a speech that I made recently to the Women's League. I struggle with that right now, because I feel that, that my journey is very incomplete. I feel that I came into office and that I have had this wonderful personal individual experience of connecting and speaking about my story and the story of women who, like me, have struggled to learn the language and all of that. But from there to say that I have been able to motivate and inspire these groups to go out and look for women, and support women who may be willing to experience a similar journey -that has not happened.

I am at a time in my life right now where I'm struggling with that. After serving for four years, I feel like now I have learned how to do this. I now have more experience with public speaking, with connecting with groups. I know how they function; I know how the Senate functions, how the political arena works. I feel like I'm in a position now to take a step to really figure what is next.

LD: Yes.

PT: It can be a very lonely place. It is not fun to be the only one. It's not fun at all - especially when you have a community that is so young and a community that struggles in so many directions. You know, we have a lot of children who are not graduating from high school. Less than half of Latino children graduate from high school. We have so many women who are not trained, who are being exploited in the workplace because they don't speak the language and who work more hours than they get paid for. I can go on with the list of struggles. And I am the senator. I have this pedestal, I have this big place at the capital. And so what do I do with that?

LD: Yes.

PT: I mean, how can I use that place to make a difference? It's a big, big struggle in my life right now. At the beginning when you get elected all of these things happen to you and you are so consumed. Your time is consumed with putting together the speeches, traveling, figuring out the system, figuring out how the politics work internally at the Legislature, figuring out how you make the connections with the governor's office to get your legislation passed, all of these things consume your time. But now that I've done that, this is the question for me in my life. How do I bring more people into this system, into this place? How do I?

LD: More people, you mean more disenfranchised people that are, so that you're not the only one.

PT: Right.

LD: Women and men of color.

PT: Right. Right. Particularly women of color who have lived my experience, you know. Who come from humble backgrounds, who are immigrants, who have struggled to get their education and then they are ready to be leading efforts, particularly in politics. This is what my life is now.

I feel that I need to figure out a way to open opportunities for women who want to run for office, women who want to get appointed to positions of leadership that are always tied to political connections. It's been interesting for me to see how that works. The political circles are very closed circles. You know, the daughters went to school with the daughters, and I knew this person way back when, or my father was the director of that, and now the daughter is in charge and appointed to that. There is a lot of community connection in politics. If you are part of the circle, it's very likely that you will be called to participate in the process of appointing people, selecting people. You will be asked to run for office because your father was in office and now you are of age and you're educated. And we don't have that in our communities.

PT: I am *the* one. When you are the one, then you have to figure out how do I make sure that my community gets called, that people in my community are appointed and are called to do this work. It's hard to open the opportunities.

LD: Well, you just won reelection this past year.

PT: Yes.

LD: Talk to me about the four years and going into this new term. What have been some of the accomplishments that you're really proud of?

PT: I think, for me, the biggest accomplishment is having built some very strong relationships with people in different places. I've been friends with these individuals, but when you are in office, sometimes you have to make some decisions that are not very popular. And when you have to make those decisions that are not popular, then you get to see who your friends are, you know. Because many people will disagree with you and then there are those who will understand why you made that decision. And the decisions we make have impact. They are not trivial decisions. They are not about you and your life and your home. They actually impact thousands and thousands of people, millions of people. I think what has happened during these last four years is that I have been able really to test those relationships. People know really where I come from, and when I make those decisions that they may disagree with, they understand why, and that has brought us closer. I think that's really the most important thing. The other thing is that I have been able to really learn to balance my passion and my desire to act on something with understanding really where it is that I can be effective.

I have been an advocate for so long, and I have been kind of this grass roots person that is always ready to go. I was like that when I came to the Senate. I made a lot of mistakes in terms of coming in and just saying, "Oh, yes. Of course this is going to happen and we're going to do this." And then realizing, no, it's not going to happen. Either because I didn't take the steps, or because that couldn't happen now, or because some of the powers that are in place did not want to work with me or move with me. There are many factors that prevent you from accomplishing what you want to accomplish. The desire and the passion and the time that you put into it are not necessarily the only things that you need to have. I think that I have become more strategic, and I have also learned to accept that it is okay not to succeed sometimes. I will fail, and I don't have to punish myself. As a Catholic, you know, I just punish myself for everything.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: You know, I would feel that because I didn't do abc, this isn't work, or I was incapable of saying no. I was incapable of recognizing that many times I had to say no because it was the only way to say that this is just not going to happen. So I was all over the place doing a lot of work for multiple groups, multiple people, knowing that many times I was not going to get there, but I didn't have the courage or perhaps the experience, and I couldn't say no. So I know that now.

LD: Yes.

PT: And I am okay with that. I am okay with not trying to be so popular and say yes to everything and then failing. I think I've learned a lot of that in the Senate. Clearly I can speak about some of the legislation that I've moved forward, and it has been *so* gratifying to really be able to put my hands into an idea about afterschool programs and then being able to secure money for that.

LD: Yes.

PT: My first two years in the Senate were unbelievable for me, incredibly successful. Pretty much all of the projects that I worked with ended up moving forward. There is a program to get some funding for prevention programs for obesity that I was able to move forward. Senator Linda Berglund worked with me and helped me in the process and asked me to lead that effort and I did, and did it very successfully. So we have sixty-three million dollars in community programs, county programs, to work on obesity prevention around the state. I work with a lot of groups to secure funding for afterschool programs, and that was done. Some of the legislation that became law, and other bills that didn't become law but were very well received, were dealing with the achievement gap. Most of the bills that I've done around disparities have moved forward to a point, and I think that I'm beginning to be recognized as a person who will advance those types of causes, that type of legislation, and ideas in terms of eliminating disparities. It is the expectation of the community and the legislature that you as a person of color kind of take that on. I was a little afraid. You know, I've worked on it for sixteen years, but I didn't want to be labeled as the person who is just focused on talking about people of color.

LD: Sure.

PT: So I tried hard to advance issues around poverty and really build coalitions with people in rural Minnesota to talk about low income families and issues around justice and fairness, not just in terms of people of color. Yet I am now at a place where I have to make a decision about what to do with those things, because I am a person of color, and I am in a position to make a difference around those issues. I have the connections and I have the passion, and so I need to decide. At the beginning it was about building my credibility - that I'm just not a person of color talking about people of color all the time. It is that I knew the issues, that I knew policy, and that I could work on every issue and this was just my passion. But now, you know, you can't, It's very difficult in Minnesota to just go to a place, wherever that is, whether that's the Legislature

or a hospital or a school or whatever it is, if you are a Latina or an African American. It is all about, "Oh, you must know…You are the expert…" Go talk to her.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: You know, she must know. And I struggled with it at the beginning, but then oftentimes, some of my peers in the Senate would apologize for coming to me with those questions. And then I thought, maybe this is a good thing, this is a powerful thing. You know, the fact that I know something that they don't know places me in a powerful position. And rather than struggling to ask about credibility and conflict, I'm just going to take it and enjoy that and say, "Yes, I do. I do know more about it." It's a privilege, you know. And not struggle so much with it. It's a challenge, I think, for us who are caught in this situation where the population is growing and you get to be the first one . . .

LD: You're the representative.

PT: Riding the bus, the first one running, the first one in that office, the first one leading this district, the first one always. You kind of struggle to say, well, I have skills that apply to everything. I'm not just the Latina. But I'm in that place right now, trying to figure out how to take advantage of both, you know.

LD: Yes.

PT: The fact that I have the privilege. Yes, I am the Latina, so . . . [chuckles]

LD: It's living in two worlds.

PT: Yes.

LD: So tell me then, with all this learning behind you, and looking forward and trying to figure out where you fit in all of that and how you want to move forward, what are some of the issues and the topics that you really want to address, or that at least you know you really want to focus on?

PT: You know, this is a question I have been asking myself quite frequently. I think that today I am concluding that this position I have in the Latino community, my culture, my ethnic background, is important and that people view that as an important element. They may view me in other aspects as a woman with passion, a woman with a skill, with a background, whatever it is. But at the end of the day, I am the Latina Senator.

LD: Yes.

PT: So, because of that, I feel that my ethnic background has provided me with this element, this unique element that people recognize and invite. You know, a lot of the invitations I get to speak, I get to speak because I am a Latina.

LD: Yes.

PT: I need to use those opportunities to call for attention to the issues that are affecting Latino young people. Part of what I found in the last year is that all that has to translate into political organizing. I think that no matter how well and how often I articulate the struggles of the Latino community, people tend to see us as a community that is low income, that struggles, that is new, that is not in a position of power.

LD: Yes.

PT: And I want to demonstrate that is actually not the case. That politically we are in a position of power and that our strength relies on our numbers and our age and geographic position. We, unlike many other communities, are not highly concentrated only in one place. There are Latinos in eighty-seven counties in the state of Minnesota. We go to wherever we need to go seeking jobs and opportunities and education for our kids, and as a result of it we are everywhere. That's very unique. And it's a very advantageous position politically. We are also a very young community. We have a *lot* of kids who are here who are very passionate and want to put that passion and that energy into a cause, because they come from families that have struggled. Their parents are undocumented, their parents have been working hard, and these are kids are now beginning to finish college. I recently had the opportunity to meet with a young woman, an attorney who was on the transition team for Governor Elect [Mark] Dayton. She was a tiny little baby who was walking around with her dad when I came here.

He is Jesus Villasenor, and he is a very passionate advocate for children with disabilities. Well, his daughter is deciding right now who is going to be in charge of this administration.

LD: [Chuckles]

PT: When I met her and we talked about the future administration, I just couldn't get my eyes off of her. I just felt, you are the generation, I knew it. You know, twenty-five years old. So people like her are really inspiring me to do this, and I feel that that needs to be my work right now.

LD: Yes.

PT: I really need to figure out during the next few years a strategy to get people excited about the civic process, about the election process, about using their political clout and participation in this democracy to change the direction. I don't think Latinos see that yet. I don't think Latinos are able to really understand, you know, that my kid who is twenty years old and my other kid who is eighteen can actually get out to vote and decide the future, the political future. And to me this is just incredible. I am so ready to take on that opportunity.

LD: Do you think that because in 2006 there was the big, huge, what, forty thousand person march at the capitol.

PT: Yes.

LD: Which I think still is the largest march that ever was at the capitol in Minnesota history. Do you think, I mean, did that have any kind of impact politically? Did people say, oh, wow, forty thousand people?

PT: You know, I have been struggling to interpret that. I personally do not feel that rallies are as effective as political organizing. The rally and the image is important, but the participation in the political process and the organizing of campaigns and actually getting people elected is a different process. It's a process that requires fewer people, it requires some resources, but it requires ongoing strategy that I think we can really develop in the Latino community. But we have not paid attention to that. I'm not a strong supporter of the big rally - get everybody to walk, get everybody to march and get everybody to the door of city hall. I am more, get to a room, let's figure out if we can get four checks, let's figure out if this person wants to run, and let's figure out what it would take to get an endorsement. I'm more the strategy behind the scenes, not the big rally person. And I feel that in the Latino community we tend to spend a lot time and energy and resources on the rally - kind of the get together. I am not going to dismiss the value of that, because I think that's powerful. It's just that from the political organizing effort that I think is necessary today, it's a different strategy.

LD: Yes, I wanted to ask that. Because a lot of people said, "Well, look, we got all these people together and nothing happened."

PT: Yes. Right.

LD: And so it's very interesting to get your perspective on it, because it always seemed to me that that's the case. It's like, well, yes, but all that energy could have been used in different ways.

PT: Right.

LD: So, beginning to wrap up because you have a life [Laughs] and kids and everything. But what are some of the challenges - besides just political organizing, but what are some of the topics that you really want to address and that you see the Latino community really challenged with?

PT: Two, for now, and in that order. I think education - to me, education is key. I think that if we are able to really make sure that our kids succeed in school and go to college and get a degree, I think they will have a better life and they will have opportunities. This country does offer great opportunities to people who have education. You and I know that. Our families know that. We've tested that theory and we know it works.

LD: Yes.

PT: Even when you have a lot of obstacles in your life like I have and like many people have, like language barriers or money, if you have education you can go somewhere. So I think education is key. But I also think that there is a need for us to really address issues around labor protection, of work and labor related issues. I think that a lot of Latinos are being exploited today and that a lot of companies are very successful and are making a lot of money and a lot of profit because Latinos are working there. Whether that's a farm, a restaurant, a small business, Latinos are contributing a great deal to this economy and to the success of this economy in this country. But I do not believe that Latinos are benefiting at the same level.

Chipotle [restaurants] just recently fired a lot of people. To me there is unfairness in a process that allows a company as successful and as big to basically hire a group of vulnerable individuals, knowingly—because I'm pretty sure that this company knew—and exploit these individuals for a number of years, taking the best out of them in terms of their time, their labor, their energy, their love for their work. And then when they decided that it was inconvenient to have them in their place, they said goodbye. There was no acknowledgement of the fact that these people had contributed to this company in such a significant way and that the company owed them some kind of a statement that said these people cannot go just like that. We need the federal government to pass immigration reform and do something for these individuals because these individuals matter to us and to our future and to our success.

This happens every day. And to me that we can stay here and accept that as being okay as a society is just simply immoral. I feel that we as Latinos have to organize a political effort to demand that this is just simply not accepted, that this is just not right. These companies have to have some kind of a plan in place to help these families transition and say, you know, I cannot employ you anymore because you don't have documents. Something has to happen there, because saying goodbye before Christmas is just simply not okay. And we're very quiet about it. You know, this happens to Latinos all over the country.

LD: I really could talk to you for another three hours. [Laughter] I really could. I mean, your perspective is fascinating, and I know what you mean, that it's not easy to be the first one, but it's pretty incredible to get your story as the first one. Because the pioneers always have it the roughest, and I kind of feel like I'm getting your story. If you were a pioneer, I'd be getting your story as you're struggling with your covered wagon. You know, it's kind of a similar thing. You're a pioneer in this. And so it's really a privilege for me to hear this.

PT: Thank you.

LD: What do you hope, personally and as an elected official, what are your hopes for the future?

PT: [Pauses] I hope that I am able to really make a difference as I pass through this, that somehow I am able to really say I did that. And that, to me, needs to be something that actually made a difference for children.

I feel very, very passionate about changing what is happening now, particularly to children of color in Minnesota. You know, I try to look at things today in my life in a narrower way. Twenty years ago I just really wanted to change the world. I just really wanted to, I thought about big things. Now, I just I just want to focus my efforts and right now it is very much about seeing a different future for children of color. I think that we have a big problem in Minnesota right now with kids of color. Kids of color are not having a good experience in the schools. To accept that forty-seven percent of Latinos do not graduate, forty-seven of black kids do not graduate, they drop out, and that the majority of children who are in juvenile facilities right now are black and brown, and to be quiet about it, to me is a very problematic thing.

I have struggled to understand this for many, many years. It's what motivated me to go to work and learn this language and do what I'm doing right now. But I don't feel that I have been able to elevate this to a place where we have some massive action. I think that it is fragmented. People talk about it and there is an article here or there. You know, we talk about it in theory all the time. But we have not had collective action in this state moving us forward in terms of addressing it and saying enough. This is to me is immoral. It's an issue that really questions, in my view, all of the benevolence in this nice culture.

LD: Yes.

PT: We're not being very nice to children of color here. I don't know why, but the reality of the numbers indicates that children of color don't do well in this state. We can try to figure out who to blame and all of that, but to me we have to resolve it. I don't want to blame anybody. I want to resolve it. For me, this is it. That is the issue. I ran for office because of it, I struggle in office right now to convince people that this is something that this state needs to address. Imagine - all of these young people are going to be the workers that have to take care of these older people and they're not prepared. Fifty percent of them are in the streets without a high school diploma. How the heck are we going to do this? Just from a practical point of view. You have to question, you know, how can Minnesota be okay with this? I came here because I wanted to do this, and when I go back, can I say that I did make a difference?

LD: I see. I see. Yes.

PT: If I want to now leave the Senate or move on to the next thing, and I look back at what I've done; I really want to say that I made a difference here. I just don't feel that my work has had this significant impact. And today I believe that it is about political organizing. But it's perhaps because I'm there right now.

LD: Yes.

PT: Today I think that's where the power is, in political organizing and getting the people who can make these decisions elected or appointed so that they can do it. So, hopefully, that's what I'm going to be working on during the next few years.

LD: Is there anything else that you'd like to share, to talk about, any kind of thoughts about your own personal sense of accomplishment or your own personal hopes, anything?

PT: No. I am just delighted that you're doing this interview and that you are where you are. And I say this because I do not believe that this interview could take place unless you were there. This is such an important element because we don't have our people positioned. You see, this project is now part of history.

LD: Yes.

PT: Because you are there, then you get to speak. And you get to put this in a place. And then it becomes history. Our communities have not had that.

LD: Yes.

PT: We have not had this position of leaders helping us tell our history. And as a result of it, people think that we were not there, that we did not do the work. But we have been there. And we have done the work. It's just that we have not had leaders who can help us tell the story. And that happens all the time.

LD: Yes.

PT: And I'm very concerned about that, that many leaders and many individuals in our communities do outstanding work, outstanding contributions to their companies, to their institutions, to their states, to their communities, to their legislative, you know, to all kinds of institutions. Yet we don't know who they are, because no one writes about us but us.

LD: Yes. Yes.

PT: And so I really think that what you do is perhaps one of *the* most important things today. We need to really figure out how to encourage young women and young men to take on to prepare, and to build the skills, to tell the stories. And make us visible, because if not we just are invisible.

LD: Absolutely – and this is a first step.

PT: Yes.

LD: This is a first step. And really, truly, it's so inspiring, just as a fellow Latina, as someone who's admired the work that you've done from afar, and your constituent, because we're basically your neighbor!

PT: Yes. Yes. [Laughter]

LD: It's just really truly very inspiring.

PT: Thank you.

LD: And just a real privilege. So thank you!

PT: Thank you. Oh, this is great. This is great.

LD: Well, so that was my personal thanks, but I'll say, once again, thank you on behalf of the Historical Society for taking the time and being part of this project.

PT: Absolutely. Thank you.

LD: Thank you.