

**Valeria Silva  
Narrator**

**Lorena Duarte  
Interviewer**

**October 25, 2010  
Saint Paul, Minnesota**

Valeria Silva - **VS**  
Lorena Duarte - **LD**

**LD:** I'm Lorena Duarte. I am here at - what is the name of this building?

**VS:** Three sixty Colborne Street. It's the Central Office Building for the Saint Paul Public Schools.

**LD:** We're in Saint Paul, and I'm here with Superintended Silva for the Latino Oral History Project for the Minnesota Historical Society. Today is Monday, October 25, 2010. I'll be doing the interview today.

First of all, thank you so much. I know that you're a very busy woman,

**VS:** Oh, no.

**LD:** It's a wonderful opportunity that you've given us to interview you.

First of all, if you could, please, give us your full name and how to spell it.

**VS:** My full name is Valeria S. Silva.

**LD:** Wonderful. What's your date of birth?

**VS:** I was born on September 26, 1961. I'm forty-nine years old.

**LD:** Tell me a little bit about where you were born and a little bit about your family, your parents' names and if you have siblings.

**VS:** I was born in Chile, in Antofagasta. It's a small town in the north part of Chile, a mining town. We're four in the family. I'm the youngest. I have a brother who is sixty-seven. I have a sister that is sixty-five, and another sister is going to be turning sixty. Then, me at forty-nine. So I'm definitely the baby. My parents married very young. My mom [Isabel Pacheco] was sixteen, and didn't finish high school. My dad [Miguel Silva] finished high school and started working.

I'm the first college graduate from my family, first generation. I lived in the north part in Antofagasta until I was fifteen. Then, I moved to Santiago. My father moved for his company to Santiago, and I lived in Santiago until I was twenty-three. That was the time I came to Saint Cloud, Minnesota. Since then I've been living in Minnesota - twenty-five and a half years.

**LD:** Tell me what was it like growing up? What kind of kid were you? Did you like school?

**VS:** I was born at six and a half months.

**LD:** Ohhh.

**VL:** My mom, at that time, was older, like forty-five years old. I had many health issues. One of them is I was born without eardrums, and I don't have three ribs on one side, and I had issues within my spine, and one of my lungs is much smaller than the other. It was just things like that, and, in a small town, it took a while for people to recognize that I had problems. I was constantly having colds and being sick and having ear infections until, finally, when I was about two and a half years old, my mom took me to a doctor in Santiago.

They figured out that my eardrums had not developed. So what they did is to take skin from behind my ear. What I did have is the border of the eardrum, so they patched it, and sewed it. Imagine the technology at that time. Then, at least I had the eardrum, which is where the sound goes in and vibrates, and that's what goes to your brain, and that's how you understand and can hear. Because this is not the real tissue, this doesn't grow with the ear. You develop. Your eardrum is very small and, then, it gets a little bit bigger, so I had about ten surgeries until about the age I was eighteen. In between, they took my tonsils out and whatever the other things they do in the nose.

**LD:** Sinuses?

**VS:** Whatever. They just decided that all of that would help. I spent a lot of time in bed, being sick and with ear pain, very severe ear pain. I have good memories of lying in bed. Don't ask me why, but it seems like it was always with a blanket. It must be nice. I carried a blanket. I have this little flick [spoken in Spanish] like the ones...

**LD:** A tassel?

**VS:** Yes, the ones you have there. Are they called tassels?

**LD:** Tassels, I think, yes.

**VS:** I just remember spending hours and hours just kind of knitting with those. It was a hard time because I missed a lot of school. Then, my mom hired someone to help me out.

It was like a teacher. So then, I went in and out of school a lot. By the time I was fifteen, I was much healthier, and from that time on I became a more normal student.

In general, those are my memories of school. I went to public school, [unclear in Spanish], which is kind of mix between public and private school where the parents pay a little bit. I'm a traditional student, believe it or not, not very super outgoing, never in the top of the class, but a hard worker. I always remember working really hard and studying really hard, and not making that top grade. It was number 7, the best grade you could get, 5.8 or 6. It was a 7.

I have a stupid memory, but my classmate's name was Valeria, too, since we were in first grade to the sixth grade. You would think there are a lot of kids who have the same names, but Valeria was unique at that time. She was six months younger than me. In a small town, my mom said that her mom copied the name.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** We had a competition going on, but she was the kid that was brilliant. She was tall and beautiful, had blonde hair, blue eyes. Here is me, dark hair, and dark eyes. I put lemon drops in my eyes to see if they would change color.

**LD:** Oh, goodness.

**VS:** You want to be different.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** That was my competition, this girl. She was just brilliant. She always scored excellent on tests and all that. I would say I was a little bit competitive in that way—and, also, because I was the youngest.

My dad always wanted a boy. My brother, the first child, is a boy, but my dad thought he was going to have another boy and here came this girl. I was a little bit of a tomboy starting out. I did *tons* of things with my dad. He worked full time, but I have so many memories with my dad. He would pick me up at noon from school and, then we would go to the beach. From twelve to one-thirty—it was a routine—he would lay on the beach, this side for fifteen minutes, turn over, another fifteen minutes. Then, we would go swimming. I had to be very careful and not put any water in my ears. So, then, I would swim on top of my dad.

We'd swim together probably for twenty minutes and, then, we would get dressed and go home, have lunch, and, then, he would drop me back at school. I'd be back at school from two-thirty until four-thirty or five o'clock. I have lots of memories like that.

Early, I didn't play a lot of sports. It's not very typical in Chile, and because I was always sick probably my parents didn't want me do any of that.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** But I did get into athletics in middle school. But not musical instruments. I wish I could have, but I can't hear to play an instrument, and it wasn't a thing that my family did.

You know, we didn't read books, at that time. Books were not like they are here. Now, we know if the kids don't have about twenty-eight books in the family home before they get to Kindergarten, the chances for them to be good readers is much lower. I don't remember having books growing up. It was a lot of oral history. My grandma lived a lot with us, and she would tell me stories about her family. They came from Spain, and she would talk about how they came as immigrants. My grandfather was in a civil war. Then, my grandma and my grandpa saw each other like every four years, it was just because he was going back and forth purchasing. He was like a salesman, but in a boat. Imagine that.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** My grandma would say, "I fell in love when I saw him. He has these blue, blue eyes and beautiful." He was absolutely gorgeous. My grandma wasn't very good looking. She was like, "I don't know why he liked me."

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** They got married. Then he would be going back and forth. My mom was born and didn't meet her father until she was five, so she remembers a little bit. He left and grandma became pregnant again. Her sister was just five years older and never met her father until she was sixteen.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** The war started. My grandma would be, now, 102 years old. My mom is eighty-seven. In 1890, that's when my grandma was born.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** She had siblings. One had what do you call that? It is very dangerous in the lungs?

**LD:** Tuberculosis?

**VS:** Yes, so, then, it was kind of like the family wouldn't talk about him. The guy was kind of always in another room. I don't remember him at all, because he was kind of hiding.

Her sister had a baby and she had, I do believe, Down's syndrome. She couldn't talk, couldn't walk or anything. I remember her sitting in this old house at a table like that in

this wheelchair and, literally, drooling and that's all she did. She was clean, and they took care of her and everything, but, you know, there wasn't a place for her to go. The biggest issue with my grandma was who is going to take care of her when her sister died. Her sister died early. So my grandma took care of her. Then, my grandma died and my aunt took care of her. She lived until she was seventy-five years old.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** So my aunt died probably a year and a half after. Her life was devoted to taking care of her. She never married. She never did anything.

**LD:** My goodness.

**VS:** It was very amazing.

The fact that my grandfather was going back and forth selling things meant that my mom went through a lot of poverty. She remembers having a pound of butter for the week. That was what you had to eat, and, then, some bread. She had that one younger sister. She would come and bring all the friends and eat all the butter and the bread. My grandma would go crazy. So that was interesting. Imagine living in a town and being, literally, a single mom. She never went to school or worked or anything. It started depending on her two older children that went to work. So my mom at fifteen was working. As my mother said that when she got married, she had two dresses that were for pregnancy. She had a stupid little dog, as she called it, that they found in the street and she felt sorry for it. The dog ate one of the dresses. So my mom had to wait for about two weeks, washing a dress every day. Luckily— since they didn't have anything related to driers or anything—the weather was good so she could hang the dress, especially when she was very pregnant. It took her two weeks to be able to buy material to make a dress again.

That was at the beginning of their life together. My parents were married for sixty-two years. My dad died almost at ninety.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** That was four years ago. He was a very smart guy. He had no college degree, but he was smart and a hard worker and very opinionated.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**VS:** Maybe that's what I got from him. Always, I remember him being very focused, and he always had a plan. Those are my memories of my dad. My mom always was the housekeeper, and took care of everything at home. She was a phenomenal cook and a beautiful, beautiful woman.

[Miss Silva leaves to get a photo of her mother]

**LD:** Oh, wow, she is very beautiful. She looks like a movie star here.

**VS:** Yes, and at that time, they didn't have Photo Shop. [Chuckles]

**LD:** No, no.

**VS:** I think she was about twenty-two, twenty-three years old at that time.

**LD:** Very striking.

**VS:** If you'd see her now—she's still alive—she is very good looking. As old as she is, she has that look. She worked hard, but she never worked out of the house at that time. She worked hard in keeping everything at home. Then, a lot of business was done when my dad had to bring people home. I remember helping to set up the table and clean up dishes, going upstairs and dressing up and putting my little bow in the hair. That happened very early in life, because I was kind of the only one left at home.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** My brother got married at twenty-one and my two sisters at eighteen, so I pretty much grew up alone having to be sitting in on some of the conversations with adults. As my father would say, "I never, ever run out of things to talk about."

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** And I think I would say that he was very right. I remember when we drove to the beach, it was about twenty minutes, maybe fifteen minutes, and I would be talking and then my dad said, "Okay, this is silent time."

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** I would be *dying* because I couldn't talk for two miles. It was like. "Okay, now I can start..." Then, I would talk faster – about everything I was thinking. My mind has always been running, running, running. I think the fact that I was very sick; it gave me a lot of time to process things. I did get to read a lot, because I was sick, and to see things differently. I would believe that I was more mature than kids my age because of the fact that I was always around adults.

**LD:** Sure.

You finished high school in Chile?

**VS:** When I was about age fifteen, we in Chile went through the [Salvador] Allende revolution, in 1970. Then, Communism took over the country, and my father wasn't very happy with that. Then, in 1973, the whole revolution came. I remember my dad wasn't around for three months. He was somewhere. The family didn't say much. We were

living with my grandma and my mom. At two o'clock there would be *la ley marcial*. How do you say that?

**LD:** The martial law?

**VS:** Yes...it is when you can't go out?

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** At about five, six o'clock, when it was starting to get dark, you started hearing the shootings. You slept on the floor. It was pretty scary. The most scary part is that, at that age—I was thirteen, fourteen—kids were not involved like they are today. At least my parents didn't share much. You really don't know what is happening. You know that there are people out there. It was kind of different. I was probably very sheltered in that environment. I remember being in the line waiting for bread for hours. They would give you a basket of food. It was kind of a chicken, and there would be some meat and rice, and other things. We had to go through that. For people who never grew up that way—we could go to the store and buy anything—it was a big change.

I remember my parents, with other people in the neighborhood, bought a freezer in 1973. Then, they would figure out a way to buy some of their food in the black market. So they would freeze meat and chicken and all that kind of stuff. We really didn't have a chance to eat a lot of meat. Just a vivid moment that I remember is when the light would go off about eight o'clock. Wait, it was the other way around. When we it was dark, we had light. During the day, we didn't.

**LD:** Oh, okay.

**VS:** Because they were rationing electricity. But my parents didn't figure it out that you cannot really have a freezer that for six hours is not connected.

**LD:** Oh, no.

**VS:** I remember my mom asked me to go and get something from the freezer and it was all marked. This belongs to [unclear]. This belongs to [unclear]. They have it all, I'm looking and I open the freezer and the smell was horrible.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** I thought something entered there and died.

**LD:** [Laughter] Oh, no.

**VS:** I just took the meat and I said, "Mom, there's something weird in the freezer." I don't think she took me seriously. Then, she cooked the meat and we all got sick.

**LD:** Oh, no.

**VS:** Then, she kind of put it together. She went there, and she had to tell all the friends that the freezer killed all this meat, and people didn't really understand, even though they were friends. She, literally, had to pack the stuff and show them. You can have it, but it's bad meat.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** That is some of the memories I have. I have tons of memories at the beach, walking around, and looking. We lived in a house where I could see the ocean. I remember walking to school, taking the regular bus when I was older, and having very good friends in the neighborhood and running around...

I also remember, when I was about ten, Fidel Castro went to Chile. We lived right in front of the square and my dad said, "Do not go there because it's dangerous." OK dad. My neighbor, who was a boy and the same age—we were like days apart—was *really* a nasty little boy.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**VS:** He would get me in trouble all the time. He said, "Oh, no, no, no. We have to go. We have to go." So here we went into the bushes. We knew that square like the top of our hand. So we hid in the bushes. Fidel Castro was giving a speech, and he started talking about children. This guard, or who knows who it was, kind of pushed us into the crowd to be right next to Fidel, and he grabbed us. We were like, "Great; we're going to get in a picture!"

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** They took a picture. So my father opened the newspaper the next day, and he calls, "Valeria! Valeria!" I go, "Yes, dad," the perfect kid, you know. He says, "Were you at the square?" "No, dad, you told me not to go." But he had the picture. He went on and on, "What are my friends going to say?"

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** He wasn't at all in favor of Fidel Castro. I saved that picture for many, many years. In 2000, I had the opportunity to go to Cuba in a delegation with different civic leaders, like Sandy Pappas and others. I brought the picture and he signed the picture and then we had another picture taken and all that. That was 2000. I was thirty-nine years old, thirty years later. It was very significant. Unfortunately, my basement flooded three years ago, and all those pictures are gone.

**LD:** Ohhhh.



**VS:** I have it here and it's just something to remember how life just kind of puts pieces together.

**LD:** Yes. Wow. Surely an incredible upbringing and so different than what an American child would experience.

**VS:** I didn't watch TV until 1970. That was black and white. We didn't have one, and so we had to go to a friend's house. I think it was about 1971, or something like that, when we finally got a TV.

My playing time until I was about twelve, believe it or not, was with Barbie dolls. If my dad knew someone who would come to the United States, he would say, "They will bring you a Barbie doll. You'll be the best, the wonderful one in school." I would hide it in my book pack to make sure that everyone sees that I have a Barbie doll that actually moved the arms! It was able to sit. It was a big deal to have Barbie dolls. Oh, I took care of those and would spend hours. I would make clothes. It was just sitting with my friends. I had two really good friends. They used to call us *los tres mosqueteros*, the three musketeers. We are all the same age, each of us—it's so amazing—26th of August, 26th of September, and the 26th of October, so we're one month apart.

**LD:** My gosh.

**VS:** We hung around until now. When I go to Chile, those are the other two people I call and email and all that kind of stuff. It has been that friendship from the time I was seven.

**LD:** You mentioned that you were moved to Santiago?

**VS:** Then I moved to Santiago.

**LD:** How old were you?

**VS:** Seventh grade. I was fourteen. We moved to a town with seven million people.

**LD:** Seven million persons.

**VS:** There were that many people in Santiago. Imagine that, coming from a little town smaller than Duluth where everybody would know you. It was a really shocking time. We moved there and we didn't have a house for a while. I ended up living with my mom—my dad kind of went back and forth working—and we moved into my aunt's house. Then, I was going to the school that my cousin went to, but the school was all in English and I never had English before.

**LD:** Oh, wow.

**VS:** I came back and said to my mom, "Hey, it's not going to work." "[unclear] you have to do this." For about three or four weeks, maybe it was a month and a half, I was so

down because I couldn't get what they were talking about. I think it had a lot to do, also, with the fact that I have hearing issues, and so the language didn't come as easy. So, finally,—in Chile, they can't throw you out of school—the director said, “She's not going to make it here,” and they moved me to another school. Oh, that was such a relief. So, then, I had the feeling of hating English.

I went through high school and I took French. I had English, too, but I barely got a C- in that. I did not like it. It didn't make sense. It wasn't my thing. It really did not help me much. I did fine in high school, typical, I would say, and probably I was a little bit of a nerdy kid, if I look back. My parents said, “You have to be here at twelve at night and at twelve, I was there. In Chile, you started going out at eleven o'clock at night.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**VS:** When I went on a date, everybody would say, “You want to go on a date and you want to be back in an hour?” So I had a lot of that. Then, my parents would *never* leave me alone in the house with another boy. It's like if you're with your boyfriend, you had to leave the house when they would leave, too, and you can come back when they are back. I was very restricted that way.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** At that time, you don't understand. It's like your parents are crazy and all that. Even with all that, I was very close to my parents and very respectful of that. I grew up much like a scholar. That was my priority, to get good grades and do well in school, and have tons of friends. I didn't start dating until about sixteen. I had a boyfriend for a year and a half, and, then, another one for a year and a half, so they were long relationships. I would take the bus to school. In the middle of the day, you didn't have lunch at school, so you could go in the little stores around and eat something, or you would bring something from home. We had about an hour to go to the favorite bread store and buy the warm, warm bread with butter and a little piece of cheese that we bought next door. My parents had a little bit more money. I had a couple of friends that were a little short of cash, and always we would share. Those are all good memories, sitting in the park eating with a uniform, always wearing a uniform. As soon as we got out of school—because the uniform had to touch your knees—we had a special belt and so we would put the uniform up until it would just be in the middle of the legs. That was the big thing.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** Then, we would roll this and it would look really cool. The collar was up. No makeup. No fingernail polish. I remember when people would come with some of that stuff—they would put it on the weekend and, then forget to take it off—they would make you take it off at school. If you had any makeup, they would make you go to the bathroom and wash it off. That was horrible because at that time, with the eyeliner and all those things, you had this black thing all day walking around.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** I think someone discovered that a little bit of cream we could have in a bag in case someone was in trouble with that. The hair had to be reasonable. You couldn't have any of that, so it was very strict, and I was very respectful. Sit in a chair. You stand up when a teacher comes in or if anybody comes in. Yes, sir. No, sir. Raising your hand. Discipline wasn't a big deal.

The most I remember trying to do was that, if a friend of mine wanted to go to a party and the parents didn't want her to, she was going to go to my house. You know that kind of stuff. That was kind of the big deal.

In general, I would go to Antofagasta for vacation, to my friends, one of the three musketeers' house and would spend from January first—usually, we'd spend New Year's Eve there—to the end of February. We would be at this small little house, kind of like a cabin, and the water was in a tank. There was no light. That is still a tradition there. Now, they have a little bit more water and the light is on, but there's no television, no radio, none of that. We did a lot of playing the guitars, sitting around a fire, going to someone's house for music that they will have. What do you call that thing the *Generador*. It would give you electricity.

**LD:** Oh, a generator.

**VS:** A generator. Then, we would have the boom box, at that time, and we'd dance and things like that.

You know, drinking wasn't a big deal. It was a big deal for some people, but we kind of hung around with a group of kids that, at least, I didn't see them drinking. I don't remember really. First of all, alcohol in Chile, it's not a taboo like here. You could go to a store and buy beer or wine at the store when we were twelve. My parents would send me, "Go get a bottle of wine to that store across the street." In a lot of those little stores, they would sell you the butter by the pound and a lot of the homemade bread. There still is a lot of that. So we would go there and it wasn't a big deal. I remember sitting at the table when I was a little bit older, probably fifteen or sixteen, on a special occasion with my dad. When we would celebrate a birthday, we'd have a little bit of champagne, and it was just fine, a little bit of wine, but just to try it, because he always thought if you try it, it wouldn't be something like a novelty. If you know how it tastes, that's it. That's no big deal. At that time, you just don't really care about it. It's something that tastes weird.

I remember going to the beach, like I said, in the summer. It was funny. In the morning, the old people went to the beach until about one-thirty. Then, they went home and had lunch. Then, the young crowd would come like at three o'clock or two thirty. I remember when my cousin who was a year older—she lived in Santiago, too, but this was a time when I was living in Antofagasta. My mom said, "You cannot go to the beach until you clean the room and do this and that and wash the dishes." My God, we would start swallowing the food and. "Do you want more? Let's get done!" Then, my mom and her

mom, I think they purposely took a long time. We would be thinking, “We’ll wash the dishes. We’ll be perfect. We’ll get the backpacks ready to go.” But sometimes they would say, “No, today, you don’t have to go.” They would play the game that we could go sometimes. Then, when you did get to go in the afternoon, it was like the cool thing.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** You were laying your towel with your friends, and giggle and talk and this one is looking at that one. Oh, my God! they’re going to kiss! It was that sort of thing.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** It was fun, fun times, but, still, with many restrictions.

Then, I graduated from high school. When you graduate from high school, you take a test like SAT [School Admission Test] and you get points. Those points allow you—you get from 200 to 1,000 at that time—to apply to the different universities. But it’s different than here. You applied for the career right away.

**LD:** Right.

**VS:** I got like 856 points, which was really high. Nobody gets 1,000. I think that 902 was kind of the top of the nation—and that friend of mine, Valeria, she got it.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** My God! And she never moved to Santiago. She still was in Antofagasta. She was brilliant! So she was in the newspaper. She and someone else got it. I remember that. She’s brilliant, finished her engineering degree really fast, and all that.

I decided that I wanted to be a teacher, and my dad almost died.

**LD:** Why?

**VS:** Because he thought it would be a waste, you know. You get your good grades, so why would you be a teacher?

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** First of all, the teaching profession in Chile is not in any way a profession that you can do to earn a good living. You have to work in a private school and, then, they don’t even pay you that well. But I said I wanted to be a teacher, and my dad said, “Well, if you want to be a teacher, you want to be the best teacher ever.” I said, “Yes, I will!”

It’s five years for a college degree. The first year, I wasn’t the first of the class or whatever. I had the opportunity to donate my scholarship money to a friend of mine that

was very poor. His mom was [unclear], so we got really close. My parents didn't want me to mix with those people. But we got really close, emotionally. We were not loving close, but just very good friends, and I passed the scholarship to him.

My father never found out until like ten years later. He went through college for two years with my scholarship.

I decided the second year that I needed to probably do something else on top of my college degree, because I may not be able to make money. So I signed for secretary school in the evening. I would go from six to nine. I started with the fact that I wanted to learn how to type, because I hated it when I had to give my papers to someone else to type, and I had to pay for it. At that time, it was the typewriter. So, then, I said, "I can learn how to do that." Then, there was a writing class, and I thought it would be so interesting, because writing wasn't my thing. So I took that. Then, I took shorthand. It was so used in college, and I thought that would be great. I ended up finishing the nine-month secretary program quickly. You could do it as fast as you wanted, kind of like independent learning.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** It was really amazing that we don't do more of that now. I finished with that, and then I went to my third year of college. In three and a half years, I finished my five year college degree. I took more credits because I wanted to be done. Valeria has always been, "This is my purpose. I'm going to get it there. I'm done with that. I'll move to something else." It's stupid, because I should have enjoyed more college and all that.

It was a time in which [General Augusto] Pinochet was in power and there were a lot of bombs in the school, *bomba*, *lacrimógeno*, tear gas. Then, the school was closed. They talk about this and that and it was [unclear] and all that kind of stuff. I just kind of got away from it. I wasn't a revolutionary at all. I just wanted to go to school and get it done. It was a tough time. Sometimes, you got to school and it was closed. I would say, "I have to get to this class! I've got to get this project done." Sometimes you were in the school and then the police would come all dressed up with their shields, and they would be arresting people. So it wasn't really good. Then, there was a lot of trouble in the streets. You had to be more careful about taking the bus and all that kind of stuff.

But I had a really good friend that had a car. It was an *old* car. It belonged to her grandmother. We had to wind it in the morning to see if it would work.

**LD:** Ah! [Laughter]

**VS:** She had a name for the car. I can't remember the name now, but she had a name for it, let's say Bobby. "Bobby is not doing good today. We've got to take the bus." "Okay." Then, she would come and she could not stop the car because it may not start again. No telephone. She would start beeping at the door and, then I would just run into the car and we'd get to the university, and we'd kiss the top of the car and say, "Please."

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**VS:** It was phenomenal. It was just good memories. She drove me probably my second half year and third year and a half. We became really close.

**LD:** Can I go back really quick? Why did you want to be a teacher even though your father wasn't necessarily all that happy about it? What drew you to it?

**VS:** You see, my sister was a college professor—not a professor, but she was working in a college. She was fluent in English because she went to the immersion school in Antofagasta. At the time that I could have gone, my parents didn't want me to go there. I don't know what happened to the school. My two sisters were pretty fluent in English. So she would come to the school and teach us in first and second grade English. I don't know if she did have a degree at that point, but she came and did like a forty-five minute English class. I learned songs like, "This is a church. This is the steeple. Open the doors and you see the people," things like that. I would remember the colors, all that kind of thing. I always told my sister. She was very much like my mom, very beautiful and cheerful and *blonde*. Well, a little blonde, but not as blonde as you would think. Then, she was kind of my role model. I think that had a lot to do with it, and also the fact that I was sick so much and I had that tutor.

**LD:** Okay.

**VS:** That was a very nice old lady. Now, I'm putting it together. She ran what was like a technical college. She was a teacher and, then, she became kind of like a coordinator. I remember going there, too. She would tutor me there and, then there would be women learning how to sew, and a lot of technical things. I hung around with her a lot. She never had children, so I think that had a little bit to do with it.

Also, it was because I was younger and my brothers and sisters had children, so the children's age difference with me was not that much - probably nine years. The older grandson from my parents was nine years younger than me. When I was about fifteen, they were about five and six. I would put little programs together and shows. I'd make them all dress up and perform. I remember—probably I was in college already—we had a Christmas time and seven children. There were seven from like two to fourteen, and we had a camera, like a video camera.

**LD:** Oh, wow.

**VS:** I remember they did a whole presentation in a show. It was a funny comedy, and they were imitating a TV show that was funny. In that group of children, you got them all. One was shy. The other one was a very outgoing, funny kid. Another one was a bit nerdy, and another one was a dumb blonde.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** So we had this show. My dad taped it and it was like, oh, my God, we can watch it and watch it. One of the pieces about my dad that I still remember was a time when he almost was ready to die. He wasn't really good at technology, and he taped over that tape.

**LD:** Oh, nooo.

**VS:** He was so upset, because there was no memory of that. That was phenomenal. My dad, when he was down, he would just put that tape on.

The other piece that I think had influence on me going to college was the fact that when my dad retired, he decided that he wasn't going to sit at home. He couldn't do that. He became a board member of [sounds like El Day-os de Niños] which is an international organization. What they do is they create little [sounds like el day-os], like little towns, and the kids who have parents that abandon them or cannot support them—not disabilities—would come and live with a family there. They were going to the same school and had stores and everything. It was a little town. So my dad would go there two or three times a week to be part of the directory but, also, as a mentor. I started going with him. Then, because he knew some people, he would try to raise money, that kind of thing. I spent time tutoring and helping. I have great memories of [sounds like El day-os].

**LD:** So all of that influenced your decision then?

**VS:** I think so. Then, I liked the classes. I decided that that's what I wanted to do and I was going to do it. I wasn't going to think about it. These people in the group that I graduated with, oh, they changed from this career to that career. No. If I'm going to be a teacher, I'm going to be a teacher. That's it. Move on.

**LD:** After you graduated college, what did you do then?

**VS:** After I graduated from college, I took a job in a little school in which I was a teacher. By that time my dad and my mom had bought me a car because Bobby, my friend's car, died.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** So that was my turn, and we got a little car. This school was really far away. First of all, when I graduated, it was hard to get a job. You needed to know someone, and I would *refuse* for my parents to just kind of contact people. No! I had to get it on my own. I was stubborn. I lined it up, getting a job in a public school. Travelling by bus it was about an hour and fifteen minutes, so it was really far.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** In a car, it would be about forty-five minutes. When I had my little car I would pack it and go to teach. It was a very poor area. I had forty-five kids in the classroom, with ten books per class.

**LD:** Ten books for forty-five students?

**VS:** Yes.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** A blackboard, chalk, and limited pieces of paper and pencils. Our duties were to go to work and the kids would come for breakfast. They had this big *olla*.

**LD:** Pot.

**VS:** A pot. It just wasn't this big, but it was like this and in it there would be *harina de avena*.

**LD:** Oatmeal.

**VS:** Oatmeal and powdered milk and water. We had turns. As teachers, we had to start it and warm it up. The students would come in and they would have their little container to put it in. They had to bring it in a bag - a container, a napkin, and a spoon. They would show it, and we would just put in this [word spoken in Spanish] on top of this and the kids will eat it. Then we would give them a piece of bread. At lunch time, it was the same, but it was soup. One of the teachers was in charge of the week, so they would bring from the government all the ingredients. I think they would chop or something. It's so long ago. They would put it in the water, and then we had to put some flavor stuff that they give you. We were cooking. There was one lady that was in the kitchen, but our role was to be there to support and, then, to serve it and everything.

**LD:** So you were teaching with ten books for forty-five students and, then cooking.

**VS:** The kids would come in uniforms. You've got to see the pictures. Those are amazing. *White* uniforms. The shirts are like they were coming out of the cleaners. The mothers in the morning would be ironing the shirts so the kids would come perfectly dressed, even though they barely had water to drink. I think it was not even good water. Their hair was all done, the girls with a little [unclear] and excited to learn. You talk about people who have issues, wow. They live in nothing—in nothing! But education was a big deal.

**LD:** How long were you at that school?

**VS:** About a year. Well, my parents decided to take away the car, because they didn't want me to work in that school because we had lice and ring worm and that sort of thing. I was the expert on lice, and washed the hair of the kids and all that. My parents were



like, “Ahhh, you can’t do that. We didn’t raise you to do that.” I said, “Who cares?” I was born on one side of the river; and I was lucky. The people who are born on the other side of the river were not. Poverty was a destiny in my country. For me, that was not acceptable. That’s what drew me to the United States - that it doesn’t matter where you come from, what your background is. It used to be more like that. Not anymore. If you work hard or you’re educated, you will move into a situation in which you can’t see poverty as your destiny. Poverty is a stage of your life, and takes you from that to the next level. To me, it’s about never forgetting where you are coming from and where your roots are.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** Then, there were plastic bags for raincoats for the kids. Shoes were hard to come by. Some of the kids would come, and they’d steal the shoes. When they were walking somewhere, they’d punch them. The government gave us a few things like that. I remember some shoes and a few pairs of pants and stuff like that to have in the school. But, in general, it was very poor. One book and two or three pencils.

What happened is I didn’t make a lot of money. Because I was living at home, my parents still gave me money for the bus and all that, and I had spending money. I ended up spending most of the money buying things for the kids, which was okay. I was lucky enough; I didn’t have to worry if I was going to eat that night or anything. It was an amazing job.

Oh, they had to have gym. That was the best part. But in order to have gym, physical education, you had to have a uniform like a [sounds like boo-sul] we called it. It’s like sweat pants and a shirt. Some of the kids didn’t have the money to buy it, so they had to sit on the side and watch the other ones play. I remember that’s the first thing I did; I went to a really nasty part of town where I wasn’t supposed to go, and where they would sell things kind of like a black market, and I bought like six of those pants, those sweats. I brought them to school for some of the kids. Some were too long, and, here, we were sewing it and the mother is like, “Thank you. Thank you. I’ll bring it all fixed tomorrow.” There was a lot of that.

I felt like I made a difference every day. I’m not a morning person at all. I remember getting up at six fifteen to be at school at eight. Sometimes, it was six o’clock and I was just taking the bus back. It really, really gave me a sense of how much we have today, and how much the world is surrounded with situations like that.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** When I hear people saying, “We don’t have enough resources,” I tell you, it hurts because I taught forty-five kids how to read. Many of them had major learning disabilities. The parents were who knows where, and there was malnutrition when they were babies, just a lot of those issues. I think it was a different desire, the family’s desire for the kids to have an education. It was a *gift* for them to be able to be at school. The

kids took it seriously, at that point. We, teachers, at that level, we were God. “The teacher said...” It was very much like that.

My parents said, “You’ve got to learn how to speak English. You can get a better job in a private school or semi private.” “Okay. Okay.” So I signed up to the British University [Universidad Chileno Británica de Cultural]. It was the first year that they opened as a university. Oh, when I grew up, there were only three universities in Chile that you could go to. They were in the different areas. There was the Católica [Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile], the Universidad de Chile, and the Universidad de Técnica. That’s not like here where you’ve got so many.

**LD:** Right.

**VS:** That’s why it was so competitive, because there were only so many spots in each for all those people. Then, maybe four years later, they had this university, Británica University, and there was a couple of others that started, more private, and the government allowed them to do that.

I started in the English program. It was in the middle of July, because our school year is from March to December. So I started in the second semester. I took the phonics and, man, did I struggle. I never worked harder than in those classes. I skipped all the educational pieces, because I just needed the language classes.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** I was kind of unique compared to the other students—probably not unique, but I was older compared to the other kids. Some of the kids were coming from schools like bilingual schools or immersion schools, so they were really fluent. Oh, my God! I just couldn’t get it.

That was the time when my sister was here in Saint Cloud. She was doing a class, too, and I brought her children to Saint Cloud in that December

**LD:** Ahhh.

**VS:** I came in December that year with the kids.

**LD:** What year?

**VS:** It was around 1984.

The two kids were fourteen and twelve. So, then, we moved to Saint Cloud. I’d been in the United States before with my parents in Florida in Orlando and Miami. So I did the Disney World visit at age fifteen.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**VS:** It wasn't the first time, but it was the first time I traveled alone and I was in charge of the kids. By then, I was twenty-three years old. It was just different.

My sister said, "Go to the school with me to Saint Cloud and audit some of the classes, audit the ESL [English as a Second Language] class, and audit an English class, and, then, a science class." I thought, well, I'll be here for three months. We were going to leave at the end of February. I'll be fluent.

**LD:** [Chuckles]

**VS:** It was enough time for me to go back and teach. Then, in the evening I went to the school. It started at five for the English class. When February came, I didn't know much English. I lived at home—my sister had a place she was taking care of for someone else that was in Norway—so we spoke Spanish a lot at home. Also, I met my husband and he was my tutor in English. We started dating and, then, my sister said, "Well, why don't you ask dad to give you more money for the second semester? So, then, you would have to sign in and, then, you would stay in the dorm. It would be only three months. Living at the school will give you a chance to improve your English skills." The bottom line was that I was dating someone, and my parents and my sister hated the guy.

**LD:** Oh, no.

**VS:** Then, my sister called my dad and my dad is like, "Oh, yes, no problem."

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** So I stayed here and went to college in Saint Cloud, and lived in the dorm, the first time at twenty-three in a dorm. I had to be in the top bunk bed with a roommate that came from a small little town who'd never seen anybody from any other place in the world. She really liked to drink. She would come in the middle of the night drunk with a boyfriend, and I'm like, oh, my God!

**LD:** Culture shock.

**VS:** Well, yes, right there in the room, you know. And you're like the next day trying to explain to her that I'm in the top bunk bed and I can hear. Okay, so she just took the mattress on the floor. It's like, okay! I left after those three months at the college.

I was dating my husband. His family lived in Sartell, Minnesota. The mom and the dad were teachers, and they said, "We have a room. You can stay in the room"—they didn't want me to stay with him, which was fine—"when you want to come and sleep here." I probably did it a couple days and, then, college and back and forth a little bit. Then, it was much different.

I liked the dorm, but I was so old. Then I got around with some of the international students and we did fun things. I met people from Switzerland and Spain. With some of the people, I still have contact. That was the first cultural experience where I realized that the world wasn't Chile, and neither was it the United States. It was just a bigger world. There were some students, most of my age or a little bit younger, from the Middle East and from Europe. I mean, it was a very good variety of students. Most of them were much more fluent than I was, but I kind of joined and started hanging around with them. It opened up how you say things differently. Even in Spain, they say things this way, and here was someone from Mexico and they would pronounce the words differently. That really right there started opening up my world.

Then I went back to Chile. Before I went back, my parents came to pick me up just to make sure that I will go back. I was too hooked up with this boy according to my parents. Then, they came, and they met the boy, and they met his parents. The whole trip was because we were going to go to New York. They'd pick me up and then we were going to see New York; which was a big deal, you know. It's New York, and we've never been in New York. I heard about New York. So my dad said, "We'll take you to New York," and it was still a good excuse to come and pick me up.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** Before we left, he offered to marry me. He gave me a ring. I'm like, oh, my God! I'm twenty-three years old and everything. My parents are like, "Ohhh-kay. Yes, yes, no problem, but she still has to go back." Then, I went back in May. We wrote letters. There was no email.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** The phone was extremely expensive. Forget about everything else. The letters went back and forth. He was an English major and *loved* writing. He was a phenomenal writer. By the way, I still have his letters for one day for my son to read.

That will be really good for him, because we got divorced. He doesn't remember us together. We got divorced when he was about two and a half. My son is nineteen. If he gets a little bit older one day, he's going to go through those letters and see that there was a lot of love. That's the reason we got married, and he's a great writer.

Finally, after we would talk and talk and talk on the phone, which was very expensive, we decided that we had to get married. So he flew into Chile with his mom and his sister, and we got married there. My mom was not happy; neither was my dad.

**LD:** They were not happy?

**VS:** No. But, you don't know when you're twenty-three, and you think you're going to go to the United States, and my in-laws were teachers and they lived in a really nice middle class house. I thought, oh, yes, we can do that. I had never worked in my life, like

real work. I mean, I always had food on the table; let's put it that way. I never had to work to eat. My husband was still going to school because he wasn't done. We got married there and had a small wedding with just the family and, then, a lunch. My dad said, "Do you want a big wedding or do you want the money?" They had done big weddings for my siblings. That's tradition, but I said, "No, no, no, no. I want the money."

[Laughter]

**VS:** Practical Valeria. Focused. I went to get the wedding dress, and they were so expensive. My mom's friend said, "There's a place that they have second hand dresses, that someone used once." "Oh! let's go there." My mom is like, "No! [Unclear]." But I said, "No! we're going there." I saw a dress there and I love it. It's supposed to be coming from France or whatever. It was like one eighth of the price. Again, the practical Valeria. We got married with a nice, small wedding, and then, we went to visit my brother up north in Antofagasta. That was kind of a fake honeymoon, but we went to my brother's house to stay with them. My husband got to see the beach.

Then we flew back here. We got married in August, so we came here just in time for him to start September at school in Saint Cloud.

**LD:** What year was this?

**VS:** It was 1985.

**LD:** So you just got married, and you moved back to Saint Cloud. Tell me about the next few years of your life and your career.

**VS:** I got to Saint Cloud and we lived with his parents in the basement. That was kind of the agreement of us getting married, and, then, I started trying to get a job. In 1985 and 1986, it was really tough, the [President Ronald] Reagan years, I believe.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** It was hard, and not only that, I spoke very broken English. I looked for many places, and, finally, I got a job in a nursing home. I started working as a nurse assistant. My shift was six to three most of the time, but sometimes I did the night shift. I got training as an LPN [licensed practical nurse] and I was there for about a year and a half. I loved it. I absolutely loved it. You were making a difference. In a way, it was like teaching in a different way. I had to take care of the old ladies and they adored my accent. They taught me English. A couple of them were teachers. You betcha and all those kinds of things.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** They would correct my English. It was very meaningful to me, because I didn't have family. I felt love from them. I just fell in love with the job. I would leave at three, take a

shower, and from five o'clock to eleven, I would work in Taco Bell. I worked seventy hours a week between the two jobs.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** I wanted to move out of my in-laws' place—not because I had any problems with them, but we had only one bathroom, and his sister had to go to school and I had to go to work. His sister was like fourteen and spent an hour and a half in the bathroom. Then, I had to go sometimes to work without taking a shower, and that was just not acceptable for me. It would drive me crazy. Between those two jobs and my husband working at the Old Country Buffet probably twenty hours a week, we got enough money, and some of the money I brought from Chile from the big wedding, and we rented a small, little apartment. We had shelves that were bricks and boards, beautiful shelves. We had a bed, which we had bought with some of the Christmas presents. Then, a night stand, I don't know, more bricks and boards. We had a really nice couch that his grandmother gave—she was a lovely lady—for us to use. We worked a lot. We would get a little bit more money and get more things.

In the nursing home, there was a position to be an entertainment coordinator or something like that. I applied and I got it. I was in charge of all the fun activities. I did the bingo. I did the boat ride. I drove the little bus. Aerobics in the water. I did stretching. It was fun. I would have to come up with different things for them to do. I always have loved the arts, and we would do painting and ceramics and stuff like that. I was a nurse assistant for about six months, and then I took this other job. I loved it.

My husband got done with his school, and then I was able to start taking classes. He was working for the power plant, where he started as an intern, kind of entry level. Then, I went back to school for nine months and took twenty-two credits a quarter. It was amazing. I finished ninety credits in four quarters.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** It was intense.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** And I worked at Dayton's, too, selling clothes for little kids for fifteen or twenty hours a week.

**LD:** What did you go back to school for?

**VS:** To be a teacher.

**LD:** To get your certification here in the States.

**VS:** Yes. They never really had to deal with anybody who had my background - my issue was that I only went to college for three and a half years.

**LD:** Ahhh.

**VS:** Even though showing them that it was a five-year program, it didn't make any difference. I wish I would have known that, but it didn't. They didn't consider that as a B.A. [Bachelor of Arts]. The reality is I needed to get this recertification anyway, but I would have had to take probably forty-five credits instead of ninety. Looking back, there was a reason - I probably would have not been as prepared in the English language if I would have gone to teach.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** The reason why I had to pack it all into a short time was because I really needed to start working in the fall. So that's what I did. Summer, fall, winter, spring and, then, I did two classes in the summer. Then, I needed to do student teaching and all that kind of thing.

To make a story short, I graduated and got hired in Saint Paul as a teacher. They did recruitment at Saint Cloud, and I applied, and then they brought me here for another interview, and they hired me in May. I was not done at all. I remember walking out of the central office going, "Yes!" You know, jumping, that moment that you just go like that. I'm very expressive. My husband was waiting on a little bench that was out there. He's like, "You got a yes?" "I've got a job. I'm going to be a teacher! I'm going to be making \$21,722!"

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** He said, "Oh, my God! what are we going to do with so much money?"

Then, he tried to get a transfer from the power plant to Minneapolis or Saint Paul. He did get transferred with an entry job. So then it wasn't a problem. We rented a little place on Dayton Avenue at Marshall Avenue in Saint Paul.

**LD:** Oh, sure.

**VS:** It was a house, and it had three floors and we got the bottom floor. So we have this humungous house, and no furniture.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** That was really amazing. My parents came that summer to see me graduate, and then, my parents helped us and bought the first kitchen table for us and the chairs, which I still have. They also bought dishes - my mom is all about the kitchen, so she got bowls

and this and that. We have matching towels and things like that. I have really good memories of that summer when they came.

I hadn't had a child yet. I had my son after seven and a half years of being married.

I went to work at Webster Elementary School in Saint Paul, in a corner room. I had twenty-two students.

**LD:** About when was this?

**VS:** It was in 1987.

**LD:** Okay. So you had twenty-two students.

**VS:** Twenty-two students. It was the first Spanish immersion class.

**LD:** In Saint Paul?

**VS:** Yes.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** When they hired me in May, they hired me also to start writing the curriculum. I knew about immersion because my country has that. I was hired with a Kindergarten teacher and also a first grade teacher. I worked for two years at Webster.

Then we moved to the Adams Elementary School building, which we shared with a Montessori school. So half the building was Adams Spanish immersion up to grade three, and both programs were growing. We shared the building for about four or five years. Montessori moved to a new building and we stayed in Adams, and we still have the program there. It has over 700 kids.

I was a part time teacher, and a part time curriculum coordinator. Every year we needed to develop curriculum. I also did all our presentations for the program, because we didn't have a lot of kids coming and all that. I did that for three years. When sixth grade came, I was full time coordinator. Then I worked for Luz Maria Serrano, who was the principal. I was program coordinator.

By then, I had had my son already. I was out for eight weeks, because I had a C [Caesarean] section. Then, I came back.

A lady who was a parent, a magnificent lady, had foster kids. We became friends, because she came a lot to help at school. She started taking care of Lucas, my son. I would drop him at the house and I would pick up her two kids and bring them to school. At the end of the day, she would come and get the kids and bring me Lucas. After that,



the kids took the bus. She took care of my son for two years. It was just an amazing relief. In my country, you don't leave your kids.

**LD:** Right.

**VS:** We didn't have money for that kind of daycare. Daycare was expensive. She would come sometimes and volunteer, and Lucas was there - a beautiful kid. He was just a beautiful little kid.

**LD:** You had been in the school system now about seven years?

**VS:** No, probably about five when I had him. I was married seven years. I've been in the district for twenty-five years, and Lucas will be twenty now.

**LD:** When you started off teaching, what did you start off teaching?

**VS:** Second grade.

**LD:** But, then, you were the program coordinator too?

**VS:** Well, no, I was part time program coordinator and I taught third grade. Then, I taught computers part time until I was full time coordinator. There were enough kids, so they needed me. Then, Luz Maria came.

But, by then, I had started my masters program.

**LD:** Okay.

**VS:** I actually started my masters program after my first year of teaching. I started my master program because I wanted to have a master's. I did that after I finished my first year. So, then, after I finished my master's, someone says, "If you take this many more credits, you'll be certified to get a principalship." At that point, I was a coordinator already. So then the leadership piece was starting to be part of my life. "I thought, you know, I'm going to go to the principal at this school, Joanne Ventura [Czeswik]. She said to me during my first year, "You've got a ton of leadership skills. I see it and you're so young. It's very unique to find someone like that. I've been in education for twenty years"—whatever it was—"and I think you need to find out if you can take any classes."

I did. That summer, I signed up for one class. I went to the class first before I signed up and I said, "I don't speak English very well. I don't know if this is the right class." It was Introduction to Leadership and Principalship. It was like a workshop. It was two or three weeks straight all day long with case studies and this and that. By that time, I was maybe twenty-eight. I was pretty young. He said, "No, no, no. You'll do this." Oh, my God! I have never struggled so much. First of all, there were a lot of people who had experience, had been in their roles for much longer. At that time, my only experience was being coordinator. I started that class with [Neal C. Junior] Nickerson. Oooh, wow! I struggled.

But I learned a ton. I thought, well, this is summer, and that's what I'm doing because I've got all the time to do this.

[Break in the interview]

**LD:** Go ahead.

**VS:** Then I started going in the evenings, but I got pregnant and had my son. I remember thinking, "I'm going to have eight weeks off!"

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** My son was born in December. I could take eight weeks, and that time is like the J [January] term that they don't do now, I think. I said, "I can take this class. I have all day."

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** First of all, I had a C-Section and I didn't know that I would be in pain.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** Then, throughout my pregnancy, I developed [sounds like muh-mare-en-glan]. It was like this.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** They couldn't do anything. After I had my son, had a C-Section, then seven days later they had to take this out and it had some signs of cancer.

**LD:** Oh, my goodness.

**VS:** I stated the radiation. I was going to class. I was raising my son, and I was taking this radiation therapy, and taking medications, and I finished. It was like fifteen credits. One day, I've got to go back and look at how many it was, but it was like three classes. At that point in my life, I realized I was pretty strong and determined. [Chuckles] The reason why I wanted to do that was I needed those credits to be able to done by the end of the summer. That was the time when I needed to be done.

Then, I worked with Luz Maria, and, oh, my God, I learned so much, but she was tough. She's Latina. She wanted the best. If there will be another Latina in the district that will be an administrator, it will have to be *better* than her, she said.

At the time that the applications came out for assistant principal, I didn't apply.

**LD:** Why?

**VS:** Because I didn't think I could do it. I wasn't ready. How would I, the Latina, be able to have a job like that. There was Luz Maria and another person, Nadia [surname?], at that time. Both came here early. They were from Puerto Rico. It was different. They kind of grew up here and all that. I'm like the old person that came. My English skills were zero. Luz Maria came into the office on Monday and she said, "You didn't apply!" "No, I didn't." "Why wouldn't you apply?" I said, "Because I don't think I'm ready yet." "You can! You are just one of the best people I ever worked with," she said to me. I said, "I didn't know that. You never told me that." "I don't tell you those things!" she said. Tough love, you know.

**LD:** [Laughter]

**VS:** Just like my mother. My mother would never tell me I'm smart, I'm pretty, or I looked good. She said, "Yes, you look good. You could improve, but you look okay." "Yes, you got good grades, but you still could have gotten a little bit higher."

Luz Maria said I had to figure out how we could do this. Apparently, there was an issue that not enough people applied, so then they expanded the application for a week. I had it all ready to turn in.

**LD:** But you just didn't.

**VS:** I couldn't. It's like I'm not going to make a fool of myself. It's not possible that I can be an assistant principal. That has been a lot, fear has been, because of my language skill.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** I always feel that I never was able to be an English speaker or able to write like a native speaker, and that people will never take me seriously because of my accent. It really, really pushed me down. I hope that never happens to kids. I probably could have accomplished even more and been happier without that feeling. It was always that I feel like I work 150 percent, because of that mentality that you're not good enough. I tell you now that I'm a superintendent. I'm starting after nine months or ten months to feel that I have a brain. I mean seriously.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** It's powerful that I can make decisions and, then, they're not bad decisions and people will not second guess you because of the fact that you were not born here. I mean, after twenty-five years, and I have accomplished a lot.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** I hope I become a role model for many, many kids and families. This is not about me being the superintendent, which is a huge amount of work. I can feel that on my shoulders there are 39,000 kids whose life depends on my future. It's scary, very scary. But, at the same time, if it's not me, who is it going to be? I don't believe, at this time in Saint Paul, after being here for twenty-five years, you will find anybody who understands the system, who has the passion and the commitment, and that politics is not going to become an issue. It will become an issue, but I will work around it. Kids are first, and they should be always first, and adults will have to adjust. I do believe truly from my heart that I'm the right person for Saint Paul now - the right place, right time, and right person. That is a good combination to be a superintendent.

**LD:** Yes, it is.

**VS:** Again, because I have kind of grown up in the system as an administrator, many people know me and respect my work because they've seen it.

**LD:** Let me ask this, because you have to go.

**VS:** I can take a few more minutes.

**LD:** I wish I could interview you for about five hours. Your story is so fascinating and so inspiring.

Tell me - as you have seen the changes in Minnesota and the changes here in Saint Paul, what do you feel about the Latino community? You're a member of the community. How has the community changed and where do you think we need to go?

**VS:** First of all, it was very difficult when I started for me to be part of the community, because I wasn't Mexican American or Mexican. So I was never in the loop. That hurt, because we share so much culture. We speak the same language. We're so much similar. When you're alone in a country, and there are only a few Latinos, and most of them are Latinos who speak Spanish and are from Mexico, I don't care where they're from, we have this background. I never really had a good connection with the Latino community. Even with all the work I've done in Saint Paul, I was not always invited. I did go to all the events that I needed to go for my work or all that, but I never really have been asked to be part of any committees or leadership group or anything, and that kind of hurt a little bit. I feel like it was like a schism between our own people.

**LD:** Sure.

**VS:** I think that has been the pattern. I'm not the only one who feels like that. I have other people that are from Spain that feel the same way, and even Puerto Ricans don't feel a part of it.

But, I've seen this changing. We're starting to become more unified as a Latino community, but not yet even close to where we need to be, seriously. Latino students

have the highest growing population in the United States. We don't even have a clue here in Minnesota. Minnesota is a place that we're going to have more success. In Arizona, things are going pretty bad. Texas is just horrible. So, then, at least here, we're a state in which we're more open-minded and the community is more willing to deal with immigrants. To me, I feel that there's a change, a positive change.

I feel as a school district, we're doing a *lot* better with the Latino community just from the time I started as the director of the ELL [English Learner Language]. I was able to bring the group together with the LCD [Latino Consent Decree], and we do tons of work. Every month, we have 300 to 400 families here. Imagine that. I think it, also, has made a huge difference for those families that *I* am the superintendent. I go out there and chat. I talk and I eat with them. I am Valeria. I'm not that mystic person that lives in the castle on the fifth floor, you know.

**LD:** Right.

**VS:** I'm Valeria, still the same person. I think that's good for them to see. Carlos Mariani has brought a lot of leadership. I know that Armando Camacho and I are working together, and I am also working with and Jesse Bethke Gomez. This has just been in the last three years that I've been really kind of accepted into it. I feel part of it now. I feel totally part of it. I know Ana Luisa Fajer, the Mexican consul. It's like I know the people and I can go out, meeting your dad [Mario Duarte] and all those things. I think we have strength in leaders, and now, we need to be more purposeful. This is not just in Minnesota, but I think across the nation. It's an issue.

I belong to an organization called an ALAS, Association for Latino Administrators and Superintendents. It's been in existence for maybe twelve or thirteen years or more. Last year, I went to the conference. There were a few of us, like Carlos Garcia from San Francisco, Michael Hinojosa from Dallas, Alberto Carvalho from Miami, and Ramon Cortines from Los Angeles, people I know that are national leaders. They're superintendents. We said, "This is enough. We've got to lead." We have the greatest organization. We had to be in it. So, now, I'm the treasurer and Carlos is the president. We put on a conference two weeks ago; that's when I met Sonia Sotomayor. We had 450 people. But we are 1.6 percent of Latino superintendents in the nation.

**LD:** Oh, my gosh.

**VS:** There are only 2.6 percent who are females, and for Latinas it is 1 percent—and I'm it in the larger school districts. [Chuckles]

**LD:** You're the first Latina superintendent in the Midwest.

**VS:** In Minnesota. In Saint Paul.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** I am the first Latina superintendent, but I am the first that is not African American or white. This is the only thing we have had. Actually, Saint Paul had never had a white female superintendent, I believe.

**LD:** Never had a white female superintendent? Really?

**VS:** They had white males and black females, and black males.

**LD:** I see. Okay.

Across the country, how many Latina superintendents are there?

**VS:** Well, it depends. There are some in 2,000 school districts. But in an urban setting, it's me. Out of the 66 larger school districts in the country, I'm the only female.

**LD:** Wow.

**VS:** And there are four other males. That's it.

**LD:** Again, I so wish I could visit with you for hours.

**VS:** You can come back. I promise. I don't know if you have a deadline.

**LD:** Let me just finish up with this because I know you have to go. What are your hopes for you, for Saint Paul public schools, and for Latinos in education?

**VS:** My hope for me is that I can do in this job the best job I can do, that I can leave a legacy for Saint Paul public schools to become one of the best school districts in the nation. I had other choices.

When I took the job, I knew that we have what it takes to move to the next level. We need to realign it. We need to rethink how we do things. We need to start being more strategic about how do we teach our kids. I think we have great human capital in this organization. We have to help them to grow. I also think there is the fact that I'm a people person, and I build relationships with people. That's my strength. I'm a team player, and I build relationships with people. That in education today is very necessary. So then, my hopes are that we can move, that our schools become the heart of the community, and that we start as a city looking at education as an expectation, a high expectation instead of just that we have to go school. We need to start really bringing the importance of education to our young children and families. Without a high school diploma, you will not be able to make much. So that's my hope.

My hope as Latinos is that our kids, the Saint Paul public school kids, are performing better than any other in the state. I'm very proud of that, but it's still not high enough. I want the dropout rate of Latino students to diminish, to be eliminated. We don't have...it's not that high, but it still needs to be eliminated. I want to do more prevention

and intervention. I think our Latino parents understand the power of education, especially those that have had a hard time getting here for one reason or another. We don't provide them enough tools. We need to start looking at factors that will determine where the kid is going to be in three or four years. Like if they're not reading by third grade, the chances for graduation diminish this much. So start teaching our parents the power of coming to school, attendance, having good grades and provide them with more information. We need *especially* to be giving them the opportunity to go to the post secondary option, whatever it takes to work through the system so that the kids can go to college, and they can have a two-year degree or a four-year degree and they can become the next leaders of this organization.

I believe there are not enough leaders in Saint Paul. We don't have enough Latino leaders in the city of Saint Paul. It's hard because I'm still kind of new at this, and I don't feel like a leader, but I am a leader and a role model. We can start working together, and it doesn't matter who gets the credit. It's about the legacy that we can all leave here. I don't care if my name is in the letter or someone credits me. It doesn't matter. At the end of the day, we're going to save so many kids. If I can't do that, then I don't need this job. I shouldn't have this job. Now I'm looking to be out there working and trying to reach out. My experience and my background become an asset. My experience, also, becomes an asset for other parents to see that there's going to be many obstacles on the way. Every time you fail, you learn something. Then, you have to get up and go on again, and again, and again. I have had challenges in my life. My son is special education, I was a single mom, with no family members to help, and trying to go to school, pay the bills and everything. I'm probably stronger than many people, but it can be done.

Life doesn't start and end in you either. We need to learn how to give back to the community. That's something that this generation, not only Latinos, but in general, that our students don't understand. I force my kids to go and volunteer—I mean, literally, force them. Finally, I had to pay them something because they don't work in the summer. They volunteer. If you don't give back to your community, what is going to end up being the reality in this country? I know I'm unique in that way.

For me, I would love to retire out of the Saint Paul public schools. It's hard, because you get a contract for three years. I already have one in my pocket. The boards can change that. I would like to at least be here five or six years, because I think that's what the school district needs in order to see the change. I've been here for twenty-five years; I know how many leaders have come and gone. They come in with a new initiative. They all want their own message, their own legacy to be left. It's hard, very hard for the organization. That's kind of been my hope, that at least I can do two contracts with Saint Paul. I don't know if retire would be the word, but I could retire from Saint Paul at that point. Even though I wrote it in my contract that if I don't get my renewed contract, I could go back and be a principal in Saint Paul, which is very unique. The board was like "Are you out of your mind?" "No, I just want to stay in Saint Paul. I love the city. I love the people." Working as a superintendent or working as a principal, you are as important.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** We need to realize that we sometimes do not know when we are up and when we're going down. Don't forget where you came from, your roots. Don't cross people and make enemies through the past, because you don't know who you're going to be seeing later on in life. For me, I work very well in this: forget and forgive. After you've been around an organization for so long—I've been in leadership positions as director and chief academic officer—there are some people that do not like me, but I have to respect them, and I still have to work with them. I do believe that when you work for a leader that you believe is the right leader, that you respect and you trust, you can do marvelous things.

I lead by example. I usually have always done a lot of work. I mean I work a lot of hours. People said, "You couldn't work more hours," but I do work fourteen hours daily. It's not work. Some of that is going to a dinner, but it still is work. I get energized by it. I treat people with respect because I want them to treat other people with respect that work for them. It has to be an organization that we center on the human capital, but with the vision that it's about the kids. It's not about my job. It's not about me paying the bills. The day you wake up in the morning and you go to work because you had to pay your loan, that's the day you need to start finding another job.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** That's how strong I feel about education and the passion.

When I see staff that are not motivated, they're not giving 100 percent, they're there because they need to collect the check, I have a hard time with that. That's why I try to be always a model for my staff. I have done many changes in the central office. If people don't fit on the team, I could be best friends, and I still can say, "You don't fit on the team. You need to move on." That is very, very difficult for many people. You are in the right place and the right time, but sometimes you don't fit.

It's always about kids. It's always about kids, and I hope every school district looks at it that way. This is not about me as a superintendent and what is my next step in life. Yes, I know, I can probably after being superintendent in Saint Paul go to a larger school district and make probably fifty percent more salary and I will be in a larger school district. You know what? It doesn't really matter. You're still working with kids. I don't care if I get fifty percent more money. It is nice because I can help more people, but it's not the reason why you do this job.

My family is very important. I try to be at home for my sons. The two of them are very different, very different. One is the perfect one and the other one needs a little bit of an improvement. They have much of my personality - good and bad things. Family, to me, is always going to be first. If it gets to the point that they don't meet my expectations, which are, basically, minimal, they need to figure out the way to figure out life. We're blessed. We have family. We have a place to sleep, to eat. We don't have to struggle about where we're going to be. My kids can go to college. They don't need to work. I can



help them out. How many people would *die* for something similar? That is a blessing. I don't want to have children that are not. How do we say?

**LD:** Grateful.

**VS:** Grateful for what have. I am so grateful. In fact, I wrote a card for my mom on the plane yesterday out of the blue. I was just sitting there and I said, "I'm just so grateful for what you and my dad gave me." Without the sacrifice they made in their life, I would never be where I am today. It's a luxury.

**LD:** Well, I really want to be respectful of your time. First, I want to thank you for being so generous with your time and so generous with your story. Really, truly on behalf of the Historical Society, I thank you. I do hope that people do read this oral history, and they do take it as an inspiration, and do see you as a role model.

**VS:** It's hard to believe that, but, yes, I am. I'm very humbled about it. Every morning, I wake up and I thank God for giving me the opportunity to be in this job, because I know I'm making a difference. What a powerful job.

**LD:** Yes.

**VS:** You can be making cars or planes or selling bonds and making a lot of money, but I'm changing lives of kids. I'm changing the face of this city. It's just so true to my heart and what I believe.

**LD:** Absolutely. I see the passion in your eyes and in your face.

**VS:** When I left my country and everything behind, there was a reason. That's kind of the payoff of missing many birthdays and family times. My dad died three four days after I got there, and my mom can die any minute. I'll be very sad, but there's a reason why God put me in this place, and I hope I do the right things. It's about the kids.

**LD:** Once again, thank you so much.

**VS:** You're welcome.