AN INTERVIEW WITH MAYRA SALINAS-MENJIVAR

An Oral History Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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Produced by: The Oral History Research Center at UNLV – University Libraries
Director: Claytee D. White
Project Manager: Barbara Tabach
Transcribers: Kristin Hicks, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Nathalie Martinez, Rodrigo Vazquez, Elsa Lopez
Editors and Project Assistants: Laurents Bañuelos-Benitez, Maribel Estrada Calderón, Monserrath Hernández, Elsa Lopez, Nathalie Martinez, Marcela Rodriguez-Campo, Rodrigo Vazquez

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The transcript received minimal editing that includes the elimination of fragments, false starts, and repetitions in order to enhance the reader's understanding of the material. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the narrator. In several cases photographic sources accompany the individual interviews with permission of the narrator.

The following interview is part of a series of interviews conducted under the auspices of the *Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada*.

Claytee D. White
Director, Oral History Research Center
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

PREFACE

Mayra Salinas-Menjivar participates in Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada panel discussion at Greenspun Hall. (October 2019)

Mayra Salinas-Menjivar's tenacious spirit has given her confidence from a very young age. She was six years old when she boarded was on a plane from El Salvador to Los Angeles. Her companion was a woman she did not know and was not related to. All Mayra knew was that this woman would be the friend who would reunite her with her mother. This one life episode is part of the framework of attorney Salinas-Menjivar and her ability to explain the difference between child trafficking and a companion.

She was raised in Las Vegas with her older sister by their mother, a hotel housekeeper for over twenty years at the Luxor. Mayra remained undaunted when it came to her education; mastering of the English language and resisting ESL labels.

In high school the diminutive young woman wanted to become a pilot. When told she was too short, she resolutely joined JROTC Color Guard at Valley High School. When finances for higher education became problematic, she did not give up. She simply modified trajectory and

work and saved for her college education. She earned a finance degree from UNLV and followed up on that accomplishment with a law degree from William S. Boyd School of Law (2013)—to her mother's pride.

In this oral history, Mayra candidly shares about her work with undocumented residents, both at the UNLV Immigration Clinic at Boyd School of Law and as a practicing attorney providing pro bono services. Her firsthand experiences providing a trusting foundation for her kindness and guidance.

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September 20, 2019
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

LATINX VOICES
OF SOUTHERN NEVADA
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Good morning. Today is September 20th, 2019. We're at the Lewis Brisbois attorney offices and today we are with…

Barbara Tabach.

Elsa Lopez.

And I'm Nathalie Martinez. We're also with Mayra Salinas-Menjivar.

Mayra, can you pronounce your name and spell it for me, please?

Mayra Salinas-Menjivar. I can spell it. It's just really long. M-A-Y-R-A, S-A-L-I-N-A-S, M-E-N-J-I-V-A-R.

Thank you. To start off our interview, when you think about your roots, what comes to mind?

That's a more complicated question than I have ever thought about. I grew up in Las Vegas, so I think of Las Vegas as my roots. This is where I've lived the most significant part of my life. Yes, I think being a Las Vegas native and Nevadan that's like my deep roots, but then I also have my home roots from where I'm from, which is El Salvador, and they're both equally significant, just knowing where I'm from and going back and visiting where I lived as a kid.

Where was that exactly?

It's in a city called Chalatenango, El Salvador. It's in the Department of Chalatenango, which is very confusing. Actually, if you name it, it's Chalatenango, Chalatenango, El Salvador. I spent most of my time that I was there at my maternal grandparents' house.

What were their names?

Martina and I don't remember my grandpa's name.

BARBARA: ***What did you call them?***

Just Grammie and—well, *Abuelita* and *Abuelo*. That's actually what I called all four of my grandparents. My grandmother died when I was about three or four, so I remember just little bits about her. My grandfather I didn't see much. Back in that time, in the early nineties, in our small town he had a field where he worked for most of the year and then he would come home every few months. I didn't see him very much. All the kids just lived with grandma, with our *Abuelita*. That's where I lived, in that house. I guess as a kid you always see things as bigger than they actually are. To me the house was small even then, but definitely smaller now. But I remember that the backyard—Chalatenango is on the side of a mountain, basically. The backyard, it's a yard and then a fence and then a deep fall down to—you could die. I remembered that backyard being this huge field as a kid, and when I went back as an adult, it's this tiny, little area where you barely fit a garden there, so totally different. That's where I was in the first six years of my life.

From that youthful perspective what do you remember about where you slept and ate and all that? Describe the house.

At that time the house was dirt floors. There were no tiles or anything. It was just a dirt floor and brick walls. We had a stove that was really old, the kind that you had to burn coals to get it to heat things. The bathroom, which is the biggest change now, was just like an outhouse. They now have running water, so big difference.

Oh, and then we did our laundry. We had some running water, but for the most part we just used buckets. I remember as a kid we had a tin tub and all the kids would just get in and take baths with water that we brought in. We didn't have hot water, so if you wanted hot water you had to heat it up, get the coals burning and going, and then heat up the water and bring it over to the tub.

ELSA: ***Who were the people that lived in the house with you?***

Oh my God. Very stereotypical household where everyone lives there. My grandparents had six kids or nine kids; I can't remember. I can't even count them. Then they were all in there at that time in late teens, early twenties, and most of them still lived there, and then they also had their kids, so I had my cousins there. It was me, I think four or five of my aunts, then two of my cousins who are twins, their brother, and then one of my smaller cousins. It was about five kids with me.

Did you have any animals or pets in the house?

I love dogs and I loved dogs even then. I did have a dog that ended up getting rabies, so it's kind of a sad story. They had to put it down, but they didn't want to tell me because I would have been super upset. They didn't tell me until after it was done. But, yes, I did have a dog at that time. When I came here and I got my first dog here. My mom remembered the name of that dog, so she would call my dog that name even though I didn't give it that name.

ELSA: ***What was the name?***

Catilla.

Can you tell me about the food that your *abuela* would cook or your mom would cook, or just the food and the aromas that were in the house?

It was all very typical Salvadorian food, so tamales, *pupusas*—that was almost daily, *panes rellenos*. Every Christmas the thing to do is the whole family gets together and they make *panes rellenos*, which is just this marinated chicken.

A *con pollo*?

Yes. It's delicious. The whole thing is they cook the chicken because you have to cook it for a while. Then everything else is just a side bowl because it's all fresh vegetables that you stuff in

it. That was very typical. Then for New Year's you make tamales. And then have *pupusas* almost every day.

Did you ever get to make *pupusas* yourself?

As a kid, no. I think I was too young. I didn't do that there, but I did that here. I've had my mom try and teach me, but she has her—it's all about technique and your hand, so mine will never be like hers, but I try.

I was in El Salvador this summer, and I was like, okay. It's a technique, definitely.

Yes, it's a total technique thing and it's your hands. Yes, it's complicated. It's more than just making tortillas.

What year did you come to the States approximately?

I was six years old, so, yes. I'm trying to do math. Maybe it was sooner than that. It might have been '93 because I was born in '87, so, yes, like '93.

Do you remember what was going on in El Salvador at the time? Why the decision to come to the States?

Not that I knew then. But we had just gone through a civil war, which I was alive during the civil war, but I didn't know what was happening. You're a kid and you were just told not to play in the streets sometimes.

ELSA: *That was normal.*

Yes, yes. I guess it's a little bit different. If there was a war happening here, you would notice because you'd see soldiers and that's unusual. But in El Salvador soldiers are kind of like police; you see them everywhere. It wasn't unusual to see soldiers around. I guess if I was a little bit older, I probably would have understood what was happening, but I was too young to even know that. I didn't even know there was a civil war until I got older. But my mom lived through it. She

was nineteen, turning twenty when she had me, so she would have been in her teens throughout the entire war period.

Did she talk about that time in her life?

She really doesn't and I don't ask her too many questions about it. But I know that she has wounds from it; she has bullet wounds on her calf. But I don't ask her. That's rough. She has told me some things. She worked for the UN doing population count at the time and for several years.

How old was she when she started there with the UN?

She was pretty young, probably eighteen. She would have to travel around to the smaller villages and take count of how many people live there, and she was doing this even during the war. She tells me about this one time. During most of the war there was a curfew, so you couldn't be out in the streets unless you were a soldier or combatant, and if you were you would probably get into a conflict if there was a rival, like guerillas or anything. She was out in some village and it got late and she wasn't able to make it home in time, so she was out in the streets. But there was a guy driving, probably a soldier, and he saw her and was like, "Hey, you know you're not supposed to be out here." She's like, "Yes, but I can't get home." By that time you couldn't even catch a bus or anything like that because there was no transport; everyone was indoors. He was like, "Well, get in because I'm going to take you home because if you're found they're going to kill you; you're not going to make it." She told him where she lived and he dropped her off. That was one time.

Then another time she said she was out again and it got late. She saw some people coming and the neighbors just kind of opened the door and were like, "Get in." She had to stay in someone's house for the night.

There are other things that she's told me about that were more serious, but she's never gone into detail of what actually happened.

Who was 'they' when he said, "They are going to kill you?"

Well, you knew the soldiers were guerillas; that's the thing, they don't know if you're an enemy or if you're—

Even if you're a young woman?

Yes. If the soldiers saw you, they don't know if you're a rebel. If a rebel saw you, they don't know if you're a spy. Either way you're not in a good position to be out.

Can you tell us a bit more about your father? What was he doing in El Salvador? What was his career, his job?

He at the time was a professor. He was actually my mom's professor; that's how they got together, a little bit scandalous. Yes, he was a professor. I really didn't have a relationship with my dad even as a kid, so I don't really know much about him. I did have a relationship with his parents, with my grandparents.

They were your father's parents, the ones that lived in the house with you?

No. I lived with my mom's parents, but I would go to my dad's parents' house, so my paternal grandparents, when I was a kid. I remember walking to their house and going there to play. I have an older sister; she's three years older than me. At the time we were kind of split. She lived with my dad and I lived with my mom. I remember walking to my grandparents' house where she lived and going to play with her and hang out as a kid. I remember that walk being super long. Because everything is in this weird steep incline, I sometimes would be walking over someone's roof and jumping down.

This last time that I went back, and I went back in 2014, I just remember, wow, San Francisco streets are no joke; that's nothing compared to this, because it's so steep and dangerous. It's all these narrow streets and it's both direction of traffic. Whenever you see someone coming, people just kind of scoot over and wait for the other car to pass and then scoot back. It's very dangerous. There is also no such thing as insurance, so if you get into a car crash, you kind of like, *eh*. As long as it's still running, you're good.

I'm curious. How did your mom become involved with the UN?

I don't really know. I've never asked her that. But I know she was doing that job for a while. She told me she did it for a few years. She had kids when she was really young. She had my sister at sixteen, which is very common in Central America, kids having kids. She finished her *bachillerato*, which is like essentially our high school here, but she didn't go beyond that. I think even today that her biggest regret is she didn't get a higher education. I remember when I was in high school—my mom does this thing where she doesn't tell me what to do; she just guilts me into doing it. She never said you have to do well in school and you have to get straight A's, no. She would be like, "You know, when I was a kid, I would give anything to have an education and to be able to…" That's what she would say.

BARBARA: ***And it worked.***

Oh, it worked. Absolutely it worked. Totally. Every time. I would be like, *I have to do it; I have to do it for Mom.*

In '93 when you came to the States, was the situation just as bad as you described where your mom had to shuffle into a neighbor's house to hide? Was the situation just as bad during the time that she made a decision to come to the States?

Her mom died and she had a pretty bad relationship with her dad. She had gone through some terrible things during the war. I think she felt like there was just nothing there that she could go on doing. The situation was still really shaky because the war had just ended. I think it ended maybe—

Ninety-one, '92.

Yes. It was pretty recent. Things were still—even today, if you go to some of the towns, most of the houses are still wrecked. I think she felt like there was no hope for her to stay there and that's why she came here. I think earlier, maybe even during the war, some of my dad's siblings left. Two of his sisters left. One of them came here and the other one went to Canada and then ended up in Australia. Having that connection that's how we ended up in Las Vegas.

ELSA: ***They came not just to the U.S., but to Las Vegas?***

Yes. I don't know why she came here. It may have been another connection like that through maybe her husband's family or someone else that she knew. That's usually how it is; you go somewhere where you know someone, right? Actually, my mom's plan initially was to come here for a bit and then meet my other aunt in Canada and be in Canada. I was almost Canadian. She ended up here and stayed with my aunt for a while and brought me about six months later.

What was the journey like for her?

It was very different then, a lot easier than now, which is kind of funny when you think about it because everyone is talking about open borders. We already had open borders and we were perfectly fine. At the time I'm pretty sure she flew over, but I've never asked her the details. I flew over as well. Then my sister came over much later, years later. I came when I was six. She came when she was sixteen. Her journey was a lot different compared to ours. She actually did cross, walking.

Did she do the whole trek through Mexico and everything?

Yes. Which, from what she's told me, was awful. Even then, it was a lot easier than it is now. Right now it's way more dangerous.

That must have been in 2003, then, if she came ten years later.

It was earlier than that. It was before 2001 because we started high school together. I don't remember the exact year.

What do you remember coming into Las Vegas? What was it like being a young girl coming into—

BARBARA: ***Let me back up just a little bit. You flew?***

Yes.

Were you accompanied? Do you remember anything about that?

Yes. This is what I mean totally different from what it is today. At the time—actually, it's pre-9/11, which is what changed a lot of it. At the time if you had a child, a lot of the times they wouldn't even ask you for any documentation. You just had to have documentation yourself. If you were with someone with a visa, for example, and they had a baby, they wouldn't question, does the baby have a visa? They would just let you in. I was a little older, but I do remember that I was with people that I didn't know. It was just a stranger. Then they brought me in as their child.

It was arranged that you would travel with these strangers at that time?

Yes, yes. The woman that brought me in, she is actually in prison now as a trafficking person, for child trafficking, which is one of the worst. I have this weird sense. You hear the words *child trafficking* and you think, oh, horrible, terrible person, but I've had the experience of being that child. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be here.

It would be interesting to know her story, how she transitioned from kindness to actual trafficking.

Well, she was trafficking. She trafficked me. That's what I mean…She got caught doing what she did with me and that's why she's in prison.

ELSA: ***It's like an exception almost that child traffickers are these people who are stealing children and all this shady disgusting stuff.***

Exactly.

But it's not always that image.

Right, right. With her, she was bringing children over to be with their family, not to be sold. I see it in a different way, I think. But if you think about just the charges, most people would think that she's a horrible, terrible person, which is what you would assume because that's what the law says. But it doesn't distinguish between the people bringing in children for bad reasons, like to be sold into prostitution or anything like that or into child labor, versus the ones bringing them in for their families.

BARBARA: ***The semantics of trafficking conjures up a negative image, obviously, in my mind. The general population thinks that way, but it really wasn't. That's a catchall phrase or taught label.***

Yes. She's treated the same as someone who is trafficking children for bad reasons.

ELSA: ***That terminology, isn't that really common nowadays?***

Oh yes.

They say, "Oh, well, they're child traffickers."

Yes. Human traffickers, yes.

And they're technically correct in saying that, but it conjures up different—

They are because that's what the law says they are. That's what they've been described as. But, yes, it doesn't differentiate between people doing it for good reasons and others doing it for bad reasons. But she got a long time; I think she got several decades, maybe thirty or forty years.

Where is she?

I think she's in California.

ELSA: ***Where did they find her? How did anyone contact—***

I don't know, no. My mom told me that she was in prison and I don't know how she found out, probably through other people that know her.

No. I meant when your mother arranged for you to be brought over.

Oh, I don't know that either. Probably someone she knew also who had their kid brought over.

By word of mouth?

Yes. It's always by word of mouth. Especially when you're new, you're usually connecting yourself to other immigrants and usually to other immigrants from the same place, like Salvadorans would be talking to other Salvadoran immigrants. They talk about how they got here. "Oh, I'm bringing my kid over." "Oh, who with?" Stuff like that. I don't know if it was the same woman that helped her come. I actually don't know that either. There are a lot of questions I don't ask. Even when it's between your family, you just don't ask about how you got here or what you went through. It's not something you do.

When your mom first came here, she came straight to your *tía*?

Yes.

When you came here do you remember what your first impressions were when you got off the plane?

That was my first time on a plane, which was new. I don't know that at that age I even knew the concept of different countries. I just knew that it was a different place. It looked nothing like where I had been. I arrived at LAX, so immediately I saw huge buildings. Everything was totally different. But I really didn't pay attention to the surroundings. I just saw my mom.

What was that like; that reunion to be back with your mom? How long was she here before you came?

Like six months. For me it probably felt longer because I was a kid, but it was only maybe not even six months. I hadn't seen her in a while, so I was really happy. From there it didn't matter where I was.

What part of the city were you located in with your mom and your *tía*? Here in Vegas.

Our first place, I don't know what it's called, but it's still there. It's across from the Boulevard Mall on Maryland and DI. There is an apartment complex. The reason I remember where it was is because there is this store that has a fish logo and it's neon and that's how I knew it was that apartment, and the apartments are still there. That was the first place we lived.

From there we jumped around everywhere. In the first five years probably we lived in every place you could think of in Las Vegas. We went from there to a place near K.O., the middle school or elementary school.

K.O. Knudson.

Yes. Then we lived on Valley View for a little bit, actually for a few years, maybe two or three years. That was probably one of the longest places before we finally found a place that we settled in for a long time. Then other just random locations that I don't even remember, especially because we weren't living in places of our own; we rented from other people. Most of the places I don't even remember. I couldn't even find them if I tried.

ELSA: ***Were there any services available to you and your family since you guys were coming in as refugees?***

We weren't refugees, no. Refugees get status outside the country and are allowed in with a visa as refugees, and then they send you out to all the services, so that didn't exist, well, not for us. You really can't get refugee status from El Salvador because there is no process in place for seeking humanitarian relief from outside the country, which is actually part of the problem now. That's never been in place. It was in place for a little bit, and I think it was called—so, CAM is for Central American Minors. Then there was another program that I don't remember the acronym for, but that was for families in Central America.

What they were doing was allowing some families who showed they were being persecuted to go temporarily to Costa Rica, which is usually what happens with refugees. You go from their country where they're being persecuted and go to another country that hosts them for a little bit while their application gets processed. The application period for refugees takes a long time, over a year usually. In over a year, you can't exactly wait in your country. There is usually another host country where you wait and wait for your application to go through. Then once it gets accepted and you're accepted as a refugee, you get a visa to fly here, or to come here however you make; usually they arrange for a flight. That doesn't exist for Central Americans and it didn't exist then, I'm pretty sure because it hasn't existed almost ever. The first time was under Obama, and that program, I think, resettled maybe three families in total. They called the program completely unsuccessful, but part of the issue was the requirements to be in the program. This is just from what I read. I think it was over two thousand families applied and only fifty were accepted to even proceed and only three were ultimately approved. Very difficult to even be considered a refugee from Central America.

Almost impossible.

Basically, yes. The most successful program was the Central Americans Minors program, which is CAM, but that wasn't even refugee status either; that was if you had a family member here who could request you because you're in danger and you're a child. They arranged it so that you could come in with a visa. That program still took a long time and it was ended with this administration. It only lasted maybe four years. Pretty much the only way to get here from Central America is to have a family member sponsor you, if you have one, or to just come, or if you can get a visa, but getting a visa from Central America is not easy and now it's basically impossible unless you're rich, but that's true anywhere. If you're rich doors open.

As you were moving around the city, what was it like going to school since you were moving around so much?

In elementary school I went to a lot of them. I actually don't remember how many schools I went to, but it was a lot. I maybe spent a few months at one and would move around to another one. This was way before we even had magnet schools, which now allows some kids to stay in their school. I don't remember what schools I went to because there were so many. The first stable school that I had where I was at for a long period of time was Cashman Middle School, and I was there the whole three years that you're in middle school. Then high school, I went to the same high school the whole time.

Were you in any ESL, ELL programs in CCSD?

Yes. It was ESL then at that time; that's what they called it. I was immediately put in that because…obviously. But, funny, I actually learned how to speak English really fast because of the kids. It's a lot easier to pick it up. I probably learned how to speak English in six months, maybe less. I don't remember actually not knowing how to speak English; that's how quickly it

was. But I was still put in ESL and I was in ESL probably only the first year of middle school and then they realized I didn't need it, so I was taken out. But then when I went to high school, for some reason they decided to put me back in even though I was totally fluent by then.

Could it have been because you started with your sister?

No. We were in different grades, so I don't think it was that. I think it was just they saw in my history I had been in ESL before. They put me back in, but then quickly realized, oh yes, she does not need to be here. They took me out within a semester, I think.

Which high school was that?

Valley.

Oh. Me too.

Oh yes? By that time they were already calling it ELL, so I was in ELL for a semester in Valley. Clearly I didn't need it, so everyone just copied off of me.

I bet your sister had to go through the program for ELL.

Yes.

Do you remember what she would tell you about what it was like in those classes or anything?

I think most people just played around. They were not taking it serious to learn English. For a lot of them, they're older. She was sixteen, but she had already actually finished high school back in El Salvador because they finish at sixteen and then at that point they start what we would call our associate's here because it's an additional two years. Then after that you go and do your professional degree. She had already finished, so coming back was going back to school.

But she liked it. She learned English. She speaks English now, but obviously with a much thicker accent. She would tell me stories about other kids in the class. A lot of them were also

older, so they had sixteen, seventeen, eighteen. The older ones were not at all concerned about learning. They were just like, eh, we're just here until we're out of here. A lot of them didn't even have hopes to get a high school diploma because they were so late in the game. They probably wouldn't get one.

What was the demographic like? This was around what year, actually, when you went to high school at Valley?

I went there 2001 to 2005. Valley has always been a really—well, at the time it was really mixed. We had a big Latino population, of course. We had a big Asian population. Actually, those were probably the two predominant groups, and then we had white, black, everything else in between, some Indian.

Latino primarily from what Latin American country, Mexico, El Salvador?

I think it was predominantly Mexico, but we also had a lot of just Central Americans. It was pretty mixed, yes.

When you were attending Cashman and Valley, where was home for you and your mom and your sister?

When I was at Cashman, we were on Valley View. The apartments are still there, but I don't remember what they're called. They've probably changed by now. It was on Valley View and Flamingo, just some apartments there.

Then when I was in high school, we lived in an apartment complex that's across the street from Valley on Eastern. Then my mom met her ex-husband now and he lived in a house that was a block away from the school. I lived at both of those in those four years.

That's a heavy Latino community. What was it like growing up in that area with other Latinos in the area?

I don't know that I got any sort of impressions. I don't know how to answer that. I also had a very diverse group of friends. I never stuck to just one group. I was very open to everybody. I had a lot of Asian friends as well, specifically Pacific Islanders, so a lot of people from Hawaii, and I still do. I'm trying to think of…Yes, Latino friends. I never really thought about being with any group more than the other. I don't know. I just never thought about that.

ELSA: ***Are you still friends with a lot of the people from high school?***

Yes. My group of friends is super diverse. I actually recently made a list of all the countries where my friends come from because there are probably twenty different countries that they come from. That's why I don't think I ever thought about, oh, being in a Latino community, because I never saw just the Latino community.

It was great that you had that diversity in Valley. It could be just anyone.

Yes. I think that's what's possible in Vegas because there are so many people from everywhere. I have friends from India, Sri Lanka, Poland, just everywhere. But, of course, Central America, Mexico, South America, yes, Cuba.

I want to know more about your high school years. Tell us about the activities that you used to partake in and what that was like?

I didn't know what I wanted to do in life. I was super confused as a kid and like, well, I know that I need to go to college. That's basically it. But from there I had no idea. I kind of jumped around to a lot of things. When I started high school, I tried to join the cheer team, but then I decided it was not for me. Like, no, I'm good. Then I tried to join the basketball team, which is, I know, funny because I'm really short. But someone told me that would be perfect because sometimes shorter is better. I did not end up joining the team. Then I joined track and I was in

track and field for a few years. I also in either sophomore year or junior year joined JROTC. I also had this idea of going into the military.

What branch were you attracted to?

Air Force, for sure. I actually wanted to be a pilot, which is also funny because I'm really short. I actually took a pilot's course at CSN when I started college, and that's where I learned being short is a problem when you're trying to fly because most commercial airlines do not allow you to fly unless you're five-four and up. Yes, shocker.

BARBARA: ***How tall are you?***

I'm five feet, so not even close. I was in JROTC, which I loved. It was great. I had a lot of friends in it. Actually, several of my friends ended up going into academies. Three of the people that I knew from JROTC went to West Point. One went to the Air Force Academy and the other one went to the Naval Academy, so very cool. I wanted to do that, but I could not do that. At the time one of my close friends, he was trying to convince me to apply to West Point. He was like, "You'd get in. You should do it." He is trying to help me, giving me the application and everything. I'm like, "Yes, yes, yes, I'll do it." But I couldn't tell him that I couldn't and why. I was just like, "Eh, I decided not to. I'm good. I'll just go to college."

When I was in JROTC, I joined the Color Guard. I had the rifles where you do the spins.

ELSA: ***Did you do any of the competitions?***

Not the competitions. I did a city council meeting, which was kind of fun. They usually have the high school teams come and do one of the meetings just to make them feel good. We did one of the meetings there.

Was the IB [International Baccalaureate] and HNT, the magnet programs at Valley, already there at the time?

Yes. I think they had started maybe a year or two before I got there. I was in the hospitality program, but I was in all of the IB classes.

So they were mixed?

No. I was just in all the AP classes, which is where all the IB students were. One of the teachers at one point was like, "Why aren't you just in IB?" Then they told me that you had to write a paper at the end to actually get your diploma and I was like, "No, I'm okay. I don't want to do extra work."

I see. Do you remember any specific teachers from Valley?

I don't remember her name, but she was my chem teacher. She was awesome. I don't know if she's still there, but she was my favorite. Because I liked her so much, I took chem and then I took chem two, which was with her and smaller class.

What about her made her your favorite teacher?

She was just super nice. Her class was fun. I liked chem. It's a lot of math, too, which I liked. She was a really good teacher. She was fun and nice.

What happened after high school? Did you go into college straight away?

I did. I went to CSN [College of Southern Nevada] and full-time there is six credits—or was at the time. I don't know what it is now.

I think it's nine.

It was whatever the equivalent for part-time at UNLV is; that was their full-time. I think at that time it was six credits. I wanted to get done quickly, so I took a full load, twelve credits.

Oh, also, I never sat for the ACT or SAT because I had signed up for one and then I forgot about it and didn't show up. Then I decided not to retake it. I was really unaware of what you needed to do for college. I couldn't ask my mom because she had no idea. I just like, eh, I'll

get in, I think. I heard that you could place at CSN, so that's what I did. I just took their placement test and then I started going there. Then I learned you could place at UNLV, so I took the test that you have to, like math, reading and writing, and placed to just start taking classes there.

How long were you at CSN?

A year. In my first year I still didn't know what I wanted to do. Things that I had in mind that I wanted to do, I don't know that it's possible for me to do. I was kind of just taking classes that I needed to because they're all prerequisites. But I was getting short on the list of prerequisites to the point where you have to start actually deciding what you want to do because you have to get into those classes. I stopped going. I was like, I don't know what I want to do and I don't want to waste my time or money, because I was also paying for it myself. I stopped. I need to think about it and finally decide what I want to do. I changed my major three times, so that's why.

What were you doing at the time since you were paying it out of pocket? What were you doing at the time to pay for school?

I started working when I was sixteen. My first job was actually at Wet 'N' Wild. Back then that existed on the Strip, not the current one, the fun one.

Where was it?

It was next to the Sahara—what is SLS now. I was a lifeguard at Wet 'N' Wild when I was sixteen. That was the summer after sophomore year. After that job, I liked the idea of making money. So my junior year, I started working at Burlington Coat Factory. I worked there I think the whole time, yes. I was there basically the rest of high school.

Is that the one off Tropicana and Eastern?

Yes. I would take the bus there. After high school, after classes I would just take the bus because it's right there; it's the same street. I didn't have to get off at any stops or anything like that, just one street all the way down. I worked for a few hours and then came back home.

Did you ever go eat at Las Pupusas that's right next to it?

Yes, I did, yes. At that time I really only liked one place, Esmeralda's, which was on Charleston. I went to Las Pupusas, but I was not a fan of it yet. Now it's way better.

Then after high school I started working at a call center for DirecTV. I'm trying to remember the timeline. Wow, it's really hard to remember all this stuff. I think I actually started working there before finishing high school. I was there for a little bit. I started as a rep. It was all customer service. People would just call with their problems, like when their TV is not working.

Just turn it off and on.

Literally, it was like turn it off and turn it back on. You worked through your problems. Then I got promoted to quality assurance and just listened to other people's calls and rate them. I was the youngest person there. I think I was seventeen and everyone there was in their forties, so that was kind of fun.

Then after that place I worked at Copland's Sports back when that existed, which it does not exist now.

Was it like Dick's Sporting Goods?

Yes, but smaller. It was in the shopping center that's next to the Boulevard Mall where the Best Buy is. They actually went under the year that I started working there.

From there I went to a car…I don't think there was anything in between. Yes, I went from that place to work for AutoNation as a receptionist.

While you were at CSN, you were working as a receptionist?

Yes. While I was working as a receptionist, I also got a job at Sunglass Hut, which was called Sunglass Club at that time before they got bought out. I think that was it.

BARBARA: ***What did you learn by working at the same time that you were going to school?***

I was working to be able to go to school. I don't know that I was actually paying attention to anything I was learning at work, just that you have to—

The wisdom of your age now, when you reflect on that.

Yes. I think I had a goal in mind. This is how I was getting through college: I had the Millennium Scholarship, which helped a lot. But, because I took a year off, it actually cut off because it's only for six years, so it cut off earlier than I finished; I went back about a year and a half, two years later. It took a significant amount of time off, which I didn't know. I wish somebody would have told me and I would have kept going. I was paying with credit cards for my tuition, but every semester I had to pay it down. I had to make enough money to pay it down so that I could refill it back up the next semester with all the tuition expenses. That's why I needed to get a second job and do all that.

Was that hard?

Yes. I mean, it was just tiring. I had jobs where I didn't have to do—I had responsibility, obviously, but no one depending wholly on me. As a sales rep, I just had to sell. As a receptionist, I just had to transfer calls. Then the jobs did try to give me more responsibility and I'd be like, eh…

ELSA: ***Were there times throughout your high school and college career where being undocumented was an issue more than at other times?***

Well, getting loans because you can't get student loans. When I was eighteen, I actually got on TPS [Temporary Protected Status] because that was around for El Salvadorans and I had been

here since the nineties, so I definitely qualified. You had to just be here by a certain time. I was on TPS when I was in college, but that really did nothing more than just allow me to stay here and work, which thank God. I couldn't get student loans. I didn't qualify for any grants or anything like that. At the time this is pre-Dreamers. Dreamers actually have made a huge difference when it comes to higher education for undocumented populations and for just immigrants in general because before that no one cared. There weren't scholarships for people who didn't have status. Most scholarships actually specified that you had to be a U.S. citizen or permanent resident, and even private scholarships. There was not a lot of funding that you could get other than credit cards or private loans.

Were any of your friends going through similar struggles? Did they ever disclose that they were also undocumented? It was just not something that was spoken about?

Oh, actually, yes, I did. I had a friend who later told me that he was undocumented. You don't find out until they decide to tell you. I didn't find out until years later. He was a high school friend. Then he told me that he wasn't in college and he was completely undocumented. In high school he had been using his brother's information because he didn't have anything. He's from Korea. I think at that point is when I realized, oh yes, the immigrant story isn't just Latinos.

Yes, that's not one place for it.

Yes, yes. I was maybe nineteen at the time. I graduated when I was seventeen, so it was a couple of years after graduation. He's the only one that I know of that did have issues and didn't go to college because of then. He also, I don't think, found out until he was graduating, which was also rough. You have plans and you're like, I'm going to go do all these things, and then you're told none of those are possibilities. They are, but you have to work extra hard and it's going to be really tough. I don't remember.

Most of my friends didn't know about me either. Even high school friends didn't even know that I was not a citizen until I posted about my naturalization last year. They're like, "Oh my God, I didn't even know." I was like, "Yes, of course, you don't because I never told anyone. Why would I?"

In the nineties this is back when it was INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service], the old immigration agency INS. Think of ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement], USCIS [U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services], which is now the agency you apply to, and CPB [Customs and Border Protection]. These agencies were all one; they were all under the same agency.

I remember when I was a kid, especially in the beginning, my mom worked in a factory and everyone there was an immigrant. They would talk about, oh, if you see a truck, if you see this kind of van, you've got to find the exits. You have to have a plan of where you're going to go. Even though we didn't have to worry because we had a permit to be here. But a lot of people didn't, so they would talk about it. It was almost taboo. It was definitely not like it is today. Now people are proud to tell their immigrant story and to say that they're immigrants. Before that—

It was dangerous.

It was dangerous and it was almost shameful, like you were less than if you're an immigrant, especially if you're an immigrant without permanent status. You just did not talk about it. This is something that not a lot of people talk about: Even within the immigrant community there was discrimination. If you had some status and you had someone who had nothing, they were discriminated against for having nothing.

Did you ever face that or did your family ever face that?

I saw other people do it, but we didn't face it, which is, again, another reason why you don't talk about it even within the immigrant community. You just don't tell people unless you're close to them; they're friends, family. But that was a different time, totally different now. I think people that grew up in that time have a hard time now seeing Dreamers being proud; I can see that in the older immigrants, like they're resentful because they couldn't do that. They were shamed into being secret and scared into being secret.

Was your immigration status something you worried about when you were in high school and getting ready for college?

No, I didn't think about it and I didn't know that it was going to have an impact, really, until I started thinking about college, which was probably junior year. Well, maybe I did subconsciously. Freshman and sophomore year I had teachers who would say, "Start thinking about college," especially sophomore year and junior for sure and senior definitely. All your teachers ask you, "Where are you going to go to college? What are your plans?" Things like that. In the beginning I would be like, "I don't know if I'm going to go to college." That would just be my answer.

Then I had my AP English teacher. She said, "You need to apply. You need to start worrying about this and planning for this." That made me look into it. Then I realized, oh yes, it's going to be kind of a problem to go anywhere. At the time we had this thing where the school could release your information to colleges. I guess it was like a recruiting tool or something. I don't know if they still do it now. But they would release your GPA, especially if you had AP course. They would release your score, if you got the score that you needed for the credit. They did that. I started getting pamphlets from colleges. I remember thinking, I can't go to any of these. I would have loved to go to New York. I got something from Cornell and I was like, oh

yes, I would love to go there. But it's like, I don't know, fifty thousand dollars to go there. There is no way. I knew that I probably couldn't go anywhere else, so I stayed here, which I think probably made me a little bit angry knowing that I wanted to go somewhere else and that if I had a different situation I could, but having to stay here—not that UNLV is a bad school. It's a great school. But it was just that realization that my options are limited. But I thoroughly loved UNLV, and all my great friends are from UNLV that I met while I went there.

You mentioned you were in three majors. What did you finally decide on? What was the transition?

At CSN I was undeclared, but I had wanted to be a pilot, so I signed up for that and quickly realized that I couldn't do that. The amount that you could do at CSN is very limited, especially then. You could really only take a year's worth of courses there and then you had to go into the private school to be able to get a pilot's license, so that was not going to be an option.

I started as an engineering major, wanted to be an architect, but they didn't have an architect major at the time. Then after I switched they got the architecture, so, awesome. But I had already switched and changed my dreams already. I was like, I'm over that.

Then I wanted to be a doctor, so I was in premed for a hot second. Now that I think back about it, the reason I didn't end up doing that is because the schooling is so long. But that was before I realized I wanted to be a lawyer and that the schooling would be almost as long, so, awesome. Then finally I was like, I'm going to get something practical that no matter what I could use it, so I became a business major.

Business in what department?

Finance. Also, at that point I was like, you know what? I'm going to be a finance major. I'm going to get myself to New York, get myself into one of these big financial firms, maybe on

Wall Street, I don't know, dreaming big. Halfway through college I was like, you know what? No. I'm going to go to law school.

Do you remember the moment or what event happened that made you want to go to law school?

After my job at the car dealership, I got a job at this small law firm. Basically because some people had told me that I should be a lawyer, I'm like, why would you say that? I'm not really argumentative. Why? Are you trying to tell me something? This included teachers from high school and even professors from college; they both said the same thing, like, "You seem like you'd make a good lawyer," or, "You seem like you would be a lawyer." I had never thought about it and I didn't know any attorneys at that point. I was like, well, if I'm considering something like that I should probably know what it's about. I got a job at a law firm so I could see what the job would actually be like. I hated it at first and I'm like, I could never, no; this is awful.

What law firm was it?

It was a small law firm. He actually isn't here anymore. He moved to New York. It was just one attorney and two staff.

It all goes back to New York.

Yes, yes. I got a job at that law firm. I worked there for about six or seven months. Then he decided to close shop and move to New York. His wife was a doctor, so he wanted to move to be with her. In the meantime, because he didn't want to leave me jobless, he set up a meeting with another attorney who was just opening up her firm and needed a staff. We went to lunch and I didn't know what it was about; neither did she. At the end of that lunch it was like, oh, so I'm going to be working for her now.

I started working for her. It was rough in the beginning because she was opening up her practice. She had been an attorney for years, but first time having her own office by herself. She had an office with someone else and she was moving out. I got a lot of responsibility really quick and not knowing what I was doing at all, but I picked it up and things started going a little bit more smoothly. Her practice then grew by a lot and now she has four or five attorneys in her office, which for Vegas is actually a good size. They're in criminal defense. For a criminal defense firm that's actually pretty significant. Most firms are only two attorneys, maybe one.

I was there for five years. I was there even a year after I graduated from college. I think I was just seeing the passion that they had for the work. I was like, you know what? I could do this, and the issues that you see. She did criminal defense from the smallest thing up to capital murder.

BARBARA: ***You want to name what that firm was?***

Her name is Kristina Wildeveld. It's Law Offices of Kristina Wildeveld and Associates. I saw an array of cases. I worked on the cases that were capital. Most of the work was mostly appeals and writs. If I'm going into too much of the technicalities of it, just let me know. I worked on all those cases. She is extremely passionate about her work, and just seeing that passion and the ability for her to be able to help someone, just told me I want to do this. I told her I wanted to go to law school, and she's like, "No, don't." But she meant it in a good way, more like 'you can do better' kind of a thing.

That was in the middle of college, so it was probably end of sophomore year, starting junior. At that point I was already in a trajectory to go to law school. I didn't even know how. I didn't know what I needed to do. I knew there was some test before that. I didn't really know at what point I would need to take it, which is another thing no one explains to you that it's a year

in advance. I actually ended up graduating from college, but I didn't go to law school for another year.

What class were you?

I started 2014, so I was Class of 2017. I think that was for the better. Everyone tells you you're going to meet your best friends in law school, and it's true. I wouldn't have met all of my friends that I have now if I hadn't gone that year, if I had gone the year earlier, the year I was supposed to.

You were Class of 2014 with your finance degree, and then you went into—

Oh no. Finance, I was Class of 2013. But law school was Class of 2017.

What were those first years of William S. Boyd School of Law at UNLV like?

I didn't know what to expect, obviously, but I asked people, "What should I do?" Everyone kind of tells you something different. The one thing that I did know, which everyone told me, was you can't work because you have to spend all of your time in school and studying. I quit my job at the law firm. She's still angry about that. I didn't work for that first year of law school. But the thing about me is that I'm a terrible student and that I don't study like I'm supposed to. I wasn't spending all the time that I needed to in studying, and I realized, I could probably do just as well and have a job at the same time and be totally fine. I started working my second year of law school. I was working as a law clerk the last two years that I was there. I still tell that to my friends, and they're like, "What?" I'm like, "Yes, I stopped reading after that first year. What do you mean? You still read your books? Serious?" But that's because I think because I started working so early on. Everything I felt like I could learn, I had to do it on the job. I learned so much from working at the law firm that I did.

Which one did you work at?

He's a solo practitioner, Jakub Medrala. It's all civil litigation. He would give me more and more responsibility the longer I stayed. Every time I'd be like, "I don't know. I've never done this before." He's like, "I know. You can learn it." He had me do things that I probably as a 2-L probably shouldn't have been doing, but he did.

ELSA: ***Who were some of your other mentors during your time in law school?***

Jakub was one. Kristina would still be a second even though I think she's still angry with me. Then I had some friends that are attorneys now, Kaitlin and Jenna. I would call them and ask them what I needed to do and things like that. Just other friends that I had met along the way.

BARBARA: ***Talk about how you got involved with the immigration clinic.***

That was my 2-L year, the fall of my 2-L year. I had already been in law school for a year and a half at that point. I applied to two clinics, that one and the business clinic. I actually put the business clinic as my first choice and the immigration clinic as my second. My idea was to do business law and practice business law, but also do immigration as pro bono exclusively. But I didn't get into the business clinic and I got into the immigration clinic. The professor that I had, I had already taken her immigration law class and she was amazing. She was just incredible.

What's her name?

Fatma Marouf. She's no longer there. She's now at Texas A&M, which is a huge loss for UNLV. She was just incredibly smart—she was one of the attorneys working on the travel ban cases in the airport when that was going on. She's had big cases. She's been cited in circuit court cases. She's incredible. I really enjoyed working there.

When you start clinic you start as a student attorney, and then the professors usually ask you back if they want you to come back as an advanced clinic student. I did two semesters of

advanced clinic with Mike Kagan [director of UNLV Immigration Clinic]. Students are only there for two semesters and I did three, well, me and my partner did.

After finishing law school I actually got a text from Mike Kagan, and he was like, "Hey, are you looking for a job?" No, I think he actually asked me, "Do you have a job yet?" Because it was the final semester of law school, you figured out something that you're going to do after graduating. I had some options, but nothing that I had settled on. I told him, "No. Why do you ask?" Then he told me that they had a position at that the clinic and asked if I would be interested in it. I didn't actually think that I would be doing immigration right after law school, but I decided that it was the only time I could do it pro bono in that capacity, so I was like, "Yes that would be great." Then it also meant that I could continue working on the cases that I already had, and I still have one of the cases.

I was in Carson City because I was doing a legislative externship that semester. I was living in Carson City when I got that text. When I came back we had a meeting, and it was like, "This is what it is." He was really trying to convince me because it didn't pay much. I was like, eh, that's okay. I'm not really concerned about that. That's kind of how it happened and then I started.

One of the biggest concerns was you have to have your bar license to be able to do the work. I took the bar in July. Our exam results come out in October. I started the job in August, so it was two months of worrying about whether I would pass or not. Then when I got the results, it was a huge relief, and that's the same for everybody. A lot of my classmates had jobs, but a lot of the firms, if they hire you on, they'll give you one more opportunity to be able to pass it, so you can stay on, but I could not do that at the clinic. If I didn't pass, they couldn't keep me because I couldn't do the work. Huge stress relief when I got the results, yes.

BARBARA: ***Describe the work. What was your job description, and what did he throw you into right away?***

When I started it was just a general fellowship; they hadn't really described it as it is now. I was kind of just handling everything. Right now and at that time they had the unaccompanied minor's fellow, who was Laura. She's no longer there. Now it's Martha. That fellowship is supposed to be specific to all the children's cases, so the predominant cases that they have, have to be children. Then they can take on a few cases, other types of cases, like families or someone who is detained; something like that. My job was just general, so I took on whatever. I worked on the Tate cases. I had family cases. I had children's cases. It was a mix of all the things that the clinic had opened and whatever needed an attorney to be on it. That's what I did the first year.

The second year, when that fellowship got extended, it became the student legal services fellow, and that was then specific to students. It didn't have to be a specific issue. It didn't have to be unaccompanied minors. It didn't have to be asylum seekers. It didn't have to be detained cases. It just needed to be an issue for students. If a student came in with whatever problem, then I would take on whatever that was. We had some limitation, like we couldn't do employment visas because the client there is actually not the student; it's the employer, so it was limited on that. But, yes, there wasn't a limit on anything else. That was the second year that I was there, and that's what I ended up doing until June of this year.

Now that fellowship has been extended to include CSN. I don't know if they've announced that yet. Is that a secret?

I haven't heard that. Wow.

ELSA: ***I haven't heard that.***

That's cool.

Well, it may be unofficial yet.

BARBARA: ***This will not be part of public record for a while, so we're good.***

I met with the president of CSN. I just mentioned the program, and he was like, "I would love to bring that to CSN." We just brought it. I know that's what they're hiring for now, so they're probably going to make an announcement soon to make it official, but, yes that's definitely happening.

Awesome.

The work needs a tie-in to students, so it includes direct representation, advice, just handling of issues that involve students. I had some issues come up with students being able to get licensed for their jobs because we're DACA. Going through those emails and communicating with people on that; that was not specifically immigration. It's not immigration work, but it involves an immigrant student, so it's something that fit in that capacity, too.

Then I worked on legislative bills this last session that were specific to students. The professional licensing bill that would allow…The whole idea came about because I heard from students and professors who talked about students not being able to get their licenses because they were DACA or something else, and the agency saying, "No, you need to have permanent status." Or feeling like they weren't sure about it because their status is only for two years. Because of that, knowing that DACA is on its last leg and whatever comes next, it may or may not be permanent status, something needed to be addressed and that's what we did with that bill to allow students to at least be able to practice. The only thing that had been done at that point was for teachers that they opened it up for the state to be able to hire DACA professionals to teach for the county, but they had made that special exception in the statute, which was what we needed to do for everything else.

Along the way how did you change your status? That has to be a story all by itself.

Actually, it was pretty normal. My mom got married to a U.S. citizen. He was from Nicaragua, so he also has an immigrant story. Yes, my mom got married. Explaining the mixed status family, my sister is not permanent yet, hopefully soon. The reason being is that she's older. When my mom got married, she was aged out at that point, and it was only by months, which really sucks. No one tells you this stuff. She was eighteen when my mother got married—no, she would have been almost nineteen because I was almost sixteen. She was aged off. In order to apply through a stepparent, they had to be married before your eighteenth birthday, so she aged out.

For me, in order for you to still be able to apply as a minor, you have to apply before your twenty-first birthday. I got TPS status when I was eighteen. Then it took just a couple of years. I submitted my application when I was nineteen, turning twenty, through my stepdad, and that's basically how I ended up getting status.

My sister was left out, so she isn't becoming permanent until now when she's thirty-three, thirty-four.

She still lives here in Las Vegas?

Yes. She's married. She's been on TPS ever since, which is another reason that—TPS was also one of the issues that I cared about and still do and talk to the people fighting the good fight in that.

But the frustrating thing about immigration is you can only do so much for individuals when the whole system shifts. In a big shift like that, for example, with DACA, the end of it; you're just cut off. You can only do so much for an individual because the program is being cut. You can't do anything about that unless you challenge that program being terminated, which is

what people have done. That is essentially what I would love to do in the future is be able to fight actual agency shifts that have a wider impact. It's the same thing for TPS. You can only do so much for an individual when the program is not going to be there and they only have so many options. Everyone is like a puzzle; you have to figure out what they can apply for, if anything, and how they have to make it happen, and not everyone is the same. They may all have the same status now, like they may all be in TPS, but that doesn't mean they all have the same options.

She's on TPS and is married, so she's applying. My mom is still a permanent resident. She doesn't want to apply for citizenship because she doesn't speak English. She's afraid of the exam. She speaks enough, which I think she would pass, but she's still nervous about it. What are you going to do?

Does she work outside of the home at any time?

She's in housekeeping for a hotel. I don't know what I wrote. I was wondering what I should put because housekeeping can be inside the home.

In the casino or hotel industry, okay.

Yes. She works for Luxor. She's been there almost twenty years.

That's where she was while you were in high school, too?

Yes. That's where she's been almost since we've been here. Actually, yes. She worked at the Stratosphere for a few years and then she transferred over to the Luxor.

Do you think she would sit for an interview? In* Español*?

ELSA: ***It could be in Spanish.***

I can ask her. She's so shy. She doesn't come off as shy because she's very loud and talkative, but she doesn't like to talk about herself. But I could ask her.

Yes, we'd really like to have her. Was she a part of the union at all?

Yes, she is. She still is. She's done some of the walks. She hasn't done all of them. I forgot what year they were trying to renew basically all of the contracts and they had a strike, so she was part of the strike. It wasn't that long ago, maybe five years ago. But she doesn't do any of the work with the union. They sometimes take workers to do some…She doesn't do that.

Now that we're on the topic of your mom: you mentioned that she was always trying to kind of guilt trip you into studying and going through high school. What was that moment like when she saw you graduate high school and then graduate from law school? What were those moments like?

I'm tearing up. She was just really proud, I could tell. Sorry.

You're fine. It's okay.

Yes, she was really proud. I don't know that she knew that I was going to keep going…

So in high school—I hate celebrations. I hate parties. I never wanted to really celebrate my birthday.

No *quince*.

No. Oh my God, no. She forced me to have one, but I did not want one.

Oh, so you did have one.

It was a really small one. I hate celebrations. When I was graduating from high school, then college, all that, I didn't even want to go to the graduation. I'm just weird. But I did because you have to for your family. I walked for high school. I think at that point it was at the Orleans. Yes, it was at the Orleans. She was just really happy. But I was already in college, so she was like, "Oh, just keep going."

I think she got disappointed when I stopped going to college. She would always ask me, "Are you going to go back? You should go back. Wouldn't you want to?" That kind of a thing.

When I went back to college, she didn't ask me a lot of questions. She would just ask me, "So, when are you going to be done? What are you going to do? What are you taking?"

When I graduated from college at UNLV, she was super happy. We went to lunch because it was early in the day. She got teary eyed and she was so proud. Then I told her I was going to law school. She was like, "Oh, that's great." She was never surprised, I think. It was just kind of like, yes, keep going. If I told her I was going to go back to school to get a master's or something, she would be like, really? Do you feel like you need to? You've done a lot. I know I told you school's great, but…

Everyone tells me I'm like my dad, which I hate hearing because I never had a relationship with him, but he is very studious and he is a professor and always wanted to have a profession and things like that. I think people tell me that only because of that. My sister is always telling me, "Oh, you just like school." I keep telling her to go back to school. She wanted to be a nurse. I'm like, "That would be great, but you do have to go to school. You do have to do these things." She's like, "I don't know if I can do it. I just hate school." She's like, "You like school." I'm like, "No. No one likes school. It's just what you have to do. You just have to get through it and then you get to your end goal." But everyone just assumes that I'm super studious. I do love learning, but the act of going to class is awful.

BARBARA: ***Were you aware of being a Latina when you were going to law school? Was that a big deal?***

Not really. Our Latino population at the law school has increased by a lot. I think the year that I was there, maybe less than ten, and now it's quite a few, a quarter or over a quarter. I didn't really think about it. I didn't think about it even when—these things didn't occur to me until after and then you realize, oh yes that's kind of different.

When I was in finance, I didn't realize I was a minority because I'm a woman. All of my undergrad friends are men. I have two female friends and they were not in finance; they were marketing and international business. But, yes, all of my finance friends are guys. But I never thought about it. I didn't think, oh, I'm the only girl in this classroom, and definitely the only Latina. It never—I was just so busy and focused on getting through class. I just needed to get through this class so I could get back to work. I just didn't even think about it. I didn't think about it until later and people pointed it out. I just thought, oh, most of my friends are guys; that's cool.

What was one of your most memorable cases from your time in immigration clinic?

Memorable cases…I think all of them are memorable. You just can't stop thinking about them. But there are two kids that I will always worry about, and I still ask them, "Hey, what's going on with that case?" They're not supposed to tell me, so they don't tell me much. I guess when it's good news, they'll tell me. These two boys, it was two of the first cases that I got when I started at the clinic working. They're kids. One of them, he was seventeen at the time, but looked like he was twelve. He was so small and looked so young; he had gone through, God, things you should never go through as a kid—like living on the streets when he's ten, that's awful. And his case here is super weak, so obviously that was one of the concerns.

This is what happens in immigration: You have a case and you're applying for this thing, and you know that their chances are very low. Then you find something else and you apply for that and their chances get a little bit better. That's what happened to him. We ended up applying for something else, and I think his chances are pretty good now, hoping. That's one of them.

Then the other one is another boy. He was also seventeen at the time. Totally different personalities. The first one, he started working when he was eight, so he's very hard-working, very driven. He's going to do really well. The other one, he—

Where was he from, what country?

Honduras. The other one, he just seemed lost every time, and I think he's still always felt lost. He had also gone through some terrible things, including having no parent to really turn to. His dad kicked him out. His mom died. He was basically alone. His siblings didn't treat him very well.

His case was a lot stronger. The problem was that the timing of it was not great because evidence gets stale. It's harder to prove cases the more time they spend in review, and it's not done yet.

Those two cases really weigh heavily on me just because they're two kids who should probably have an opportunity at something, but who knows if they'll get it.

The other one is actually a case that I still have, and only because it reminds me of me and my mom. It's a twenty-five-year-old mom. Her daughter is five or six; she's probably seven now. It was just like that was my mom. They're both from El Salvador, too. That was us twenty-four years ago.

BARBARA: ***It's got to be hard.***

Yes. Just knowing how quickly things can go south and having to tell them, "You have to prepare for the worst," which is having to go back, and figuring things out, it's not an easy task, yes.

At this moment what would you say is the biggest problem in immigration policy? It's a very broad question.

Do you have a notepad that you're taking notes? It's so many things.

The system is totally broken. One of the things that—there's always talk about getting in line, right? Of course, there is no line, and when there is one for specific applications that line is thirty years long. But aside from that, especially now, I think what we've seen, and this is just what I think, is that we've kind of realized all the roadblocks because they've been made more prominent now.

There are so many roadblocks. Even when you do have something you can apply for, that it doesn't mean that you're going to get it. You may not have the right kind of entry, you may not make enough money, you maybe took some sort of assistance some years ago that might come back to haunt you. Things like that. Those are all roadblocks even though that person does have a family member that is petitioning them. And that's the process; that's the line. But that line is always filled with things that you have to overcome. That's for every category.

I think that's what we're seeing now is that wow, there are a lot of roadblocks and it makes it almost impossible. And, when you have someone who is really anti-immigrant, they can make those roadblocks so much worse. It's all because of how the system is structured. It's set up in a way that someone can use their power to make it literally impossible to get through. It's a question of, do we want to continue that, or if we don't, how do we change it?

Some of the politicians that are talking about it and changing the system, "Oh, it's so radical." We've done it before. This is how we ended up changing from INS to all the three agencies that we have now. It's been done before because we realized then that this system didn't work. The structure didn't work. The structure today isn't working.

The questions is: what do we do? I don't know that anyone is coming up with any ideas. But there are some ideas out there, like not having the immigration court be under the same

branch that prosecutes immigrants. That's a thought. And having them actually be judges; that could be a thing.

ELSA: ***I have a question. Are there some common misconceptions that people have about immigration policy, like the judges' thing that you just mentioned now? Can you talk about that or explain what you're talking about?***

I think the biggest misconception is that everyone thinks the system is fundamentally fair, which it is not. It is fundamentally unfair. It is set up specifically to be unfair. People who have not been through it don't realize all these roadblocks that exist and don't realize that if you mess up, there's really no going back—which is what I tell people even when we're helping them. They may not know exactly when they came in. When we're filling out applications, if you don't know, I am not going to guess and I'm not going to allow you to guess, because that can come back to haunt you. If you put anything that is inconsistent in any of your applications, they could use that to say that you committed fraud, and very easily now.

What I tell people is: Immigration, the way that it works, is it has a long memory; it never forgets and it never forgives. You may think, oh well that happened years ago, like twenty years ago; it's not going to hurt me. It might.

For example, I saw a gentleman who applied for citizenship. He had been a permanent residence for, I don't know, twenty years. He decided it's finally time to become a citizen. He applied for citizenship and he was put in removal because he had a case from 1989; he was a kid and was doing some cocaine. Granted, not great. But he was caught with possession and that put him in removal because that is a reason that someone can be deported—possession of a prohibited substance, anything under the schedules. That's an example of immigration never forgets.

No one is perfect, by the way. We're expecting immigrants to live to this standard that even American citizens don't. Whenever I hear, *Oh, this immigrant is a criminal,* if they're a permanent resident, no, I can guarantee you they're squeaky clean because they have to be, and especially in more tenuous statuses, like DACA. The requirements for DACA are very strict. Even not having a conviction but having an arrest can result in you not getting the status or having it taken away because there's a catchall that says they can take anything in your background to find you to be a danger to the community. That means they can literally consider anything, including you just being arrested, not even being convicted for anything, just being arrested, and juvenile records, which for most other things juvenile records are excluded; you can't consider that for anything, but they can for that.

I think that's one of the misconceptions; that people think because there are these programs out there, the system is fundamentally fair. We're giving you an opportunity. You have all these things that you can apply for. The only reason you're not applying for them is because you're lazy or you just don't care or you don't really want to be a part of this. Yes, that's the biggest one.

And having a court, I think, also creates that—a court, quotes—also creates that sense that there's some sort of fairness to the system because someone reviews it; an impartial judge reviews it and they give you an opportunity to fight your case when that's not true. The judges, one, are not judges. They're employees. They're employees of the same agency that is actively prosecuting immigrants for entering the country. You cannot have a system that's fair if that's the structure of your review. Just having the sense that there's a judge makes people think that it's fair, but they're not bound by any of the same rules that judges are. Judges are meant to be impartial. Judges can't be told how to rule in cases other than by a higher court—like the

Supreme Court, if you're a federal judge or a state judge, or your Supreme Court in the state if you're a state judge. They're not telling you how to rule; they're telling you just what the correct interpretation of the case is or the correct interpretation of an issue. The difference in immigration judges is that they have an employer; they have the attorney general who is literally telling them how to do their job; is telling them you have to prosecute, or you have to get this many cases out of your docket, or you have to rule on these issues this way. There's no room for them to do anything else, so how is that impartial? That's not impartial. They're being told what to do. That's another thing.

And structurally, aside from that problem, the judges, by and large, are former ICE attorneys. Basically when you're in court, you have two ICE attorneys against you. If you're alone—now, a judge is supposed to—supposed to—if the person is not represented, they're supposed to guide them through a little bit so that they have a meaningful opportunity to fight their case. That's never the case. Judges are just as tough and they penalize people just the same if they're not represented.

There's a case that someone just posted about a person in custody, being held by ICE. They applied for permanent status through a family member. Now, part of each application, when you're applying for a family member, is that you have to submit a medical exam conducted by a civil surgeon. There's a list of civil surgeons that the immigration agency provides; they're the only ones allowed to do that exam. He's in custody, so getting a civil surgeon into a jail, not exactly easy especially if you're in jail, and he's not represented. The court denied his application because he did not have his medical exam even though he could not get one. When it goes to appeal into a real court, like a circuit court, because of the way that agency law works, the immigration courts get significant deference, which means that they will only change the

ruling if they see that they abused their power in some way. That's a very high standard to meet. He lost his case. Things like that you think about it and it's like, that is so fundamentally broken. How is that fair? It's not fair.

I think the fact that there is a court and there are judges gives people that aren't in the system and aren't going through it, it gives them the idea that oh yes, they're getting so much fairness and they're getting all these things and they shouldn't even have those things because they're not here legally; that's the argument. But the system is not fair and it's stacked up against you every single time.

ELSA: ***With all this anti-immigration rhetoric, especially in national politics, what does that do to the immigrant community? What are the consequences of all of that?***

They go into hiding; that's what they did in the nineties; that's what they're doing now. You can see it. Like I said before, no one talked about their status, which is now what immigrants are doing again. You don't talk about it. There are still certain groups that will fight because they have some wiggle room to do it. But you're not seeing too many undocumented people coming out and saying, we need something. It's mostly someone who fits in those categories, like DACA students or people who would have qualified for DACA if it was still existing. They're fighting because there is something there. But you are not seeing any new immigrants coming out and fighting, and that's not likely to happen because they're the most at risk. They have everything to lose. It's the same thing that happened then. People go into hiding. They just live their daily life as if nothing else is happening, but they're constantly in fear. They move around because they're afraid that they'll be found. They avoid certain things because they're afraid they'll be found. They avoid calling the police when they need to. They avoid filing a report against an employer who is abusing them. They avoid all of the basic rights that all of us have; they avoid exercising

them because they feel like their status will always be held against them, which is the reason now that courts have realized, especially with the growing population, certain laws were passed and put into place where you couldn't hold someone's immigration status against them in child support and child custody hearings. Of course, before that was in place, it was. Again, your status is always brought up when you try to do anything, so people just hide it as much as they can. I think that's the effect and just being afraid, so they limit what they do, a lot.

Then I imagine it's like a strategy that's used sometimes repeating all this rhetoric all the time.

Yes, of course, yes. It's a scare tactic, but it works. They use people as examples to make the tactic work, which is why they have a raid because it will be on the news. People will go, oh, they're willing to do this, so it might happen here. They'll take precautionary measures, yes. And I think kids who are born to immigrants in that situation also are impacted because they have to live under the same kind of rules of not talking about things, limiting what you do so that you're not calling too much attention to yourself.

Not jeopardizing your family when you're a kid. Whatever happens to your parents directly affects you.

Yes. Don't be an activist because they might take it out on your family; that kind of thing, yes.

As we're reaching our time limit, one final question. Having worked with the immigration clinic at UNLV and your background with immigration law, how valuable do you see of collecting those stories of the undocumented experience in Las Vegas as a part of this project?

I think it's definitely valuable because you're going to hear stories from people that are not seen and heard from. They live in the shadows, literally and figuratively. For example, when my mom first came here, one of her earlier jobs was actually cleaning banks and offices, and that was

done at night, like at midnight until two in the morning. She would take these sometimes when she didn't have anywhere else to leave me. Everyone doing those jobs is usually undocumented. These are people you're never really going to hear from because, one, again, they're not calling attention to themselves and they're never going to. But they achieve great things. They raise great children. They, a lot of the times, start businesses of their own because it's the one way they can accumulate wealth. They do these great things without anyone really noticing. I think it's really beneficial. But because I know that a lot of people are concerned about telling their story, it's important to be mindful of that and they're desire to not put themselves in any kind of jeopardy.

Any last stories you want to share or comments or advice for the future Latinx generation?

I think these stories are going to be really important because it will show people that you can do a lot of things. You're interviewing some important people, too, like senators and people like that. They obviously had different stories and different paths, but I think it's important to show people that no matter where you came from and how you got here and what your circumstances are, you can always achieve your dreams. You can always strive to achieve your dreams. Even though you may have to do it in a different way, it's still possible and you can still do all the things you want to do. I'm trying to think of a good quote, but I don't have one. I just think about my mom's friends who obviously are undocumented, but they have their own businesses and they have life goals, like everyone always does, and they're still trying to achieve them and nothing holds them back. I feel like sometimes even first-generation Latinos, when they've been children of immigrants, they kind of tend to limit themselves because their family and their situation has been limited, but you don't have to do that. You can definitely achieve everything you want to achieve, and even though people are going to fight you or they're going to say that

you don’t deserve it or that you aren’t good enough, you can always be good enough because you have what it takes. It just takes hard work and your parents have showed you that usually.

Thank you so much.

ELSA: ***Yes, thank you.***

Thanks.

[End of recorded interview]