AN INTERVIEW WITH MAGDALENA MARTINEZ

An Oral History Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

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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
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PREFACE

Dr. Magdalena Martinez characterizes herself with many identifiers: a wife and a mother, a *comadre*, a professor, person of Mexican American heritage, and a Chicana—and much more depending on where she is and what she is doing. At UNLV, Dr. Martinez is an assistant professor in UNLV's department of Public Policy and Leadership College of Urban Affairs, and the Director of Education Programs with the Lincy Institute. As her resume states, her "areas of expertise include education policy, leadership, access and equity for underrepresented student populations and the role of higher education in a diverse society."

The youngest of six children born to Alicia and Marcos Martinez, her early years were spent in Los Angeles. Her father was a farmworker in the Bracero program and returned to Mexico, where he died at a young age. Her mother preferred life in the U.S. and exceled at investing in real estate to take care of her family. Over the years, members of the family settled in Las Vegas.

In 1986, when Magda, as her friends call her, was about sixteen years old, she too moved to Las Vegas. She attended Bishop Gorman High School and involved herself in the Latinx community. Among her activities was the Latino Youth Leadership Conference, where she met many lifelong friends and future leaders of southern Nevada.

Dr. Martinez holds her bachelor's from UNLV, her master's from Harvard, and her PhD from University of Michigan. She and her husband, Jose Melendrez, who is the Executive Director of Community Partnerships, School of Community Health Services at UNLV, have two children.

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April 4, 2019
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Monserrath Hernández

LATINX VOICES
OF SOUTHERN NEVADA
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Today is April fourth, 2019. My name is Monserrath Hernández, and I am sitting here in Professor Magdalena Martinez's office in Greenspun College at UNLV and I am with…

Barbara Tabach.

Our narrator will be…

Magdalena Martinez.

Can you spell that?

M-A-G-D-A-L-E-N-A. Martinez, M-A-R-T-I-N-E-Z.

How do you identify?

I think I wear many hats. In terms of race and ethnicity, I am Mexican American, Chicana, Latina depending on the context. I think throughout life I've had different ways I prefer to identify myself. I think at this point in time, given that I work in the academy and there is more openness to identifying yourself differently, but not everywhere, just in certain circles or in certain places, I felt quite comfortable identifying myself sometimes as a Chicana, sometimes as a Latina. Hispanic, I think, is less in vogue now. Now it's Latinx, of course, which I've slowly come around to. That's how I identify myself. That's race, ethnicity.

Of course, I'm a woman and that plays an important role in my life. I am a mother. I'm a wife. I'm a *comadre*, a colleague. All of those identities are important to me at this point in time.

Like I said, at different stages I was more interested in exploring certain aspects of my identity. When I was an undergrad, I was a part of the Student Organization of Latinos, and so ethnicity was a very prominent aspect of my identity and not so much gender; gender came later in graduate school. So, yes, that's how I identify myself.

It's hard, isn't it, sometimes?

Yes.

Like you said, in different contexts you identify differently.

Yes.

Where is your family from?

My family is from Durango, Mexico, a small, little town in La Purisima, Tepehuanes area. I am the youngest of six and the only one born in the States.

Tell me about your childhood. Any favorite childhood memories?

I was the only one born here. My mother came to this country in the 1970s. My father was a farm worker, part of the Bracero program where he came and worked seasonally. He never really wanted to live in the States, and so he would go back to Mexico and work the land there. He was a very mild temperament man, never drank, never smoked, and didn't raise his voice. He lived a long life, too, well into his nineties, and I think part of it was that he didn't get too excited about things.

My mother was a little different. She was a woman ahead of her times. At the time it was much easier to immigrate to the States, and so my mother asked my father, "You should immigrate us to the United States." He said, "But I don't want to live there. I just go and work there." She said, "Just…You never know. It may be a good idea." As soon as he did that she was out of dodge and he was none too happy. I was not born then. I wasn't born until a year later, until she arrived here in the States. I grew up in L.A.

My mother was the oldest of fourteen and did not have any real formal education, just got to the second grade because rural Mexico, you took care of the kids, you helped your mother out, or you worked on the farm or the ranch. She had very limited formal education, but she was a woman ahead of her time and was quite an entrepreneur. When she was in Mexico—I hear stories—not from her; she's passed now; she passed in '15—but from my siblings and her sisters

of the type of things she would do. She was quite an entrepreneur, always thinking about, *how can I make money for my family?* When she came to the States, she used the immigrant network. There were people already here that were working in factories. In the early seventies it was a different America than it is now; there were large manufacturing companies. She got a job at a warehouse where they made men's suits, *tobias*, because some of the women that she knew from her town were working there. She started working there and she would iron men's suits. She worked full-time and she had health benefits.

Within five years of being in this country, she bought her first duplex. She quickly realized, *oh, if I live in one side and rent the other, that can pay the entire mortgage*, and so that's what she started to do. She started to buy homes, in L.A. mind you, that were rundown, fix them up, and rent them or flip them, before it was a thing to do on Home Network.

Much of my childhood was observing my mother. My mother still worked at this factory until they closed shop down and went abroad, but by then she had accumulated quite a few properties, renting and fixing up. But the woman that I saw in my life, the woman that modeled what a woman should be, she was doing everything a man would do; and that is painting, laying concrete, pulling up linoleum floor, telling contractors what to do, negotiating real estate deals, collecting rent, and so my childhood was also spent in many places.

I think the fondest memories I have is of growing up on Baltimore Street in Highland Park. Highland Park is now a highly gentrified area, very desirable. Back then it was just a bunch of Mexican immigrants. It was predominantly white at the time, too. We had this beautiful home, I thought, and I can still see it. We had this giant pecan tree out front and then another one in the back. There was a house in the front and another house in the back and there was a big alley because that's the way homes were. It was built probably in the fifties. A lot of land to have two

homes like that; one primary home here and then it was like a duplex in the back, and a lot of gardening on the side.

My grandmother, my mother's mother, would often move from daughter to daughter and she spent a lot of time with us. I remember her taking care of living things, of the plants, of the flowers. I remember having the windows open because California weather is great and the wind blowing through. It was a happy childhood.

Because I was the youngest of six, I kind of grew up as an only child because my siblings were out of the house by then. I would make a lot of trips to Las Vegas, though, because my mother's sisters all lived here. Every summer we would jump on the Greyhound and come to Vegas. I would spend weeks and months here with my cousins.

My aunts came to Las Vegas probably in the mid-sixties, maybe even earlier. They came when it was a dusty little town and there weren't many Mexican restaurants. So what do Mexicans do? They open up Mexican restaurants because you've got to feed people. My aunt, which I hope you have an opportunity to interview, this is Michael Flores' grandmother. Michael Flores works at the chancellor's office and I think I've tried to connect them. But anyhow, she opened up this restaurant on Charleston and Eastern area and it was called Casa Tequila. It was one of the few. Across the street was Doña Maria's. Hopefully you'll have an opportunity to interview some of the Martinez family, too, because they have a rich history here as well.

I would come to Vegas and I just thought Vegas was this place where only rich people lived. Mind you, I grew up probably more working class, poor to working class. I thought we were fine, but my mother never drove a car. We took the bus everywhere. She never spoke English, by the way, either. She only spoke Spanish. She became a naturalized citizen much later in life and always voted. She would always say, "When are you going to take me to vote? I've

got to vote Bush out." But I'd come down to Vegas and my aunt had this restaurant. I thought they were so wealthy because they had a two-story home and Redd Foxx lived down the street. You know who Redd Foxx is.

Yes, yes.

You probably don't.

I don't.

And they had their own business. I was like, *wow, and they drive a car*. I'm like, *they don't have to ride a bus.* I would come down. I have many fond memories of spending time with my cousins; we were very close in age, Laura and Marylou. It was the three of us. The leader of the pack was my cousin Laura. She was always getting us into trouble and thinking up all these schemes. I'd come and I'd spend all this time in Vegas and I'd go back to L.A. burnt because sunblock was not a thing back then and my legs all full of mosquito bites. I have fond memories of that.

Despite the fact that I was primarily raised by my mother and my sister—I have a sister who has always been a part of my life. She's the middle one. When she married she came back and lived with us, her husband and her. They'll come into this story as well on a number of levels because when we made the move to Las Vegas, it was because they came out and opened up their own Mexican restaurant, El Azteca on Charleston and Las Vegas Boulevard.

What's your sister's name?

Norma Gomez. I think she'd be a great person to interview, too. They have closed it down now, but it's where that Dragon casino is. That's where they had this shopping center and there was a Greek restaurant, sushi, Mexican, and something else. But they had a restaurant there for a decade and a half at least.

My sister was always a part of my life. My sister, Norma Gomez, she also runs this nonprofit organization here that's called *Milagros Escondidos*, hidden miracles, and it's for families with children with severe disabilities. It's primarily focused on Latino families and they talk about what resources are available to them. They are a peer support group as well. They have social events and things like that. My sister doesn't have any children with disabilities. She has worked at the school district for twenty-four years and she works with children with disabilities. She is the Mother Teresa of our family; her heart just goes out to everyone. She was always and still is an important part of my life.

Growing up in L.A. it was a great childhood. There were the ups and downs and my mother had to worry about me hanging out with the wrong group of people, so much so that she sent me to boarding school in Mexico when I was twelve.

How was that?

It was great. It was an awesome experience. In fact, she came to me and said, "Do you want to go to this school in Mexico?" It was in Monterrey, Nuevo León, *la Universidad Autónoma de Montemorelos*. I said, "Yes, sure." Because I think I was feeling the peer pressure as well. I went to L.A. Unified Public School District. Everybody was Mexican, Mexican immigrants and Asians. It was highly segregated, but I didn't know any different. I just thought this is what my world looks like. I started to have some questionable friends. This is like fifth grade. I didn't think they were getting in trouble, but later on in life, when I came back from boarding school, I was like, *ooh, yes, okay*. There was a path that clearly they were on that my mother did not want me on.

I went to public schools most of my early childhood, and then I went to boarding school when I was twelve for sixth grade and it was a transformative experience. It was a Seventh Day

boarding school. My mother was not particularly religious. She was a mover and she knew that something needed to be done. I guess she talked to other people, and someone said, "I know someone who knows someone who sent their daughter here. You ought to look into it." It wasn't so much the religious aspect of it. In fact, she was the most unreligious person you could ever meet. I'm Catholic.

Well, did you have a spiritual foundation in your family?

We're Catholic, yes. When I was born my mother didn't rush to baptize me or anything like that. I wasn't baptized until I was seven and that's because a sister of hers said, "You've got to baptize this child. I'm going to take her down to *La Placita Vera*. She took me down. Literally, this is how it happened. She needed a *padrino*, a godfather, so she asked this random man, "Will you stand in and be this child's godfather?" He said, "Okay." That was my godfather who I never saw ever again. Now, here is the best part. My aunt that did that, she's not even Catholic; she is Jehovah Witness.

Why did she think it was important for you to be baptized?

I don't know. I don't know if maybe she was Catholic at the time. I didn't figure this out until much later, and even when I did as an adult I didn't give it a second thought. I was like, *oh, okay, that's what my* Tía *Juanita did, big deal*.

But that speaks to my mother in that she was not particularly a religious person. She didn't like politics. She didn't like *chisme*. She kind of wanted to be left alone. Part of it was she had some difficulties in her life, like she was molested as a child and she was treated badly. Women back then—this was normal—in rural Mexico, it was male domination and women were kind of second class, and so she carried a lot of that. She never told me that actually. Later on I started to collect narratives from my aunts, and they didn't even say it outright and when they did

they were like, “Turn it off,” because my mother was still alive then. But it was really important for me to know that because I understood her better. I have a running joke that everyone goes to therapy because of their mother. It’s never the father. It’s always the mother. I think it’s because women have had to overcome a lot of major obstacles, and we think that with every generation, we hope, it’s going to be a little bit better and a little bit easier.

Break the cycle.

Yes, yes, yes, definitely. Even now with my daughter, my hope is that she doesn’t feel the pressure to perform as a woman for a man, and I don’t mean perform in a sexual way, but in everyday practices; that everything she does is to please the man, to elevate him. It’s very different. When I was growing up that was observed and seen by women, but it wasn’t articulated because the white feminist movement was primarily for white middle-class women that were bored at home whereas you had women of color, like my mother, who were immigrants and they had no choice. If they had a choice to stay home, they probably would have stayed home and raised their children and drank *horchata* all day or whatever.

Cafecito con leche.

Yes, and *conchas*. But that wasn’t an option. The experience of women of color here in the States and I think globally is very different than the kind of liberal white feminist movement that we’re all used to seeing and know about and circulate in the academy.

That was my childhood and I know I’ve gone way over and I know you probably have more questions, so I’ll pause there.

No, take your time.

That’s all really good. It ties so much together.

Yes. Any favorite family traditions growing up?

No, not really. I think that my mother was not traditional at all. She was not the type of person that loved to be in the kitchen. She would much rather be outside laying concrete and painting walls and looking for the next great buy of a house and fixing it up. She did some wild things. We had this marihuana plant growing in our backyard and she would take the marihuana and put it in alcohol. Do you know why? It's great for arthritis. She would sell it.

She was ahead of her time in many ways.

Yes. Medicinal purposes. We know this now and we can talk about it in these educated ways. But here is this woman with a second-grade education knowing what works, and so she would do that.

She was not a person of great traditions. I think because of her own upbringing, her childhood, her difficulties that it wasn't like, *oh, I want to create this wonderful environment for my children, these traditions*. I think it's a very privileged view of the world. It was about survival. It was about, how do I make the next day get here in a way where we still keep it together? Mind you, she kept it together pretty well. We always had a home. We always had food. My gosh, I went to boarding school.

Who cooked? Who prepared the meals? Did you learn to cook, young?

Did your older siblings?

I think so. Well, my grandmother lived with us for a long time. A memory that I have is there were always frijoles, *de la olla*, on the stove and tortillas. We always had to have cheese, tortillas and frijoles, and milk I guess. I guess I ate a lot of beans and eggs. I remember my grandmother would always make eggs, and I'd say, "I don't like eggs." I couldn't even eat two eggs; I would eat one egg as a child. I think as I got older Campbell's soup, sadly—this is generation of the seventies, 1970s—and a lot of cereal and Campbell's soup and Cup O'Noodles and stuff like

that, stuff that I would not give my children now. I think my sister—I guess there was cooking. My mother must have cooked, too. But it wasn't like around the holidays, *oh, let's make this special tradition*.

Her sisters would come; for a couple of years they would come and I remember that was fun because we'd all do a *tendido* in the living room where all the cousins would sleep together and I'd hang out with my cousins. There was always people living with us, too, actually. One of my aunts split up, and so she came and lived with us for a while with her son. Then my mother would always pick up random people. I am not kidding. One day she showed up with this fourteen- or fifteen-year-old boy who she saw, I guess, downtown near the Greyhound. He just arrived; he just crossed the border, basically. He didn't have any family. He didn't know anyone. She brought him home. She converted the garage into this living space with a bathroom and bed, and so random men would always live there because it was men that were crossing the border. This particular guy Bolo—that was what we called him; I don't know what his real name was—he ended up coming to Vegas, too. When we moved here he moved here, too. Later on, during the amnesty movement he became a resident, married, got a job, and he would still go visit with my mother.

Oh, how sweet is that.

He must be now in his fifties. We always had…People followed my mother, and so when we came to Las Vegas, there was another handyman. He's still alive. I don't remember his name. He was this handyman from El Salvador. She met him while she was fixing up her homes. She came across these two brothers from El Salvador and they would do a lot of work for her. When we moved to Vegas, she brought him here. Don Hiraldo; that's his name. He's this little, tiny man, very soft-spoken, but knows a little bit of everything. He came here and he made a life for

himself here in Vegas. In fact, at one point when my mother went back to Mexico when I was in college, she took him there, too, and did some handiwork there.

That's kind of my memories. It was a lot of movement, a lot of building, and a lot of moving forward and trying not to look back, moving forward, moving forward.

You talk a lot about her. How did she influence your trajectory?

My gosh. I mean…

Talk about that.

You're going to make me cry. Clearly she influenced my trajectory. Every mother does, I think. I think instilling that education is key.

Thank you for sharing.

Well, there's more. That's just the beginning.

I know, but I know it's emotional.

Yes. Education is key and I think that the narrative especially right now—I really thought we were moving away from this with progressive political leadership—this idea that Mexicans in particular don't value education and their parents don't prioritize it, I knew from a lived experience that that was not the case because my mother always said, "I could have been a good student." But she couldn't, so she is me and I am her.

I see. Were you the first in your family to go to college?

Oh, yes. Oh, yes, and I didn't stop there; I went to get a PhD. Essentially my own body of research looks at that; Latino students, how they progress, what works, what doesn't, not just in terms of social policy, but communities of support and things like that.

What schools did you go to?

When I moved to Las Vegas in ’86, I came out because the economy had really dipped in California and, also, we had had some difficulty in our family. . . She decided to sell everything. She had a home here that she had bought in the seventies as well in Henderson that she rented. She had different family living there. Sometimes it was my older brother with his family. Sometimes it was a *tía*. It just kind of circulated in the family. The house still stands and it was the last house she lived in and now my niece lives in it.

It’s still in the family.

It sure is. I came out first in ’86. I was about to go into high school and I came to live with my aunt that had that Mexican restaurant, Elaina. I lived with her about a year and then my mother came out. My sister came out because she had a house, too, down by Pecos and McLeod. You know where juvenile court is? Right in that neighborhood my sister had a house there. That’s when she came out, too, with her husband and her children and they opened up their Mexican restaurant.

We came out in ’86. My cousin was going to Gorman and I was living with my cousin and my aunt, so naturally I was going to go to Gorman, too. This aunt of mine was also divorced and it was all women. This is my life, just a bunch of women taking charge. The same story with my aunt; she didn’t really have a formal education, but she came here, opened up restaurants with her husband, split up, but still managed these restaurants and did very well for herself. I came out and went to Gorman. I was excited about that, a new place. I’ve always been someone that’s always looking for the next move, like, *ooh, how exciting; let’s go somewhere new*.

We came out and I went to Gorman with my cousin. I went from being a top student to whoop because it was just a different culture. At the time the deal was that I would come and also work at my aunt’s restaurant. I started working at fifteen. I turned fifteen here that summer. I

started working as a hostess and cashier at Casa Tequila and I did that twenty to twenty-five hours a week. I think part of it, too, was, *oh wow, I've got to balance work and schoolwork.* Then I did that with my sister and her husband's restaurant, La Azteca.

When I was at Gorman my senior year, I thought, *well, I've got to go see a counselor to see what I should do*, a high school counselor. He looked at my transcript and he's like, "Go to the community college." And so I said, "Okay." Even though I had the grades to get into UNLV at the time. It was an honor's math. I always took honor's classes. I didn't even know it until well into my twenties and thirties when I found an old report card and I said, "What's this *H* behind these classes?" It was Honors.

And you had no idea where they had put you?

I had no idea that I was in honor's classes; that I was actually not a bad student.

As they made you out to be.

I went to the community college and then I figured, *well, I guess I ought to go there,* to UNLV. I came on campus. I didn't know a soul. I was kind of walking around randomly trying to figure out, where do I go next? I saw someone that I knew, this guy from high school that used to date my cousin. I said, "I want to come here. Do you know where I go?" "Oh, that's Admissions and Records. You go down there to Flora…" Whatever building it was at the time.

I went there and I applied and I got in and continued to work at my sister's restaurant. One day when I was sitting in this class, Spanish for Bilinguals that Laura Gutierrez-Spencer taught, this guy sitting next to me said, "Hey, there's this club called UNA. It's United Hispanic Association of Students. You ought to come." I was like, "I don't have time. I work." "You ought to come; you ought to come." Finally, after a semester of trying to persuade me, I go. This

person, his name is Leo Sanchez and we're still friends. He's a probation officer now, married to Africa Sanchez, who is an attorney, phenomenal person.

I go and it's like three students sitting around thinking about, *we think we need a change; maybe we should change the name of the club. What should we do?* This small group of students, we changed it to Student Organization of Latinos. Then that becomes really an important vehicle throughout my undergraduate here at UNLV because it is a peer group that is ambitious, high-achieving and similar backgrounds. Children of immigrants are immigrants themselves trying to make it, trying to do good. We start to slowly expand it and soon we're the most active organization on campus. This is during the early nineties, I guess. That network of friends are still very close friends of mine and wonderful community leaders.

Then when we were there we thought, *oh, we need to build a bridge to other students like us*, so we developed the Latino Enrichment Program where we would bring students on campus and basically let them shadow us. We did this for several years and then the Latin Chamber—Tom Rodriguez and Maria Chairez—had this idea of creating this Latino Youth Leadership Conference. We were very close to the Latin Chamber because they kind of took us under their wings in that they invited us to fancy luncheons and galas and, when they had their golf tournaments, we got to volunteer. For a lot of us this was like another world; none of us had been exposed to these much more upwardly mobile-type events. It was like, wow, we get to go for free when the tickets are like two hundred dollars; yes, we're there.

We started to work with them very closely and they brought us into the Latino Youth Leadership Conference. Of course, the LYLC just celebrated its twenty-fifth year. It is a six night, seven day program that immerses students on campus and basically exposes them to mentors, peers, college careers and financial resources, college knowledge basically to be

successful. Many of these individuals are now are state leaders; they're legislators, they're doctors, they're attorneys, on and on, they're council people.

I'm an alumni.

Yes. See what I mean? Our network is now more than fourteen hundred individuals that have gone through it.

I was there in the early years. I was an undergraduate student.

It was a three-day thing. Students didn't sleep here. They were brought on campus. I think we had forty students and we were calling people. "Can you please come?" Now it's like applying to college; you have to write an essay, you have to get letters of recommendation, you have to do your transcripts. We have this whole committee of people that sit down…My kid probably can't even get into it now.

But I'm very proud of the LYLC. I started to make those connections in undergrad. Actually, my educational trajectory comes back to the LYLC because after I graduate with my degree in business, I went on my happy way and worked for the City of Las Vegas and was working in Human Resources. At the time I continued to be involved in LYLC. The organizer, Maria Chairez, one year told me, "I want you to go observe the California Youth Leadership Conference." Because that's what it's modeled after. "And I want you to bring back ideas." I said, "Okay, sure." What do I have to lose, right? I wasn't married. I was dating my husband. We met at UNLV. We met through SOL and he's been involved with LYLC, too.

I go out to California, Sacramento, and I observe. It's this robust, amazing program that now the elite schools of the nation go and recruit students, and I'm not kidding, like Stanford and Harvard. What started off being this program to catch the kids that would fall in between the

cracks became this very prestigious program, which is I think where LYLC is moving now. It's kind of a mixed bag.

Anyhow, while I was there I was so moved by the things that they were doing. You'll find this interesting. One of the things that I brought back from the California program was the skits and was the *familias*. Now, when you talk to students about LYLC, that is the thing they remember the most, the *familias* and the skits.

Can you tell us what the *familias* are and what the skits are supposed to show the kids?

It's a simple idea if you break them up into groups. The way it's evolved now is that you really build a family, and so there are peer mentors who have gone through the program and they are the facilitators for the entire conference. They are your point person. They're the ones that socialize you. They're the ones that give you the love and care and guide you throughout the week and, in many cases, for years to come. That was it. That was the idea. And we weren't doing that. I just said, "Let's create these families." They are still color coordinated, so they wear these bandanas. It's really flipping, also, many of these negative stereotypes of Latino culture. Bandanas, gangs, ooh, bad. We're saying, no, good. We're embracing our culture and it's actually not hindering us; it's helping us move forward.

In the skits it's this idea of really giving the participants a creative space to explore in a creative way the ways in which their lives shape who they are now and where they want to go, and so it was pretty open-ended initially. You could do a skit on whatever you want. A lot of the kids would do it on the speakers throughout the week and kind of poke fun. But a lot of them would get into some really deep issues: Sexism, racism, violence. They are vulnerable at that age, to begin with, as youth, and to shake them in that way, it's really transformative. It's transformative for adults.

That's what I did. While I was there, though, I heard this group of women talking about this program and it was a Harvard program. I thought, *I have never met someone that graduated from Harvard*. This woman was a Harvard graduate. I went up to her. Her name is Sandra…I used to know her last name. I can't remember her last name right now. It will come to me. I said, "My name is Magda and I'm observing the program." She was a facilitator. The program in California, they actually fly in their facilitators from around the country and they pay them a stipend. That's something I've been advocating for LYLC forever, since then. I said, "I hear you talking about this Harvard program. Can you tell me about it?" She said, "Well, basically it's this graduate program and you have to be nominated." It was like a creating awareness program, like a college access program. You meet with faculty. You meet with current students. It's over the weekend. I said, "Oh that sounds really interesting. I'd like to go. Can you nominate me?" She said, "Well, I don't know you." I said, "Well, what do you want to know?"

Long story short, we ended up becoming very close. She nominated me. I came back and I called my good friend Edith Hernandez. I hope you interview her as well. I said, "Hey, we're going to Harvard." She was involved with LYLC at the time, too. She says, "What do you mean?" I said, "I met this woman. There is this program. We're going to go to Harvard."

My intention was I wanted to go and take a picture in front of the John Harvard statue and under the gates and say, look, I went to Harvard once to visit. Well, we go there and my husband went, too, because, you know, I've got to take him, too. I don't know how we did it; we all got nominated and sponsored by other students that were hosting us that weekend. We met faculty. By the end of the weekend I thought, *hey, maybe I could do this*.

I applied along with Eddie, my husband, and I got in, as well as my friend Edith, and we went to Harvard. It was literally just serendipitous in that way—it was and it wasn't because I

think it speaks to the power of networks. If Maria wouldn't have asked me to go, I never would have known about this program. I never would have imagined myself just physically in the space of Harvard, not a student, not applying, just in the space. I owe a lot of that to the LYLC, to the idea behind the LYLC of the power of networks and the power of community and the power of instilling aspirations and supporting people to achieve those aspirations.

I went to Harvard. I took a leave of absence from the city. It was a transformative experience. It was all these other Latino students who were really wanting to change the world and saw their work as important and all these amazing faculty and people. I learned more outside the classroom than I did inside.

Walking by this theater that just happens to be on the way to my dorm, it said, "Free tickets for Bell Hooks." I had no idea who Bell Hooks was. Do you know who Bell Hooks is? She's a black feminist scholar. I picked up a bunch of tickets because I figured we got nothing going on; let's go see her. Sat in the front row and heard her reading from her book that had just been released, *Bone Black*. She shook me internally. Once she was talking about her own experience, one, she was using foul language, which as Mexicans, even though I was raised by strong women, we just didn't use bad words. I don't why. We just didn't. Here was this woman using the F word from a book, talking to a bunch of learned people from Harvard. I was shaken.

After she did that I was telling my friends that we'd gone to see her. I said, "I don't understand why she uses that language. It took away…I was so focused on that. That was so dominate." They said, "Why don't you go ask her?" Okay. So I stood in line and I asked Bell Hooks, "Why do you use the F word so much?" In retrospect, I don't know where I got the courage to do that because, one, I didn't know who she was, so ignorance is bliss. She said, "Why not?"

What year was this?

This was in 1998. She was really on top of her game. Later on in life I realized what an amazing experience to just—

Did she answer the question?

I think she said something along those—what stuck with me was, "Well, why not? It's describing what I felt. It's a word." Basically she was saying, it's the meaning you ascribe to it. Why shouldn't we use that language if it encompasses what we feel? To me that was revolutionary, like, wow, you don't have to adhere to someone else's rules and parameters; you can make your own rules and parameters.

That was my entry point into feminism was through black feminism, through Bell Hooks' work, Maya Angelou and Angela Davis. Then I started to realize, wait, there are Chicana feminists, too, and started to read people like Sandra Cisneros and Gloria Anzaldúa and Ruth Behar, who is Cuban but she uses a lot of Chicana feminism. When I was a PhD student at Michigan, I actually took classes from Ruth Behar. I actually met Sandra Cisneros. To me, I don't know that I would have had those experiences if I wouldn't have had the mother that I did and then the other mothers throughout my life, motherlike women.

I went to Harvard and then I came back and started to work with the city again because I figured, okay, now I have this fancy degree, I guess I'm back to work. I got moved into Neighborhood Services. One day the Latin Chamber said, "Hey, we're having this Career Day program. Can you come and be the keynote speaker?" I said, "Sure." It was here at UNLV, right here at Student Union.

What is Career Day?

It used to be this program where the Latin Chamber would take Latino students, like four hundred, and pair them up with a professional for one day and they would shadow the professional. Then those students would be eligible to apply for a scholarship, a one-time scholarship to come to any Nevada institutions. They've done away with it since then. Now it's primarily LYLC and other scholarships that they have.

Anyhow, I said, "Okay, sure." I went and prepared my notes. I couldn't even tell you what I said. Later on that day I went back to my office and I got a call from Richard Moore. You know who Richard Moore is? He is a former president of CSN, College of Southern Nevada, and he was the first president of Nevada State College. I pick up the phone and he says, "This is Richard Moore." I said, "Okay. Hello." He said, "Will you come have lunch with me tomorrow?" I said, "Okay."

I show up in his office and there was no lunch. He said, "I want to hire you." And I said, "Okay." He was at the program and hired me on the spot. But he didn't stop there. My friend Edith who was also at Harvard with me also spoke that day on behalf of UNR because she was working at UNR, a recruiter at the time. He called her in and said, "I want to hire you, too." He hired both of us. That was my entry into higher education.

What did he ask of you?

At the time I was working in Admissions and Records. I was the director of Admissions and Records. I started to work there. I was still young, still enthusiastic about the power of education. I still am. Then I started to really be critical of stuff I didn't like and I thought, *why do they do that? Why isn't this done this way? This doesn't help students. This is a roadblock.* I was just identifying all of things that could be done better. Then I said, "Who is making these decisions?" The people up there. "What do they have that I don't?" They had a PhD. I said, "Well, okay."

Taking from my mother's lived experiences, "I guess I need to get one of those. Where do I get one?"

There is this program called Project 1000. It was for students of color who are interested in graduate degrees. What you could do is you could apply through their portal and they had a consortium of schools that were a part of it. One application, it was like the common application and they would send it out to all these institutions. It was like Michigan State, University of Michigan, Wisconsin at Madison, all the Big Ten basically and a bunch of other selective institutions and not so selective institutions. They waved your application fee. I applied. I said, "What do I have to lose?" That's how I got into a PhD program.

A lot of these access programs, a lot of these social policies that we laid down during the civil rights movement, they did what they were supposed to do; they opened the pathways. They made it possible for people like me and people like you to be where we are. They are now all being slowly dismantled one by one.

Why is that?

Well, there are many theories and I think one of them is that fear and anxiety, social anxiety of mobility. I think fear of the unknown, fear of the other. There is no secret now. Before it was kind of subtle. Critical theorists, like Bell Hooks and Cornel West and Gloria Anzaldúa, they were in the face about systemic racism, but now the secret's out.

It's blunt.

It is quite blunt. I think it's fear of the unknown and I think it's anxiety of not having the same type of social mobility, economic mobility that existed before for predominantly white people. Now we see a lot of people of color who are engineers, who are doctors, who are lawyers, who

are professors, and I think the white population that's been working class, in particular, I think they're fearful that for their children it will be worse than it was for them.

These programs did what they're supposed to do and so I went to Michigan. I started off at MSU; I did one year there. But it was not such a good fit, so then I applied to University of Michigan. I was married at the time, so I came back after my Harvard degree and said, "Hey, I want to do a PhD." He said, "Okay, but you have to marry me because I'm not going to follow you if I'm not your husband." "All right, let's go get married." I went and got married. He went and did his master's while he was at Michigan. I did my PhD.

I was really fortunate to be in a place that really values graduate education. Again, these institutional resources saying, we believe in you so much that we're going to invest a lot of money in you to be successful, and what we ask in return is that you do whatever you're going to do to the best of your ability. I was a Rackham Fellow; that means I got a five-year fellowship that paid for all of my tuition, my health insurance for me and my family, it provided me a summer stipend, and paired me with a researcher that I could work with. I feel incredibly fortunate. By the way, my *comadre* Edith, we were both there together.

***Comadres* for life.**

Yes, for sure. We talk almost every day, even now. It was an incredible experience as well. It added to that Harvard experience. It had amazing faculty. It was intense because the academy, especially at the Michigans and the elite institutions as well, produce, produce, produce, and production in that context is usually get lots of grants and put out publications.

I worked with someone who was not in that same boat. It was a man by the name of John Burkhardt, a white man from Michigan, but a beautiful soul. He is still a clinical professor at

Michigan. He worked previously with the Kellogg Foundation and he brought me into his shop and we looked at higher education for the public good.

One of the projects that I worked on was looking at the pipeline to the presidency for minority serving institutions. We had an additional—we didn't; it was this other national organization in D.C. called IHEP, the Institute for Higher Education Policy. We received a ten-million-dollar grant to develop a program for three years to bring people into the presidency at minority serving institutions. He tapped me. He said, "Magda, I need you to do the evaluation for this program. For three years I was elbowing with all these people next in line to be presidents. It wasn't like graduate students. It was like provosts, deans, associate VPs of minority serving institutions.

I learned a lot there and it continued to expand my world. I was like, wow, there are students like me, like my entry point was like, why did I make it and others didn't? Then you start to see, okay, there's social policies like these access programs, like Harvard, and then my world instead of going like this, it went like this, from narrow to wider, and I started to look at the different types of post-secondary institutions and the way in which they transform not just students but communities and the nation as a whole and really are an important pillar of our democracy.

By then I knew too much to try to retreat to a quiet life in the country. People have invested in me and my success, and so I really feel this sense of commitment and urgency to give back, and that's why I'm still involved with the LYLC, still doing their evaluation. I think this year is going to be the first year that I haven't been as involved since the last six, seven years because I am going to be in Montreal presenting some research, but it's in great hands; Irene Cepeda. Now it's its own nonprofit and I was a part of that. I was like, "You need to make it its

own nonprofit. That was the original vision that the students that went through it would eventually take it, own it, and lead it, not the Latin Chamber. Latin Chamber is an important partner, but it needs to be the students that went through it." Now it's its own nonprofit. That's where I landed after a PhD.

I was not done with my PhD when I had my first daughter. I had both my children in graduate school. My husband said, "I want to get back home." I said, "Okay, but you have to find a job you really like." Lo and behold, he found a job; he applied for it here at UNLV. It was an assistant director in Student Services. He interviewed and they called him up and said, "Sorry, we can't offer you the assistant director position." He said, "Okay, thanks for calling." They said, "But we can offer you the director position." I don't know if you've met him, but he's a very charismatic person.

Then we came back to Vegas in '06. I thought I was out and then I came back in. I did my high school and my undergraduate here, went to Harvard, then came back to Las Vegas, continued to work with LYLC, made the transition to CSN, and then left for Michigan, and I thought, *I'm gone; I'm gone for good*. I came back, collected my data through LYLC. My dissertation actually looks at Latino students and first-year college experiences. Then I defended right in the midst of the Great Recession and started to apply for faculty positions and was offered faculty positions in the Midwest and the East Coast. At the time I thought*, man, if people like me don't stay in Vegas to make it work, then how do we expect other people to come to make it work?* I had some other pulls, too, like my mother was still here and family. But my mother was not one to make me feel guilty about, *you have to stay here with me*. She was like, "Do what you need to do." But I thought, *well, Jose Luis seems to be in a good place, too, so I'm going to make it work.*

I started working at the state agency of higher agency; otherwise known as NSHE. I did some interesting work there as well, oversaw some grants and got to see some pretty high-level policy and politics of higher education in the state. I was a little discouraged by some of the things that I saw, but continued to push forward. I then came here to the Lincy Institute. I got to stir the pot a little bit on a number of issues, including governance and ELL and K-12 funding. For the last three years I've been in a tenure-track position where I'm trying to see if they'll take me as one of their own. We'll see.

I can't imagine not.

Can you tell us a little bit about your professional work and what you do in education public policy?

Yes, I think I've been talking a little bit about that. Right now a lot of my work is looking at urban universities and their aspirations to top tier, or their achievement to top tier status.

So, UNLV.

UNLV is one of them. Actually, we started off with other institutions. We're doing case studies. We have seven institutions that we're looking at: Florida International, Houston University, George Mason, UTEP, UNLV and UNR; maybe it's just six institutions. We've been working on this project for a bit basically looking at how urban universities balance their social justice goals with their economic development goals. A lot of times when they move in that direction, they have to do it at a price and it's usually at access and affordability of the students, and urban universities are typically important gateways for students of color, low-income immigrants, so we're looking at that.

Then another project that I'm looking at and collecting data for is women in leadership and policy making. We have the first female majority legislature. I've been interviewing all the

women. We have a very diverse, racially and ethnically diverse legislature, so I'm particularly interested in the women of color and their narratives and their stories of their trajectory, not unlike what you're doing here today. I'm really excited about that work and that's the work I'll be presenting in Montreal this summer on how the dynamics of policy making and policy discourse has shifted because of the female-majority legislature. That's some of the work that I've been doing.

I feel incredibly blessed. I have a dual appointment right now, so it's tenure-track half-time and Lincy Institute the other half. But when I was at Lincy just full-time, there are certain individuals that come across your life and that you don't realize what an impact they'll have for a number of reasons whether good, bad, but somehow they shape your life. I think Rob Lang is one of those individuals. He is…I don't know how to describe him other than he is a fireball. He's incredibly passionate about many issues and one of them is bringing greater equity to Southern Nevada, in particular in terms of public investment. I started to work with him around issues related to governance, issues related to K-12 funding. He's been a champion of mine, as well as for Southern Nevada and for UNLV especially.

I've had these different champions throughout my life, my mother and my family certainly being one of them, but operating from a perspective of, *we don't know what it's like up there, but you should go and we'll still be here*. Then through graduate school, primarily men because this is who dominates the academy, white men. At Harvard I was fortunate enough to have a black man advisor, Chuck Willey, who was a part of the desegregation movement in the East Coast. Then at Michigan, John Burkhardt, who took great care to make sure that I was not going to fall into a million pieces because of this crazy thing we call a PhD and doctoral studies. I still love him very much. I still respect him and see him. He was recently honored at a national

organization, Association of Hispanics in Higher Education, AHHE. Here is this white guy being honored by this Latino organization; that just tells you the type of person that he is. And then here at UNLV, it's been Rob Lang, who says, "Yes, that doesn't seem right. You need to think about that more and you need to write an op-ed piece about that. You want to research that? Yes, I'll find the resources for you to research that issue."

I think that obviously being in Las Vegas has something to do with it because opportunities just don't happen in a vacuum. Place matters. If there is a gap and if there is a need in something and if you can offer a solution for that then you're positioned right. The thing about Nevada and Las Vegas is that we think we're a small town, but we really aren't. We're like the twenty-fifth largest metropolitan city in the nation. We're not that small, but we still operate like that. It's still very malleable, not like other cities our size that have this very engrained culture and established individuals and strong gatekeepers. Here, it's like, I want to interview legislators; sure, go ahead, and they will let me in their office and they'll give me an hour, two hours, or fifteen minutes. I think part of it is that the city itself is open to change even though it doesn't feel like it sometimes and it's a very open place to people. It encompasses the type of person my mother was; looking forward, not back. What do we need to do to make it through? What do we need to do to ensure that we have the building blocks to get there? I think that's why there is such a strong connection to this place aside from family, obviously.

Two things that bring people to Las Vegas: The sun and low taxes. I think for many people of color, though, Latinos in particular, it's jobs, obviously. But even people that have options with jobs will come here because of the sun and they want to retire soon. But I think for Latinos in particular it's always been a gateway to work, jobs, and to create stuff here whether it's a Mexican restaurant or a construction company or a dump company, whatever it is,

childcare, or if you want to be an academic or if you want to run for office. Look at our Latino legislators. We're kind of ahead of the curve. The city of Las Vegas is what the nation is going to be in 2050, and that's not my prognosis, those are demographers.

I heard that from Bill Brown, I guess is where I first heard that.

Absolutely, yes. It's one of the Brookings' scholars. That is the story of me and that is the story of how I intersect with Las Vegas: People, places, and the space. It's messy. It's full of opportunity, but full of pain as well because it has a history, too, of not being inclusive in some areas. With Latinos, we're at a point where we are the majority. When you look at K-12 and you look at who's coming up through the pipeline that is the new America; that is the new Nevada. Either we try to push it away or we embrace it and try to identify the strengths and build it.

What's it like to raise your children here?

It was really hard initially. I really wanted to be somewhere else, like Ann Arbor. Have you been to Ann Arbor?

Oh, yes. It's a great college town.

Right. Or Cambridge. This is my frame of reference. How lucky am I? It was difficult from that perspective. But then I started to realize and I would tell my husband [Jose Melendrez], "We need to make the community that we want. We can't go and just run into the arms of something that's established. We need to establish what we want." In fact, when I made the decision that, okay, we're going to stay here and we're going to make this our home, I called my good friend Nora Luna, who I hope you interview, too, and I said, "Nora, I'm going to stay here, but this is what I need from you. We're going to create this group and it needs to be a *mujeres* network. Let's get women together once a month. Let's talk about our celebrations, our challenges, and let's support each other."

Nora is an amazing person. You give her an idea and she runs with it. We started meeting, The Mujeres Network. I said, "I just want to have a good time and let's meet over drinks." I don't drink, by the way. "Let's just have hors d'oeuvres and meet over drinks." Well, you get a roomful of Latina women, they're not just going to do that. They're going to want to solve the world's problems. Next thing you know, we have this focus group and we're building a policy paper and we're identifying policy priorities and we're pitching it to legislators. I'm like, *I just wanted to have fun.*

Now that you mention that can you touch a little bit on the bills that you helped pass to improve quality of ELL firms?

Okay. Let me just tell you The Mujeres Network is now a part of the Latin Chamber because what happens when you do something good and successful? The reward for good work is more work, by the way. Never forget that. But when you are successful, everybody wants to be associated with you. When you're down and out, *we don't know her*. But when you're successful, everybody wants a piece of that and that's good. Now it's a part of the Latin Chamber and they'll do their monthly events. It's more with professional women from the Latin Chamber.

In terms of policy work, I have testified on issues related to governance, primarily Promise Scholarship; that's scholarship for community college students. I don't do too much of that anymore because I'm focused more on my research and writing. I do hope it does inform that conversation eventually. That's some of the work I did. When I was just at Lincy, I was very external, so very engaged with many different types of policy and economic organizations that had a stake in education policy. I was on this committee and that committee and convenings and in the thick of it all. It was very exciting initially. You're like, *oh, I'm somebody. Look at me. I*

got invited to this meeting. But I knew that that was not me and that was not what I was prepared to do my entire life. It's really important work and I don't want to diminish it in any way, shape or form. I knew that I wanted to get back to research and teaching, and so I have intentionally backed off from some of those type of work in the last two years to focus more on collecting data, doing more scholarly writing, collaborating with colleagues here internally, and things like that.

One last question. What is the last thing you would like to mention about the Latino community or anything that you want to say for future students like me or anyone listening to this interview?

I think we're living in a really difficult time right now with our current political leadership and it's not just the United States, it's the world; something's happening. Sometimes I wish I knew more about history so that I could put it in context and it wouldn't be as scary. But it's really scary. I think that sometimes I wake up and I think, *man, I'm a first-generation American. Are my children going to be able to enjoy the fruits of what this country offers and what the state offers? Are we going to have to keep moving north?* Obviously, we haven't moved to Canada. I think that it takes a lot of courage and a lot of self-reflection to know that you belong and that you have purpose in this place. Whether it's trying to get through high school or deciding on what university to go to or you lost a job and now you've got to try to find another job, there is always going to be downfalls and that's what makes life so dynamic. But we've just got to keep lifting our chin up and moving forward.

I used to have a good friend named Polly Gonzalez. Do you know who Polly was? She was the first Latina news anchor here in Las Vegas.

She was in a tragic car accident, right?

She sure was, yes. She was a beautiful soul. Polly was a beautiful, beautiful person internally and externally. She had two daughters. I met her through LYLC and different types of community events and we became close friends. She tragically passed while I was in Michigan. I remember when she would talk to students. She had a great story of how she was raised, low income and always wanting to be this newsperson. She said that people would call her when she was on the news and say, "You mispronounced this word," or, "That's not proper grammar," and so on and so forth. She said, "The only thing I could do was get up and keep walking." And she would literally walk. She would say, "You just keep walking; you just keep walking." I think of that often. I think, *yes, we've got to just keep walking and keep imagining another way of being and another way of living*.

Right now our democracy is really at risk, really at risk. Again, I think that places like UNLV, higher education, are one of the most critical pillars in our democracy. I think that students need to not check out and keep walking. Keep moving forward, reaching out, and looking back at maybe stories like this, maybe stories within their own families, because it's there; the answers are there. We just have to ask the question and look and listen.

Awesome. Thank you so much.

You're welcome. Thank you for including me.

[End of recorded interview]