

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. SANDRA GRAY

An Oral History Conducted by Elsa Lopez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
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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



In 1991, the demographic landscape of Las Vegas was changing, when Dr. Sandra Gray’s Mexican parents decided to move from southern California to Las Vegas, where other family members lived. She was seven years old, from a Spanish-speaking family, and exhibited strong academic skills that her parents encouraged. However, it was not a perfect youth. With great candor, Dr. Sandra Gray talks of about her own childhood trauma and embracing an inspirational path helping youth, especially in the Latinx community. She also speaks about being the parent of her biracial children.

Dr. Gray owns and operates Innovation Behavioral Health Solutions, LLC. She earned her Ph.D. in clinical psychology, as well as dual masters in mental health counseling and in psychology. Her dissertation research, training, and experience has focused on racial and ethnic differences in

the experience of trauma, specifically sexual abuse. Dr. Gray's pre-doctoral and post-doctoral training focused on psychological and neuropsychological evaluations, respectively.

As a bilingual, first-generation Mexican American, much of her work has involved working with Spanish-speaking populations and other minority groups. In keeping with her dedication to the mind-body connection to wellbeing, in 2012, Dr. Gray founded Empower LV, a nonprofit that makes both sports and academic tutoring accessible to more young people in Las Vegas.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Interview with Dr. Sandra Gray
December 13, 2019
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Elsa Lopez

Preface.....iv

Childhood growing up in Los Angeles and Las Vegas, identifies as Latina and Chicana. Family migration story from small town near Durango, Mexico; maternal through Bracero program and paternal illegally. ESL, trauma, family traditions. Predominantly Caucasian east side of Las Vegas 1991; Panaderia Universal bakery; schools and academic excellence;1 – 6

Her personal background and choosing to become a psychologist specializing in trauma and sexual abuse; Desert Pines High School, SOL, athletics; caring for students’ mental health.....6 – 10

UNLV, first-generation college graduate; School Refusal Lab, Dr. Kearney; infant discrimination studies; Hispanic population outreach; starting her own behavioral health agency in 2008; master’s degree 2012; PhD 2016 in clinical psychology; about being a behavioral health counselor; boxing experience.....11 – 17

Growth of her business, building a team; contracts with CCSD and Department of Family Services and Vocational Rehabilitation; work with immigration attorneys. Latinx culture, depression; equity in access, stigmas, decolonization of mental healthcare.....18 – 24

Empower LV, her nonprofit, 501(c)(3), founded in 2012 to provide youth access to sports and tutoring; community partners such as Police Athletic League and the Raiders. Teletherapy, tele-tutoring.....24 – 30

Raising biracial sons in Las Vegas, how differs from her personal experience. Details from her doctoral program experiences, dissertation published in Journal of Child Sexual Abuse, as a Latina. Her quinceañera; family’s religious foundation; her bicultural wedding, Monday Fun Day tradition.....31 – 35



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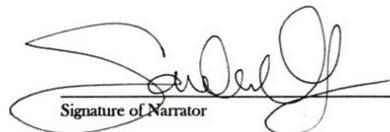
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Hello. The day is December 13th, 2019. My name is Elsa Lopez. I am here in the Oral History Research Center. Today I am joined by...

Barbara Tabach.

And...

Sandra Gray.

Sandra, can you please pronounce and spell your name for us?

It's pronounced Sandra [*sahn-drah*] Gray, but I go by both Sandra [*saan-dra*] and Sandra [*sahn-drah*], and it's S-A-N-D-R-A, G-R-A-Y.

Thank you. Dr. Gray, how do you identify?

I identify as a Latina and a Chicana.

Great. Thank you. We're going to begin all the way at the very beginning with your childhood. Tell us a bit about where you grew up.

Mostly I grew up here in Las Vegas. I moved here when I was about seven years old. I relocated from Los Angeles. My parents emigrated from Durango, Mexico. I was born here in the States. We lived in L.A. and moved here right before the riots, so we just missed that. We moved to the east side of town where I spent most of my life growing up.

Have your parents ever shared their migration story with you?

Yes. On my maternal side, my grandpa was part of the Bracero program back in the 1940s. He was probably about forty years old, so about 1945-ish when he started working as part of that, working in the fields and that. He was able to legalize, get visas for his children, and so my mom was able to obtain her visa at the age of twelve. Her and her siblings would all come and work here in the fields in different parts of California and in Oregon. With the money that they earned,

they would give all to my grandpa and my grandma. What they did is they started saving up money and bought land in Mexico.

They grew up in a town called which they call La Carreta; it's a very small town outside of the city of Durango. Growing up, my mom was going back and forth every six months, coming out to the fields and working six months at a time and then returning to Mexico, and she did that until she was about twenty-one years old when she got a job at a factory in L.A. It was a clothing factory. Growing up, she was pretty well off compared to other people in her town.

They would employ people. By the time my mom was probably eighteen, my grandpa had earned enough money to buy about thirty to thirty-four *hectareas* which is about eighty-four acres. They were very much into agriculture and planted corn and beans, and so they lived off of that and they were able to employ people in their town. But then she came back when she was about twenty-two years old with my dad, and I came along shortly after.

On my paternal side, my dad grew up very impoverished, so he was working from the age of six in fields in Mexico. It was four of them at the time, so a total of six of them. He had a really rough childhood from the time he was about five to about nine or ten; at that point his parents left him with someone in Mexico so that they could get their legalization status fixed, and then he came out to the States at the age of twelve, (Spanish/*via a coyote*), so illegally.

But he started attended school at around eighth grade in California and attended one year of high school, dropped out so that he can work and help send money back home. He stayed out in the States, went back to Mexico occasionally. Then once they settled, he and my mom—they almost moved back to Mexico. But my mom really wanted me to go to school, because during her time working, since she was about twelve, in the fields, she didn't get much education in either in Mexico or in the States. She probably completed about a fourth-grade level of

education. As a couple they decided, we're going to stay so our kids can go to school and learn English. Here we are.

Can you describe your childhood in L.A.? What was that like?

My childhood in L.A.—very vaguely, I remember being in ESL classes. I remember having a lot of separation anxiety when I would start school. At about first grade, I went to a school in East L.A. where half of my school day was in Spanish and half of it was in English. Spanish was my first language, and I didn't get any exposure to English until I was in school. I spent time in ESL classrooms. We moved around quite a bit. I remember moving to Sacramento for about a year when I was in kindergarten. At that point I remember my kindergarten teacher asking who was going to pick me up, because, again, I had that separation anxiety, and I wasn't very fluent yet. I remember not being able to say my aunt's picking me up, so I just said, "My *tía* is picking me up." That's kind of what I remember in terms of my upbringing in California.

You mentioned siblings, right?

Yes. I have two brothers. I'm the oldest. I'm thirteen years older than my youngest sibling, and then my other brother is about three years younger than me.

What's the relationship like with you and your siblings?

It was good. It is still actually really good. We're a very close-knit family. In our culture extended family is very much valued, so we grew up with lots of extended family, family gatherings and things like that. When we visited Mexico we never really went on vacation; we were just going back home with my parents and spent some time there growing up; that, or we were going because we had a death in the family or something, but never much travel or vacationing.

Do you remember some of the traditions or celebrations that you would have in Mexico with your family or that you celebrated?

I remember celebrating my birthday in Mexico at one point. We would go months at a time, not so much in terms of tradition, but I remember going to school. My grandma's home was right in front of the school in this small town that they lived in, and so I remember going to school with them, just kind of going for fun.

In terms of the typical traditions, it would be the 24th of December and not putting down your Christmas tree until the sixth, *Día de Los Reyes*, the Three Kings. We did Easter where we broke eggshells on people's heads. Those were some of the typical traditional holidays that we celebrated.

That's great. Now, why did your family move to Las Vegas?

We really actually followed one of my paternal uncles who my dad grew up very close with. But really for job opportunities. When we moved to the east side of Vegas, we lived right off Bonanza and Marion area. Back then we were probably one of two Hispanics in the neighborhood. I remember that the other Hispanics who lived on the corner of our cul-de-sac, they owned a bakery. It wasn't very diverse back then where now it's predominantly Hispanic or African American. I remember our neighbors didn't look like us. We had some families who were Filipino, but the rest were Caucasian. It's a drastic change now to how the east side looks.

What year was this?

It was in '91 when we moved out here.

Out of curiosity, did they own a Hispanic bakery? Did they sell that type of bread, your neighbors?

Yes, they did. It was the *Panadería Universal*, so Universal Bakery. It was on Eastern and Bonanza back then. I remember getting cakes from that store. The Hispanic community was growing a lot, starting to grow at least back then. Yes, they owned a Hispanic bakery.

What school did you attend?

I attended Elbert B. Edwards Elementary School. It was right on the corner of my cul-de-sac. I started in the second grade there. I relocated probably somewhere within the second-grade year because I was placed in a classroom that was in a portable. I remember being put in ESL, but once I was assessed again, I got moved into a different classroom. My dad remembers I used to be in charge of a lot of things in that class, because my teacher thought I was really smart. Academically I did well up until my adolescent years, I think, probably because of some experiences I had.

Do you remember any teachers that stood out to you, or that you remember to this day as being influential or kind?

Yes. Actually, my second-grade teacher, Ms. Scratton; I remember her having so many animals in her classroom, like hamsters. She had a tarantula and Guinea pigs in her classroom, and so we would take turns being in charge of them. She stood out to me just because she was a great teacher. Also, my third-grade teacher filled my life with a lot of books. Her name was Ms. Smith. We did a lot of spelling bees in the class, and so whoever won the spelling bee would be able to pick a book out of the bookshelf, and so I made sure to win a lot. I accrued a book collection, and I think that's where my love for reading started.

Did your family remain in that area of East Las Vegas for a while?

Yes, we stayed there. I remember living there and I was coming to UNLV as an undergrad. We lived there for quite some time. Then they relocated to Henderson and then they relocated back to the east side of town once I was already an adult and had my kids.

Now my parents' goal is to retire. My dad has always wanted a ranch-style life, so they bought a home on an acre in Pahrump. They have goats and chickens and turkeys. That's how they were brought up. With my agricultural background that's what they love.

That's amazing. What brought them back to East Las Vegas that second time around?

I think it was more of the housing market crisis that happened around that time. They had invested a lot in their home that they purchased in Henderson, and then everything collapsed, and so they decided to relocate and move back to the east side. Probably about two, three years ago, they relocated to Pahrump.

What middle school did you attend?

I went to Dell H. Robison Middle School. By the time I was in middle school, it was predominantly Hispanic and African American student population. I still remember very much enjoying reading and writing. I remember I got one of my poems published when I was in sixth or seventh grade for a contest or something.

That's awesome.

I started having some struggles academically and some behavior problems as well. When I was three years old, I was sexually abused. Then when I was about twelve, I was molested by an older family member. I think that and...I grew up in two different cultures. My parents are very much Hispanic, Mexican culture, so they didn't quite understand American culture and what that looked like in terms of wanting to hang out or wanting to go out; it was just not allowed. There were some contributions from the machismo values in Mexico where my brothers could do

things, but I couldn't, or not being allowed to go out and hang out. There was that that contributed, I think, to some of the issues I had, but also some of my own experiences with sexual abuse and things like that.

That's part of what you work with nowadays, right? I think I saw on your website.

Yes, I specialize in trauma and sexual abuse. I actually did my dissertation on...The title was Exploring the Racial, Ethnic and Gender Differences and the Effects of Child Sexual Abuse in a National Sample of Adolescents. I looked at how kids use coping mechanism, male-adaptive coping mechanism specifically, like substance use or behavioral problems, depression, suicidality; I kind of looked at that. Even with my first master's, I did my capstone project on a male-focused sexual abuse prevention program, and so I was very much interested in that. I learned along the way about myself and about how it impacted me in terms of growing up. Academically I earned really good grades up until...something must have triggered everything else, and I started having some behavioral problems.

Did you have a support system at school? I know that when these things happen ideally I'd like to think that there are people at school to help. Sometimes it's not the case, of course.

But what was your experience?

I think being in middle school, people didn't really know what my background was in terms of my academic functioning, so there was nobody who would have been able to say, *oh I wonder why she stopped earning straight A's*, or, *what are these behavior problems about?* It was more so, I think, getting labeled. My parents didn't have enough information or education to know, hey, what's going on with my kid? Rather it was perceived as rebellious. In our culture, not listening, you're just being bad. That caused a lot of problems in my household, but I don't think they every once thought, hey, what's going on with you? I didn't get much of that help.

In fact, when I was in ninth grade, I got expelled from school. I got expelled from school for fighting. It was probably my first or second quarter of ninth grade. I was put in one of those court continuation schools, which was really weird for me because I had a strong academic background, and when I got to that school, it seemed like everybody was doing fourth-grade math. I was like, *really? All bad kids do fourth-grade math?*

It was quite an experience, but I think it definitely led me to the path that I'm at now. I fell in love with psychology when I took my Psych 101 course here. Just hearing my instructor, I had been undecided for a long time with regards to my major, and I remember being in that course and I'm like, *ah, this is so interesting*. Never once did I put the pieces together with regards to, *oh, this is why I got into psychology*. For me it was always like I'm really interested in it more so than, *oh, I got into it because I experienced this* or because that happened to me.

Yes, I had a lot of interesting experiences growing up. I survived not only sexual abuse, but sexual assault in high school and relationships. Being a survivor of sexual abuse puts you at risk of being re-victimized over and over and over again. That's exactly where I'm at now.

Upon graduating high school did you know that you wanted to go to UNLV, or did you have any plans?

My ninth-grade year, I ended up going back to another high school. I went to Desert Pines High School, which is where I graduated from. I remember going back there and having to sit with the dean. I was coming from this court continuation school. I remember being put on a behavioral contract. I was this really bad kid. But I think schools now are doing a way better job about looking at trauma informed approach with kids, but not back then. But in high school I met a lady; her name was Jeri Berlin...Give me a second.

Take your time. This is really kind of you to be so candid. It's helpful.

Yes. I think it happens so often and people don't talk about it. I thought long and hard about how honest I wanted to be (in this interview).

I met Jeri Berlin. I want to say she was a counselor. She was part of the administrative staff, but I feel like she really took interest in me and saw the potential that I had. I'm really grateful for her because a lot of people didn't.

Was she a teacher?

I think she was an administrator. She was like a counselor. I remember her talking to me about submitting my application. She started talking to me about UNLV. She basically schooled me on FAFSA and taught me about how I can access Pell Grants to go to school.

During high school I really knew that I wanted to be a doctor, some kind of doctor. I didn't know if I wanted to be a psychologist. I didn't quite find that out until I was here at my Psych 101 class.

Yes, she took interest in me and she really helped guide me in terms of figuring out what I needed to do to get into college and what that process would look like. I participated in the student organization of Latinos back then, and so I received their medal that they gave out to students. I ended up being eligible for the Millennium Scholarship, and so I was able to use those monies to put towards school. It was really difficult because my parents don't have a strong educational background, so they couldn't really inform me as to what I needed to do or what that process looked like, so I was really blessed to have this lady and that she actually saw something in me.

In high school I started to kind of shape up in about my sophomore year. I started really focusing back on my grades because I really struggled. I think looking back—as a psychologist, I can identify a lot of the emotional difficulties I was having including things like disassociation,

which is commonly seen in PTSD and complex trauma. Nonetheless, I started to do well academically again and started focusing on what it is that I wanted to do. Things started to change then for me.

I applied to UNLV and got accepted. I started my path. I initially was majoring in fine arts, which is really different. Then I went to criminal justice and then I was undecided. Then I found myself in that Psych 101 course and it was psychology from then on.

Quickly, you mentioned when you were at Desert Pines that you were in SOL and you became more involved in the school. What was SOL like at the time?

It's hard for me to remember a lot of things, I think partly because of my trauma history. I remember being part of a group that went to the Nevada State Bank and got exposed to different career paths. It wasn't really focused on—I guess it was focused on Latino students back then, but it was more so like an organization to guide us into career paths and things like that. That's what that was like.

I participated in sports, which I think saved my life.

Tell us about that.

I started playing soccer for Desert Pines High School. I also did track and volleyball. I stayed in sports throughout my whole high school career. I definitely think it was a good release and a good coping mechanism, which obviously inspired me to do Empower, right?

Yes, I participated in those kinds of activities. I started to really focus on my grades and making sure that I had that GPA so that I could get into college. I remember being in a geometry class in ninth grade, so I was bright. I was in there with juniors. I think that Ms. Berlin saw that potential in me and I think she was a key player in making sure that I got on the right path.

You mentioned that now schools are getting better at identifying these issues? Is that because there are more school counselors in CCSD high schools?

I think we have more knowledge about how trauma and what kinds of traumas impact us. Growing up in low-income households, you're more likely to experience community violence, which I did. I remember being at parties or different things that we were doing in high school and being shot at, not towards me specifically, but you're exposed to community violence. Most kids who grow up low-income are more likely to be exposed to violence, to traumatic events, and then when those traumatic events compound, now you're looking at complex trauma. I think that the research and the information that's available is really informing not only schools but the mental health field about how these issues can manifest, not only internally—we can internalize things, which comes out as depression and anxiety—but we also externalize things that show up as behavioral issues and anger. I remember being a really angry person in middle school. I think that's why they're doing a better job: We have more knowledge about how that affects kids.

One of the things that I've learned in my career is that there is no such thing as a bad kid. There is no such thing. Kids are a result of their experiences, things that they've gone through. I always explain to my patients that adults can talk about stuff that happened; we can process things that way, but kids, they don't. We don't even make informed decisions because our brain isn't fully developed until we're in our mid-twenties. That's what I mean by my career has really informed me about my own experiences and what that looked like.

I'm an educator and I'm hoping to work in CCSD. I've done some research on this topic, so that's how I've educated myself. Who in the school is kind of responsible for making sure these kids have proper mental health...?

I think it's everybody's responsibility. You have your administrative staff and you also have your school counselor, but as teachers, you're the ones seeing the students for a majority part of the day, probably more so than parents. You have them for six to seven hours depending on the school that you attend. I think as adults we tend to focus on the disruptive kid. The other kids who may be depressed or are anxious, they're kind of shut down and withdrawn and they're not really causing a ruckus in your class. It's those kids that are being disrespectful or belligerent or defiant that are probably going through a lot of things and they're externalizing. It's showing up at school.

I remember in seventh grade I had a teacher that I always clashed with. I don't even know what it was about. I had never, never been disrespectful to a grownup before. Something about him just triggered me and I would go off in class to the point where I got changed around in his classes because I always found someone to team up with in my class.

I think teachers can contribute greatly to making sure that kids are getting their needs met. Instead of being labeled as a bad kid, I probably could have used counseling.

Talk to us about your time at UNLV and how you navigated all of college life. Were you a first-generation college student?

I am. I'm a first-generation college graduate. I'm a first-generation high school graduate. I'm the first doctor in my family, at least my paternal side; we have a psychologist on my mom's side as well. At UNLV I really had to take the initiative and teach myself and learn a lot about what that process looked like. I worked full-time and went to school full-time. I remember I worked at the Rio as a bus person. I worked there for a few years. I remember bringing my books out on my break and trying to study when it was slow and really making sure that I could pay my way through college if I needed more than what the Pell Grant or the Millennium covered, so being

able to purchase my books and getting myself to and from school. I think my parents were...not uninvolved, but just completely unaware of all the processes I had to go through to be successful in school. I mentioned I'm thirteen years older than my younger brother and it's only now where they realize, *oh, this is everything you had to go through?* To make sure that you paid for college. I was self-motivated.

That's awesome.

I participated in the School Refusal Lab with Dr. Christopher Kearney when I was here, and also, I was a research assistant for Dr. Ramsey Reynolds and she ran a lab where we were researching discrimination studies on infants and how they perceive different faces, like discriminating among different genders and ethnicity. I remember participating in that and making it so that we were able to reach the Hispanic population back then and get a representative sample for her study. I remember doing that.

I also remember having a really hard time during that time emotionally to the point where she was like, "Hey, what's going on with you?" I went from thriving and achieving to then, again, struggling emotionally. Back then I was in a pretty negative relationship, and so again with the re-victimization over and over again.

Can you tell us a little bit more about re-victimization means?

Being a victim of something, specifically sexual abuse, for example, childhood sexual abuse, increases your risk of being victimized again, and so you become more vulnerable to others type of abuse or assault. Oftentimes you'll see that individuals who have a history of complex trauma will get into unhealthy relationships, or they're more likely to become sexually assaulted again, or to become a victim again, and that's what that means in terms of within the trauma perspective.

You mentioned that for your work you reached out to the Hispanic population. Can you tell us about how you did this?

Being Spanish speaking, I was reaching out to families to see if they could bring their infants in. We needed different age groups. At the time for part of the sample she didn't have enough Hispanic individuals to be representative of the population here in Las Vegas. I was basically just calling. We would go on public pages of births, and so whenever we needed an age group, we would reach out to the family and say, "Hey, we were seeing if you wanted your baby to be part of this study." That's what I did. Then they would come in and we would have the infant looking at two different sets of faces and we were coding. That's what I did then.

That's cool. When you graduated did your whole family come out to the graduation?

They did. I graduated in December of 2006. Yes, it was a big deal because it was me and a paternal cousin—we graduated together. We had started our journey here at UNLV together. Yes, we had a gathering and a party for it. Even high school we had a party for it because it was a big deal, being a first-generation high school graduate. Yes, they did come out.

That's so awesome. What were your plans post-undergrad?

Post-undergrad, I had taken a neuropsychology course here, and my professor—it was a really interesting course. We got to dissect brains and we had an actual human brain that we could look at. I remember doing really well in that class. He recommended me to someone who owned a facility up in northern California, and they came out and interviewed me for a job and I got hired. My plan was to move to northern California, Santa Rosa, because I had gotten this position. My plan was to attend a PhD program there.

But in January I found out I was pregnant with my son, and so that kind of threw me for a loop, and so I didn't go back to school until about 2009. I had obtained a job as a provider liaison

for a company called APS Healthcare out here. What they did is they basically met with behavioral health providers to ensure that they were providing services. I'm not really sure. But I met Dr. Sandel Calley at that time who was an MFT. She also had a PhD in psychology. She introduced me to the world of behavioral health here and suggested I should start my own company and go back to school. She introduced me to online schools because I had my baby at the time.

It was really scary to transition into being a business owner. It was 2008 at the time. After undergraduate I wasn't able to pursue what my goals were. I had to take a break. Then in 2008 I started my own behavioral health agency with a bachelor's. Then I went back to school in 2009 and got my first master's degree in 2012.

What was your undergrad in again?

It was in psychology, and then I minored in family studies counseling.

How did you choose clinical psychology as opposed to the other branches of psychology?

I didn't go into clinical psychology until later. Because I owned a behavioral health agency, we provided rehabilitative mental health services to kids that were primarily in the foster care system. That's where my trauma work began. I earned my first master's in mental health counseling, so I got licensed as a clinical professional counselor, intern at first. Then I decided to go back to school right after I finished my first master's program, earned a master's in psychology in 2014, and then completed my PhD program in 2016. That's when I transitioned right into the PhD in clinical psychology.

I think ever since undergrad I got really interested in clinical psychology. I knew I wanted to do testing and I knew I wanted to continue doing some work in trauma.

Can you tell us about your time working as a behavioral health counselor?

I started off doing psychosocial rehabilitation. It's basically a supplement to therapy. As a bachelor's level clinician or provider, I would go out to the community, in the homes. I remember reaching out to a specific foster care agency that was led back then by Trudy Parks, who is now deceased, but she gave me my first set of clients.

Psychosocial rehab is termed PSR. I worked one on one with these kids who were in foster care, and so I worked on teaching them coping skills and behavior modification and, aligning with the goals of therapy, making sure that they were reaching some type of stabilization. A lot of my work was in-home. I remember taking one of my first clients to a boxing gym because she had a lot of anger issues. My dad had introduced us to boxing because he was like an amateur. I did some boxing back when I was seventeen years old for a little while and it was helpful to me. I went to...What is the gym? It was a boxing gym off of Cheyenne and they're still there. I took her there. Different things like that that I would do with them.

I remember working with a girl with social anxiety, so giving her some exposure in public settings and teaching her how to cope with different situations, or even teaching them how to apply for a job, how to interview; that's the kind of work I did when I first started doing behavioral health.

Was that in Las Vegas?

It was in Vegas. I was an independent provider, so I started my own company. I remember hustling and going to different practices or agencies, like Mojave Mental Health, which is one of the landmarks of therapy here. I would go and schedule meetings with their clinicians and talk to them about my services. Once I was able to get enough referrals where I wasn't able to take all

of them, I started hiring people. I expanded in 2010-2011. At one point I had about ten staff with me working and providing services. I was really successful with my first business.

You were pretty young for this all to be happening.

Yes.

You were really entrepreneurial.

Yes.

Was that overwhelming? What did you learn about operating a business?

You know what? Kind of like I taught myself how to get into college, I had to do the research and teach myself about business. I knew that my work and my reputation were going to speak for itself, so I started building those relationships within the community, and, yes, I grew. I knew then that okay, now I'm going to get into my master's because now I want to be able to do therapy and have other people do these rehab services. Eventually I knew that the goal was for me to be testing and have master's level clinicians involved and also bachelor level clinicians, which is what I'm doing now.

Tell us about your team now, your team then. Who has worked with you?

My team then was mostly other bachelor level clinicians as well. I had to hire a master's level clinician to supervise everyone. But when I decided to go back and get my PhD, I had to downsize significantly because I was doing an internship that took up probably fifty-five hours a week. I was unable to supervise. It was a very stressful experience, not only financially, but emotionally. I dropped down significantly, and I maintained a very small private practice just to kind of supplement my income. It was very stressful, and I would say that I got licensed as a psychologist in 2017, so I'm a fairly new psychologist. I've been, again, on that entrepreneurial mindset and growing. I currently have three master's level clinicians in my practice and I have

about five bachelor level providers and the staff. That's where I'm at now. I've been really busy over the last year.

That's impressive, very impressive. Good for you.

Thank you.

What was the process like putting together a team?

Just stressful. It was stressful, but I had that background from back then, so I knew what the steps were that I needed to do. But I also was working full-time. I started focusing on testing when I was doing my pre-doctoral internship. In my post-doctoral internship, I wanted to focus on neuropsychological testing, so I did my post-doctoral fellowship with a psychologist who was doing that. Because I had that therapy background already with my master's degree, I didn't want to focus on therapy anymore; I wanted to go into testing.

I started doing testing. I still test twice a week. I focus primarily on neuropsych and psychological testing, so I do a lot of autism evaluations, learning disabilities. I'm contracted with the Clark County School District and Department of Family Services and Vocational Rehabilitation. I do a pretty diverse set of evaluations within the scope of neuropsychological and psychological testing.

In what ways do you work with CCSD? What are some specific ways?

I conduct independent educational evaluations, so kids who have an IEP or may not qualify for an IEP and the parents want a second opinion with regards to the services that they're getting, then CCSD provides them with a list of ten psychologists, and I happen to be on that list, so I get a lot of referrals from there. I work with making recommendations for intervention and informing the IEP teams.

Wow. Do you work with all sorts of schools or just some in particular?

All kinds of schools, even in the private sector. I get a wide range of referrals. I get referrals from pediatricians specifically, but I've also done private school evals. I'm also doing immigration evaluations, so asylum and medical certifications and things like that.

Can you tell us more about that work?

I work closely with a couple of immigration attorneys in town, and so those referrals are typically hardship waivers, and so assessing the family or one of the family members in regard to the potential, not only psychological hardship, but financial and other types of hardships that they might experience if a loved one who is applying for a waiver is denied. I'm working with families who was going through a very stressful immigration process, especially in this political climate right now. I see a lot of depression and anxiety, lots of trauma histories as well.

A little while ago I read an article that talked about how Hispanic or Latinx youth nowadays were more depressed and were more anxious than their other peers because of the anti-immigrant rhetoric going around. But you're seeing that, right?

Yes, absolutely.

How do you help them cope?

My work as an evaluator is really to make recommendations about how they should follow up with treatment, things that would be helpful to them, helping them find resources that are going to be helpful to them. I think that most Hispanics have someone in their family who is touched by the immigration situation now, or somebody in your family is undocumented. I definitely think it spreads fear and anxiety specifically with things like ICE being around town or setting up on the east side of town, specifically. People not wanting to go out or avoiding public settings because they fear being caught by ICE or deported. I think there is a lot of concern about that. Also, it trickles down to kids because they start to experience anxiety or academic difficulties. I

think that's why it's also important to understand that not only things like sexual abuse can be traumatic, but things like poverty and being undocumented and being exposed to different things that we see in the media can be very traumatizing for a kid. I've had patients ask me, "Do you have to go back to Mexico?" Little kids.

Ask you if you personally have to (return to Mexico)?

Yes, because they're being exposed. A lot of the times these kids that I see aren't even Hispanic and they're concerned for me. It definitely trickles down to Hispanic kids, but also to other kids that are seeing this. Their friends are Hispanic, their teacher.

Yes, I've seen that too in my own classroom. It's heartbreaking. That kind of leads into my next question, which is about cultural competence especially with psychologists. Can you tell us a bit about why that's important in your field?

Yes, absolutely. Nationally psychologists, I think Hispanics make up about one percent of licensed psychologists in the country. It's really interesting to me that I am one of the few Spanish-speaking testing psychologists here. With regard to the population in Nevada, we have about three million people in this state, and when I got licensed in 2016, our licensing numbers were in the 800s. When you think about that, that means half of those people are probably retired; half of those people aren't practicing. On top of that, most psychologists don't specialize in testing. They may specialize in therapy or other services, but they're not necessarily specializing in testing, and then even fewer are doing neuropsychological assessments.

It's been really interesting for me to just see the lack of diversity, specifically here in Nevada, within the psychological community. I definitely think it's changing. We're transitioning and we're getting more and more trainees who are staying here to embark on their careers in psychology. I remember looking for an internship here and it was just very limited in

terms of training sites and trying to find a space where I could focus on testing. You didn't have very many options, so when you found something you were like, great, this is where I'm staying. But I definitely think it's important. We hear representation matters and it really does, not only in the movies, but definitely in the therapy office. Being able to see someone who looks like you, who understands your values and your culture, and you don't have to explain it, there's something about that that's not only relieving, but nonjudgmental. You understand the idioms and the proverbs that are used, the *dichos*, in your culture, and you don't have to explain what that means, or you don't have to defend your experiences because your psychologist or your clinician gets it. Even in my group practice, I've made a very conscious effort to ensure that we are very much inclusive and diverse in our clinicians and that we're able to meet the community's needs.

Even that group *Cafecito con Pan Dulce* it was a group that I put together for women forty and up, which is my mom's generation who would never seek out services. It was almost like an appetizer, but just to get them to buy in. I was able to provide some psychoeducation on not only trauma, but the ASIS study and how stress impacts your physical health, talk about generational trauma, depression and anxiety and what that looks like. A lot of the times, especially in our communities, in minority communities, not just Hispanics, we tend to talk about things without really knowing, oh that's anxiety. *Why am I having these sleep disturbance issues?* When it could be depression or excessive worries. I was able to do that and it was very rewarding. I did it very low cost.

My thing is equity, ensuring that we increase access to services and that it's accessible to everybody. I think it's really important to have diversity and inclusion in mental health because we're only helping to minimize and reduce the stigma associated with it and teaching folks that

hey, your adverse childhood experiences are going to impact not only your physical health, but now you're at risk for depression and anxiety. It's important to process some of those experiences.

I'd like to talk a little bit now about the stigma and the stigma we see a lot within the Latinx community when it comes to mental health. What do you think are some of the reasons that sometimes we don't seek out therapy?

I think there are a few factors that contribute to that. One, socially we've been socialized to think that you have to be crazy to go to therapy. If you're in therapy, there must be something really bad going on if you're going to talk to a stranger. The other part of the stigma I think has to do with family systems. Being in a culture that values extended family, but also values family, like *oh that's family*, even if it's toxic, even if it's unhealthy, family is always first. I think some of the issues have to do with we want to maintain equilibrium. We want to make sure that things are consistently stable. When things come up in the family, we kind of don't talk about them. They kind of get swept under the rug. If you're not talking about it within your family, how would you talk with a stranger?

I think that it's important to not only provide education to our community, but also do things like psycho educate and teach about what mental health is because it's such a taboo thing that we're like, *I'm not crazy*. We quickly go to being defensive.

Is there a gender division there, too? Are men or women more or less likely?

Yes, I definitely think there is. With regards to things like machismo, being that strong masculine figure is valued where we tell boys, "Boys don't cry;" things like that. I have kind of thrown out a lot of values that I completely disagree with and teaching my kids like, hey, did you know when you cry, your tears have stress hormones and the God and the universe created you in such

a way that that's your way of releasing, so it's totally okay to cry. You're just holding everything if you're not. Creating a shift, I think education is really important when we're doing that. It's different to hear, "Boys don't cry," as opposed to, "Hey, did you know that this is what's happening; that your body is releasing stress?" It kind of makes you understand how your body works and how stress works.

I didn't know that. Do you think that maybe events like *Cafecito con Pan Dulce*, do you think that is sometimes easier to go to than to jump straight into going to a therapy session?

Yes, but there's still hesitation. Once you're there, at least the women in my group were able to relate to other women and realize, *my situation is not unique*, and that makes sense, and now I realize how being exposed to X, Y, and Z when I was little has impacted me and my other generations. Really teaching. You can't change what you don't know.

What was the turnout for that event?

I had a group of six women. We met for six weeks in the morning. Gama Bakery sponsored us and they provided the *pan dulce* every Friday, which is when I held the group. I think they wanted more. I think the feedback was when you do this again, let me know.

That's great.

Yes. It was a small group, but it was definitely rewarding. Word of mouth is powerful.

For this next question I'm thinking back to an interview that we did. It was with Babelito [Emmanuel Ortega] from *Latinos Who Lunch*. He sat down for an interview with us and he talked about these preconceptions he had about therapy. I think it's preconceptions that a lot of people, or at least a lot of Latino people, have where it's like, "Well, therapy is for

white people.” That is verbatim what he said. You’ve probably heard this before, right?

What are your thoughts?

I definitely think that it’s a Western concept. But there is a shift where we’re decolonizing mental health. I’ve been finding that lots of clinicians, psychologists, and patients have kind of been in tune with this where we’re implementing more spirituality and energy healing and indigenous practices into mental health and understanding that mental health isn’t just a bunch of theories. There’s not one way to approach therapy specifically when we’re looking at our indigenous ways of healing ourselves and embracing that more within therapy as well. At least I was taught in grad school to implement things like pastors or healers or things like that, but now I think patients themselves are kind of clinging to this, but also other Latinx psychologists where we’re doing smudging and energy cleansing, just really protecting our indigenous values and implementing them in how we look at mental health.

Can you tell us now about Empower LV and what it is and how it started?

I founded Empower LV in 2012. It’s a nonprofit, a 501(c)(3). I remember doing all the paperwork myself for that, too, with the guidance of one of my mentors and the person who I did my first master’s level practicum with, Lynette Johnson. She helped me because she had started her own 501(c)(3). Again, with the value and equity at heart, I wanted to make sure that we were creating access to things that kids need.

One of the things I learned doing PSR [psychosocial rehab] and rehabilitative mental health when I started was that a lot of the kids in foster care or kids that had some pretty serious emotional disturbance, they didn’t have access to things like competitive sports, they didn’t have access to tutoring despite them having academic difficulties, and they really didn’t have time to be kids; they were very much overwhelmed with services and having multiple providers

touching them in terms of being involved in their life versus being able to be a part of a team and learning coping mechanisms and emotional regulation within sports. I started looking at some of the research on the effects of physical activity and looking at how physical activity and/or organized sports has an impact on your overall well-being, so academic achievement and mental health, but also your physical health because you're working out. But I also thought about kids who were struggling academically and were ineligible for sports at their school. It's kind of ironic.

I started Empower with the idea that I wanted to increase access to competitive sports. I remember putting my kids in basketball at Tarkanian. It's a club basketball, traveling team, or competitive basketball. I remember paying a hundred bucks per kid, so we were paying about two hundred dollars a month. I just thought, there's no way low-income kids have access to this, especially when you have three, four, five kids in your household. I thought about how low-income kids are also more likely to be exposed to trauma and how sports saved me in high school and it was a really good way for me to cope and to deal with all the internal stress that was happening. I wanted to do that for our community.

Empower increases access to not only sports, but we want to be able to increase access to tutoring services and very tailored tutoring services. I do testing, and so I'm able to look at strengths and weaknesses in terms of a cognitive profile and seeing that hey, this kid struggles with processing speed, so it might take him a little bit longer to do things in class, so maybe we should focus on fluency and processing speed. Being able to tailor versus teaching everyone the same way as is typical in some tutoring locations. Being able to look at this kid and look at their cognitive weaknesses and strengths and the areas they're struggling in, and then giving them targeted interventions to help them, including helping guide them, especially if they're first-

generation college attendees, guiding them through that process as well. Tutoring is one component. Mental health is another component. It's a three-pronged approach. Then with the sports.

Last year we put together a basketball league. It was a six-week league, but it was really eight weeks long because it finished off in a tournament style, and we did it at Desert Pines High School, which was nice to go back there. I hadn't been there probably since I graduated. But we touched about nine hundred to a thousand people every week on Sunday, and that included not only the teams and their coaches, but people who were coming to see the kids play. We ran games from nine in the morning until about six or seven at night. We had a team of volunteers, which included a lot of my family. I was working the concession stands and admission tables. We made everything really cheap, so we let people get in for a dollar or two dollars for adults. We made sure they had access to go watch their kids play, but also had access to the concessions. They could buy a hotdog for two bucks. Making it accessible all the way around, but also giving the kids somewhere to go and look forward to every Sunday. We did Player of the Week, so we handed out awards every single week that we did that for every game that we had. We probably had about twenty games a day, if not more.

I was trying to grow my business at the same time, so I was pooped by the end of the day when we were finished. It was really rewarding. We were able to partner with Police Athletic League last year and the Raiders. We did a free flag football league for high schoolers, for juniors and seniors. We're trying to be involved in the community and making sure that kids are busy and that they're getting things that they need; that they can be kids. We provided gym time to a lot of the teams that participated. With the money that we were raising from concessions, we were not only paying for the gym we were in all day, but also paying for gym time for them to

practice at. I think the biggest struggle is not having enough hands to help us out. Also, raising funds was difficult. But it's definitely rewarding and I'm hoping that we're going to continue to grow. We have a meeting again with the Raiders in January about our basketball league because now we're getting a lot of feedback. *When are you doing this? When are you doing this?* That's Empower LV.

Very cool. Do the coaches for the teams volunteer? How do you get those people involved?

A lot of the coaches are volunteers. Most of them are already volunteering if they have a team that they're working with. A lot of the kids were from low-income communities and most of them had already been a team and some of them formed new teams, and so we gave them somewhere to go every Sunday. We had volunteers refereeing. We had volunteers helping us out, cleaning the gym after, before we left. It was stressful, but it was definitely worthwhile.

That's wonderful.

As for the tutoring part of that program, where are your tutors from?

We have people who just volunteer. For example, my kids' teacher last year volunteered to do tutoring for reading. Unfortunately, we've kind of paused everything right now because I've been trying to grow my practice again, and so we're just starting now to delve back into Empower LV. We have that meeting coming up and making sure that we're partnering again with the community. We've had a lot of feedback from old teams that participated and they're really anxious to get started. We draw from the kids who are participating and, hey, if your kids are struggling in school, let us know so we can plug them with services. That's really how it's been working.

How many kids did you have at that time involved in Empower LV?

I would say about half the attendees, so about four hundred kids. We had twenty teams and each team has at least twelve or more kids.

That's touching a lot of young people.

Yes, we touched a lot of families last year, and so it was really rewarding. It was awesome to be there even though it was exhausting most of the days. It was definitely nice to see that these kids were accessing quality sports because we made sure that we mimicked a lot of the NBA-type things, so we had the music going and we introduced the starting five and rewarded the best player of the game. We basically had an MVP every game from the winning team. We had anywhere from three-year-olds to seventeen-year-olds playing in our league.

That is amazing.

Thank you.

What are your goals for the coming year in terms of Empower LV?

With Empower LV, I'm currently in the process of trying to become an approved site for the social work program, so I'm hoping that once we can get students in, they can assist with grant funding and making sure that we can fund some of those programs, specifically the tutoring program. But, yes, that's my goal. I'm hoping to have more time in the upcoming year to really dedicate to Empower LV because I think it's a worthwhile effort and program and it's much needed here. Yes, I think that's where we're going in terms of that. The funding, I think, is the most difficult part for any organization, being able to pay for things like iPads or computers or a room and making sure that kids have things that are accessible. One of my interests is being able to do—you know how we do teletherapy now?

Yes, yes.

I want to be able to develop tele-tutoring. That way eliminating the transportation issue. If you can't get to your appointment, now you're missing services.

Where were the appointments before?

We would have them meet at a library, for example. I think again because of things like transportation or because of a stigma—there is still also a big stigma with having an IEP, for example. It's a very opposite perception among non-minority individuals where, for example, I'll get families who strongly advocate for interventions at their school for kids. These are the same families who are coming back to me for accommodations for testing for the bar or for a medical exam for college. Whereas in minority communities, I feel like we want to think that there's nothing wrong with our kids and being special ed is very much frowned upon and no one wants to be in special ed. I think it takes a lot of also educating parents in terms of, hey, your kid might have a learning disability and they really need these interventions, and they really need an individualized education program. I think families are hesitant to say, hey, my kid needs tutoring. I think that happens so much in the minority community.

Even when there are parents who know how to advocate, you need to know that there is someone there who is willing to listen.

Yes. I think I do a lot of that when I have parents come in. I refer people to Nevada Pep, for example, and say, "Hey, call them and they'll go with you to an IEP meeting, or they'll help you advocate for your kid." But a lot of the times, as a society we've bullied kids in special ed so much that kids don't want to be in special ed and they don't want to be made to feel different. I think it's important to teach kids that hey, we all have strengths and weaknesses and we need support in certain areas, and that's what this is for.

I want to ask about teletherapy and how that is evolving and working to make mental health services more accessible?

I just implemented teletherapy in my practice recently, but there are still a lot of barriers to it. For example, individuals who really have transportation issues, specifically individuals who are receiving services through Medicaid, for example, are unable to access teletherapy services unless they have a comorbid diagnosis, so these are individuals who have to have a substance abuse diagnosis and also mental health diagnosis. Right then and there you're eliminating a whole population of folks that need the services and would really benefit from teletherapy, for example. I have a Hispanic family who drives out from Mesquite every single Friday to bring their daughters to therapy, and they're on Medicaid, and unfortunately because they don't have that comorbidity; that substance abuse diagnosis, they don't meet criteria and they don't qualify. Teletherapy is really limited right now to folks on private insurances that are accepting teletherapy, but also to folks paying cash. There are still a lot of barriers. I think there are still a lot of things to eliminate to increase access, but we're definitely getting there.

I've heard of mental health apps, like the one I keep hearing about is Better Health. What do you think about these apps?

Like the texting therapy ones?

Yes.

I'm not very familiar with a lot of the apps. What I have heard is a lot of mixed feedback about them, specifically with regards to who the licensed clinician you're talking to, if they're a licensed clinician or if they're just there for support. But I always encourage patients to do their research even if they're seeking out a face-to-face therapist. That should be someone who is trained to address the issues you're coming in for, like trauma, but also be culturally competent,

specifically in minority populations. I think it's really important to see things through a cultural lens, but also a trauma informed lens. That's what I have for the apps. I'm not really familiar with them and I haven't looked too much into them only because I've heard that mixed feedback about them.

They're so new, but there are apps for everything nowadays.

There's an app that I actually like, the Calm app.

What's that?

It's basically mindfulness and meditation. It's not necessarily a therapy app although it's very specific to mental health. I think that's a great app... They're like ten-minute videos and it really brings your attention to the present. They're very helpful. I have my kids do them.

Can you tell us a bit about being a mom and raising kids in Las Vegas?

I have a twelve-year-old and an eight-year-old, Anthony and Noah. Being a mom of boys is a busy life because they're doing sports. They were very much involved with Empower. My kids were helping in the concession stands and doing things like that. They also have their own team that we've started for them.

I think being a mom, not only in Las Vegas, but growing up as first generation and having that bicultural upbringing has really influenced the way I parent. Learning not only from my childhood and my upbringing, but also having multiple roles. Their mom is a psychologist, so I'm constantly making sure that I'm checking in and questioning my parenting, as most parents do. But I think their experience is very much different than mine growing up in Las Vegas where I very much advocate for my kids whether it's in school or in any other situation whereas I was the translator; I was the interpreter growing up for my mom, and my dad was oftentimes working, and so our meetings at school when I got in trouble were with my mom.

There I was interpreting what the dean or whoever was saying. Even at her doctor's appointments, I was the interpreter. My experience is very different, but very much informed by my own upbringing, and so making sure that I'm teaching them to identify things like anxiety and how to cope. My eight-year-old will say things like, "That's anxiety," when we're in the car. I'm glad that my work as a psychologist and as a mom is to inform them and destigmatize mental health and making it part of life where we all go through periods where we're really anxious or we're really sad and knowing how to cope with that.

Being a mom in Nevada has been really interesting. We've had a diverse set of experiences growing up. We see Las Vegas, at least, as very diverse, but it's not really very diverse in terms of administration. For example, Nevada is very diverse, but within the psychological community, not so much. I've had some interesting experiences in terms of being an advocate for my kids. My kids are biracial. They're African American and Mexican, and so they have a very unique experience compared to mine. I experience my own bit of subtle microaggressions and racism growing up, and I think that they have, too, more recently only because of the political climate in some of those things. Dealing with my kid, for example, being called the N word at school, or being told he can't play basketball because he's Black; some of those things. I think that life has really equipped me to be a great advocate for them, but also to help them deal with some of those difficulties. That's my experience as a parent in Nevada.

Challenges. How do you help them understand their cultural upbringing, with those two different sides?

My twelve-year-old, I wouldn't say he's fluent in Spanish, but he definitely has conversational Spanish, so he understands. My little one understands. He's not as fluent as my oldest one. I was really lucky that my husband is part of a very close-knit family as well, so we get to spend time

with them. They get exposed to his family values and his culture. Once they go to my parents' house, it's like full-blown Spanish speaking, and they get exposed to the music and our own values. We celebrate Christmas, for example, on the 24th. They get bits and pieces of both worlds. I think they're very much bicultural. I cook a lot of Mexican food because that was my upbringing. They get exposed to all of it. Going to our family parties, they see the Mexican bands and then, on the other hand, they see my husband's values and culture, and so I think they have a pretty good mix of that.

Was your husband born and raised here, too?

No. He was born also in California. He moved out here when he was about twelve or thirteen years old. He pretty much grew up out here as well. He graduated from Centennial High School, which is total opposite of where I went to school. He was a football player. He actually won State MVP when he was in high school for football. Everywhere we go he knows someone. I met him when I was about twenty years old, and the rest is history.

That's amazing. I wanted to ask about—I guess I'm asking this because I know that there aren't many Latinas who have PhDs or who are in doctoral programs. What was your experience like in your doctoral program?

I was really blessed to have started my business when I did because I was part of a hybrid program where I had to fly out every three months to do a residency, a nine-day residency. I was away from home when my kids were younger for ten days at a time, ten to thirteen days at a time. I say I was really blessed because I had that passive income coming in to help support me through that time. Of course, with student loans and that too. But I think at that point I was more informed. I was still learning about myself. I'm still somehow being very interested in sexual abuse, not knowing I was inspired by my own life. But I thrived in school. I always tell my

husband that sports and school and learning saved my life because I could have ended up something different or somewhere different given my experiences. School really was a safe place for me. I spent hours and hours in this library studying back when I was in undergrad. I almost thought I was a lifelong learner. I'm even thinking now of going back to a post-doctoral program.

Yes, it was very much a safe place for me going through that PhD program and meeting mentors. My chair, committee member for my dissertation, was so, so supportive in that process. I reached out to her last year. She was very much still supportive. I published my dissertation in the Journal of Child Sexual Abuse. She was still very much guiding me through that after I finished my schooling.

Do you have any advice you would give Latinas who want to go into PhD programs?

Don't give up. It doesn't matter what your life experiences are. Your life experiences definitely don't dictate who you are. I had to go from perceiving myself as a victim to really looking at myself as a survivor of all those things, and knowing that I was very much in charge of writing how my story ends.

That's so powerful. Do you have any last anecdotes you'd like to share with us?

I'm curious. Did you have a quinceañera?

I did and I didn't want one.

I was going to say, well, you were having all of this going on as a teenager.

Growing up, my parents were very much into church. I grew up raised a Christian. We spent three days a week in church. In fact, in reviewing my life journey, I spoke with my mom about how her mom, my maternal grandmother, helped build the first Christian Church in their small

town in Mexico. My aunt had donated the land and my grandma donated money to build the first church there. I grew up very much within the church.

By the time I got to be fifteen and I was kind of acting out—and I was really tomboyish, too, so I didn't want one. I remember asking my dad, "Just get me a ticket to the De La Hoya fight." My mom is like, "Absolutely not. You're the only girl." I did have a *quinceañeras* with a Christian band that played Mexican-style music. My mom catered the whole thing because that's Mexican tradition. When my husband and I got married, I told her, "You're not cooking anything. We're paying for all of it and we're going to relax and enjoy the wedding instead of being tired." I did have a *quinceañera*. I didn't want one, but I had one.

What was your wedding like?

My wedding was something I never thought I would have in terms of how it turned out. I was really thriving in my business back then, and we were married at Canyon Gate Country Club here. We had a hundred and fifty people. That seems like a lot, but when you take an African American family and a Hispanic family, it's really hard to choose who you're inviting. We had it there. We got married on the balcony. Then we had an hors d'oeuvre and cocktail hour and then we had our dinner. We had two different deejays because I needed a Mexican one and my husband had a deejay he knew. It was definitely a bicultural wedding. My oldest was three, so he was our ring bearer when we got married. We went to Nice, France for our honeymoon.

Beautiful. What's one of your favorite things to do as a family in Las Vegas?

We love sports. As a family we love family gatherings. We get together with my husband's family every Monday; we call it Monday Fun Day. We have family gatherings. We love doing karaoke. We love hanging out at home and cooking and really just spending time with family. I love going to the movies; I always have. But, yes, that's what we do. We like to travel although I haven't been able to do it because I've been so busy with work.

Thank you so much. This is an amazing interview.

Thank you. *[Photo: Elsa Lopez with Dr. Gray, 2019]*

[End of recorded interview]

