AN INTERVIEW WITH JULIANA URTUBEY

An Oral History Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

Latinx Voices of Southern Nevada
Oral History Project

Oral History Research Center at UNLV
University Libraries
University of Nevada Las Vegas

University of Nevada Las Vegas, 2018

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

The recorded interview and transcript have been made possible through the generosity of a National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) Grant. The Oral History Research Center enables students and staff to work together with community members to generate this selection of first-person narratives. The participants in this project thank University of Nevada Las Vegas for the support given that allowed an idea the opportunity to flourish.

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

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

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

PREFACE

Born into a tumultuous Colombia, Juliana was about five years old when her parents relocated Juliana and her two older sisters to the United States. For a time, they settled in Chicago, then Arizona. She describes an upbringing that was safe and privileged. Education and preservation of bilingual speaking skills were held in high regard.

Juliana Urtubey has made Las Vegas home since 2013 and has become a highly regarded educator, an elementary teacher of special education. While at Crestwood Elementary School, she became known as Ms. Earth for leading the way to raising money and creating a garden program.

More recently she is the bilingual special education teacher at Kermit Booker Sr. Innovative Elementary School. She is also an instructional strategist, developing supports to meet students' differing academic, social-economic and behavioral needs.

In May 2021 she was selected as the National Teacher of the Year by the Council of Chief State School Officers and honored by a presentation from Dr. Jill Biden. She is the first teacher from Nevada to receive this distinction.

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June 2, 2021
in Las Vegas, Nevada
Conducted by Nathalie Martinez

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OF SOUTHERN NEVADA
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Good afternoon. Today is June second, 2021. My name is Nathalie Martinez. We are here in the Oral History Research Center, Lied Library, and with me are…

Barbara Tabach.

And I'm Juliana Urtubey.

Juliana, can you spell your name for me, please?

Yes. Juliana is J-U-L-I-A-N-A and Urtubey is U-R-T-U-B, as in boy, E-Y.

Thank you. I'd like to start by asking you: What does it mean to be a teacher?

To be a teacher means to be somebody who is committed to a community and committed to helping students see themselves as lifelong learners and to see that their learning is connected not just to who they are, but to their community, service to their community, but also amplification of who their community is.

Growing up what did community look like for you?

My mother has always had a really strong bond to community. It's how you survive in countries that have seen a lot of strife. I was born in Colombia during the height of the civil war, and so community meant survival; community meant support. My dad actually immigrated to the United States before we did. My mom wanted to finish her law degree. We, my sisters and I—there's two older sisters and I'm the third—we were actually cared for by my mom's community while she was finishing her law degree. It was really important for her to finish it before we left Colombia. Some of her friends, who are also professors or research assistants at the university, had cribs in their offices for us because they believed that much in mom, in her getting her degree, and so that's a really good example. Your community extends beyond your family. It's those folks who are going to be there for you regardless. As an immigrant and as a first-generation person, I think that I've learned to be really generous with what it means to be within

community and to know that within our communities we need to be as representative and as inclusive as possible. I've always kind of pushed the boundaries and erased the borders on what it means to be a community. Even the term *Latino* sometimes feels too big or sometimes feels too small at the same time, and so I think that it's perfectly healthy and normal to question if our community is inclusive enough.

Going into that term *Latino*, how do you identify?

I think for the sake of bringing as many people with us as possible, I'm comfortable using the word *Latina*, *Latinx*. I know that there's all sorts of dialogues about how to amplify the word. Some folks say the X is too exclusive. There's all these layers to it because in Spanish it's really hard to be gender inclusive with that language, so it is challenging. But I don't see that as something that we have to have a definitive answer for right now. I think that it's okay for it to be a little bit blurry. It's okay for *Latino* to encapsulate my mom's generation living in the United States, and her experience was very different than my experience. Even my older sister's experience, as being the oldest in the family, was so different than mine, being the youngest. I think that it is great to encapsulate us all as long as we're making the questions we need to make. There is a certain privilege that certain Latinos have that others don't. The xenophobia or the racism a lot of indigenous people in Mexico face within the U.S. is unfair, and so how do we elevate those voices? How do we do the work within our community to make sure that *Latino* is what it needs to be? Because I'm Latina doesn't mean that I'm not Colombian, but I understand that the identity of Colombia is geopolitical because not that long ago Gran Colombia was big and it was parts of Panama and Venezuela, so all that is static and it's changing. I think that if there is a word that can give us pride about who we are and encourage us to maintain our roots and our identities, then I'm all about it.

Tell me more about Colombia and what it was like growing up over there and what part of Colombia you are from.

I'm from Bogotá, Colombia, the capital. I left when I was about five. My memories are all really happy memories. I've got a sprinkle of some hardship and some violence, but for the most part all of my memories were really happy, and it goes back to your first question about community. I think the way Colombia sees children is really different than a lot of the other places that I've been. There's a certain embrace of children and the process of being a child, play. For example, if you're in Bogotá, even to this day, and you're on the craziest freeway, you'll see next to it a park. There's parks everywhere in Bogotá because they understand the importance of play. I think that growing up in Colombia I had really happy experiences. I do remember the trauma of bombings and violence and how that impacted our family, and those are memories you have as a young child that kind of come up.

But I don't see my memories in Colombia stopping when we left because my mom and my dad carried those stories. If you know anything about a Latino storyteller, it's not linear. It's these spirals that don't connect, and then ten years later you see how they connect and you're like, "Oh." I think my life has been unwrapping my parents' stories and kind of piecing them together.

Growing up in Chicago and Arizona, it was interesting. I don't complain about how I grew up because the immense amount of privilege my family had. My parents were highly educated. My dad spoke English. My dad was born in New York, so we had access to documentation and safe travel, and that impacts my story quite differently. Nonetheless, I struggled to maintain my languages and my identities and have that pride because you're "otherized." You're made to feel like there is a normal and you don't fit the normal, so you're

sub-categorical your whole life. I think even as a young child people know that. I think as an adult I learned to navigate both worlds and to not have to negotiate those worlds.

An example is my first name is Lauda. Everybody in my family has two names. I'm Lauda Juliana. My older sister is Maria Camilla. There's a lot of Laudas in my family. My family has always called me Juliana, but when I got enrolled into school in Arizona, everybody started calling me Laura. It was a departure of who I was because as a child you don't feel like you can tell your teachers, "Who is that?" In a certain sense, if you just go along with it, then people will accept you, in quotations. It wasn't until I left high school that I was like, "No, my name is Juliana. I don't have to be two different people." That kind of comes back to why I'm a teacher. I'm a teacher that has similar experiences of my students. I know how to build those bridges. I often ask my students, "What does your mom call you? How do you feel happiest being called?" Because even if I ask particularly my Latino kids, and say the name is Caesar or Cesar and everyone calls them Caesar and I ask them, "What do you like to be called?" They'll tell me Caesar because society tells them that that's what they should be called. But after some relationship building and then you ask them the question, "What does your momma call you? What do you like to be called? What do you feel happiest?" Then it's Cesar. Even if I'm the only person on campus calling them Cesar, there is a unique bond. I think that those are experiences that I've had that a lot of Latino teachers can share with their students that opens certain passages for our students.

You mentioned that your father was born in New York. What is the story of your parents?

Yes, it's interesting. My dad was born in New York. His dad was Argentinian and his mother Colombian. They immigrated to the United States and had their children there, so my aunt and

my dad were born in New York. Then as a teenager my dad wanted to rescue his language, his culture, and so his parents divorced and he moved back to Colombia with my grandmother.

How old was he?

He was in his late teens, so seventeen, eighteen. My parents actually met because my mom did some organizing, community organizing with my grandmother, my dad's mom. They were friends long before, and my mom was friends with my aunt long before, and that's how they met.

Community organizing for?

My grandmother, she was a badass. Am I allowed to say that? She was a scientist. She worked with a cellular scientific team that helped find the cure for leprosy. She is fantastic. But she also worked with a lot of different women liberation groups. In Colombia, the civil war, it's really complicated. It started in the '50s and the reasoning evolved and all the players evolved, but part of it was separating the constitution from the church. My mom and my grandmother were really active in those circles.

You said your mom was a lawyer. What did your dad do? What was his occupation?

He's a musician. Today he's a music therapist and a teacher.

A music therapist?

Yes. He uses music therapy to work with folks who have memory issues, so young children with ADD, autism, and then the elderly who might suffer from dementia or Alzheimer's. And then now he's teaching music at a school.

Where do they live right now?

They live in Arizona, in Phoenix.

Where did you all go—the first city, as you mentioned, was Chicago—the journey from Colombia to the States?

From Colombia to Chicago. I remember how appalled we were with the cold.

I bet.

Bogotá is in a mountainous area and it's cold and it rains frequently, but there's no cold like Chicago cold. We lived in Chicago for a little bit.

How old were you?

I was about five. I think we lived there for about a year, year and a half, and then my dad actually got an opportunity. He was working with McDonald's out there, and then they were opening all these new McDonald's in Phoenix. I don't know if this is true. I'll have to ask my mom. But probably for warmer climate. I think my mom was like, "Nope, this isn't…I can't be bullied by the wind." I think that was part of the reason. But I just remember when I was probably end of first grade, second grade, living in Arizona, in Phoenix. That's where I lived most of my life.

Around what year was that?

Probably '92, '93.

What was the climate, no pun intended, the area like for you? You went into first and second grade in Arizona, so what were those first days of school in the area like?

It's interesting because the West Coast has a very different feel than the East Coast. I know Chicago is technically in the Midwest, but I think that Chicago probably had more of a connection with diversity than the West did. I know that my mom was able to find us a bilingual school in Chicago, but once we moved out to Arizona, it was just this is your public school, this is the school you go to, and that's that, and so I think that that education stopped there and my parents kind of took the role onto themselves of making sure that we kept Spanish in a conversational tone, identities and things like that. I remember in my elementary school there were very few kids of color, no teachers of color for sure, and very few kids of color. It wasn't

until high school that I started seeing more kids of color at my schools. I think of that as a big shift.

What part of Phoenix were you in?

We were in north Phoenix, central north Phoenix.

Was there a suburb name?

No.

It was still Phoenix?

Yes, yes.

In keeping it in the household conversational, what was your home life like? What parts of your traditions or cultural practices from Colombia did you bring that kept going in the household?

My mom is the carrier of those. As in most Latino families, my mom is the carrier of all those. You have your obvious ones, like food: *Sancocho*, *arroz con leche*, *lechona*; all that good stuff. And then you have the deeper, more rooted ones, like music. It wasn't just Colombian music, but I think it was also music of my mom's time, so there's *trova*, like the '60s and '70s, the '80s, *salsa*. That whole lineage of that protest music was really big in my household. I think I subversively, in a positive way—I love the word *subversive* because all these things are unintentional—but it planted certain seeds of social justice in me. Then some more music that was rooted to our roots, like "*Totó la Momposina*" and different Afro Colombian-type genres and then a lot of classic, Vallenato. That was always playing in the house.

I think there was also a sense of valuing literature and stories. We learned English and my mom learned English because she would read to us in English. We would read stories, like "The Little Prince" or "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," in Spanish, and then mom would

read them to us in English. Looking back I admire how much she just didn't care about her accent. She has the cutest accent. To this day she still has an accent. She'll help me with my Spanish; I'll help her with her English. It helped me understand that there is a new evolution of the language. When our parents come and the way they speak our languages, it's a new evolution of the language. Sometimes there is things that only us in the family will understand about how my mom speaks English, but it's really beautiful and it's really comical, too.

I remember my dad had two bosses. One's name was Bud and the other was named Doug. Bud and Doug. For a Spanish speaker, those are hard names to pronounce. My mom would call them Butt and Dog. There's a comedy in it. There's a comedy in how fun language can be, but there's also exclusion, people who pretend they don't understand her in stores and things like that. That was a side story, very Latino of me.

But going back to your question about *Colombia-ness* in our home, it was literature. To this day I still read Colombian authors; yes, "Gabo," [Gabriel Garcia Marquez], but other authors, too, and I think that that's key to staying connected.

There are just certain mannerisms and certain way of being when you're Colombian. Some world organization did the scale of happiness, and Colombia time after time is found to be the happiest place, the happiest country. Even though there's all this strife, inequity and corruption and war and all this stuff, the people are still the happiest. It's a certain mindset that we have of "*no pasa nada, nada es tan grave"* [nothing is wrong, nothing is that serious.] just keep it moving, which I think has come up in, like, my platform as National Teacher of the Year, which is this idea of joy and joyfulness and joyous occasions and joyful learning being central to learning because I think it's just such a critical part of our survival and our thriving. It's not just

survive, but it's the thrive part, too. I think that those are some of the more abstract ways that I've kept in touch with Colombia.

There is also this idea of collectiveness. I think that that's very cultural to who we are as Latinos. I think that's tied to our indigenous roots because, again, it's survival; it's your community; being collective is not leaving anybody behind. I think that idea is really true to who we are.

How do you bring some of those different cultural values into your classroom?

I think the joy is definitely a huge part of it. I know that joy is possible in all spaces. But the joyfulness doesn't cancel out the fact that we've got to work really hard to fight for equitable spaces, to fight for access, to fight for mindset shifts that are more, not just inclusive, but representative of who our kids deserve us to be. I think that there is always this idea of collectiveness and that intrinsic motivation. I think public education from time to time tends to focus more on production versus on reflection. I talk to teachers a lot about this idea of compliance versus collaboration. Teachers feel like they have to get kids to comply. I wonder if we thought about it as a collaboration, if it would be more inclusive of our kids' identities and cultures. I could tell you, "Stand up straight; walk in line; keep your hands to yourself; don't talk," but there's no collaboration in that. It's just like you either do it or you don't. Or we could talk about why. Why do we need to move in a line in a school? I'll show my students pictures of little ducks following a momma duck. They'll talk to us about their observations. "Oh, they walk in a line." "Well, why do you think they might walk in a line?" "So nobody gets lost." "Yes." "Oh, so if somebody gets hurt, we all see." "Yes." Then the collaboration comes through. They'll talk about learning in the other classrooms and let them come to the conclusion, okay, we should be quiet, and we should keep our hands and our feet to ourselves, and we probably should stay in

a line. But you're not taking their autonomy from them to have them do those things. I think that that is a huge part of…

The word *Latino*, it's great, but it's also problematic. Who we are has deep roots in indigeneity in African culture and ancestry. There's also the colonial Spanish part of it. I think that the imposition of colonialism has a huge impact on who we are, and so trying to return to those roots of indigeneity and African ancestry I think is really important because there is just a lot more that makes sense in that world for me.

The idea of collaboration and the seventh generation ahead; that we're a grain of sand, but what we do could impact those before us and those ahead of us. I think that those are really abstract things that if I tell teachers, they're like, "Wait. What?" But you can quantify them in a classroom. Listening to your students, knowing who they are, knowing their families is a really concrete way of capturing those things.

If you could take me back to your upbringing in the classroom, what were some significant experiences? You mentioned that you felt "otherized" at points. Did you ever feel that way in the classroom growing up through elementary and middle school and high school?

I think retrospectively, yes, in elementary school. Being an elementary schoolteacher now, you reflect a lot of what your elementary school teaching was. I don't think it was intentional. I think it's the assumption that there's a normal. It's why it's English speaking. It's four seasons in a school year. Can you imagine how ridiculous it is in Phoenix, Arizona cutting out little mittens on things? It just doesn't speak to you.

I've lived there. Yes, it's ridiculous.

You're like, "What?" The mitten thing isn't bad, but it's not inclusive of who you are. I think in retrospect my family—and I think there's a little bit of being Colombian—are you Colombiana?

Yes.

Okay, so you get this. I don't know if the word *no* exists in our country. You know what I'm saying? I think folks in the United States would call us pushy. You know what I'm saying. There is just a creativity about getting things done. I'll give you an example. In the fall we get to go to the White House, and they're going to do a gala and a ceremony, whatever. I already have distant cousins and all sorts of people all over Colombia ready to come to the White House, and they're going to come; they will be there. There is this inclusivity, which is really beautiful. English doesn't capture it because in English you would say "forcing your way in."

Then say it in Spanish.

Como empujando, like just kind of pushing people aside so you're coming in, you're coming around and here you are. My family always did that in my school. My mom would teach Spanish classes, and my dad would come in and teach music classes, and they would sing and dance to the kids, and it was in Spanish a lot of the times. I think for my teachers back then, which a few of them have reached out to my mom, I don't think they knew that they were being exclusive. It was just this understanding, this operation of this is normal. I think they sensed a lot of love from my family and from me. I just don't think they knew how to nurture who we were because there is also the narrative of the "good immigrant;" that you come in, you're obedient, you do your work. I think that those are things that now in education we're able to be like, no, we have to know who they are, mirror who they are, because as an adult it's a lot of work to go back to rescue those things. I think about my immense privilege in having a family that was really bold, really outspoken about this is who we are and you carry it with you. I know that a lot of families don't have that. I've been in meetings where I translate between child and mom. Just linguistically that's really heartbreaking. You can only imagine culturally what's lost. This idea

of kids not having to rescue who they are because who they are is carved out in the school, it's a lot more work for teachers, especially teachers who don't share cultural identities and experiences with their students. It doesn't mean it's not possible. I think it's just about the conversation.

Thinking back to my education, yes, there just wasn't too much of a space for it unless my parents carved out that space. I often think about agency as an adult, as first-generation adults, where an undocumented woman from Central America might not feel the agency coming into a school. She might have a lot of gifts to share, but she's not going to come into the school and say, "Hey, you guys want me to do this and this and this for you?" She's not going to do it because she doesn't feel welcomed, because she doesn't feel reflected. Be it with that Colombian pushiness or be it just my parents' skills or agency or privilege, they were able to do it, so that helped me see how important that is in school, but it shouldn't be something that is dependent upon a family. That should be accessible for everybody.

My mom was the same way. She was always volunteering in my third, fourth and fifth grade classroom. She was always there.

What would she do?

Sometimes she'd have arts and crafts. She'd help hand out fliers. Do pretty much anything that the teacher wanted her to do even though it was very manageable for my teachers, but she just had to be there. I can empathize definitely with that pushiness, I guess, but I wouldn't think it was necessarily interjecting. They just wanted to be present. Did you ever see other—because you said you were one of the only children of color in the classroom growing up. What was that relationship that you had with your classmates, especially in high school when it seems to be a very growing period, essential time for students?

I think in elementary school and middle school, I did gravitate to folks of color. My best friend from elementary school to this day, she's half-Chinese. I wonder—I don't know; I can't say—but I wonder if we gravitated to each other. I do remember from time to time we'd have newly arrived students that just got to the country, and I was always paired up with them. I was also always paired up with the kids who had special needs in our class. It was genuine, they were my friends. A little girl who was blind, she had an assistant, but I was always hanging out with her. Then a little boy with Down syndrome, always hanging out with him. I think that I just gravitated to those communities because for whatever reason they spoke to me.

My high school program, I had an IB program.

You did IB?

I quit IB. I started IB, but I quit IB because I wanted to join the Teachers Academy at my high school. It was a brand-new program and I'm like, I think I'm going to be a teacher. They were like, "You can't do both," and so I just did that, which is okay. It was okay. I had enough AP credits. But that program brought kids from all over the world to our school. I was so lucky. I had friends from Burma, I had friends from all over Asia, all over Asia, a lot of kids from India, a lot of kids from China. There was a great diversity of ethnicities. However, again, in terms of *RAZA*, in terms of connection with African American and Black students, it was minimal. It was minimal because our high school went *ploop*. My connection with a lot of native people, too, in Arizona, a lot of my friends in high school were Diné or Pascua, and so the way I connected with them was through sports. I tried to play high school basketball, and so on the basketball team were a lot of Diné girls, a lot of African American, Black girls, and a handful of Latina girls whose parents were like, "You're playing what?" And my dad would show up with his *bombo* to the basketball games, and I was the shortest girl on the team and I never got to play because I

was so short. It was just a whole thing. But, yes, I wonder about…and I think that's something that's really important today is looking at our AP classes because they mean a lot in terms of where you end up and making sure there's a diversity of experiences and cultures within those classes.

I think that those experiences have informed me. Thanks to the resilience that it was demonstrated and modeled for me that I was able to be *terca* and stubborn about who I am. But I wonder how many people weren't able to hold onto their identity with that kind of grasp. I think for me, I was one of the lucky ones. I have definitely tried to pay it forward, but I definitely do wonder about how many youth whose experiences were enough to be like, okay, assimilation is the way to go, just do it. If we think about it that's a lot of the messaging kids get.

You mentioned shifting to the Teachers Academy. What made you gravitate to that program to be a teacher?

Look, life is too short to be too serious, and so I think that was one of the things about the IB program; it was so serious. A lot of the students were Asian, and so their family culture was to take school ridiculously serious. I kind of knew deep down it wasn't that serious. Also, I love learning, but not at a lose-yourself-at-all-cost type of learning. I didn't match up with the program that well from the beginning. I'm a little bit rebellious. Authority is just kind of like…I don't know.

It's that Mercedes Sosa coming in there.

Yes. It's like Leonard Peltier says: it's like an illusion of power. I remember in our Depth of Knowledge class, I would bring him up and I'm like, "Oh, this is just an illusion of power." I think that was the only high school teacher that really was, "I like your spirit," because, otherwise I was like, "This is…" whatever.

Anyway, the Teachers Academy was put together by our…I don't know what his position was…the athletic director. He was always getting me to sign up for sports and run the athletic clubs and all this other stuff, and I just loved his energy. He started it up and I was like, you know what? I think that this is something that's calling to me. He was also like, "You should do this. This would be great for you." I just did it and I fell in love with it and fell in love with it because we got to go to elementary schools in my neighborhood, and so I got to see. By that time there was a bigger demographic shift and there were more Latino kids. I just got to see their faces when they saw my face. I was like, this is really powerful. From then I was like, great, this is my path; this is what I'm going to do.

That was the last two years, your junior and senior year, it sounds like, of high school?

I think so, yes. Yes.

You graduate and you're in the class of…

2005.

What high school was that?

North Canyon High School.

After graduation what were the next steps? What was your senior year like leading up to the end of high school?

It was fun, yes. It was fun. I had a great time. By the time my senior year rolled around, I knew who my people were. I had reconnected with my best friend from elementary school. We just had a really great time. I played basketball. I was on the golf team. I didn't play golf. I just drove the golf cart around. They needed one more girl. I was in student organizations, like March of Dimes, and we'd fund-raise all sorts of money. I realized the importance of being well-rounded, not just for you resume, but for you.

My two sisters, we're all eighteen months apart, and so going through high school with them was really beautiful, but my senior year I was on my own. It was a newfound freedom. My sisters have taken care of me my whole life, and they still do, and they're wonderful and I love them. But being the youngest, being able to just do your thing on your own was really fun.

Then getting ready to transition to college was fun because I was going to go to the University of Arizona. I knew that I wanted to stay in-state just because paying for your own education, I was like, I'm going to be a teacher. Plus, U of A at that time had a bilingual program. I was like, that's my program. My sisters were already there. I had a path that I was comfortable with, and so I got to enjoy everything, which was really cool. As opposed to the first two years of high school where it was IB, studying, nerd out. I don't know, I kind of shook that tree a little bit.

Tell me about your college years. What was that like and getting into the studies to be a teacher finally, officially?

I really enjoyed college. I worked a lot. Looking back, I'm like, gosh, I hustled. I was a tutor for the Students Disability Resource Center, which was fascinating to me because I've always been really intrigued about people who learn and think differently. Working with adults with learning and thinking difference, I think really transformed the kind of teacher that I wanted to be because I definitely love teaching special education. I don't think I would ever teach anything other than that. I worked at a restaurant. I nannied. I did all sorts of side hustles. I was a research assistant. It was fun.

But going through college the first two years where you get to take all of your core electives, I got to choose really interesting things, so I learned about all sorts of different perspectives around the world. I also had a second degree, which was Spanish literature degree. I

was part of a little *bolita* of students who were pushing back on how colonialized the program was, but it was what it was. It was your BA; get it or don't. What we did was we decided we were going to study abroad. Yes, we were going to do the Spanish lit requirements, but we were also going to do classes in Puerto Rico and Mexico and Ecuador. I went to Spain. I'm like, if you're going to make me read Spanish lit, I better be in Spain to read it. I spent those three years just traveling. Most of Mexico's were in the summer, but every other semester I would go somewhere else to travel and learn over there, and it was really fun.

Tell me more about those experiences in those countries. What did you do in Mexico, for example, when you were there for those summers?

I taught. It was amazing. I was part of a group; it was Canadian, U.S. and Mexican grant. What we would do is we would take teachers, preservice teachers to Mexico to have the reverse immigration experience so that they could understand, what is it like to be in a country where you're an adult, but you don't know how to take the bus, or you don't know how things work? And teach them some Spanish and teach them just some perspective-taking because a lot of the times families come from Mexico and the cultural differences in schooling are so different that it causes a lot of misunderstanding, mutual cultural gaps between teachers and families. We thought it was really important for teachers to understand the Mexican schooling system so that they could better understand families.

What are some of those differences?

In Mexico, for example, school is free, but it's not really free; you've got to pay for a uniform, you have to pay for food, you have to pay for materials. In some rural areas you have to pay for electricity and cleaning and all these things. For example, buses every day, public buses. If you don't have means to do these things, then you don't go to school. Then the question is, is public

education really free? The parents' role is quite different because it's more of a formalized authoritarian-type public education where the teacher is held to high esteem, but you don't contact the teacher; the teacher contacts you. You don't come on school campus; you pass your kid's sandwich through the gate. There are just differences in roles. I haven't spent a lot of time in public education outside of Mexico, but in Mexico your job as a parent and as a family is to make sure your kid has good behavior, homework is done, materials are available and they're clean and fed; that's your role as a family. The teacher's role is to educate. The family doesn't educate the child in that way; the teacher does. There are very distinct roles. In the U.S. if you're not constantly talking to the teacher, the teacher thinks you don't care about their education. It's about changing how teachers here see Latino families, saying, no, actually that's their way of showing respect.

There's things like consent, especially in special education. We have to have consent because it has to be a team decision to identify with a learning disability or to move forward with a plan. In a lot of Latin American countries families don't get the opportunity of consent; it's uniform what happens to kids. In the U.S. we ask for that consent, but most of the time a lot of Latino families will feel…maybe not *offended* is the right word, but taken back by that request because you're the teacher; you should know what's best for my child. As a parent, I'm going to tell you to do what's best because that's how we grew up, and that's a big difference. The way you go about getting consent with a family from American Latina is quite different. You build a relationship first. You ask for preferences; you ask it in conversation before the meeting because at a formal meeting a lot of families are going to feel a lot more reserved. I think that that one is probably the key one that teachers need to realize.

Also, the spaces for informal interactions between teachers and families are really important because if you can get families to come to those and feel themselves at those that's when they start talking to you about all of their *conocimientos* [beliefs/knowledge]. Because I've worked mostly with Mexican communities, especially this is something I've learned from Mexican women, is that they're very humble about their skillsets. They're not going to come in and boastfully tell you, "I can do this and I can do that." You have to catch it in informal conversation. An example is in the garden. There were all sorts of medicinal plants and they helped us plant them in the garden and use them in the correct way, and they would come and take them home and use them for their remedies and things like that. Nobody said, "I know how to do this. Can I have…?" It wasn't like that. It was talking about it and then making it happen.

Tell me about the garden. How did that come about, and getting families engaged with it?

The school, Crestwood, it's in downtown. It's one of the older schools. It was built in the '50s. I think it's strikingly beautiful because it's all this different sloping '50s construction, but a lot of people don't see it that way. A lot of people saw it as old and rundown. I saw the neighborhood as a neighborhood very similar to one I had grown up in. The garden started because we wanted to use some of the unused grass areas. The principal said that there was a grant and if I wanted to do it. I didn't know anything about gardening, but I said, "Yes. Why not? Let's do it." Because I knew that community gardens kind of opened spaces up. Crestwood at that time was very closed off. There was fencing everywhere and parents really couldn't come on campus too much, and I knew that it was a way to soften those barriers.

What year was that?

2014. We just built the garden slowly. We would ask families, "What do you want from the garden? What do you want the garden to look like?" We just made sure we included their voices,

and we would do community build days, Saturdays, teachers, students, family members, neighbors, organizations would come help us. We'd have two hundred people each time and it became a party. Build and work in the morning, and here's some food and hang out in the afternoon. I think because people were just allowed to be themselves, there wasn't a formality about how to build the garden. Teachers were kind of on the same level as family members that they got to collaborate in building things that it just boosted morale. It changed how a lot of teachers saw the families. It changed the seriousness of being on campus, which I think was key. I think I did all these things, not unintentionally, but without knowing fully what the impact would be. I look back and I'm like, "Yes, that's why."

How did that transition happen, going back to college? After college did you spend some time in Arizona teaching, or did you come straight to Nevada?

I did. I taught a little bit in Tucson, and then I taught a couple of years in Phoenix; I taught in Maryvale. Then my now partner, (husband David Olmeca Barragan), his family lives here in Vegas, and so we just wanted to be closer to them, and so we made the transition to Las Vegas.

How did you meet him?

We met in Tucson, Arizona at the transformative La Raza Studies Conference. Have you heard about La Raza's studies conference in Tucson?

No.

Oh, it's fascinating. It was a whole studies program that focused on indigenous principles and what we'd call today social justice. It was ethnic studies and it was in K through twelve in Tucson, Arizona. Then during the crackdown on immigration and the whole policies of criminalization and attrition for the immigrant community in Arizona, they passed—Tom Horn

was our superintendent for public instruction—he helped passed this proposition banning ethnic studies, and it was one of the first ethnic studies programs that got banned.

Every year this ethnic studies program would put on a huge conference. My husband came to keynote, and I was just starting out, and that's how we met. Fast forward a bunch of years and here we are.

I highly recommend that you look into it because it set the precedent for this backlash against ethnic studies. Their student body took over the board meeting, and they chained themselves up to the Tucson Unified School District's board. It was amazing. They were amazing. They are amazing. There is also a lot of strife in that movement, all that attention. It really split people up into different groups. The work of a social justice educator is that; it's these ebbs and flows of public support and affirmation. We're seeing it right now with the critical race theory and the Project 1619 and a lot of other ethnic programs. Yes, it's really telling.

You mentioned a social justice educator. What is that? How do you describe a social justice educator?

A social justice educator is an educator who wants to make sure the perspectives that they're informing relate directly to their students. A perfect example is "Howards End," the people's history. We're telling history from the perspective of not just the people, quote-unquote, at the top who hold the power, but you're doing a critical analysis of power, and there's different ways to do it in different age groups. There's folks who do it really proudly and really boldly, and there's a lot of us who do it in our ways. The garden, for me, is a social justice project because to include families in a child's education is really healing for children because then they don't have to negotiate their identities, their identities are there and uplifted. There's different ways to do it. It's not just one type of teacher. It's just a teacher who wants their students to look critically at

history, of power, critically of their role within the survival of their community; that ability to thrive within their community. Some would tell you that it's just a simple pushback, an alternative to assimilation, but it's really questioning the idea of education as a production line-type model. It's really creating critical thinkers, which a lot of people are intimidated by that thought. I think that there's a lot of voices that don't necessarily get heard in education, and so social justice is just really making sure all those voices are being heard.

When you came to Las Vegas, what year was that, and what was your first impression of the city?

I came here in 2013…I thought I lived in the desert before.

Different desert, isn't it?

I was like, "*Woo*, it's dry up here." That was my first impression. The Sonora Desert is so beautiful. I think it gets fourteen, sixteen inches of rain a year. Las Vegas, we're lucky if we get four. It's so dry. That's what I first thought. I was taken back by the Strip. It's one thing to come here and hang out for a weekend; it's another thing to live here. I started seeing the Strip as something I drove around. But I fell in love with the school community. When we moved here we lived in Henderson, and I was commuting back and forth to downtown and the Crestwood neighborhood, and then I was like, "No." My husband and I bought our first house in the Crestwood neighborhood, and I just felt so at home. Once we had moved there, I was like, okay, this is good.

What was the appeal or what was it that you think drew you to live in the Crestwood area versus the Henderson area?

I'm going to tell you for sure the community. There was a lot of folks from America Latina, but there was a diversity. There are a lot of folks from the Philippines. There are a lot of different

varieties of property value, so I think that's really important. Up the hill you have two-, three-million-dollar homes. Down the hill you have accessible housing. I thought that was important because that kind of diversity, you don't see it very often, especially on the west side of the country. I think the houses have large spaces in the front, so it means people are hanging out in their front yard and it feels more like a community. Kids play on the street. For me that was really important.

What was the difference in the education system? What did the demographic look like for your students here versus in Arizona?

Pretty much the same. I've always been the kind of teacher that wants to work in schools that are Title One, so they receive free and reduced lunch support. It varies, the type of support, but, give or take, three-quarters to all of the kids are on free and reduced lunch because of where the family income is. That for me was always where I want to teach. I don't see myself teaching elsewhere ever. Teaching Latino populations has always been really critical to me, really important to me, kids of color in general. That's where I feel I'm needed.

Have you always taught special education since you graduated from college?

Almost. I did a year of bilingual fifth grade, and then I did my master's in bilingual special ed, and since then it's been special education.

Where did you get your master's?

In the University of Arizona.

How impactful did you see your experiences since the Teacher Academy, then your studies at University of Arizona? What were some of the most impactful experiences from those that influenced your role as a teacher now in the classroom?

I think some of the most impactful things weren't necessarily formal things. For example, in Arizona I was part of the human rights group Puente Arizona. They were the group that was really leading the charge against SB 1070, which was the 'show me your papers' law, before it happened, while it happened, after. They're the same organization that pushed Sheriff Joe Arpaio out of office. They are the same organization that stops countless deportations. One of the things that they do differently than a lot of organizations—and things have shifted because a lot of organizations are doing it now—but the folks who were leading and making the decisions were undocumented folks; everybody else was just supporting, and that was really powerful. It was really powerful to see them organize civil disobedience, to see them fight this criminalization on a really deeper sense. A lot of organization would take deportation cases that were winnable. The person didn't have a criminal background or criminal charge or whatever. But Puente Arizona didn't shy away from those cases because they refused to believe that undocumented people only had a right to stay if they didn't have a criminal background. They saw the role in the criminalization of the Latino community.

I was just a tiny, little drop in this big bucket of this organization. But what I learned there was the importance of intergenerational work, of the folks who are being are leading, so student voices, family voices impact what I do. I think for me that was really monumental.

I also got the chance to participate with a few indigenous groups in Mexico and see their organization of education, their organization of community organizing and gardening and arts and things like that. I think those things have informed me perhaps more than what I've learned formally, which makes me continue to believe this idea of your informal education is just as important as your formal education, which brings me to push for more community schools, not like a vacuum school, but a school that bleeds in and out of the community.

It's really cool to talk to you about this kind of stuff because normally I have to package what I say in a way that the general public will understand, but when we're talking about *Latinidad*, it's really important to go deep and find all these root beginnings of why the things we do are so important. The idea of autonomy is so critical to people of color. This idea of you get to decide who you are, and you get to decide what parts of you stay with you. I think those are really, really critical in education.

Outside of the classroom, being a teacher here, as well in Arizona, outside of the classroom what do you like to do for you? Who is Juliana outside of being Miss Earth in the classroom?

That's a dangerous thing about falling in love with your career is that it becomes so much of who you are. I think in the last couple of years I've made a conscious effort to make sure that there's a balance. I love, love, love nature, obviously. I love hiking and traveling and being immersed in nature. I love reading nonacademic, non-education-related books. I'll read those, but I prefer to read literature.

Which genre do you like or authors?

I just got done reading *Homegoing* and I loved it. It reminded me so much of *Cien Años de Soledad* [100 Years of Solitude] and *Caramelo* it's like this lineage of who we are. I love reading comedies. I don't know if you know who Amy Poehler is. I loved reading her autobiography *Yes Please*. It was beautiful, beautiful. I love really all sorts of different things. I love plants. I was hip to the houseplant before people were hip to it. I love spending time with my family. The days of nothingness are my favorite, just play with the nephews and hang out.

Nice. Do you keep up some of those Colombian traditions that your mom has? Do you keep those in your household with your partner?

Yes. I think the literature, the music and the food are probably the most visible. It's interesting because when you partner up with somebody who has different cultural experiences than you do, there's a lot of…not negotiation, but maybe fluctuation of those. We invited our parents to live with us, and then they passed. But for the time that we did share with them, it was very different cultural values between his family and my family. The other thing I learned was to carve space for his culture and his values and his family's values, and he's done the same for me. I know how to make salsa now and adobo and all sorts of Mexican dishes. I don't make it as good as they did. I think that those are important and interesting to who we are. With this idea of Latinidad, there's a lot of similarities, but there's a lot of differences, *ooh*, a lot of differences.

You mentioned your interest in language, in linguistics. Could you tell us about what those differences look like linguistically? My mom is from Colombia and my dad is from El Salvador, so there's always clashes of how to say watermelon. *Sandia* for my dad and *patilla* in Colombia. Do you see that in the household, too, with your partner and his family?

Oh yes. Oh yes. In Mexico there is this *doble sentido,* double meaning, for a lot of words. A lot of the words we use in Colombia aren't offensive in Mexico, but they just mean completely different things, so it leads to really awkward things, awkward times. We learned to not take those things too *a pecho* [to heart], just roll with it. But, yes, linguistics. But it's also beautiful because the Spanish that they speak in Mexico is so derived from so many Indigenous words and practices, such a beautiful way of speaking Spanish. My husband, because he's a musician and he's a percussionist, will always notice the way we say certain things, like *tentempié* is like a snack. Like *tente en pie* [keep yourself standing up] like "stand up" kind of a thing. This is a little snack to keep you standing. It's definitely derived from African ancestry, *tentempié*. Certain

words have certain—like *patacón pisao* [tostones]. There are certain things that he'll catch and he'll say back to me. I'm like, "Oh, it IS very musical." The way we speak is really musical and it's really different, but it's really beautiful. With my accent, sometimes he'll start speaking with his accent. That happens to your parents?

Me too. Growing up here I really adopted the Mexican accent. When I would go visit family in Colombia, they'd be like, "Why are you saying *híjole*?" I'm like, "Sorry." Have you had opportunities to go back to Colombia, and how often do you go?

Yes, before COVID we were going every year or two years. I still have family there. Things are rough out there right now. You know. Hopefully as soon as it's safe to travel there…I can't wait.

Given the time, could you share more about what's happening there right now or how your family is doing given the political climate and social climate right now?

COVID hit Colombia really, really hard. There is a lot of disparity. I think less than five percent of the population has had the opportunity to be vaccinated, so it means a lot of people are out of work. There is no social support for folks out of work. Schooling has been really hard. There's a lack of access to internet devices to be able to participate. Teachers don't feel comfortable going back to school in person because there's no vaccines. There's not a priority of the vaccine. It's still a lot of unrest and negligence from the government. COVID exposed it and made it worse, and I think that's something similar that we've seen in a lot of countries. But in Colombia they tried to pass a tax. It was a significant tax, I believe around 20 percent, on food, bus, everything, and people were like, "On *our* backs? No." The economic state of Colombia is not the people's fault. It's years and years of negligence and corruption in the government. And so that was it; there was a *paro nacional*, which is a countrywide protest, and we've seen the response of the government be militarization of streets, killing of protesters, no civic supports or protections for

people. Just a few days ago, Duque, the president, ordered more militants to go to Cali because that's where the stronghold is, in Cali. If you want peace and negotiation, the response can't be militarization on the streets, but that has kind of always been the response from the government, and so a lot of this movement is being led by the youth, by youngsters in college, saying that there's not enough possibilities that things can be redone. You look at what happened in Chile—was it last year?

Yes.

Yes, in Chile. You look at what's happening in other countries. Right now there's a big movement in Brazil to get the president to resign. Because we have to come out of COVID better, not worse. When you have a country like Colombia, people are literally dying of hunger. In the richest country in terms of resources and possibilities, you can't make sense out of that. There's been a lot of outpouring support from Colombia with me being named Teacher of the Year because it was a bright light in the middle of all this. The story just caught fire and people are so excited about it.

How did they reach out to you? How did they learn about you?

The media, I think. I'm very open and very proud of being Colombian, so it was present in a lot of the news sources. I've gotten a lot of requests from median in Colombia, TV shows, podcast, radios, our print media, and then I've just gotten more messages than I can count from people in Colombia and people in the U.S. that are Colombian, just overall mostly support.

What are they most curious about? What part of your story are they hooking onto?

They just either send me congratulations or tell me that it's uplifting particularly in these times. A lot of folks are asking for help with visas or teaching positions, helping with immigration. It's sad because you want to be able to help, but you're not in that position. There is a good amount

of folks who say that I'm irresponsible for speaking out about the violence and the military on the streets in Colombia because I'm not there, so I don't know. There's a lot of folks are feeling the repercussions of what's happening. Their loved ones can't get medical care. There's a lack of food and supplies and all because of the stopping of the freeways, and so it's difficult and they blame the protesters. There's a lot of infiltration of the protests. There's a lot of people who tell me it's none of my business; I'm not Colombian enough to be talking about it, and that's okay. That's fine. There's space for that, too. But mostly it's just people being like, *"¡Felicidades! Nos da mucho orgullo".* [Congratulations! We are proud of you.] You give us a lot of pride for marking the country, which has been really healing for me because for somebody who left Colombia as a young girl, sometimes the connection—you know what it's like when you go into Colombia. You're kind of like this oddity and they're poking at you and making fun of the way you speak Spanish. It's been kind of healing for me because they still see me as Colombian, which is beautiful, and I get to push back on this idea of you're not enough in Colombia or enough in the United States. Olmeca sings one of his songs, he goes, "Forget about *ni de aquí, ni de allá. Somos de aquí, somos de allá*". [Forget about not being from her and not being from there. We are from here and we are from there."] Like, there is a diversity of my identity and it's okay that my Spanish isn't perfect, it's okay that I speak an older generation's Spanish. I don't speak like the young kids in Colombia. I don't have that connection. It's been healing because I've been able to reconnect in a really beautiful way.

I really resonated with your statement of "being Colombian enough." How has it been to interact with the media there compared to interacting with the media here? What does that dichotomy look like?

It's intimidating, for sure, to be on live Colombian TV. I go, "My god." You know that scene from "Selena" when she gets interviewed in Mexico and she butchers it? People love her anyway. I'm like, okay, I need all the Selena ancestry, please guide me. It's intimidating. Media is very different in Colombia. Here you have the AP; everybody shares a news source. If CBS premiered it or rolled it out, nobody else cares too much about showing you on live TV because you're kind of owned by that one. In Colombia it's different; they don't share any media. While I'm grateful, the Colombian media part has been overwhelming because I've probably done five times as much Colombian media interviews than I have here in the U.S. Yes, yes, because they don't share the story.

A lot of the things they want to know, too, are really different and really difficult to capture in a way that's culturally responsive to Colombia because the teachers have had a lot of struggle with public support because they don't want to go back without vaccines, not just for their own safety, but for the safety of their students, and so they are being seen as unfair and really scrutinized for that decision, and so they wanted me to speak a lot on that. I just talked about how it's universally people's right to have a vaccine to this pandemic.

Also, they want to know about the different school structures because in America Latina the idea of disability is quite different than the idea of disability here. Here there's been this whole process of identifying disability, these nonvisible disabilities, like behavioral, cognitive, linguistics. There are different disabilities that aren't visible. While in América Latina, if you have a visible disability, then, okay, that makes sense, but these invisible ones haven't developed in public schools the way they have here, and so they want to know a lot of the difference. They want to understand what it means for me to be a special education teacher. They'll say *niños con*

problemas [kids with problems] or *enfermitos* [sick little ones] and things like that. It's a difference, so you have to explain how those are different.

And they want to know my story. They want to know, why did you leave Colombia? How do you feel about being Colombian? Stuff like that.

How do you answer those questions?

Like, how I feel about being *colombiana*?

Yes.

I definitely kind of share what I've shared with you about how in my adulthood and in teachings students who are Latino, I've learned that we all have gifts to offer. An example is I don't call my students English language learners; I call them linguistically gifted. If you come to this country with any other language than English, you are offering a gift to the county, and it is silly of us not to see it as a gift and not to make sure that we maintain it as a gift. If we flip it in that way, then you're empowering yourself as a linguistically diverse person. I talk a lot about that, about how my experiences have helped me see both sides and make sure that we're nurturing kids. If it ever gets scary, all I do is just turn it back to the kids, how wonderful the kids are, and then they lessen the intensity of the questions.

What was that process like for you to become the Nevada teacher and then the national? What was the trajectory? Were you offered to nominate yourself? Did someone nominate you? How did that process go for you?

Each state, including the territories and the Department of Defense, has their own process, so Nevada's process is different than Arizona's or California's. In Nevada it is a nomination process, and then once you're nominated—you can self-nominate; I was nominated by my mentor. She really encouraged me to apply, and I really didn't want to do it.

Who is she?

Her name is Dr. Tonia Holmes-Sutton. She graduated, did her PhD here at UNLV. She was Alumni of the Year for the College of Ed this year. She's phenomenal. She really encouraged me to apply. It's this very long application. It's a very reflective process of who you are as an educator, how you connect your students to their community. Then there is a selection committee and they narrow it down eventually. The last set of finalists, we do a keynote and an interview. We did it all virtual this year. Then I got surprised in September. I thought I was attending a teacher retention virtual meeting that I was about to cancel because I had a lot going on. I open up the meeting and the governor is right there. I'm like, "*Ope*." It was a surprise announcement. I spent the school year just presenting and just meeting with teachers across the state virtual, of course.

When was that?

September of last year. Then in October all the state Teachers of the Year get to apply again, a different application, to be National Teacher of the Year. I submitted my application. I'm like, yes right, here you go. In December I found out I was a finalist, and there was four of us. Actually, another one of the D.C. teachers, he's half-Colombian, too. I'm like, what are the chances? Then the four of us did another; we presented a mock keynote about what our platform or body of work would be like, and we were interviewed. I think it's the most difficult thing I've ever done in my life because you are being interviewed by people who represent the largest educational organizations in the country, and they say, "Make a keynote about your work, what your work means." It's a big task, and so it was a lot of reflecting. In that reflection I realized that what I had been doing for the last ten years was constructing a joyous and just education. I put those two together and I just talked about what that framework looked like, what it could

look like for teachers. Like, this is how I looked at my community, but I believe that teachers in different places can make it resonate with their communities. Because what ogre does not want a child to have a joyous and just education? Even really conservative people are reaching out to me, giving me their support. I'm like, you know what this means, right? Do you know what you're supporting? Okay, I'll take it. It's mindboggling because I don't think anybody would be like, no, you shouldn't have families involved, or, no, kids should be miserable in school. There is a new wave of energy and I think that it just resonated. Because I don't see this as me; this a we thing and that's something I talk about frequently. It's about my students, about their families. It's about other teachers, it's not just me. I get to echo those voices, but it's not just me.

They selected me and when I got the call, I was on the floor. I'm like, are you sure, me? There is this whole imposter syndrome that you have. Yes, it was incredible. The third special education teacher ever to be named as National Teacher of the Year, the first from Nevada, and they're pretty sure the first Latina. This is interesting for your work. They never did a census on the National Teacher of the Year ethnicities. With my naming it was really important to me. They were able to track back to 2005 that none of the teachers identified as Latina. They say that I'm the first Latina since 2005, but really because that's the only access they have to information about ethnicities. *Latinidad* is a whole other question for race and ethnicity. It's like, I'm not White, but you tell me Latina is an ethnicity. Anyway, whatever. It opens up about this question of teacher diversity. But I'm pretty sure I'm the first Latina ever, and it's huge. It's huge for what it means for communities that typically feel unseen, uncelebrated and kind of just forced to go along with things. It's kind of like a halt in the opposite direction, and Dr. Jill Biden gets that. Her entire team is mostly Latinas.

What was that like for you to meet her because it was unexpected? You were very surprised.

I was like, who is going to come down through that door? My mom's here. Who are they going to get to come in through that door? I thought maybe the Teacher of the Year from last year. I had no clue. She made that trip just to come for my announcement. It was crazy, right? It was really beautiful. I got to hear her speak when she was here, I think it was 2017, for the Heart of Education Awards. She was here and she did the keynote, and it was spectacular. Don't tell him, but even my husband teared up during her speech. She is just an educator who gets it. She is the first lady of the United States. She could teach at any really Ivy League, private, fancy-schmancy university. She teaches at a community college in Vermont. What that tells you is that she cares about education being accessible and education being transformative. When she came to visit me, she told me that just recently she had submitted her grades. And having taught two courses at UNLV, I was like, "Ooh, that's a lot, good for you." I know what it meant to submit those grades. It feels good to submit those grades. You're like, bye. Everybody has their grade; I can move on with my life. It's a stressful time for instructors. But she had literally submitted it on her way, I think she told me. She's a teacher just like us.

This change in political tone, I know that it's a weight off of my students and their families just not to have that toxic criminalization being poured down on them. I think that that's a huge breath of fresh air. She signifies including teachers in decisions that we're going to make about public education. I think President Biden said something about education for all means education—no, it was Secretary Cardona—education for all means education for all. It's this departure of undocumented kids not having access. It's really beautiful and I think the planets kind of aligned with her coming to my announcement. She was also so generous. She could have

very easily made it about her, but all she did was make it about me. I'm gushing because I'm like, oh my god, these words are coming out of her mouth. She was just really nice. Talk about a shift, right? It meant a lot.

How has that shift been from being Miss Earth, making a community garden, connecting with your students and families to now having the spotlight on you as a Latina and as a teacher? What has that shift been like for you and your family?

Oh, well, there's been a lot less sleep, that's for sure. It's a lot of work and it's beautiful work. I think the shift is in the initial stages. Officially I start my duties on the first of July.

Your duties?

Yes, as National Teacher of the Year.

Talk about those. What will those be?

I am on administrative contract this year where I won't be teaching in the classroom or a school this year. I get to move around the country as an advocate and as a spokesperson for education, and I get to present at conferences and meet with different groups of people and teachers and students. I am so excited to learn from all these folks I'm going to get to meet. I think that's it challenging because we perceive teachers as teachers who are directly in the classroom, but I'm still going to be that teacher. Our mentor from the program keeps asking me, "What do you think people need to learn right now?" It's really intimidating to think of yourself as a teacher to the mass public. However, if I think about it as the "we" not "me," then I can find the foresight to be able to be like, all right, I can speak up; I can say these things. I think we are contesting a lot of ageism. I think we're contesting a lot of what we perceive as powerful educators by having to fight for one sweet little Latina teacher, because I am that, but I'm also really fierce when it comes to policy and advocacy. I'm not afraid to have the conservations about exclusion and

racism in our schools, and xenophobia and homophobia, and all these horrible things that appear, manifest in schools. I think it's kind of like amplifying the expectation of what a teacher is.

I think the most impactful thing is the inclusion of families. It's not something that's typically talked about in public education, and if I can give one thing to public education, it's that; it's that now it's not just about students, it's students and their families, because you know in the Latino community how hard it is for us—not in my family because I had this privilege, but in a lot of families—how hard it is to become educated, to choose a profession like teaching, and to have this massive divide between you and who your family is culturally. We can't do that. That's a disservice and that's harmful to our students. We have to think of their education including their families.

I think one of the biggest compliments I've gotten recently was from a family member from my old school saying, "I would love for one of my children to become a teacher one day." It's not something you hear in the Latino community very often.

That is powerful.

It's huge.

That is.

It's huge.

Talk about your fellow teachers at Crestwood, the faculty, their reaction or what they were like, just in general, before you got to this point, even.

It took me a while at Crestwood to find my people because I think I was one of two Latino teachers and maybe staff members on campus. There wasn't a diversity.

You were underrepresented, then.

Oh, absolutely. I think that my principal through our conversations made it an intentional choice to make sure that we had more diversity in our teaching staff. But I would hear a lot of comments about how ugly the school was, how unsafe the neighborhood was, and in my head I'm like, "They have not taught in Maryvale. This is not unsafe." It made me really realize the importance of perspective and the importance of storytelling. There wasn't enough storytelling between families and the teachers.

But then I started finding my people, and I made friends with a lot of the White teachers at the school who were open to seeing things in a more inclusive way, and so they're some of the best teachers and the best friends that I have, and they were really supportive. They would say this all the time: "Juliana, you're the crazy one with ideas. Sometimes when I see you in the hallway, I'm going to turn around and run away because I don't have time to help you. But sometimes I'll run towards you, and when I do let's do it."

It was just mad ideas that we had about…just the structure of it. Think about putting in a garden, digging, breaking ground in a garden on a school that was built in the '50s that we don't have the blueprints for, so we don't know if there's lead pipes; we don't know what we're going to get when we dig. You can imagine the district was like, "Ooh, slow down and let's find a way." We found a way.

We were doing something that hadn't been done in the district, but we had the support of the organization Green Our Planet. They helped schools build gardens, and now more so hydroponics. But hundreds of gardens went up in the course of six years; we were the first one. We were the first one to design it as a classroom, as a community space, and so we really made sure that that was the model. It was hard. It was not easy. It was not always like rainbows and

butterflies, people supporting us, it wasn't. But it was about the kids, and the kids loved their garden, and so that's what made this happen.

At Booker—I switched to Booker Elementary this year—it was really hard to be a new teacher at a school this year with the pandemic. But then getting this *reconocimiento*, this acknowledgement of who I am as a teacher really helped build the morale and uplift teachers there. They were so excited to get that spotlight. I hope that I did it in a way that really embraced the whole school community, and I think the Crestwood community was really happy.

I think it's fair to talk about this kind of stuff because it's important. There is a lot of diversity in teacher leadership, right? When we had a shift in administration at Crestwood, I was not welcome there and that's why I had to leave. I think a lot of it has to do with this boldness and being a person of color. It's almost like sometimes people don't expect you to be bold and be a person of color. You're supposed to be obedient and docile and grateful, and so there was pushback from that. That was when I was like, okay, I'm ready to explore other spaces where I can be valued as a leader. I think a lot of people of color, not just within education, but within public spaces, confront that kind of pushback and that kind of push out. I don't share it a lot because it's really…for this story I think it's important, but for National Teacher of the Year and other things, I don't really share too much because I don't want people to be distracted by the internal pushback. But is there pushback for people of color? Absolutely. I think that we are getting better about vocalizing them and saying, "No, this isn't okay. We need to create space for teacher leadership." I think that the friends, who I'm still connected to, at Crestwood are so excited.

After you take this year off—not off, but for your new job, do you come back to teaching? What happens for you after that?

I have no idea. I have no idea. I think that if I'm called to support and serve in a way that makes a big impact, I'd explore it, really making sure that I'm doing the most I can with this opportunity in terms of uplifting communities of color, special education communities, the Latino bilingual community. I have no clue. I have no clue and I'm a little scared about it, but it will all work out great.

No aspirations right now?

I don't know. I don't think—I'm so busy that I don't even know what my agenda looks like for tomorrow. I think if I'm called to serve in a way that will be impactful, I will definitely do that. The beautiful thing about being a classroom teacher is you could always be a classroom teacher and you will always continue to be a teacher even if you're not in a classroom. I think advocacy work is really important, and so we'll see. I don't know. We'll see. We'll see.

Actually hearing you speak, I'm wondering if you ever considered working in educational policy, national and public level, or whether you'd never see yourself detaching from—not detaching, but stepping out of the classroom space with the kids, which sounds super important to you as well.

Some of my role models and mentors, like Peggy Brookins, who is the CEO and the president of National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, she created a school in Florida. It's a STEM high school, and the way they attract and select students breaks with tradition because they look for students who have traditionally been excluded from STEM schools. She's Black and she grew up in the South and she wanted to be an astronaut. She grew up in Florida or Texas, I don't know, somewhere where NASA has a lot—

That would be Florida.

Florida, yes. She wanted to be an engineer or an astronaut. She helped her uncle, who was a NASA engineer, build different parts of Space Shuttles in her garage. But she was pushed out. She said because she was Black in the '50s, it was like, you can be a teacher or you can be a nurse or you can be a housewife; you're Black. She started this school to make sure that kids had access to STEM education. In her own school she got confused as being the janitor. Talk about oppression and marginalization. Nonetheless, she ended up serving on Obama's Black Education Excellence committee, and she runs the National Board. To this day she still teaches a few classes at the high school.

There is a way of still keeping your sense as an educator. I am a National Board certified teacher, so that means every five years I have to renew my certification, and so I have to continue teaching. I will find a way to never leave it completely. But it is hard because so much of your identity as an educator revolves around your students, so it is a transformation.

Going back to the application process, you mentioned that it was all virtual. What was it like when March fifteenth, 2020 came around and you were told you couldn't go back to school to see your students?

It was difficult, for sure. Working with populations that I work with that have access issues to fair housing, fair food, all these different things, the first thing you worry about is their well-being and their families' well-being. The first week they told us not to do anything. They told us not to contact the families and all that, but I contacted all the families. They all have my cell phone number; that's not allowed, but it doesn't matter. Because I had to make sure they were okay. Luckily our district did a really good job of responding. Within a couple of days, they had set up the food spots where folks could pick up lunch and breakfast for their kids. Every time I called the food services to be like, "Hey, this policy is excluding these families," they would

amplify their services. They would open up more satellite schools so the families that were walking could get the food home before it was completely ruined. Families with kids in multiple grades could pick up the food instead of having the kids there. Can you imagine dragging your kids out? Anyway, all these things, they were really receptive to teacher feedback.

Then with Superintendent [Jhone] Ebert's leadership, we had that group Connecting Kids Nevada. Every child in Nevada by, I think, October had a laptop and a Wi-Fi hotspot. These resources meant that I could shift to teaching and social and emotional wellness for my students.

It wasn't easy. I think that the stress of the pandemic and teaching at the same time and teaching all sorts of hours of the day and working two or three times as much was really hard on teachers. I really hope teachers take the time to recuperate because it was really tasking and difficult, but we did it. We did it.

What was the biggest challenge, and special ed, of teaching during COVID?

I think that a lot of our students who have special education services also have very vulnerable home lives and home structures, and so I think that was the toughest, was the majority of my students were seeing increased struggle and increased adversity. I think that was the biggest challenge.

The other challenge was some of the more obvious things, like keeping their attention virtually, helping them feel confident with technology, individualizing their instruction, which is something I do in the classroom quite easily because I can just bounce around. In a virtual classroom it was really difficult because first you could use Zoom and have breakouts, and then a week later you couldn't do Zoom, and so the kids had to learn Google Meet. It was all this back and forth about technology because we were all figuring it out as we were going. I think that the

logistics were probably the hardest thing for the students, and students being in vulnerable situations, it was really tough for them, too.

We have a small project that we've been working on for COVID-19, so we always ask people for the silver lining. You have a big silver lining, but I don't think it's because of COVID necessarily. When you reflect as an educator from the past fourteen, fifteen months, what was the silver lining whether it's educationally or just personally?

Educationally the silver lining was teachers acknowledging the huge role families play in their education. I think that that was something I talked about a lot, and people were like it was an optional factor, and now it's not an optional factor. Now we have to keep the momentum going so teachers continue, not to add it on as something extra, but as something integrated into everything we do. This isn't something we do in a silo. This is something we do with families. Nor for families, but with them: I think that was the silver lining because teachers were at the mercies of families. We were invited into their homes. It's a lot for families to be vulnerable and say, "Yes, here's a camera into my home." Some families had no issues with it. There would be family members that didn't know they were on camera and would walk back and forth in their underwear, and you'd have to call and have awkward conversations, but for the most part…

I remember we did a music group. My dad would come on our Zoom call or our Google Meet call and do music. Some of my students would gather all their siblings, their cousins, and sit down and listen to it together. That was something you couldn't do in person. There were beautiful moments like that.

Had you used your dad in the classroom before?

Yes. In Arizona when we lived in the same city, he would come frequently.

But not here.

Not here, no.

That opened that up, having the technology.

Yes, yes.

That's a positive.

Definitely, definitely. There was a certain group of teachers who refuse to evolve with the technological needs of education, and they had no choice. But I did teach teachers how to use Gmail this year, how to open up a Google Meet, how to save things on a drive, how to minimize Windows, how to share their screen. There were teachers that you started from square one in terms of the technological understanding. It was really stressful for those teachers. But, but, but, but it made them, forced them to rethink education in a way that matches the times that we're in.

Did they ever use a smartboard in their classrooms, even?

There are teachers who don't know that it's worth twenty thousand dollars, and they just hang posters on it, or just use it as a projector. It was a necessary evolutionary part of teaching. But I do believe that that pushed some teachers to the limit where they retired early. We had quite a bit of teachers retire early.

I was just at a high school graduation party where there were a lot of teachers, last night, public schoolteachers that were talking about the outrageous number of retirements and vacancy, and we've always had a vacancy issue here and now it's going to be even worse. It's frightening.

Yes, especially in the rural areas. I did this tour. I talked to different teachers across the state. One of the teachers in a rural area told me that in her district five teachers had retired early. I was like, okay. Well, five teachers was a significant percentage of their school district. To be able to replace those five teachers is going to take years. It's all relative.

But I wonder how much of it is about retention. How much do we cultivate in retention versus just this constant recruitment? We have really good teachers. How do we redesign things so that teachers don't feel forced to leave? It's tough because some teachers do need to leave. For the majority of the teachers I work with, they're beautiful, wonderful educators. But there is a certain subset of teachers that maybe some other kind of space in education is right for them, maybe not directly impacting students is right for them.

It's tricky because we need to support teachers more with more time more than anything. They don't need more resources. They don't need more professional learning, and if they do they need to be able to name what it is they need. But they need more time. Teachers don't have free time to be creative or be reflective. It's just this constant go-go-go. If we carved out more time for the, I wonder how things would be different.

I have three friends who were first-year teachers this year, so that's been really rough, and then first- and third-grade teachers.

Oh, oh. Yes, it's really hard. If you can make it through this year, you can make it through anything in education.

Two of the student workers on this project were first-year teachers, Elsa and Laurents, at different ages, high school and elementary.

Are they going back for a second?

Yes, they are. They're very excited.

Good. Good.

They're doing summer school right now.

They're both good teachers.

Good. Good.

One of them shared with me, and you mentioned it as well, of how the hardest part was seeing families and their impact in the home life. One of them talked about how they saw their first-grader holding their little brother while they were taking a test, in the camera. That was really hurtful for her as a teacher, not being able to help them. Were there any instances similar to that that you could share or feel comfortable sharing of the hardships that you saw during the pandemic as a teacher, through your eyes?

Yes, I think there are certainly students who felt—I hope not—but ashamed or embarrassed with their family. I had a family who they had a lot of older brothers, and older brothers did all sorts of things that they didn't shield from our virtual classes, and so it got to a point where those students would mute or turn off their camera. I knew they were there. We had other ways to participate and engage them and make sure they were okay. But those things break your heart because for so many kids school is a safe haven. School is a refuge from chaotic-ness, which in some families might be culturally appropriate and culturally responsive and leads to wellness, this chaos. But school is a separation from that, a time to be just be an individual. I think in a lot of communities of color, kids don't often get to be an individual, and so that's really tough. That's the perfect example of your friend's student holding the baby. You're not just a kid, you're a kid that's helping with a kid because maybe mom is working two jobs. There's always a something behind the scenes. I hope teachers learn to ask the questions with empathy about family structures before the judgment. Once I build trust with a family who doesn't have behaviors that align with public education, like maybe the mom shows up in pajamas or the mom says things that aren't the most terribly appropriate things for a school environment, once you get to know them and you ask them, "What were your experiences in school?" you find that more times than not they had a need that wasn't met at school; they had a traumatic event at school;

they were ostracized and pushed out of school. It's really conflicting for them with their children. They don't want their children to have those same experiences. There is always something that you can find as a commonality with families, especially when you consider the children being that commonality. It is really heartbreaking when you struggle to find that commonality with families, especially virtually because you go from one or two of your kids struggling in the classroom with family home lives and issues impacting them to all of your kids, be it finding a quiet space. I had kids working in their pantry. They were quite comfortable there. They loved being in there because it was quiet and they could focus. I try to look at these things with an asset mindset because we're always focusing on the things that make our students (Spanish/1:43:14). That's going to become such a big part of their identity versus without devaluing their struggle. Focus on what their mom does great. There is always something. There is always something.

At the beginning of the interview we talked about the importance of community and that support. Where was that support for you through that transition during the pandemic and, as well, through this application process and now moving into this new spotlight? Where do you see that support in community?

I think it's about finding people who see you the way you should see yourself. My mentor helped me…it sounds really easy to talk about your philosophy as an educator, or your impact as an educator. It's really hard. It's super hard. It's really reflective. It's really analytical. Soul searching. Then you have to find people who, one, share similar visions for education that you do, and always be in collaboration with them, and then you have to find people who can support you emotionally. Because when you're making yourself so vulnerable, for me, it just kind of made me into a puddle all the time. My husband makes fun of me all the time.

Because your interviews were a week; they were three days. Just that week you would come into rooms and you would just burst out crying because you're just unveiling these parts of yourself that are so vulnerable, but that make you who you are that you want to share with people. It's a process, but it's that authenticity that I think helped me communicate who I was with people; that willingness to be somewhat vulnerable.

And then the community, you had to find people who had been through similar experiences. Richard Knoeppel the 2019 Teacher of the Year, is one of my best friends in education. He is the one who helped me really dig out the story that I wanted to tell. The Teacher of the Year before him, Pilar Biller, she is the one who is like, "You need to talk about being Miss Earth. That's really special." Otherwise, I don't think I would have shared that. I didn't realize that there's things special about my story that other people find special. It's about having really deep-rooted relationships with both people in your profession and outside of your profession who can reflect you, who can be like, "This is important. Talk about this." It makes it not just about you, which can really mess with your ego and your self-perception and your confidence if you make it about you. Ooh, I'm so glad that I took that road because I don't think I would have been able to handle the responsibility, the spotlight without having that groundedness.

People will tell you, "Look, you messed that up. Don't say that again. Maybe say this instead of 'Is this what you mean?'" You need people you trust who will be truthful with you because the thing that I wanted the most was to be able to echo the stories in the way that they were they most authentic. In my preparation, part of what I did was called all the families whose stories I was interested in sharing. It was hard to dig up some of the phone numbers, but I asked them for their consent. "Do you want me to tell your story? This is what your story meant to me.

This is what your story taught me as a teacher. Do you want me to share your story?" Or, "Put your parents on the line," because some of them were still in high school. Make sure it translated with some of the families, like, "Is this okay? Do you want me to use your real name? Do you want me to use a different name for you? When I tell you this, what do you capture?"

Taking that time took me a long time, but I also learned a lot more about my students, and they were so generous. All of my students wanted me to use their stories. All of them wanted me to use their real names. In the world of special education, this is huge because usually you don't use people's real names when you're talking about students with special needs. But they wanted their names because they didn't see their disability as a negative thing, and that to me is the story that I've got going. It's not my story, it's that. It's powerful. It's visceral.

That's very powerful, yes.

Students with autism. I don't know if you saw the CBS segment, but it's very visible that they have disabilities. But how they center themselves as people, I like to take a little, tiny bit of credit for that because that's what education is. In that sense that's the community. You want to make sure that you are being informed by the people who should inform you and that you're doing them justice.

For me, it took quite a bit of coordination with the CBS team to make sure they had an ESL interpreter for Vanessa's family, to make sure that the moms that were coming would be interviewed in Spanish and given a space to communicate however they wanted and that there was translation, subtitles. Those were things CBS never had to do before for the Teacher of the Year announcement, but we amplified the space. We made it more inclusive and more reflective, and they were beautiful about it; CBS was really beautiful about it. But, again, it's like my mentor tells me, Sara, she's like, "What do you have to teach people that they don't know?"

Well, I had to teach CBS that they were not very inclusive in how they reached out to families, and that this is what was going to happen and this is how they could do it. It's always about being generous of who your community is. I never thought this producer from CBS was going to become part of my community, but she did.

Your questions are spot-on.

Thank you.

That's what made me want to talk to for hours. I hope I wasn't too longwinded.

We could keep going because there are so many things, but I respect your time. This was great.

Yes. Thank you.

My pleasure. This is such an important project. I'm so excited to be able to help.

Thank you.

We're glad that you were able to come in. We official end the project at the end of June.

Oh, good. I'm so glad, then, good.

This is great to be able to bring you in. Nathalie's three years of experience is showing, really good.

Yes, your questioning is on point.

Thank you.

It's really great questions.

Thank you. I guess the final culminating question is, what is one word of advice that you have for future educators and educators that identify as people of color and Latino, Latina, Latinx educators for the future?

I think it's about bringing people with you. We don't all have the answers. We don't have all the solutions. Sometimes inequities and the disparities and the systemic issues are so big that we can get lost in them. But it's about your direct impact on students. If I can share one thing, it's just making sure that that learning connects to their families and communities because we never want to be teachers that separate our kids from their families.

Then in terms of teacher leadership and advocacy, carve the space if the space doesn't exist. Teacher voice is the voice that matters because we're guided by that student voice. I think that we can't get deterred by these huge issues in the profession. We've got to create the profession that we want. We have to echo out the profession that we see as what we have. I believe we're on the right path. I think we're getting there. I tell future potential teachers all the time, "We're working to make it better. Come on, help us because if you're not choosing this because it's hard…"

Now, there are some very systemic things that we're doing for recruitment of teachers. One is trying to do away with this unpaid internship. That's one of the biggest deterrents for people of color. *I can't go pay to work*. It's ridiculous. There is ways that districts can fund those projects, universities can fund those programs. Also, debt relief. I know that a lot of kids of color, myself included, going into college it's hard to take on a fifty-thousand-dollar debt plus if you're going to be making forty thousand dollars a year. You can't support your family with that. You can't pay off the debt. I think there are a lot of concrete things that are being talked about and that will happen very, very soon to make those things easier on people.

Thank you.

I hope so.

I hope so, too. You're so welcome. This was so much fun. **[End of recorded interview.]**