

## **Brenda Valeria Perez Amador Oral History Interview**

### **DC Oral History Collaborative**

#### **Summary**

Longtime community organizer and advocate, Brenda Valeria Perez Amador, shares detailed memories of her childhood in Mexico City, where she and her siblings often played outside in their neighborhood and took family field trips to the zoo and the parks. She reflects on the different aspects of school that she enjoyed, her growing interest in the history of the country and participating in cultural events that highlighted that history. She also looks back on growing up in her grandmother's house and the circumstances around having to move around a lot. Later on, she discusses her political awakening while attending high school in D.C. and what led to her involvement and leadership in the issues affecting her and her community. Brenda further expands on developments in the immigrant rights movement, including DACA, and what it means to have liminal status as a DACA recipient herself. *Note: The following interview transcript has been translated to English.*

#### **Narrator Bio**

Brenda Valeria Perez Amador is a local D.C. community organizer and currently works as a Grants Manager at the Department of Energy and Environment in the Office of Urban Agriculture, where her efforts focus on finding new ways to make public funds more accessible to the community to reduce food insecurity and create more opportunities to grow food locally. Originally from Nezahualcóyotl, Mexico City, Mexico, she has been living in D.C. since 2006 and attended D.C. public schools, including the School Without Walls. Though she began to notice disparities early on as she navigated the public education system, her formal introduction to organizing spaces happened at Many Languages One Voice, where she met other students who were mobilizing to address issues that were affecting them. In high school, she began to organize around language access and language justice and the broader immigrant rights movement. She also works to address environmental issues and has previously worked with organizations like City Blossoms. She continues to organize in all her capacities and is currently working on the New Deal for Youth at The Center for Law and Social Policy to propose policy changes that provide more economic opportunities for youth.

Narrator: Brenda Valeria Perez Amador

Project: Hola Cultura - Dreamers: our voices and dreams

Date of Interview: July 10, 2021

Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega, Norma Sorto

Interview Location: Columbia Heights

Interview Length: 02:13:59

Neighborhoods Mentioned: Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant, Capitol Hill, Georgetown, Cleveland Park, Nezahualcóyotl

Delia Beristain Noriega: Hello, we are here with Brenda Perez Amador, right?

Brenda Pérez Amador: Yes, hi.

DBN: Today is Saturday July 10th and we are here to talk with Brenda about the history of the Latinx community and also to give us a better idea of some of the changes that have taken place, among others, in the Dreamers movement and the perceptions around that term. So we can start from the beginning. Can you tell us your full name, date of birth and a little bit about where you were born?

BPA: So my name is Brenda Perez. My full name is Brenda Valeria Perez Amador and right now I'm trying to use my full name but people know me as Brenda Perez, it's simpler. And I was born on January 29, 1996 so right now I am 25 years old. And I was born and raised in Mexico City, in a city called Nezhualcóyotl. And it is in Mexico City in the state of Mexico, in Mexico. That's the address and that's where I grew up until I was 10 years old and at 10 we came here to D.C. in Columbia Heights, one block away from Howard University.

DBN: And what are some of the earliest memories of where you were born?

BPA: What a good question. Usually, no one asks me that but one of the earliest memories I have of Mexico is, usually, the first thing that comes to mind is the infrastructure. In Mexico there are a lot of people, there are a lot of buildings, everything is covered with concrete and sometimes a block has a small park. That is how I remember Mexico. Other memories I have is of going to *Parque del Pueblo* [the People's Park], which was a park that was near my house. We were going to see clowns with my family; it was a zoo. I remember that always, before arriving at the park, there was an aquarium and we always went to the aquarium and then to the park, and that was our routine every time we went out on weekends. I also have good memories. I grew up with my grandmother, so most of my memories are of my grandmother's house, living with her, going to the flea market with her, with my brothers and those are my good memories. There were also difficult moments and they are memories that I have super engraved in my head but in terms of good memories, it's all that.

DBN: And you say you grew up with your grandmother, so, can you tell us a little about your closest relatives, did you know your parents, do you have siblings?

BPA: I am the older sister of three boys, girls, three siblings. And it's me, my sister Paola and my brother Pedro and we call him Lalo. He is the youngest and we are a year apart. We grew up with my mom in the beginning and with my dad, and we lived close to, I don't remember what the neighborhood is called, but we also lived in Mexico City. My mom was-- she sometimes had jobs but she was mostly a housewife and my dad was a cop. We grew up with them until we

were five years old and then there were some problems at home. My dad and my mom didn't get along very well and it was primarily because my dad was super violent. Being a police officer in Mexico means that you have a lot of power over people who live in the city and every time we think of the Mexican police we think of corruption and that's the way it is. There is quite a bit of corruption. For those reasons my parents separated. Or my mom tried to separate from my dad at first because she said, "I don't want to depend on you financially." He also hit her, not in front of us, but sometimes my mom [00:05:00], you know like, she looked a little upset and had to leave the house for a few hours and I always wondered what happened. Did he shove her, did he do something to her? And for those reasons-- and we were treated well but among us siblings, there was favoritism. Like my dad was always giving a lot of love to my brother and my sister and there was a separation between me and him. And it was fine with me as long as he treated my brothers well, it was fine. But for those reasons my mom said, "Okay, it's better to find another place to live because this place is not healthy and that is not how I want my children to grow up." When I was six we moved in with my grandmother and we stayed there for a while. During that year, the first year we were with her, my dad didn't like that at all. He said "No, you are my family, you have to come back to the house where I can keep an eye on you." He didn't say that but that's how it felt, like he wanted us close to him to keep an eye on us and he started to threaten my grandmother, my mother, my family. He got a little more intense and when I was seven years old, my mom made the decision to come to the United States because she said, "Ok, there are no more opportunities here for me to support my family financially." Her husband or my dad was continually looking for her and abusing her space and, finally, she made that decision. And from the time I was seven years old until I was ten years old is when I grew up with my grandmother, because my mother had come here to the United States. And myself and my siblings stayed there in Mexico because we were still too young to come here, and she also didn't have a good idea how things were going to turn out here in the United States. She left us with my grandmother. And when we were with my grandmother, I was raised with my grandmother and my aunt and even though there were too many problems with my dad. We also grew up with his family and sometimes he would take us out because my mom always said, "As long as he doesn't hurt you, I want you to know your dad and I don't want to stop you from knowing him," because what she had is that in the future she didn't want us to say, "Oh, you didn't let us get to know our dad." So what she did is let him take us to places and we were very young, and I think from the bottom of my heart, I want to think that he loved us a lot and that he wanted to make sure we were happy even though he had a difficult way of doing it but we grew up a little bit with him. But the person she primarily left us with was my grandmother and my aunt.

DBN: And where did your grandmother live? Was it nearby or where?

BPA: My grandmother also lived in Mexico City and had two houses. There is a house that is in a neighborhood that we call *La Villada* [The Village] and it is a little closer to the city. That is

the place where I remember being more and spending more time there, and it looked like a concrete jungle, houses very close together, trees from time to time on the streets and quite a few cars, a lot of large roads. But she also had a house that was a little further out of town. I don't remember the name of the neighborhood but I do remember that it was a little more rural, that even the streets didn't even have names. They only had nicknames and I don't even remember the name of the neighborhood but they called it *El Puente* [The Bridge] because there was a large bridge that was more like a highway, but we called it *El Puente Blanco* [The White Bridge] and we lived quote on quote, on *calle Limón* [Lime Street]. That is how people found it but it didn't have an official name or I don't remember it. [00:10:00] Maybe it has one now. And we were close to my dad's house. To my grandmother's house, it was a matter of just taking the bus and walking for a little while, and I think the time it took us was about an hour or an hour and a half. It was close.

DBN: And you mentioned that you have siblings. What were some of the things you did as kids? What did you play or what kind of music did you listen to?

BPA: That's a good question. You're making me think of my childhood memories. So my brother and sister and I were super close, mostly because of our age--we were a year apart. I am 25 now, my sister is 24 and my brother is going to turn 23. And when we were growing up, we were like friends or we saw each other as friends because we were the same age. The things we liked to do, go out to the park a lot. In one of my grandmother's houses, on the White Bridge, there was a park right in front of the house. You only had to cross a very narrow street and there was the park. We liked going to the park, being on the swings, climbing trees. At one point we had our unofficial tree house in the park. The other children knew that this was our little tree house. There was no tree house, it was just a tree that we liked to climb. And we also had a game where--sometimes I think about the things that we played and sometimes I say to myself, wow, we were really creative--we liked to play a game where we pretended to be witches and wizards, we cast spells on each other. At one point, we were growing up, and we used to call my brother the baby because he was super small, so he was like the baby wizard and the baby wizard had special powers. We also liked to play with mud a lot. In Mexico, where we grew up, sometimes it rained a lot but it wasn't a little bit of rain here and there and then the sun comes up and goes away. It was horrible, raining for days until the streets flooded. But in the neighborhood, in our house, on the white bridge, in the park, big puddles always formed and what we liked to do was make mud cakes and look for tadpoles and frogs, their eggs would appear. So we liked to be there watching the animals, naming the frogs and imagining where they would live next. Those were the activities we liked, going to the park, our made up games and playing in the rain a lot, too.

DBN: And can you describe where you went to school? Well, as early as you can remember.

BPA: I actually remember school quite a bit, growing up, sometimes--and that's something I've been thinking about a lot--when you don't have a super emotionally stable place or home, you usually try to find stability in other parts of your life. I am reflecting a little on the past, and I remember that I always liked education and being in school because I said, Okay, there are no problems here. If there are problems, the problems are not very big, if something happens I have someone to tell. My siblings are here and I know they are learning. And I have always liked reading and doing academic things, I don't know why. It is usually super boring for other people, but since I was little, I was very curious about the world, history, how things work and I was very attached to education. But also because we had a super unstable house, that meant we went to various schools while we were growing up and it was mostly because sometimes [00:15:00] we had to get out of my dad's house and live with my grandmother for a few months. That meant we had to get out of school and go to a school that was closer to my grandmother's house. Then, when my mom came to the United States, we changed schools again. At one point we were with my dad and we changed schools again. I went to like five schools from first grade to fourth grade. I mean, every year I was in a different school. And school, I have good memories. Growing up I was more like a tomboy so I went to classes, and at recess I went to play soccer with the boys--they were usually boys--and we played soccer on the asphalt. There were some teachers that I loved, especially the last teacher I had before I came to the United States. He focused a lot on the history of Mexico and who the Aztecs were and writing fictional stories, and I liked that a lot. But I also had quite a few problems at school. It was a little difficult to make friends because every year we were moving, and I remember that in each school I had a friend that I always hung out with during recess or after school, but it was always difficult to maintain a concrete friendship. And I also always got into trouble with the other kids because the children were, kind of, a little tougher because they played soccer and I think I started to have a little more of those characteristics. And also the children in Mexico when they are growing up are super rough, and if they do something to you, you have to do something to get back to them so that they stop bothering you. But overall, I have good memories of school. I think for the most part, I did get into trouble from time to time but for the most part I was a good student and I really liked going to school and going there.

DBN: And did you have subjects that you liked more than others?

BPA: Yes, I definitely liked to read a lot and read about the history, more than anything, the history of Mexico, because history and the way in which we tell the history of Mexico is super integrated in the cultural events that we have and in the holidays. If it is September and we are going to celebrate the independence of Mexico in school, you usually learn, Okay, what happened or what were the events leading up to Mexico's independence. If it was the Day of the Dead, we usually learned about what is the Day of the Dead, how we celebrate it, how it is celebrated in different states of Mexico and we had a cultural event. That is also something I liked, the cultural events. They made us dance, they made us march with the flag. It is super

patriotic, but I liked to integrate myself into the cultural events of the school because that meant that we were going to learn about it, and we were going to do an event, and we were going to teach it to the community, because we usually have events, folk dances, someone recites a poem, dances, presentations. And all the moms, and all the kids, and all the people in the neighborhood would come to see the school festival. That's what I liked the most, the history. I was good at math but I didn't really like math, but it was good because I think a teacher once told me, "You think very logically." I said, "Oh, ok, that's great," but I don't like math anyway, don't assign it to me, but mostly history.

DBN: And you mentioned that you liked the cultural events that you all organized through the school. Aside from those events, were there other events that stood out in Mexico and can you describe them a little bit?

BPA: I think one of the advantages of growing up in Mexico is that in Mexico people like to have a lot of parties, and big parties [00:20:00] in community, it doesn't matter if we are celebrating a child turning five. It is a big party and we close all the streets of the neighborhood or if it's someone's fifteenth birthday or if it's Christmas, and we are walking and asking for a *posada* [caroling]. I remember all those events and they were all super fun because that meant there was really good food, music and lots of kids to play with. We had those events that were more than celebrations but also Independence Day is quite big there. The Day of the Dead is also pretty big. And what I liked the most, my favorite celebrations were the festivals we did during the summer. A year before I came to the United States, I was finally old enough to go out with my grandmother and be out in public because I think that, sometimes, my grandmother and my mother were a little scared to take us out, because we were so young that someone could take you away and you wouldn't even realize that you are missing a child. But we went to this festival in this neighborhood of the bridge, which we call *El Puente*, and there was food. It's like Fiesta D.C., what happens here in D.C. in Mount Pleasant. They close off the streets, I remember that there were quite a few stands where they sold food, people singing music and whenever it got dark, they lit all the bonfires and the fireworks. And there was a festival where a bull-shaped frame would loom over you, and they lit sparkles on it and the bull would, kind of, shoot off sparks everywhere and chase people, and that was super fun. I remember we had an incident because my brother got so scared that he ran and disappeared into the night. And my grandmother was screaming, "Oh my goodness, where's Lalo? We have to find Lalo." And he grabbed me and my sister and pulled us away and we were running. And we found my brother rocking on a swing, enjoying life, happy that he left the festival. But we had a mini heart attack, but that was one of the funnest festivals I have been to in Mexico, where there is music and people are happy. In the moment, no one has a problem with anyone and the goal is to have fun and for everyone to be enjoying themselves.

DBN: You mentioned that you loved food. What foods do you remember that were the most common?

BPA: The most common or what we ate the most, what we liked was definitely *Mole* [a traditional, spicy, chocolate sauce] with chicken and rice, which is your typical dish when you are at a party. People make big pots of *Mole*, pots of rice and chicken and they throw everything at you. But those who make the food are the grandmothers of the family so it is always delicious. My grandmother also worked in a flea market and she sold jeans, and what you eat there are just tacos, so street food, street tacos. And there were quite a few taco stands everywhere. And my grandmother has been working there for decades, she knows all the taco guys and knows who makes the most delicious tacos and who doesn't. That was it, eating tacos. We had a place or a little stand where we liked to go and the man who looked after that stand was almost like--I don't know if he was Mexican but if he was Mexican he was African [Mexican], and they called him the *el moreno* [the dark one] one and he had the most delicious tacos you could find In the flea market. And the last thing we liked to eat was, what we liked to eat the most was, the *Mole*, the tacos, I was going to say something else but I forgot, but those are the two dishes. We ate other things but that was what we liked to eat. [00:25:00]

DBN: And in terms of music, do you remember what were some of the artists or musicians who you listened to a lot or who played maybe on the radio or at home?

BPA: At home? Okay, we listened to two types of music. We grew up with my grandmother and it was typical, every Sunday when it was time to clean, we would listen to Los Tigres del Norte and that's my grandmother's favorite band. I think they are from California and they came to Mexico, and they talk a lot about immigration and they are critical of how the Mexican system works and the gentlemen are also handsome and play good music. So my grandmother loved to listen to Los Tigres del Norte. So we listened to Los Tigres del Norte. My uncles, or my aunt and uncles, when they came to visit us from the United States or when we were living with them, they taught us to listen to modern music. We listened to quite a bit of pop too. We listened to Timbiriche in his last years. My aunt loved Ricky Martin or she loves him, she still loves Ricky Martin, a band called Menudo. When we were growing up there was a telenovela called *Rebelde* and they started a band and all the songs I think, now, I know them by heart from listening to them so much. My mother also liked a genre called Ska so Panteón Rococó, also rock, we listened to Maná a lot, Café Tacvba, Calle 13. And in Mexico, when we were growing up, we started to listen, when I was seven years old, to a little bit of reggaeton but obviously my grandmother didn't like us listening to reggaeton so much. But I liked listening to reggaeton and Shakira too, especially a song where she was incorporating her culture from Lebanon. That's the kind of music we listened to.

DBN: And one of the things you mentioned earlier was about your dad, that he worked as a policeman. When you were little, what did you think about that?

BPA: Another very good question. At first, I did respect my dad a lot. I wasn't exactly sure about his personality or anything because I was only four or five years old, but I was aware of his energy and I could feel that my dad had a big presence and that he had to be respected. And he always came home, he came from work. And when we were living with him, before we noticed there were problems, we were super comfortable. We went to the parks, we went with his parents, we ate well, we had a house completely to ourselves, each of us was going to have his/her own room. I remember that at one point he painted a mural of Mickey Mouse, Goofy and Donald the Duck and I saw that he cared and paid a lot of attention to us. So since I was little, or when I was little, I used to say, oh, my dad has a big presence. But later, when I was five and six years old, I did begin to notice that he was a little toxic with my mother and there were things that he said about my mother that I didn't like very much. And ugly things like, "Oh, your mom is going to be killed," or "She is going to die because she is going to be crushed by a donkey," things you are not supposed to say to your children. And I also started to notice the way he acted at home. Like at one point his energy was great and I appreciated it, but then, it became, kind of, suffocating, like, ugh, you're taking up too much space that maybe you shouldn't be. [00:30:00] And my mom also started to distance herself a little from the house so when my dad came, she would go out for hours and then come back and I felt, "It's because he's here that you don't want to be here." And whenever she went out, it was always a drama with him because he would say, "See? She just left, maybe she has three boyfriends." And I remember every time she tried to come back, like, he wouldn't let her in and we were like, "Let her in, she lives here, we want to see our mom." At one point I did realize that maybe his energy was super suffocating and I noticed that, too. One of my aunts, his sister Karina, one of my aunts, she loved to do tarot cards and I remember, once, she took out the cards and said, "Come on, I'll read the cards to you," and I, at six years old was like, "Oh, okay, let's read the cards." And I remember that she drew a card of a man on a horse upside down, and then she drew another card or a princess or something, a queen. And I remember that she clearly told me this means that maybe you saw someone in your family and you had a lot of respect for them, but that energy changed and now he/she is no longer who you thought he/she was. And I said, oh, maybe she's talking about my dad, she read my mind. But yes, before, I appreciated him a lot but I began to realize that maybe it was not necessarily great the way he behaved at home or when we were out.

DBN: And can you tell us a little more about what your relationship with your mother was like?

BPA: My relationship with my mom has always been good. I think my mom, if you see her, is super cool, she is super firm, super direct but she is not so emotional. She's not the type of person or the type of mom who looks at you and says, "Oh my little one, I missed you," hugs, kisses, nothing. She is firmer and to the point. She hasn't changed much. When we were growing up



with her, it was fine to an extent, and she raised us well. She told us, "You have to go to school. If we cross the street, we cross this way. If we are walking, and we are not holding hands, I am going to be behind you and everyone has to go in front of me. Brenda--" or Valeria is what she calls me--"Valeria, make sure Paola is by your side," and it was like, Okay, this is the team and these are the rules and my mom is the leader, and this is how we are going to move through the world. And I understand why growing up or being in Mexico when you are 23, 24, 25 years old and have three young children and you are a woman, a single mom, you have to pay close attention and be super direct with what you have to do. So that's the way we grew up, she raised us. There was also a lot of love. Now, I understand that maybe she was not so emotionally available because she was having a lot of financial problems, and with my dad, and making sure we were safe. And when we got here, to the United States, there was also a little distance because she left us for two years and we have been working on getting closer and I think that right after--I am 25 years old--after all this time, we are finally reaching a moment where she is like allowing us in, like she is loving us more emotionally. Right now, she is at a very good point in her life. She has her husband, she has her own apartment in Virginia, my siblings and I are all working or we are in school, and we have our own space and we are fine, we are happy, we are stable. I finally think that, right now, I'm feeling that she is allowing herself to be loved a little more [00:35:00] and, if you hug her, she will hug you back and it won't be like before like, Okay, that's it, a hug, five seconds and stop hugging me. Sometimes I tease her because I tell her that sometimes she was a little bit more utilitarian. So if you have to eat, if you have a roof [over your head], you are fine and the emotional does not matter. And I'm like, "No, it does matter. You have to hug me back. Not only because you are giving me food will I know that you love me and that you love us." Now, I understand why, but we never had many problems when I was growing up. Maybe I did get into trouble but there was a lot of love, but there were also quite a few rules.

DBN: You said she came here before you. So, can you describe a little bit about that stage, what year was that, and how she made that decision and communicated it to you?

BPA: She came in 2003 or 2004, I don't remember, but I was seven years old. I think she was like 25 when she made that decision, so I think she was my age. But when she made that decision, we didn't know anything, we didn't know that she was going to do that. We have a grandfather who has been here since 1996, since the year I was born, and we knew that he lived here and we always called him but it never occurred to me that maybe it was an option that she could come to the United States to live with him, to look for a new opportunity. So when she told us, when she told us we had already been living with my grandmother for six months. We had moved, taken all our things out of my dad's house, and we were living with her and my mom. And I remember one night, out of nowhere, she told us, "Hey, I have to talk to you." I was seven years old, my sister was six years old and my brother was four years old. And she sat us on the bed. It was night time, we were about to go to sleep and she sat us down and she said, "I want to tell you something." And she told us, "Things are going to change a lot." And in my mind I was, like, "What's wrong, are you dying, what is happening?" Because she was super serious. And

then she told us that she had made the decision to go to the United States and that she did not know how long she was going to be gone, but that we had to stick together. Oh my goodness, right now that I'm remembering, sorry if I shed a tear. But she told us, "During this time when I'm gone, make sure that the three of you take care of each other, and no one goes anywhere alone. If you want to go out with your dad, everyone has to go. If you want to stay here, everyone has to stay here, but stick together. And, Valeria, it's not like you get to go someplace else and they stay behind. No. You go together. " And then I said, "How long are you going to be gone? When are you coming back?" And she told me, "I don't know, but you are going to stay with your grandmother." And I remember that my brother was very young and he was like he did not understand and the whole time he was laughing. He said, "Haha, you're just kidding. You are not leaving us. It can't be." And that helped a little bit to lighten up the situation, but I remember that she was looking me in the eye--and I don't know if sometimes any of you have had a moment when your childhood is suddenly gone, like you're awakened like, Okay, I have to be a little more responsible and be a little more, how would you say--you kind of have to be more hyper aware about your environment, where you're at. I don't know how to say hyper aware in Spanish. But [00:40:00] all my five senses were awakened and I kind of said to myself in my mind, "Okay, I'm not a child anymore, now I have to take care of my siblings," and I was barely seven years old. But she told me that and I don't think I said much to her. I think at one point I was mostly in shock and I went to sleep and then, oh my god, and then we woke up in the morning and my mom was gone. [Cries] Oh my god. I'm sorry, it still makes me emotional. But I didn't see her. That night she slept with us and the next morning I said, Okay, I don't know when she's going to come back, I don't know when we're going to hear from her next time but, I was like, I have to take care of my siblings and this is the first day. That's it. I'm sorry.

DBN: No, it's not a problem. And when was the next time you heard from her?

BPA: So when my mom came to the United States, she came through the desert and I think it was a week and a half before we heard from her, and I was counting the days. And my grandmother would always tell me, "Okay, maybe she's at this point in her journey to come here." Like, Okay. Maybe right now she is taking a bus, maybe right now she is crossing the desert, maybe right now she is in a car on her way to my grandfather's house. But it took a week, a week and a half almost for her to finally get here to D.C., to Columbia Heights a block from Howard University, with my grandfather. When she arrived, she spoke to us on the phone and before, no one had a cell phone or a home phone. She called us from the gas station on Sherman Avenue, using some quarters, because my grandfather had lent her some quarters and a card to call internationally. But she called us and said, "I'm here" and my grandfather was also there to tell us, "Yes, she is here with me and she is going to be living at my house."

DBN: And the grandfather you are talking about is on your mother's side?

BPA: Mhm [affirmative]. Well, he's her father, but yeah, he's her father. She grew up with him but I didn't meet him until I came here to the United States. Now I look at him and I think, "Oh, I didn't meet you until he was 10 years old." But that is her dad and she grew up with him.

DBN: And how was that transition for you now that there was this uncertainty of not knowing when you were going to see her again?

BPA: At first it was horrible for me. I think after she arrived, she tried to call us every day and whenever she called me, I remember that I cried. I told her that I missed her, I didn't know what her situation was here, and I knew that she was really, really far away. And I also had this pretty big sense of responsibility that I thought, "Okay, like, this is a little too much for me to handle emotionally." Every time she called us, I was like in tears, crying, I'd hang up and, Oh my goodness, my world would crumble. And then, to be able to sleep, I had to cry a lot and tire myself until the day was finally over. But that only lasted like a few months and then I started to realize that, Okay, this is not working. Just because you're crying doesn't mean she's going to come back sooner. But I remember, Okay, I'm going to be a good granddaughter for my grandmother. I'm going to help her with her work, I'm not going to make her angry and I'm going to make sure my siblings are okay and that no one does anything to them. During that time, also, [00:45:00] reflecting on it, I started to get a little more intense with people and my siblings were sacred to me, like nobody could touch them, nobody could look at them funny, nobody could do anything to them. And I think, at that point, I was also fighting with other children, and they were young children who were taking advantage of them. If someone said something to my brother, I would go to that child and scare him to let him know, "Don't touch him." And we also had a problem in the neighborhood where I was fighting with a kid from my classroom because he said something to my sister or he said something to me and my siblings. And I said, "Okay, don't touch them." That was my sense of responsibility and it came from that uncertainty of not knowing when my mom will be back but for now I have to take care of them and I have to be a good granddaughter for my grandmother. I don't know, yeah, I definitely did not handle things the best way at the time, but I did what a child does when her mother is gone.

DBN: And how did your siblings take it?

BPA: My siblings. That is something I have never asked them. I think there were times when we sat around and looked at each other like, "Oh, we miss our mom." And my dad sometimes came to the house to see us. Yeah, we never talk about it but if it felt like solidarity between us like, "Okay, the three of us are here, we have to take care of ourselves." But my mom would always call us on the phone, she would always send us books. And what she did is that she would buy children's books. She would buy a copy because obviously books are expensive and she was still saving her money. She would buy children's books, she would grab a notebook--and she loves to write too, she loves to take notes and she is super academic. She would take the book and copy

everything the book said, she would send the book to Mexico and when she called us she would always read us a paragraph. And we were like, "How do you know what it says here?" But when we got here we saw the notebook where she had everything written down and I was like, "Obviously, it's obvious that this is the way she memorized it." But yes, that's how we managed more or less.

DBN: And then, when did you start talking about you all coming?

BPA: That happened two years later and it was a very similar conversation to the one we had with my mom, but this time my grandmother sat with us, and so did my aunt. My aunt didn't ask us. My aunt was excited and when we started talking, she was excited and I'm like, "What's wrong, why are you so happy?" And she says, "Oh, because you may have a chance to see your mom again." And I said, "Oh wow, Okay." So my grandmother sat with us and she asked us if we wanted to go to the United States. And we sat down and started talking about all that it meant. She said, "That means you are going to have to travel to the United States and maybe you are going to go with your dad." Or they also gave us the option to stay in Mexico if we wanted and if we stayed in Mexico, we could stay with her and go to school there and live there. And we were young and we weren't thinking about other possibilities or what it would look like to stay in Mexico, because we were so excited to go with my mom that we said, "Okay, let's go with my mom, we're going to go to the United States." But the deal was, and what I remember that they told us is that if we are going to go, that the three of us were going to go together and if someone wanted to stay, that all three of us were going to stay, so that was the only condition that we had. And obviously we said, "Okay, we want to go, we want to go see my mom." [00:50:00] I remember that after only a few weeks passed, we packed a backpack, we said goodbye to all our friends from school, to all our teachers and my father came to pick us up from the flea market where we were with my grandmother, and we said goodbye to my grandmother. I remember that when we said goodbye to my grandmother she made us kneel--and she had a huge painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe with a golden frame--and she made us pray to the Virgin and had us kneel down, she grabbed our hands and she was holding my hand and was squeezing it and almost crushing it, but she was asking the Virgin of Guadalupe to allow us to cross without any obstacles and to arrive safe and sound. And it was only a few weeks after we made that decision.

DBN: And you said this happened in 2006, right?

BPA: Yes this happened in 2006.

DBN: And can you describe that journey a little bit, how you got there?

BPA: Fortunately, that journey was not as difficult for us as it has been for other people who come from Mexico and Central America to the United States, because we were quite young. I was already ten years old, my sister was nine and my brother was going to be seven years old.

Crossing three small children of that age is super easy because you can tell anyone, oh, these are my children, and if the person is a U.S. citizen or has U.S. citizenship it's very easy. But I remember that we said goodbye to my grandmother at the flea market and my dad picked us up. So there was also a deal that if he brought us, that my mother would also pay for his ticket so that he could come to the United States because my father, I think one of the conditions--and we had a little bit afraid--one of the conditions he set is that no one is going to take them unless it's him. And when we got to the north of Mexico, he was also going to cross but the two ways in which we were going to cross were different because he is an adult and adults cross in a different way. He picked us up from the street market, we took a bus to the north of Mexico--I don't remember exactly what state we were in--we took a bus and finally we got to the north, and I remember that the climate was a little more arid. I remember that everything looked orange and it was super hot and that was the first time we were exposed to people who spoke English, because they would speak and we did not understand anything. We were like, "Okay, this is not Spanish." And we were there for three days and then we met two women. My dad left us with two women near a river or a tributary. It wasn't even a big river, it was a smaller creek. And he left us with them and the girls said, "Okay, say goodbye to your dad, you are going to stay with us." And my dad told us, "Do as they say." The women put us in a car and told us--my dad had already left--they told us, "Okay, you are going to change your clothes, we are going to take you near a river and when we get to that river we are going to meet up with two guys. Those guys are going to put you on a boat, like a little floater, and they are going to help you across. And from there, you will follow these two guys and you will follow their instructions." So we said Okay. We changed our clothes. And the clothes they gave us were meant to make us look more American, and so we wouldn't get so wet. We changed, they drove us to the entrance of a fence and when we got close, we had to go down below, get under the fence and we reached this river. [00:55:00] And I remember specifically that we could also see the bridge where they were checking if people had papers or not. And the guy who was guiding us told us, "Go over there, those are the United States. Right now we are in Mexico." And I'm like, "Okay, perfect." We got on this boat and we crossed, we spent about five minutes there and they were in the water pulling the boat, it was not even that deep. And then when we got to the other side, again, we had to go under the fence and we had to walk to a parking lot and in this parking lot there was a couple who was a little older and they were obviously Mexican. And we were in Texas, we crossed through Texas and those guys put us on the truck and took us to their house. And I also remember that the lady who grabbed us from the truck or put us in her truck, when we got to the house she started to cry a little bit and said, "Oh, I've never seen children so young cross." She was telling us that she also had children and she remembered when they were little and the lady, when we arrived, it kind of made her very emotional to see that we were so young and that we were practically alone and she treated us super well. I always tell people that the first dinner I had here in the United States was Popeye's because this lady sent her husband to buy us chicken because it was the most delicious thing they had in the neighborhood, fast food. We were with them for three days and after that, they took us to another couple who helped us cross through a checkpoint, because in Texas there

are checkpoints where the officers ask you if you have papers. There, we pretended that we were asleep and the woman said, "Oh yes, these are my children, here are my papers. We are going on vacation someplace." They let us pass and from there they took us to another parking lot where we met with my uncle and my aunt's husband and they drove from Texas, in the Texas neighborhood where we were, to D.C. And that took like three, seven days, something like that and we arrived here in D.C.

DBN: And what was going through your mind during this journey?

BPA: My main goal, what I was telling myself almost every day is, "Okay, we have to make it there safely and I can't let anything happen to my siblings." And I remember that during this whole trip, I don't remember sleeping much because at night when they fell asleep, I kind of said, "Okay, I have to stay up to make sure that if something happens, that we leave or go somewhere else." So I didn't sleep much, I was also super attentive to the way people treated us and who those people were. And I didn't speak to anyone because I said, "Okay, I'm not going to give you any information. I just have to watch out if they make a move or a suspicious face," is what was going through my mind. And I think that was my first priority rather than getting to see my mom. I said, "Okay, for now we have to survive this," because I had also heard quite a few stories about what happens if you don't make it across, or in Mexico, when you are a child, you have to take care of yourself because children would get kidnapped. I was hyper aware [of] what was happening, how they are looking at us, where is Lalo, where is Paola, where are we, if something happens where [01:00:00] can we run to, all those things were going through my head.

DBN: And when did they reunite with your dad again or when you arrived, what was the first thing you saw?

BPA: When we got to Columbia Heights, we arrived at my grandfather's house which was on Harvard Street, literally a 10 minute walk from here. And the first thing we saw was the house. My mom wasn't even home yet because she was at the Giant, here, buying food for us. We arrived, we sat down, we were taking in the house a little bit because the house looked super different from the houses in Mexico. Here everything is narrow, while in Mexico we had a patio, sometimes two patios and the whole house is yours from the first floor to the third floor. But we were appreciating the house and my uncles were asking us questions like, "Are they okay? Did they do something to you? Are you hungry?" And we were like, "No, we're fine. We just want to see my mom." And then we finally heard the door open and we saw my mom for the first time in two years and, oh my god, I've never cried more than I did that day. Finally seeing your mom and having all this weight that you have been carrying for two years by yourself when you are barely seven years old like [sighs], I got this weight off my shoulders, Okay, now [inaudible]. And we saw my mom but we didn't see my dad until after six months or so or a year after because my dad had moved. After he crossed over, from what I understand, he went to Utah, and

in Utah he started a new life with another lady for a few months, a few years, until he got into trouble there and had to come here to D.C. to ask for more money. But my grandfather was here and my grandfather did not allow anything to happen. And also here in the United States, there are rules that you cannot threaten someone, you cannot touch a woman, you cannot do any of the things they let you do there in Mexico. He didn't do anything but we did see him briefly, but I think at that point and I already had--or we saw him after a few years, I was already like 11, 12 years old and I said, "You know what," or I said to myself and I told my mom that I don't want to talk to him anymore, I don't want to have any connection with him--one question, do you have something to eat?

[Side conversation]

[Interview continues after a short pause]

Norma Sorto: Prior to that, had you had an image of the United States and if so what were those opinions about the country?

BPA: Yeah, that's a great question. Before, the only thing that I knew about the U.S., really, was that my grandpa was here and that he lived in D.C. but I was so tiny. I was like seven years old so I was like, Okay, I know that my grandpa lives there. I don't know anything about the U.S. I don't know how it looks like, how the states are divided, anything like that. I knew that people spoke English and a couple of my aunts and uncles, they were pretty close to my grandpa so then they got the opportunity to come to the U.S. and visit. So the thing to do is like, come here, take a bunch of pictures and then when they would come back, they would bring us books or gifts, and we would just see a bunch of pictures. And when they would come, they would come to New York to see the Statue of Liberty, go to the monuments. We saw a bunch of pictures of the monuments in New York and D.C. So, we were like, Okay, my grandpa lives where the monuments are and they speak English, but besides that, we didn't really know a lot about it. The one thing that, so Mexico and the U.S., they have a lot of, when it comes to like political [01:05:00] stuff, they are pretty close with one another because they border each other's countries. So we were aware about the--I don't even know why I was thinking about this--but we were really aware or I was really aware about the relationship between the U.S. president, so at the time was George W. Bush, and the Mexican president Vicente Fox. And I remember studying that there was a period of time where both presidents--they called it the Mexico-U.S. honeymoon period, where everything was so great and they were meeting and everything was great. There were a few problems but they were working really hard to work on them. But then, 9/11 happened and that's something that we heard. I remember watching the TV in our living room when I was young and we saw the Twin Towers fall on the TV. And we were really paying attention because we have an uncle that lives in New York so we call him, like, "Are you okay? And is everything alright there?" So that happened and it was also interesting to see how strong

the connection is between the U.S. and Mexico because after that happened, we saw that some of the doors of Mexico--like people, whenever somebody dies, they put the black ribbon, and, so, I started to see a few throughout different parts of the city so it really made me think, Okay, there is a direct relationship between the US and Mexico and there are a lot of people that do go to New York and that are there from Mexico City. So that was interesting to see. Yeah, that was my only image or perception of the U.S., the monuments, everybody speaks differently, everybody's white and 9/11. I was like, Okay, that's the U.S.

NS: So when you first came here, did that perception change when you started living here?

BPA: Yeah, that's a good question. It definitely changed. It was almost like I was kind of shocked of how small the U.S. or D.C., specifically, is. Again, everything is so, like all the row houses are so tight. It was also really incredible to see how much cleaner the streets were compared to Mexico, the infrastructure here is a lot better. Like when it rains, it doesn't flood as much as it does in Mexico. Also, it gave me a good sense of like, Okay, these are the monuments and this is where the neighborhood is, not everything is like necessarily like all bunched up together or it's not like everybody works for the federal government. So that was interesting as well. Everything kind of seemed smaller and it was very surprising for me to see how intentional the government and people were about cleaning the streets and about having green space. That's another thing that I was amazed by, by how much green space there is here and D.C., specifically, compared to Mexico City. Over there it was like a concrete jungle whereas here you have like a huge emphasis on parks and even like the front lawn, you know, in front of the Washington Monument there is like three different grasses that they use and they have this very intricate irrigation system. But it was just interesting for me to see, Okay, this is how much attention they poured into the streets and infrastructure here versus Mexico where there is a lack of emphasis on repairs and making sure that people have access to green spaces or good infrastructure.

NS: So just to clarify, when you first arrived here, did you [come] with your father here in D.C. or did he just [go] somewhere else?

BPA: Yeah, so when we got here, the people that brought us here, the first family members that we saw were my uncle and my aunt's husband, her husband at the time, and there was another friend. But they were [01:10:00] the ones who took us from Texas all the way to D.C. The last time that I saw my dad before we crossed was in the Northern part of Mexico, right before he gave us to these two women that we didn't know. And that's the last thing that we saw him there. The next time that we saw him was a couple years after, and he was in Utah and he did use to call us and message us because at that point we had Messenger, you know, we had like a shared Messenger account for me and my siblings. So he used to contact us, like, "Hey, I'm building this new family and this is my new girlfriend, these are my soon-to-be step kids," like, "Okay, cool.



I'm glad that you have another life there. " But we didn't see him until like two years of us being here in the U.S. I still didn't feel too confident about my English but I was, like, Okay, I feel confident and I know that he can't do anything or he can't take us away, so that's when we saw him. And he came for a couple weeks and then he went back to Utah, eventually got deported back to Mexico, and I haven't seen him ever since, since I was like 13. That might have been the last time that I saw him ever.

DBN: Something that you said also caught my attention. You said one of your perceptions before coming was that everyone is white.

BPA: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: Can you tell us a little bit about that, where does that perception come from?

BPA: Sure. I think the perception comes more from my grandfather. I think my grandfather was the one who told us, "Oh, everyone here is white." And when we got to Texas, the people you saw frequently on the streets walking or in restaurants, they were white people or Hispanic people. On the road to coming from Texas to D.C. We saw white people but in more touristy places where we passed there were more people of color, Asians, African Americans and definitely when we got to D.C. I specifically remember that he had told me of this idea that everyone is white, I'm like, that's not true. That is not true. Most of them are African American and when we got here, the first school we went to, Bruce Monroe, which is 10 minutes from here also walking distance, the majority of the student population was African American and a third of the student population were Hispanic youth, the majority of whom were Salvadorans. And we had some white teachers. But after going to school and after spending a few months here in D.C., I said, Okay, the United States is not full of white people, it's super diverse, and if anything, there are more black people than white. But later I learned that it's just something that happens here in D.C., specifically.

DBN: Going back a bit, can you describe a little bit of those first months of living here, how were you and your siblings doing, what things did you do?

BPA: The first few months we were here, definitely, the first thing my mom told us was that we had to go to school. After we arrived, three days passed and I think it was only the weekend and the following week we were back in school because my mother said that--well besides, she did not have time to take care of us--she wanted us to have an education or make sure we took advantage of the education they offer here, which is free until you are 12 years old and it is your right and it is a policy that they have here that you have to go to school, if not, mom can get in trouble. We took advantage of that, we went to school. It was definitely super [01:15:00] difficult because we didn't know any English, we didn't know what they were talking about, we were

feeling like we were missing out on what they were telling us about the subject and we were super stressed. It was a new environment, a new culture, so I remember that for a few months the teachers were trying to include us and teach us everything we needed, but it was also super difficult to integrate into the community because we couldn't talk to the African American kids because [we] didn't speak English. And for some reason or another, the Salvadoran kids kind of have a negative perception of Mexicans, because here in D.C. there are not many Mexicans. The majority of the Hispanic community is from Central America, especially El Salvador. So because of what those kids saw on TV or because of what they had heard from their parents, they had a negative image of Mexicans and it came to a point where every day, children were bullying me. Okay, I can't study, I can't defend myself, the teachers are trying to teach me but I'm afraid to communicate with them and tell them what's going on. It was a little difficult. If I got into some trouble with some of the kids at school, and I tried to get out of it but to this day I'm still, like, I didn't even do anything and people kind of took advantage of me, or the children abused me a little bit because I didn't know English, because I was new and they knew it was a completely new environment for me. They took a little advantage of that. But I had the same attitude that I had in Mexico, where at home--my mom was also working a lot too. She said goodbye to us in the morning and at night we would see her after she arrived, but it was already like three in the morning because she worked in a restaurant. She was working at Haydee's in Mount Pleasant. Restaurant jobs mean that you leave early and don't arrive until the last customer leaves. It was a little difficult but I stuck with my education a lot, especially math. I think I reached a point where I was feeling that, Okay, everyone can take advantage of me but I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of--other than the fact that they are bullying me--doing badly in school and also let them hurt me in that sense. I started focusing on math, because it was basically the only thing I understood, and ESL classes where they teach you English. I focused on those two classes and tried to be, in my mind, the best student I could be to take advantage of that so that people, or other young people, would stop abusing me. It was like, Okay, I have to defend myself. And then we got used to things a little more but that didn't happen until a few years later, but the first months were a little intense.

DBN: And what grade did you finish here?

BPA: Here, I finished the fourth grade.

DBN: And what do you remember about your first school, what were your teachers like, how did you perceive the environment? You said that you did have that bad experience of being bullied. And, apart from that, in general, what were the things you noticed about how the school is structured here compared to Mexico?

BPA: The first thing I noticed is that the school is a building. In Mexico, all schools are built in a way that you have a lot of patios and green areas and a building, a classroom, in the middle of

the courtyard and there are classrooms right next to each other [01:20 : 00] But here, what I noticed is that it is a building and instead of walking horizontally, you have to go up and down and up and down, and you don't go outside until recess time and you only have a few minutes of recess and that lunch was separate from recess. In Mexico, you go out, eat and you are running around and you eat at the same time, or sometimes you don't eat because you are playing. But here I said, Okay, it's more structured like class ends, breakfast, lunch for a few minutes and then you come back. That was super interesting for me because I said, Okay, I feel like there is more surveillance, like the system is more rigid but I said, maybe it's because people are more educated to do this, where there is a building that they are supposed to go into. My teachers were always super supportive, they always supported me. They realized that I was trying to improve and that I had this desire to get ahead. Quite a few of them, especially one teacher, "Mr. Mirror," they used to call him, that was his last name and he was also bald, that's why they call him Mr. Mirror, because I can see my reflection on his head. He was also very supportive and made sure he was in communication with my mom to say, "Okay, she's getting better and she's trying." We clung to the teachers a lot but I think it was because of Mexico. In Mexico, teachers come from your community and teachers in Mexico are highly respected, or at least in the neighborhood where I grew up. Mothers, grandmothers, all of the communities appreciate teachers very much because they know that they are the ones who are going to provide an education, and sometimes you see the teachers walking through the community and you call them "teachers", you don't even call them "sir," or by their name or last name; it's always, "teacher," or "professor." When we got here, I also had that appreciation for the teachers and my mom also made sure to keep in touch with them to see that everything is okay. Those were the only two things I noticed.

DBN: And did you attend the same grade as your sister in school?

BPA: No, so something funny happened. In Mexico, they moved my siblings around pretty often and they kind of lost a--I don't know, like they got all confused from changing schools for so long. They stopped doing a good job in school because they were super stressed out because they were being moved around a lot to the point that one of the schools said, "Okay, you have to repeat a grade." And I think my sister should have graduated a year earlier. But when we got here to the United States, instead of taking that into account, they said, "We have to send them to the grade that corresponds with their age so they don't feel isolated," so we took advantage of that. We took advantage of it a little bit, but now, I don't remember the question you asked me.

DBN: Sure, I just wanted to know if you were in the same grade and--

BPA: Oh yeah, yeah. We weren't in the same grade but me and my sister did share lots of classes to learn English and we were in the same schools here in the United States. We went to the same elementary school, we went to the same middle school, but once high school arrived, we had the opportunity to choose where we wanted to go based on our interests. And I think my siblings

were already a little tired, tired that I was a good student and that all the teachers knew me and when they got there, they expected the same and put a little more [01:25:00] pressure on them. But when high school came, we all said, it's better that everyone go someplace where they feel better because I didn't like knowing that they were being pressured either because I said, "I know you don't like this and I do, but it's okay."

DBN: Speaking of that transition and change of environment, how did you feel in your new home, did you see it as home, and what other things did you do outside of school?

BPA: I think this house here at Harvard, the street called Harvard Street--and we call it the Harvard house--we never feel super connected to the house. We grew up there but my grandfather, that was the first time I had met him in person, the first time I had interacted with him. He and I had a super intense relationship at first until a few years later when we said, Okay, peace. But we had a super intense relationship because I didn't have a good relationship with my dad and I said, Okay, it's hard for me to have a relationship with an older man. And aside from him he's super conservative and at one point he was super intense, very like, "Women have to clean, they have to take care of the house and men can do whatever they want." And I kind of didn't like him, but we were also living in his house, and there wasn't much space and we had to be in a small room for a long time. That place never felt like a home and if there were issues, we thought or we wanted to get out of there and have our own space, but due to financial limitations, we couldn't. But it never felt like home, just like, Ok, this is my grandfather's house, here we are, but we were working to have our own space in the future. That was always the mindset. After school, we always try to do after school activities more so because my mother would come home late from work, also because we wanted to integrate more into the culture and the community and over here they offer many opportunities that they do not offer in Mexico. At one point my sister and I were on the cheerleading team, cheerleaders, and my sister wanted to do that and I said, "Okay, I'm going with you so they'll let us do it." At one point I was in a robotics club, so I got to go and do robotics and competitions, my brother did a lot of sports, football, I think a little soccer too. But yeah, we started doing a lot of activities because they are fun. In Mexico they don't offer you that and you spend more time playing with your friends.

DBN: And speaking of integrating, how did you get to know your neighborhood, what things did you see and hear?

BPA: The way we got to know the neighborhood--and my mom has always been very good at this, that every time we would go out and walk around the neighborhood, we would say, "Hello," and we knew the names of all the people, too, and the ones we saw in the morning. For a long time, after we left that school to go to middle school, we had to walk from Columbia Heights to Kalorama Park because that's where the middle school was. So, we would always walk through all of Columbia Heights, all of Harvard Street until we got to 16th Street and then we would

walk down Columbia Road, where the McDonald's is, where all those buildings are. We walked, we went on until we reached Kalorama Park. And before, all that, there were quite a few immigrants and a lot of Hispanics who had businesses in that trajectory. Also in Mount Pleasant. My mom knew everyone because she worked at Haydee's and, later, [01:30:00] she went to work with Don Jose who is next door to Heather's Bakery where my mom also worked. We knew all these people out there, the lady who cut our hair on Georgia Avenue, the dentist, everyone. Also because she wanted to make sure that if we went out, if we were in the neighborhood, that she could find out where we were and, if something happened, who was the last person to see us. So, she established those relationships. People always noticed us because it was my mother and her three children always walking, and her children were always saying, "Hello," and talking to everyone. Also when they saw us walking, they would always tell my mom, "Oh I saw them go by, they look well," or, "To be honest, I saw them with a new friend, I don't know who he is." But we did take care of each other a lot in the community. On our block, there were quite a few Afro American families and I remember that there was always a man who sat on the stairs, who still lives there, who cuts hair. And he would always say to my mom, "Oh, hello, America," and he would say hello to us and whenever we passed, "Oh, hello, how are you?" Quite a few of those families, but with everything that is happening with gentrification, that was changing very rapidly when I was in high school, as people and businesses began to close and we saw new people, more white people we didn't know and it has changed quite a bit. Now, I walk around and I don't know anyone, which feels super strange but at first there was a community that was aware, and alert of where we were, who we were, and you could feel the community a little more.

DBN: And speaking of those demographic changes, once you went to high school, how did you see that change? Or what were the differences from high school and--

BPA: Yeah, I mean, even going to high school was like a culture shock for me because I went to School Without Walls which is supposedly the best public school in D.C. I went from having super diverse classes to going to classes where there were more white kids, so I said to myself, "Oh wow, this is a pretty white school," though if you do the stats, it's super diverse. It's like 30 percent, or it's like 50/50. Half white, half African American and a percentage that is everyone else but I've never seen so many white people, Yeah, I said, Okay, this is a white school. Apart from the fact that it's in Foggy Bottom where GW [George Washington University] is, which is a university where it's all white people, and the way to leave the school and get to your house, you have to go through the monuments, through the White House, and it gets whiter. In my mind I was like, Okay, I'm in the white part of D.C. So that was a big culture shock and gentrification started to become more and more evident. And as I was talking to my friends from high school, I began to realize that they had more opportunities, and better homes, and more money than the people in my community and I. I think I started to connect the dots of like, Okay, this is happening because white people have more opportunities and more money to come here, to

neighborhoods like mine and take us out and raise the price of houses. I started to notice that. The only good thing is that there were not so many shootings or so many deaths on our blocks anymore. Growing up in D.C., when we got here, I think there was an accident every week. And every week the policemen would come and ask us, "Did you see what happened?" Or we had to throw ourselves on the ground away from the windows when we heard gunshots, but in high school it started to calm down a little more and [01:35:00] crime and violence decreased a lot too.

DBN: And as far as your changing perception about those demographic changes and social class and all of those things, you came to those realizations, how? Were you having conversations with other people about it or how did it happen?

BPA: How did I notice the changes?

DBN: Other than what was more visible about those differences, how did you become aware of it?

BPA: I think when I mostly noticed it was when I was hanging out with those people, or when I was hanging out with a friend, the places where I went. If we were going to her house, we were going near Cleveland Park and it was a huge house, almost a mansion, and you can only get there by car and a senator lived next to her. And I said, Okay, these are the kind of people I go to school with. Or one of my best friends, Caroline Lati [ph], her mother was a neurosurgeon--she did surgery on people's brains--and her father was a lawyer who lived in California and she had a house in Georgetown. So I said, Okay, you live here and this is the way you live, while I live over here and this is the way I live. And all the Hispanic kids that I knew, I remember, if I was going to see my friend from middle school, Joana [ph], I was going to go to an apartment near Malcolm X Park. If I saw my friend Gabriela, she also had a very small house with all her little siblings. But if I went with my white friends, I went to these huge houses, everyone had their own room, they lived on Capitol Hill--most of my friends--Georgetown and Cleveland Park. And I said, Wow, this is a huge difference from how the people who live in Columbia Heights and these people live. And that's how I began to notice, and it was in high school when I joined Many Languages One Voice, which is an organization that fights for immigrant rights. And one day, I followed my sister to see what she was doing after school, and I came across this organization. And that was a space where they gave me the opportunity to put words to the things that I was seeing. Social injustice or gentrification and what it means. When we were talking about white privilege, what does it mean, where does it come from? Economic disparities, language access, language justice, our rights. I was like, "Oh, I thought that this was just my experience," and I didn't know how to put into words that my white friend, or the reasons why they had a better lifestyle than my immigrant friends until I came to this space and they told me, "These are the

words and this is what you're experiencing," and I'm like, "Oh, Wow, yes. This is exactly what I'm experiencing." That is how I began to realize how things are.

DBN: Now that you brought up this organization, can you tell us a little bit about how you got involved, what were your roles there?

BPA: I got involved, for the most part, because it was a place where my sister went and my sister always said, "Oh, we have celebrations and today we are going to celebrate Mario's birthday and today we are going to go on a bike tour." And in D.C., they always ask you to do 100 hours of community service in any organization and that's the way she was doing her community service. I said, "I went to help at a food pantry and that wasn't so fun, how come you are doing fun things?" One day after school I said, "Okay, I'm going to go with you, I'm going to drop you off at this organization to see what it's about." I had a bit of suspicion but I got involved with the organization because they told me, "Yeah, we are doing this but apart from that we are fighting for [01:40:00] language justice in D.C. schools," so the main goal is to make sure that immigrants here in D.C., whenever they are using social services, that those social services or that agency has to give them the information that they need in the language that they prefer, whether it's translated or interpreted in another language other than English, in which they feel most comfortable. So I was like, "That's really cool." And I asked them what our rights are in school because it was super difficult for me to navigate the public education system in D.C. So what should I have asked or said? And they told me about the Language Access Act, they told me that teachers have to have interpretation especially when you go to parent teacher conferences. That it's not you [the student] who is supposed to be translating, and I was like, "Oh I've been translating for my parents or for my mom this whole time, or for other colleagues, I have been translating." I didn't know I could say, oh, I need an interpreter. I learned all this. And I was at a point in my life where I was going to a really good high school, I had good grades and I was doing robotics, I was good. Part of me was like, I'm a little angry that I had to work this hard in order to get here when, instead, the education system should have put a little bit more effort so that I could enjoy myself a little bit more and so that I wasn't suffering so much to learn. Because I also saw that quite a few of my peers were not learning English, they were not graduating and they were falling behind, and I was like, why? Is it really because I'm putting a lot of effort into it? But I'm also like, I'm working a little too hard, it shouldn't be this way. I'm hardly sleeping because I'm doing my homework. I'm tired. But they taught me all this. So then, in community organizing we say you have to agitate people so I was definitely very agitated, like, this is not fair. People shouldn't be struggling this hard. And they educated me, so I learned all this language of what it means to organize your community, what does all of this terminology mean and how does it play into society and how can we change the system. I started to educate myself and learn about how we can organize the community. Yeah, I was really, more than other students, I was really passionate, more so because I was super angry because I was, like, I shouldn't have had to work this hard. And at one point my role at this organization was--they

were, like, "Brenda is really passionate, we're going to give her a little more responsibility. " At one point I got to hold my own meetings, talk to other young people, recruit other young people, tell them, "These are your rights, don't let them take advantage of you," and testify in D.C. Council, talk to the [council members] and tell the mayor, "Hey, we got to change something." Talking to other parents and talking to my teachers and talking about that, Okay, we have to change. That was my role as a leader, we called ourselves leaders, and at one point I managed to facilitate quite a few meetings during a summer where there were more opportunities to spend more time there. That's where it started.

DBN: And all that time you were volunteering?

BPA: Yeah, they didn't pay me. It was all volunteering and I had already finished my community service hours but it was more because, I'm like, something has to change for everyone, it can't be like this. It was more like anger than compensation that kept me there.

DBN: Yeah, I was interested to know about that because I realized that people do get involved for that reason, that you have to do community service but they end up extending [01:45:00] their involvement for that reason, because really they are interested in the cause. And then as you gained all this new knowledge, in what other ways did it start to affect you or what did you see changed in you?

BPA: Definitely what changed was, for a long time I had the mentality of, Okay, if I want to do well in school, I have to keep quiet, I got to do all my homework, I can't cause any trouble, and if someone does something to me, don't say anything because you don't want to bring attention to yourself. So I felt very small, or I wanted to stay small and I wanted to stay quiet, like don't look anybody in the eye. But after they told me that, after I became educated, I felt really empowered. And they were other young immigrants just like me and that's where I met Miguel, my sister was there, that's where I met my best friend Frank, Hayne [ph], Jordanus [ph], Tedla [ph], and we were not all from the same country. Three of us, my sister, Miguel and I were from Mexico, Mario from Guatemala, Hayne from Burma, Frank from Cameroon; Tedla, Jordanus [inaudible] from Ethiopia, some Chinese students. And it was a space where they were prospering and they were happy and we were talking about really interesting things so I'm like, "This is dope, that's how it should be." After that, when I got to school I remember, I felt myself growing. I was like, I'm going to take up more space, you can't talk to me like that anymore. We're going to start a Latino club because there is a lot of Latinos who don't feel like their culture is represented here, and we're going to dance and we're going to take up space. I got this weird, "Fuck you" kind of personality. I was like, "Fuck it, I'm a new person." So I started to stand out a little more because I said, Okay, things don't have to be like this. I'm going to advocate for myself from now on, and for other students as well. And sometimes even people say, "It's like you put on your social justice glasses, your racial consciousness glasses, and you see everything for the better or



worse." I felt like the world got a little brighter, because I was, like, "Yeah, we're going to fight, I have a community that understands the same thing." And at school, my teachers also noticed I became a little more, I started to take more space when injustices happened, I would call it out and take it to the Vice Principal, like, "Hey, things can't be like this. " I began to notice that. It kind of made me a little more extroverted, not because I wanted to be, but because I wanted things to change, so I wanted to voice them.

DBN: And speaking of some of the injustices, what were the injustices that you noticed in school?

BPA: At my school specifically, two [incidents] happened to me that really affected me. One, a young white boy--one day we were at lunchtime and, whenever I eat, I eat and clean after myself, and I clean my space because that's how they taught me at home. That's the way, you eat and clean your space, but while I was cleaning, he looked me in the eye--he was a white boy and the number two in the whole school, in the whole class, like super smart. And I used to hang out with him, we didn't have any harsh feelings or any negative energy between us, but one day he told me, "Oh, you're cleaning because you're preparing for your future." And I said, "Wow, Ok, noted." I said, "You know, just because I'm an immigrant and I'm a woman, doesn't mean that I'm going to be cleaning for the rest of my life." And then he said to me like, "Haha, [01:50:00] I'm kidding. Don't take it too hard. " And I was like, "No, that one hurt." It hurts, because I'm like, you're supposed to be really smart, you're supposed to be in this really diverse school, in this very diverse city and you're still saying things like these. And then, reflecting again, he ended up going to Yale, working in the Navy, right now I think he's fine, he is very well off, you know. I'm like, damn, that sucks, that you have this much access and resources to really learn but you're also putting down people of color. And I'm glad that you have access and resources, right, but that's the problem, that you're not conscious of what you're saying and that you see people this way. And you are not the only one, there are quite a few and there are people who say or do worse things. Another incident or injustices I saw at school, school in general was a little weird because I had this image that it was the best school in D.C., so, the principal always told us, "Okay, dress appropriately, if someone visits, you have to behave," super weird now that I think about it. But also another thing was, the counselors did not know how to work with young immigrants and when we started talking about college, what my counselor suggested for me was to go to France because, over there, they don't check to see that you have papers, or don't go to college, she said, "There are no opportunities unless you go to UDC." And with UDC, we had the image that it was the worst school in the whole world but I'm, like, they shouldn't have told me that because it was the only university that accepted me. Well, there were quite a few universities that accepted me but paying for tuition, I was like, I'm not going to finish paying this until I'm 100 and my family doesn't have this kind of money. So those were some of the few injustices that I saw in school, but they helped me a lot to reflect and think about how the system has to change or what are the things that have to change.

DBN: And when you started talking about all of this, either with the administration or with other people at the school, what were the reactions, what did you see change, if anything?

BPA: There were some teachers who kind of saw something and said, "Yeah, you should be thinking about this." There was a teacher who said, "You should start a Latino club because there are not enough cultural events that we do to show you that we appreciate your community." So that teacher said, "Do it, I will be your advisor." My art teacher, too. I started making a short film called Risers, the movie you saw, that talks about the lives of undocumented youth who are activists and have DACA in D.C. We did this project and I showed it to him. I said, "Oh, I want you to see the project I'm working on because you're an artist and I'm working with a filmmaker / photographer / storyteller, so learn from it." He got excited and said, "We need to talk a little more about injustices." And when I spoke to my vice principal, I said, "This is what is happening, this is how it has to change." Like she gave me a little more respect and she was very supportive. At one point they gave me an award. There is a program called The Princeton Prize in Race Relations, which is a Princeton program where, if you are making a lot of social changes in your community, they bring you to meet other young people who are doing similar things in their community. When Princeton wanted to give me that recognition, they wanted to take me [01:55:00] to one of the downtown buildings, and I was like, I'm a little scared, I don't want to go by myself. And I said to my Vice Principal, "Will you go with me?" because going downtown is a little intense. She [was] someone who supported me, so she went. She was happy. When we got back to school, I saw that she was a little more intentional in, say, if someone brought up a problem that was [a] racial [problem] or if they wanted to do an event to emphasize their communities, she was a little more receptive to those ideas. They weren't systematic changes, but I definitely saw how they changed their way of being and how they absorbed information differently after, more than anything, bugging them and saying, "Look at what I'm doing, things have to change." They changed a little, but not systematically.

DBN: And now that you mentioned Risers, can you tell us a little about how that started, what year was it?

BPA: Risers is a project that we started in 2014, or in 2010 and it didn't finish until 2014, something like that. I don't remember the exact years but it was a four-year project and it was a project where we were trying to--a guy told me about that project, Gerson Quinteros who works for United We Dream. When we were in high school, we met through a friend named Aura, who we met at a gardening organization, City Blossoms. She said, "Oh, I want to introduce you to my friend who is also an activist at school and also has DACA." And I said, "Okay, let's meet them." And they introduced me to Andy Fernandez, who is a filmmaker and photographer here in D.C. And he told me that he was doing a project where he wanted to make a 30 minute short film and a series of photos about DACAmented students in D.C. who are also doing activism. And we

started talking and I said, "You know, this would be very good, it would be good to think about making a short film to be a tool to teach other young immigrants in D.C. that they should get involved in activism even though they don't have papers or even though they have DACA," because that's what we saw a lot. That in California, all undocumented youth with DACA took to the streets but here in D.C. like there wasn't much of that. Well, also D.C. is smaller and we also saw that in Maryland, as it was growing, an organization fighting for rights, the closest one was the Casa de Maryland. We were like, "Why don't we have a Casa de D.C. or something similar?" So we were like, "Okay, let's make this short film." And now, what it is, it's the 30-minute short and it's basically a presentation, talking to other young people, telling them, "This is my story, this is how I got to the United States and this is the way you should start organize because it is important." And we also discussed this Dreamer versus Risers term a lot. Andy Fernandez asked us, "Do you feel connected or what do you think of this word, Dreamer, when they call you Dreamer?" I said, "Well, I'm not a Dreamer. People who are Dreamers are already adults because the DREAM Act, the first time it was introduced in Congress here in the United States was in 2001, I was not even here." And at that point 10 years had passed. And I said, those people, if they were 15 years old, now they are 25. I am no longer a Dreamer. Besides, I said, right now we are at a time where young people are no longer dreaming, we have DACA and we have DACA because of the fights, because of the [02:00:00] movement of young students, not because Obama was a good person, but because the young people got fed up and said, "No more. We need something for us and the 11 million that are undocumented here." We wanted to say Risers because we said, young people are taking a lot of action right now and they're rising up to the plate. They're doing things. They are no longer dreaming. This pathway to citizenship, immigrant justice is no longer a dream, it is already so actionable and there is a lot of energy. That's why we gave it that name. And it is also a series of photos with other young people. Yesterday I did a presentation on Risers. Someone did criticize what we were talking about earlier. They asked me, "Why are there no Afro Latinos or other people of African descent, and most of the people who are in Risers have DACA and have access to education and right now they are going to college?" And I said, "That's a good point that we are not portraying other people. But most of that is not because we said, "We don't want those people," but because those are the majority of people who have DACA, that's a systemic problem. For a person to have DACA, which is the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which was Obama's executive order, people have to have a high school degree or be in school or have a GED, they had to have arrived in the United States before the age of 10, they have to be under 36 when they are applying and cannot have a criminal history. We were talking about how that application and how the system is giving benefits and privileges to people that fit in this category of what a good immigrant is and what they look like. So it was interesting, it was interesting. But that's what Risers is and right now we are thinking about possibly doing a second part and talking a little more about this good versus bad immigrant perspective and how we could destroy all of that because right now we are at a critical moment where the Biden administration, they're considering a pathway to citizenship but what does that mean? And how are you going to do it?"

DBN: I'm glad you mentioned all this because that's one of the things that we also want to explore with this project, how these perceptions have changed and how you say the DACA program comes from a more systematic problem of how different immigrants who are in the country at the moment have been categorized and in general, as you say, that the program has reinforced the meritocracy of this country. So what strategies have been talked about to start changing the system?

BPA: What strategies have we talked about. Well, there are quite a few strategies at the national level that are happening but there is a new one, in general, all immigrants--especially after these protests against the judicial system happened after the death of George Floyd--I think that quite a few organizers, especially in the immigrant community, those of us who are fighting for immigrant justice, we kind of took a step back. We were like, "Let's talk about anti-blackness, and let's talk about police brutality, and let's talk about black and brown unity." So, that's definitely why some new conversations started to be generated and also to explore [02:05:00] this, more than anything the issue of why people are criminals and why we see them as criminals. We started all these conversations. Now, after a year of that, I am seeing that people, especially the immigrant movement, are more aware about racial disparities even within immigrant communities that for me, I'm like, that's amazing, because for a long time, I personally have been fighting for it even though I'm the one who fits the good immigrant narrative. But when I started organizing, the people I was organizing with were primarily Ethiopians, then Cameroonians, then Chinese folks, and then Hispanic folks, and Salvadorean folks and Mexicans. And for me, I was like, Okay, this is the way people should be organized, building multiethnic, multiracial spaces. But in the immigrant movement, especially when I started to go out of D.C. more, I started to notice it was mostly Mexican, mostly Spanish speakers, and mostly DACAmented folks. It was interesting because I was like, Oh, that's me, I'm the one taking up space. Even in the context of D.C., if anything, there should be more Ethiopians. Well, I don't think there are a lot of Ethiopian DACA beneficiaries, but a lot of Pacific Islanders, a lot of Asian folks from the main islands, and a lot more Salvadoreans, they should be taking up space. And even within the Salvadorean community, speaking of Afro Salvadorans, there are folks who should be taking up more space. So all those conversations have been coming up more, which I'm like, amazing, this is great. Right now what is happening is that the movement, in general, is being divided into two parts. You have your non-profits, you have your institutions that are funding movements, and then there is also very much like grassroots organizers who don't necessarily work with anybody but it's like they want a better place and they're constantly pushing organizations and institutions to think about who is it that you're portraying and who needs to be portrayed. And even telling them, "Don't take up too much space, like the community change happens in the community." It's super interesting that it's been changing and also seeing organizations like United We Dream take a step back and put people like Joella Roberts in the front lines and Joella is a person who has been talking a lot

about the intersection of being an undocumented immigrant and being black. I'm like, yes, those are the conversations that need to be happening. And we've seen it here in D.C., too, with oral historians like Manny who works at the Mount Pleasant Library, that he, as a Dominican person, has been a big advocate for putting Afro Latinos in the front pages of stuff. And also Ana Rondón. I have known Ana Rondón since 2007 when I came to this country. The first time I met her, she was organizing at my school and she is a person who is also Dominican and, really, pushing for Black Lives Matter and for Latinos to be conscious about Afro Latinos and about their blackness. These conversations that I grew up with, they're becoming more mainstream and they're getting funded and they're getting recognition and for me that's like, this is great, we're moving into the best direction when we're thinking about, alright let's build solidarity between one another and we're not the problem. The problem is the system but we have to unite.

DBN: And [02:10:00] then backing up a bit, because I know you mentioned that you have DACA, can you talk a little bit about how you came to know about the program? What do you remember about that, when it was proposed and once it was passed?

BPA: Unfortunately, when they passed it we were a little bit disappointed because we thought Obama was thinking, or the Obama administration, we were pushing them to think of a program where young people, as well as their parents, could benefit from the program. At first we were like, "Oh, maybe this is an opportunity for my mom to apply for DACA, so she can work, or for my uncle or for all my friends." But when we watched Obama on TV, when he explained the guidelines, we were so heartbroken because I said, "Wow, my mom is not going to be able to apply for this program, my best friends are not going to be able to apply for this program, and I can and my sister can and my brother can." When we heard that, it was so awkward, we were kind of like, really? And then we started to think, Okay, the system is always, when it comes to progressiveness, always going to give you a taste of *atol* [hot corn-based beverage] with a finger, like they're only going to give you a little bit of what you're asking for. We were a little bit disappointed. There were some groups that were super happy, they were like, "Oh, we did it, thank you Obama," But most of us, it was like, "Really, Obama? You couldn't even think of my mom, like come on, dude." And the way the system is, we were like, Okay, let's be super cautious about this because what does it mean to have DACA. And when he was explaining the things you have to provide, you have to give them a record of everything, of all the places where you have been living here in the United States, where you have gone to school, give them fingerprints, your name, the names of your relatives. We were like, Okay, if they one day decide to deport us, remove the program and deport us, they know exactly where to look for us, and if they can't find us, they know exactly the people and the community we are surrounded by. We had to think about those risks a little bit but after a few months and talking to lawyers, and knowing that the people who were applying were still here, after a year we decided to apply for myself, my sister and my brother. And we applied, it gave us the opportunity to work but yeah DACA has given us enough opportunities for which I am grateful. And right now I have my

government job because of DACA, but the most difficult thing has been these conversations that you have outside and, for example, seeing one of your best friends who you have known for 10 years and knowing that you have better opportunities because you have DACA and your best friend doesn't. That is the most difficult thing but it has helped me a lot, yes. It's a little awkward.

DBN: Sorry, can I pause for a little bit?

[End of interview] [02:13:59]