

**Brenda Valeria Perez Amador Oral History Interview**  
**DC Oral History Collaborative**

**Summary**

Longtime community organizer and advocate, Brenda Valeria Perez Amador, shares her insights on the intersectionality of ongoing efforts around the fight for immigrant rights, Black Lives Matter, and environmental issues, and explains that the death of George Floyd sparked conversations around those intersections that are shifting organizing strategies as a result. She also voices an urgency for people of color, particularly black, brown and indigenous women to take up more space and be at the forefront of these conversations. Finally, she discusses her current focus to make funds more accessible to communities and ensuring a greater emphasis and economic opportunities for youth, both through her role in the Office of Urban Agriculture and through CLASP. *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

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Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega

Interview Location: Columbia Heights

Interview Length: 00:46:36

Neighborhoods Mentioned: None

Delia Beristain Noriega: We are here again with Brenda Perez Amador. And it's October 2nd, 2021, and this is a continuation of our previous conversation. Last time, we talked about several things, about your childhood, about changes that you have seen in organizing strategies, and one of the things that caught my attention is that you mentioned that people within the immigrant movement have become a little more aware of different things, of intersections, and I wanted to know a little more about, how have you seen that the community has reflected on the privileges that they have or that certain people have within the movement?

BPA: Yes, good question, that is something that I have been exploring a lot, the intersections in the different campaigns and, not to sound naive, right, but when I started organizing, I started organizing with a lot of young people who were from different countries and we were specifically organizing to improve D.C.'s education system because D.C. has a lot of difficulty in dealing with people who don't speak English. So we were fighting for language justice in the schools and when I started working with them, it was me, my sister, Miguel and we're all Mexican, our friend Frank who was from Cameroon, other Chinese students, there were students from Ethiopia, Hayne [ph] who is from Burma, completely international. And in those moments, with our very limited English, we were able to talk and get to a point where we said, "Okay, we don't speak English perfectly but we want a quality education and we are going to fight for this." So when I joined, after that, thinking about activism, that was my introduction, right, super multicultural, super multilingual, super safe, safe and diverse. This is how I started. And after that, when I was about to apply to college, my identity as an undocumented person became even more and more important to think about because you have to apply for scholarships, you have to apply for FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] and you have to apply for school. And if you do not have documents, you are considered an international person and that's a lot more money. So my identity as an undocumented student became more evident and I had to take it more into account. So I began to get more involved in immigrant campaigns and I began to raise my voice about the experience of being undocumented, they also gave me DACA so it gave me a little more courage to be in those conversations.

And those conversations in the immigrant movement, it's completely different, especially when you leave D.C. It's a little more focused on Mexican stories, on Chicanos, the movement is predominantly Mexican. But here D.C., it is very multicultural, here most of the people who are undocumented are from El Salvador, or they are Salvadorans, or they are also African or Asian, it's a little more diverse. It has also been a little difficult, right, because when you come from that foundation of everything has to be multicultural, diverse and you enter a space where most of the people speak Spanish and are focused on the Mexican experience, it's hard, it's hard. But in these last few [00:05:00] years, because of George Floyd's death, because of the activism of indigenous youth who are fighting for environmental justice, we have seen that within our movement we are also thinking about the intersectionality of all these issues. And I have also been reaching a point where among immigrant communities, we have been talking about

solidarity between Latin American communities or brown communities and African American communities or black communities in general. So we have been talking about that intersectionality, especially because of George Floyd, everything that has to do with police brutality not only affects African American communities, or black communities but it also affects us all and, if we do not focus on that issue, it will continue to affect us.

Also with climate change, I have been meeting quite a few people who, quite a few immigrants who come to the United States, not because they have suffered from violence or because of political issues, but they have come here because of climate change. So we've been exploring those conversations and we've been getting to the point where any campaign intersects with another issue. And right now, I am at a point in my life where, if we are talking about health justice, we cannot talk about it without talking about linguistic justice; If we are talking about water rights, we cannot talk about that without talking about the indigenous women who have been disappearing in those communities; if we are talking about immigration, we cannot talk about it without talking about police brutality against black communities.

Everything is intersectional right now and young people in particular have that in mind a lot more compared to people who have been doing this a little longer, especially people who are involved in non-profit organizations. Because these organizations, in order to exist, a problem has to exist and they have to apply for grants but those funds, those grants are always very limiting in the work that people can do and obviously the funders are not thinking about the intersectionality of our communities. So, yeah, that's what I've seen, this movement of seeking out intersectionality has been a movement of young people, specifically, something that they are leading and many of us are following them because it's the truth, we can no longer fight for ourselves only without thinking about other communities. Because at the end of the day, we are like an ecosystem, even though this world is huge, the earth is the earth, it's a planet and if we don't start collaborating with each other, we won't survive. And the way we've been doing things, extracting a lot of natural resources, being capitalists, fighting for ourselves, has led us to this crisis right now. We are experiencing a pandemic, drastic climate change and all the side effects that come with those problems. And people are realizing that, but it's the young people who are leading that because they are the ones who, in the end, are going to deal with all the problems that we have been creating. They seek solidarity among themselves, but now, those are the conversations that have been going on.

DBN: Thank you so much for that perspective. And the other thing I wanted to ask is something that [00:10:00] you mentioned in the previous conversation, that you feel like you've already taken up a lot of space in these conversations and as you mentioned, there's also a focus on the Mexican community, for example. So can you talk a little bit about how other communities have been taking up more space or trying to take more space?

BPA: Yeah, I think that time, the last time we spoke, when DACA happened here or when it finally happened here in D.C., we needed young people to talk about the DACA experience, the undocumented experience of having DACA and being young here in D.C. At that moment we said or I said to myself, Ok, nobody is talking about that or in my immediate community there were no people who were talking about it so I said to myself, Ok, I'm going to take up space. And now, going back to intersectionality, people have been realizing that a person who [doesn't] have DACA specifically, may look completely different from me; maybe they are African people who don't have an education through school, an institutional education, who maybe have [a record]. We have been trying to be a little more open because that narrative of the good immigrant has to change completely. So right now, especially in D.C., especially after the conversations with Black Lives Matter, or this movement, we have seen that people are more willing to talk about the Afro undocumented experience.

And there is a young woman specifically, Joella Roberts, who is from Trinidad and Tobago, who is in these movements, she is super active in the movements about immigration and the movement about Black Lives Matter and it's because of her--She works with two well-known organizations, United We Dream and [and] Black Lives Matter D.C. And I've seen that in Black Lives Matter posts, they sometimes say, "Oh, immigration is a black issue too," and in United We Dream posts, I have seen that they support Black Lives Matter and they're like, they are more open to talking about Afro people or Black people who are undocumented and supporting them with resources. So it's beautiful to see that this person who has these two identities has brought these two organizations together and elevated them to speak on the same issues to support each other. I've seen that personally.

And right now, the space that I am trying to occupy, or right now I am taking a step back and usually I try not to take up space, or if I take up space when people tell me that it is necessary for me to contribute my story, I do it when it comes to immigration. But if it really is something super important, if there is money, if there are resources, if there is attention, sometimes I pull Joella and say, "Hey, look, it's good that they asked me but I think you are going to be a better candidate for that, to contribute your story. " But I think that now, at the moment that I am, especially with my career, I am working for the Office of Urban Agriculture and I am exploring what it means to be an environmentalist and what it means to take up space in the environmental movement. And in those spaces that are predominantly white, there are not many Latinos or people of color, and there are not many people who are undocumented who are talking about the intersection between immigration and climate change. And I think right now, that is the space that I am trying to occupy like, how can I, with my experience, and with my work and with the stories that I have gathered and that I have been collecting all this time, how can we talk about that. [00:15:00] Right now I'm in this space.

And the immigration issue, right now there is a lot of focus, it's beautiful. Biden is supposedly going to propose some new policies. There are new policies, there is a lot of movement. And right now, also, what is affecting us is climate change and I'm like, Ok, how can I open the conversation on climate change to include more of our people? Sometimes you see something and you say, Ok, it's been done, it's being done, there is movement, there is energy so I took one step back and I am taking two steps forward on climate change. So those are the conversations I'm involved in right now.

DBN: And something you mentioned is that this narrative about the good immigrant has to change completely. Can you comment a little bit about your personal experiences or even what you are exposed to, how have you observed that language has been used to criminalize people?

BPA: Oh, definitely. Right now, even Biden and the package he's trying to introduce--or one of the packages says that in order for a person to be considered for citizenship, they have to speak English, they have to have an extensive criminal background [check], you have to pay all your taxes, and you have to have a high school degree or be in school, something like that. That may apply to some people like me, I don't have a criminal record, I still have my college degree, I speak English, I pay my taxes, right, but it's just me and to find a person who is doing the same things as me, it's a bit difficult because our community is super diverse and no one has the same experiences. And especially in other states like Georgia, well, the Southern states, places where it's a little more difficult to be undocumented and where the system is constantly looking for you and trying to catch you, it's more difficult for people to meet all those requirements. I have a friend, Alejandra Pablos, who is an undocumented activist and who advocates for reproductive rights. And with her, specifically because she's an activist, the police and immigration have persecuted her and have been trying to catch her and whenever she does an event, they always retaliate, they grab her, arrest and detain her. The last time she was detained was in a detention in Arizona for protesting deportations and deportation centers. And she has a criminal record because no one is safe under this system. She doesn't necessarily have--her immigration case is super complicated and it's completely different from the experience that I have and probably-- And that makes me think, she and I are, our situation is completely different and between her and me, there are also quite a few stories. She is a spectrum. There are quite a few stories, there are quite a few people who do not have financial access, maybe some do not know how to do their taxes, maybe they have not paid them because they have tried to decide, either I pay for my taxes or I pay for my food. There are people who do not have access to learn English. My grandfather has been here for 25 years and he still doesn't know how to speak English because he is an old man. He has already been here for some years, he can no longer, he literally no longer has the ability to speak and learn another language because it is difficult, it is super difficult. [00:20:00] And I have a few friends that because of stealing something small or because someone thought they looked suspicious, they were arrested and now they have a criminal record. There are so many experiences and it is literally super difficult to think, apart from me, of other people who meet those requirements as well. It is super difficult.

So we have to reconstruct that narrative because there are many injustices, the system is completely constructed in a way that always tries to get a person for being black or for being brown, for being brown looking so it is difficult, it's difficult when they say that or when I see that kind of narrative in those policies. It makes me think, "Who are they trying to help?" Because I don't know many people who meet all of these requirements, it is super difficult to find such a person. And you can't just help one person, like what we saw with DACA, you can't help one person without helping the whole community, because at the end of the day, Okay, I have DACA but I'm still part of this community and if my community does not improve collectively, I will not improve. It's like, it's a trap, it's like we're only going to help you, but not your community. It's difficult, it creates a lot of tension in the community, a lot of tension within families. Some people have access and some don't and I wonder why?

When DACA came out, we were hoping that the requirements could include my mom who provides for us, who helps us, and they didn't include her, and it was very difficult for me to accept that. And I kept wondering, how is it possible that I have this privilege and not my mom who has been here longer, she is working, she is contributing to the community more than me. It's hard. We have to change that narrative because we are definitely not an economic asset, we are not--They have to consider us as human, as simple as that, we are human, we are here, we have suffered because of an immigration system that is completely unfair and unsafe. And all this, all these things--sorry I'm getting mad, I'm wondering why this is happening. We have to change the narrative because at the end of the day we are human, immigration was happening before us, before we created these countries, these borders, immigration was happening for thousands of years and it was completely natural and normal to go from place to place. And it wasn't until we built countries and borders and made it political that it became unsafe and difficult. We do have to change this narrative completely because we are human and that should have to be the bottom line. We should help each other because this narrative, not many people fit into it, not many people are good immigrants quote unquote. It's hard to think about it and it's hard to be divided that way in our own communities.

DBN: That's interesting what you're saying, too, that many times they also define those communities based on their economic value.

BPA: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: And that, as you say, the language that is being used even in the legislation that is being created at the moment, automatically excludes [00:25:00] people who perhaps still struggle a lot with English, for the reasons you mentioned, it is normal that adults don't learn at the same speed as children, for example. And now that you also mentioned that you are in a new job, can you tell us more about that?

BPA: I am working for the Department of Energy and Environment in the Office of Urban Agriculture. And urban agriculture refers to agriculture, farms, gardens and food that is grown in cities, in urban places with buildings, limited spaces. And here in D.C., space is very limited and to get a piece of land is super expensive, super difficult, almost impossible. But we are trying to work with communities and explore other ways we can produce food here in D.C. to reduce food insecurity, access to food. And we are working with people who have gardens as we see them and how they work on the land or farms. And we are also working with people who do rooftop farming, or who are doing hydroponics systems, or who are growing food inside. And we are working to expand those opportunities so that people have more access to food, because right now, as it looks, 80% of the vegetables, and the fruits, vegetables that we buy at the Safeway, at Giant, 80% of that comes from California and Texas and that is very far and if something happens there, 80% of that is going to disappear here. And there is also a lot of food insecurity in some communities here, so we are trying, this office is trying to create economic and social opportunities for people to have more access and for us to support innovative ideas of how we can grow food in urban places like D.C.

DBN: And I was also interested to know, what was that experience like of going from organizing to working with the government?

BPA: Sure.

DBN: Well, what have you learned, I don't know--

BPA: Mhm [affirmative]. Sure, I have learned that there is a lot of bureaucracy in government. It is completely different from what I have been doing as a community organizer, as an activist. Things happen a little bit slower. But the government has a lot of resources and it has a lot of money. So right now I am thinking that, I still have my activist hat on but in this governmental system, I'm thinking, Ok, what are the conversations we have to have to get more resources from the government and putting them directly into the hands of our communities. Right now the work that I'm doing specifically, and it's going to sound a little boring, but right now I'm a grants manager, I work with funds, with grants to give to people, to urban farmers specifically. And it is difficult to apply for a grant or to apply for government funds. You have a lot of requirements, and if a person does not have the capacity and does not know how to write a proposal, if they don't have the time, it is difficult to get that money. And everyone in government right now is talking about equity and diversity and everyone is changing their mission statements and their values, and I'm like, great, I'm glad they're here thinking of new vocabulary but tell me about the money, where is it, where are we putting our money, how can we help people access that money more easily and everyone has told me, or quite a few people in the government have told me,

"Brenda, I'm glad you're taking that initiative but it's a [00:30:00] system that has been around, that hasn't changed for a long time."

And if anything, that grant system gets a little more difficult, that system specifically isn't talked about much, it hasn't changed much and it probably won't change immediately, but that's the conversation I want to have with the government or with my colleagues, about how can we make this money more accessible. I'm glad, once again, I'm glad that we talk about equity and that we have it at the forefront but we have to change this system specifically. And we are changing it, we are exploring how we can create partnerships with other organizations that have an easier system for people to apply and that they have support and a grant staff to apply for our money. So we are going to give it to an organization and that organization is going to be in charge of distributing that money. And we are relying on them because, possibly, we are going to work with an organization that already has those relationships, that has an easier system and that the community trusts them, because it is also about the trust in government being terrible because even I don't fully trust the government because it is super slow and I see why. But it is very difficult, but I'm used to having difficult conversations and right now this is like shaking the table a little bit and they are interesting conversations and it's not impossible. People think that changing the government is completely impossible and I obviously am on the side that if we can destroy the government completely, perfect, and build a new government, but right now in this situation, how can we access those funds. And that is what I have been doing, taking those resources from the government and putting them directly in the hands of the communities.

DBN: Thank you very much for telling us about your personal and professional goals. And I also wanted to know about what other changes you want to see in the future? Well, yeah.

BPA: In the future, the fewer the--about everything?

DBN: In general, yes, if you want--

BPA: In general, I definitely hope that we reach a point where we really support young people more. Right now, I am not young, I'm already 25 years old but I was young at some point and I was part of the movement that changed many conversations. And right now I am realizing that young people have even deeper ideas, are even more innovative, and I want to continue those changes. I want to continue supporting young people by giving them resources, supporting them and following their leadership because they are definitely going to be here longer than us. And we have, past generations, have destroyed our systems and our resources completely and everything has to change and young people are looking at the ways that they need these systems to change. So I definitely want to see more of an emphasis on youth and I want to continue doing this. I also went one day--I was invited to be in a conversation specifically about women of color on different subjects. And I'm not very involved in those spaces, so they focus on the experience



of women and women of color that are the leaders and following their efforts. I also want to see our systems, our campaigns, these organizations focus more on supporting women of color, especially indigenous women and black women and follow their lead. Also this democratic system and the system in which we work in the organizations, [00:35:00] hopefully will become a more organic system.

I have been learning from the Zapatista movement and the way they governed themselves and it is a radical egalitarian government which means that the people, that everyone, everyone has to support each other and that all resources, if anyone needs more resources, they focus on that community but they all help each other. And the system in which they govern themselves is not like a triangle, like, here is the boss and everyone follows the boss. It's like a spiral and at the center of the spiral you have the internal fire and the leaders and the people who are near the fire, but all those people work for the people who are outside but all the people who are outside also influence what happens inside the fire, so it's completely organic. And it's not about, oh, just because you're the leader, we're going to follow you, no. It's a conversation and everyone supports each other. And I want to see that people take a look within their campaigns, among their organizations, that they can do an exercise, that they begin to talk about how their campaigns intersect with other issues and be in solidarity with the communities that are affected by those issues and that they support one another, that's one. Those are the four things I want to see: that there is more intersectionality, that there is a little more focus on young people, that there is more focus on following the leadership of indigenous and black women, specifically, or women in general, and that we are a little more aware of what is happening around us that we support one another.

DBN: And I wanted to know if you plan to return to organizing more formally at some point, or in the future what do you--?

BPA: I am always organizing formally or informally, because organizing the end of the day is being in community and all the young people I worked with before, I keep in contact with them because now they are part of my community. They already have my number, if something happens, I help them. Yesterday, I had a young man at my house and we were looking at budgets because he is planning to go to college and I said, "Ok, I can help you budget, this is what I do for a living, obviously I am going to help you." But I am also formally working for an organization called CLASP [The Center for Law and Social Policy] and we are forming an economic package with economic policies to support young people. It's called the New Deal for Youth and it focuses on five themes, one is immigration, another is mental health, another is safe communities, environmental justice, civic and democratic engagement. We are looking at all these issues and underneath those issues we are presenting demands of how the government has to change to generate new economic opportunities for young people, so I continue to organize formally. That is the project that I have right now, it's a project at the national level and I am

working with 34 other young people who are under 35 years old--on those different issues--and who are from different parts of the United States. In this way, I am organizing formally but I continue to have DACA, I continue to get to know these young people, I continue to be part of this community so I think that for the rest of my life I will continue organizing, and whenever I can support an individual person or a campaign or a movement, I will be there because I already committed. I am a part of this, of all this.

DBN: And if you don't mind talking about your family again, I also wanted to know--well, you told us about your family [00:40:00] a little bit last time. So I just wanted to know, what has changed with your family, are you in contact with them, do you still have family in Mexico?

BPA: My family is super complicated but my immediate family is me, my sister, my brother and my mother. And it's the four of us, that's the nucleus--oh and my stepfather and my husband of course [laughs], so that's the family nucleus. And from there, here in D.C., specifically, we have an aunt, an uncle, my grandfather, on my mother's side we have a little more family. And then in New York we also have a little more family, just one family member, an uncle who is my mother's cousin. And it's just us, we're like, I think we're like 15 here that are here in the United States. But in Mexico, the other half of my mother's family and my father's family are there. And on my dad's side, we mostly don't talk to anyone, sometimes I talk to my grandmother but my relationship with my dad is very difficult and it's a relationship that I'm probably not going to explore much, but he's in Mexico. But my grandmother is still in Mexico, my grandmother is probably my favorite person in the whole world, she is still in Mexico but she comes to visit us in D.C. frequently and she lives with my aunts. I have a lot of little cousins in Mexico who have been born in the 15 years that I have been here. And I hope I can go back to see them and meet them very soon, but the family continues to grow. But those of us here are 15 of us, which is also a good number. I am very fortunate to have my family here, in New York, and to know that one day when I return to Mexico, I will have family there.

DBN: And now that you mention that you still have family there, can you talk a little about the changes you have heard about in your hometown?

BPA: Oh yeah, it's changed completely because it's the same thing that's happening here in D.C. Mexico City is also a city that people are paying a little more attention to, specifically white people. My grandmother is telling me that there are more *gringos* there. And I said, how interesting but it makes sense, it is an international city. But it has already changed a lot, I don't know, specifically, how because I have not seen it in person but there is more infrastructure, development, there are more people, the population continues to grow. And on environmental issues, because I always ask my grandmother, "What are you seeing, is the city getting greener or what things do you see?" And there are quite a few really interesting projects that are happening there. She is seeing that the city is becoming a little bit greener or people are being a little more

aware of climate change and how to be more environmentally friendly. So I imagine that when I return after 15 years, it's going to look completely different. I hear that the city continues to develop like any city but there are quite a few interesting things that are happening.

DBN: Thank you very much, Brenda. I think we are reaching the end, so I just wanted to know if there is anything else you want to share that we did not talk about, either regarding your work or regarding anything personal?

BPA: I don't think so, I think I said everything. Another thing that may be interesting to share is that right now, my partner and I are thinking about how to be a little more, a little more grounded. And we're thinking about looking for houses in [00:45:00] more rural areas and we're thinking about how we can live a simpler, more intentional life. Because it's not only about humans but also about natural resources and how to survive with less. And obviously it is something that, it's an experience that I had in Mexico, there was not much there so we were growing up with very little but right now that we can be a little more intentional. I'm reflect a little more on these experiences and thinking I was very humble because we were poor but it was a very simple and very satisfactory way of living and we are thinking about how to return to the land. And hopefully when I return to Mexico we can also buy land in the city or land in a rural area, too, to make a connection between those things. I think that's all, you asked good questions [laughs].

DBN: Thank you very much, Brenda, and well, we are going to keep you up to date with what we are going to do with this project and with everything you told us.

BPA: Yay, we're done.

[Interview ends]. [00:46:36]