

Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez Oral History Interview
DC Oral History Collaborative

Summary

Local DC middle school teacher, Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez shares memories of attending high school and middle school and grappling with living with an undocumented status as she was planning for her future. She explains her teachers, and later on, professors, were not always supportive of her introspective writing style, but she continued to write nonetheless. Carla reflects on her experiences and takeaways while living abroad, in Thailand and Spain, as well as trying to find her place and purpose in the world. She discusses the personal challenges she faced as she embarked on new projects back in Bolivia and upon returning to the U.S. during a global pandemic. *The following is a transcript of the interview in the language(s) it was originally conducted. For a full Spanish transcript, please see additional translated transcript.*

Narrator Bio

Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez is a local middle school teacher, writer, and blogger who came to Washington, D.C. in 2001 at the age of 11. Born in Caracas, Venezuela, and raised in La Paz, Bolivia, Carla attended and graduated from Maryland public schools but always felt a deep connection to D.C., a place she often found herself exploring and where she saw herself and different cultures reflected in D.C. neighborhoods. She earned a Bachelor's in Social Work and Sociology from the University of Maryland Baltimore County. After returning to Bolivia, where she spent 5 years in La Paz, her experiences there allowed her to explore marketing and travel and eventually co-founded How to La Paz, a platform that aims to show a new side of Bolivia and provide a place where Bolivians can reconnect with their roots. Carla previously taught English as a Second Language in Thailand and Spain, and more recently taught at Perry Street Prep Charter School and went on to teach 7th and 8th grade at Washington Latin Public Charter School.

Narrator: Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez

Project: Hola Cultura - Dreamers: our voices and dreams

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Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega; Norma Sorto

Interview Location: Columbia Heights

Length: 01:32:59

Neighborhoods Mentioned: La Paz

Delia Beristain Noriega: Great, so we're recording now. So thank you, again for being here with us, doing this follow up interview. I know we covered a lot of ground last time, and we really just want to find out more about your adult life. And I guess what your vision is for the future now. So I think one of the first questions I wanted to ask, just to kind of bridge last time's conversation and now, is what were your last few years of high school like? And when did you start thinking about college or what college you wanted to go to?

Carla Nicole Gott: So college was never a question for me, it was never something that I wondered that would happen. It was never those dreams, unachievable dreams. I always knew that I was going to go to college, because my grandma had been telling me this since I was I was very little, but I just didn't know what college I was going to go to, like, all my classmates were going to go to Ohio, and they were just buying things for their dorms junior year. And we were brand new to the country, we didn't really know much about taking trips on the weekends and scouting colleges. We didn't know much about that, but I knew that I was going to be close. Most of my friends were in Montgomery College, and I knew that that was also a good option. And also, my GPA wasn't good. I had a very average GPA. And I was too lazy to study for the SAT so I thought, you know, I'm just going to go to MC just like some friends, Montgomery College, and then I am going to end up transferring to some university. And that was junior year, like, my junior year was just, I guess it was just dreaming about what I wanted to do. And then, my senior year, I had applied to a bunch of universities, I got into some but it was just too expensive, and my mom wasn't going to be able to cover the fees, and even financial aid wasn't necessarily helping us 100%. So then I just chose to go to Montgomery College, to a community college, for the first two years, and then you know, see where I could transfer.

DBN: Okay, yeah. And what was that transition like from high school to college?

CNG: So my last year of high school, my senior year, I was taking a bunch of AP classes. And I was always busy and you know, in clubs, and I was just doing a lot of extracurricular activities. But I wasn't necessarily looking to upgrade or to improve my GPA. I was honestly, like, a slacker by like a smart slacker. I always wanted to find out more and know more and that's why I took like a bunch of AP's. But, at the same time, I think that I wasn't looking to be the best student. I really wanted to just learn. And then my counselor had a meeting with me. And I remember, like, it was one of the most depressing meetings I've ever had, because she said, "I don't think you'll be graduating high school," because I would skip a lot to study for my classes. It was such an unsustainable model that I was using. And this counselor said, "I don't think you'll be graduating because you've skipped so much." And she just basically, you know, crushed all my dreams, like she said, "You know, I don't think you're going to be like a good professional," and she was just like a bad, like a really bad high school counselor. And then on my last day of senior year, I log in to see what my math grade was, and it was a 59.1. And back then, if you had a 59.6, it meant that it was a D so it was a passing grade, but I was like, points away from a D.

And then, a ritual in my high school was to throw all your papers up in the air because you're done with school, and then you march out the parking lot, and then you start celebrating that it's the end of high school. And then everyone's doing that and like, Oh my god, I'm not gonna graduate with like my class, and everyone's sporting their college shirts, everyone has Rutgers and Wyoming State, and everyone's so proud because they're marching out and they'll be in college, and I'm like, I'm going to go to community college. I don't know if I'm going to graduate with these people. This sucks. So everyone is throwing their assignments up in the air, and I'm catching all of them because I'm looking for my math homework, so I'm looking for that math homework that I'm missing so that I could delete or erase their names and I could just put my name, and then I could just turn it in and be like, "Hey, I did it. It was a mistake. I did it." So I ended up catching all these assignments. I mean, and nobody found it weird that I was out there just like collecting papers off the floor. [00:05:00] I was walking around school like a ghost just trying to find the homework that I was missing. And then I ended up like turning all the work that I had done, ended up passing with a D, which was great. And then it was one of the happiest moments of my life. And then I thought, Okay, I'm never going to take statistics again. But then I had to take statistics three times in college, and I did so bad, I had horrible trauma. But it was strange to go into college and then and not necessarily being prepared for all the rigorous work, like it was completely different. I remember English 101, for example, was so different from my high school English class, they required more research papers. We had never done a research paper in high school. And I don't think my teachers read half of the stuff that I wrote. So it really was about improving your writing academically. So that was that. And then another thing throughout the years, I had been writing just for myself, like writing about my feelings, I kept journals, I kept blogs, and I started writing on Facebook notes. Just so that, you know, just pouring my heart and soul and, and not necessarily wanting anybody else to write, I was just doing it for me. And then people started reading a lot of these notes. And then that gave me more confidence to keep being vulnerable and keep throwing my feelings out there, because there were people who were messaging me, they were like, "Oh, man, I feel the same way, this and that." And one of the questions that I got asked, you know, that we all get asked when we apply to college is like, "Who are you?" And it's such a lame question, because at 17, you don't know who you are, like, you're still learning. And I remember just being so angry and putting on my Facebook notes and saying, "I'm a taco eating machine." Like, I'm almost old enough to buy porn and cigarettes, but I really don't know who I am. That's why I'm going to college, because I want to figure it out and find out who I am. And I got so angry at that. And I think I turned that in [laughs] but I didn't get accepted to the college that I wanted to. But then I had this voice because I was so introspective, and I had been writing since I was a kid, and because most of the things that I felt in school where, I was writing about, and my experiences and all that, I had developed like a voice like a writing voice, my very own unique writing voice.

And then, by the time I got to college, my professors were trying to kill that voice. And so it, of course, it would be reflected on research papers. And then they would have meetings with me

and say, “You know, no, like, you need to be more professional.” And I’m like, “Yeah, but we are talking about things that I’m passionate about,” like, I wrote a research paper about the DREAM Act and it was hard not to get involved in something like that, because I was so passionate about that, even during that time. And I just had so many conversations with professors, because they were just trying to kill my voice. And they were like, “Yeah, but you should take more creative writing classes.” I am, but I also want to be able to integrate this voice to my essays, because it’s hard developing your own writer’s voice and then suddenly, having that voice disappear. Like it’s hard, you can’t switch it. So that was definitely something that I struggled with. And I still struggle with that because I think a lot of professors are not ready for people who write from the heart.

DBN: And you mentioned that you were concerned about your grades back in high school. Was there a lot of emphasis on grades or I guess, academic performance in general in your family? Or what was that like?

CNG: Uh huh [affirmative]. So my sister was a really good student, she would always get straight A’s. But in my high school, it was known it was one of the best high schools in Maryland. And people were going to like all these very expensive colleges and no one was going to community college, like back then community college was seen as something that you don’t go to, pretty much. So I even had to lie and tell people that I wasn’t going to Montgomery College and I wasn’t going to community college because even my counselor was embarrassed that I was thinking about community college. It just made it seem like it was the worst place ever. And they put a lot of emphasis on grades and you know, grade levels and test and test scores, but I don’t think they put enough emphasis on knowledge and what you’re actually taking from your four years in high school.

DBN: And once you went to college, what did you end up majoring in?

CNG: So I was confused. I was like, I want to do International Development, I want to be [00:10:00], I want to save the world. I had watched Blood Diamond, that movie, and like that movie changed my life. I was like, I need to save the kids from, like, you know, I need to free everyone. And then there was, I don’t know if you guys heard about Kony.

DBN: Mhm [affirmative].

CNG: Yes, Kony. So there was a documentary about it, children that they were in the guerrillas and stuff, like it was just heartbreaking. I was like, “No, I’m going to save them.” And I just like, always felt like prince charming, you know, always wanting to save people, I don’t know. And then ultimately, I ended up majoring in Social Work. So after two years, I transferred to UMBC

University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and I ended up majoring in social work with a minor in Sociology.

DBN: And so those two years in community college, you say they were trying to crush your voice almost? Did you feel like anything changed when you transferred to a four year college? Or was it a similar experience? What was different?

CNG: So it was a very similar experience and also, this program was new. So I didn't actually end up going to that university. There was a satellite campus near my house, where that's how that satellite campus hosted nine state universities. So I went to school with people who were commuters, and people who were older and were reinventing themselves, and like, it was just a very nice, little bubble and it was brand new. And they still wanted to crush my voice, you know, I came in, and I'm like, Okay, social work, like we're going to be writing about social issues. Like, there's no way I can't get involved in something that I'm writing. But I had so many meetings with my professors to the point that I was just like, "What should I do," asking for advice, like, "What should I do," and they were like, "Well, you need to change, you need to change everything about your writing." So I would never get like A's on my papers, I would always get like B minuses and B pluses because of that, because of my voice because they really wanted to crush my voice. But the good news is that I was very much involved on campus, and I was throwing events, and I was part of the social work organization, I was an ambassador for people who are coming in, like, I was super, super involved. And then that required me to write from the heart, you know, that required me to come up with blurbs, and come up with funny captions for Instagram posts, or like--no, not even, Instagram wasn't a thing--just Facebook posts and stuff. So I guess that helped. And then I ended up being like, one of the speakers, I was always like, speaking, in front of microphones for whatever reason, I was always behind the microphone. So yes, they noticed me, but they just didn't approve of me when it came to academic essays.

DBN: And you talk about your voice and I guess, maybe, can you describe a little bit of what that voice was like, what stood out to other people, right, that they felt like it wasn't compliant?

GNC: It was a mixture of pain, I think pain and questioning things, I think. I'm always questioning everything, whether it's my feelings for something or someone or just life in general, I'm always just questioning it. And I think that that's why they didn't like it or didn't feel like it matched, you know, the paper or whatever I was writing about, like, very reflective. I think I'm like a very reflective writer. I found that out much later in my life, but back then, they were just like, "Yeah, you write like in a blog post. This not your blog, this is college," and that was so crushing to me, when your professors, the people you look up to are telling you that instead of being like, this is amazing or something like give me praise, because it's hard to come up, it's hard to write an essay, period, and then hard to be open on an essay and then have someone that

you look up to just be like, “Yeah, this is terrible. You should be in a newspaper. You’re in the wrong major.” And I’m like, “I’m not in the wrong major.” So it was definitely crushing and something that I traumas about because I never felt like I was good enough. And then when I was blogging, I never felt like I was good enough blogging. I just felt like I was someone who was just being reflective on things. I never considered myself a blogger, I just considered myself a person who was reflecting on life.

DBN: And you mentioned that you know, you weren't sure about what direction you were heading. So I guess as your college career progressed, how did you feel about [00:15:00] having picked Social Work?

GNC: I thought that it really was a great major. I was also done with Montgomery College. I wanted to do sociology and go to University of Maryland but I missed a few credits, and that meant I would have to stay an extra year, and at the same time, I’m already this disorganized organized person. I had a timeline in my head, and I thought, if I start at 18, then I’m going to graduate at 22. And by the time I’m 22, then I’m going to go off to the world, and I’m going to see the world. So I had this timeline, and I was like, I am just going to pick something that I love, because I know that social work has to do with teaching, has to do with children, and there's so many branches to social work, so if I want to do something internationally, I can always, you know, these are my days and I can just do whatever. So I think that's how I picked it, because it's such a broad career, it doesn't just--I think a lot of people don't see it as a broad career, like I see it as something that it's just my base. It's a sheet of paper that says that I graduated from something and what I do with that sheet of paper, it's up to me, that's how I always saw it. It's just a career. It's not, like, my career choice is not my lifestyle.

DBN: And it's interesting that you mentioned that because a lot of times people don't necessarily go into the career that they majored in.

CNG: Mhm [affirmative]

DBN: So when did you start thinking more about teaching?

CNG: During, I volunteered in different places, and I was always around kids. And then I volunteered at this church's ESL program, and I loved it. And I was helping the main teacher like I was--I was not the RA [Resident Advisor]--I was just a helper, pretty much, like handing out papers and what not. And then, I also took a class for people who are interested in becoming teachers, and I just loved that whole concept. So I was always around kids and I always knew that one day I was going to do that, not really sure when but I just knew that, and I always had it in the back of my mind.

And then, during college, I didn't choose that route, because it was going to take me forever, or I thought it was going to take me forever. And then I thought, Okay, social work, and then I'll figure out how to circle back to teaching. And when I graduated, or the last year, I remember everyone was freaking out about the rest of their lives, you know, like, "What am I gonna do? I get my Masters," and everyone's just rushing and rushing and rushing. And I thought, this sucks. Like, this cannot be me, I don't want this to be me. This is horrible. I remember looking outside my bubble and looking at other adults, or older adults who were miserable. And they had followed their life plan, they got married, they bought a house, they got a car, and they were so miserable. And they were in like credit card debt and they had cell phone plans. And I was like, no, that's not for me, I don't want that. I want to take a break. I've studied for 16 years, like let me just take a break for a bit and then see where my life takes me pretty much. And then I was looking up doing something for Peace Corps, or AmeriCorps, and I really wanted to do something related to education somewhere else. And then I ended up finding this amazing program in Thailand. A friend of mine was doing it in Thailand. And then I ended up applying for that program and then moving to Thailand right after graduation. So yeah, so that was 2012. And this was my last summer here, pretty much. Like back in 2012, I was chilling with my friends, saying goodbye, saving money, working here and there. And then in August 12, I believe, I got to Thailand, and that was just one of the best experiences of my life.

DBN: And going back a little bit, you kind of described what it was like with your college experience, at least with your teachers or professors. And I guess on the other side, did you make any friends or how involved were you in other things in school?

CNG: I made tons of friends, especially in Montgomery College, I made so many good friends. And the thing about Montgomery College is that it's a very diverse college and you have people from everywhere in the world, except people from the U.S. So it's a very like, immigrant oriented college because everyone knows the struggle [00:20:00]. It was just like coming home pretty much. You have people from all over Africa, all over Latin America. So my classes were so interesting, because, right next to me was the ambassador of like, Nigeria, and then and then on the other side was this diplomat from Colombia. So like, we had all these very, very interesting conversations about politics in general. And then, I felt like, there was that social justice spirit, and I felt like I could talk to someone from Iran, and I could tell them, like an immigrant from Iran, and I could be like, "I want to go back to my country and change politics," and then that person would understand what that meant, and that person would be like, "Yeah, I want to go back to Iran and also change my country." And so, we would have all these very intricate discussions about how it is and what it is to be from that, from those parts of the world. And I really, really enjoyed that.

And then I joined the Latino organization at my school, and that was amazing, because I got to meet people from all over Latin America, and my best friend, actually, one of my best friends was the president of the organization. And just to learn more about her, learn more about her

ideals, it was the best and back then I was going through a communist phase. So we were both obsessed with Che Guevara, we were obsessed with Russia, Soviet Union, just really like trying to understand more about communism. And my mom was a big commie back in the 60s and she has very communist ideas, but the thing is I think all of that really helped me understand that I just wanted to make the world better. You know what I mean? It's weird, because when you're 20 or something, you just really want to make the world better. And you're like, capitalism sucks, you know. And so you honestly just want to learn as much as you can. And I had so many posters of Che Guevara in my room. He was like my idol. And my friend Alexandra, the president of the Latino organization, she understood because she also had tons of posters in her bedroom. So we talk about that so much. I appreciate, I really appreciate that moment in my life, because it was really awakening. Also in high school, I would go in and I would learn about-- sorry--I learned about the civil war that had happened in Central America, in El Salvador, Honduras and it just broke my heart, like people didn't know about that. And I made this entire presentation and I walked into class, wearing a Che Guevara t-shirt, and no one knew who he was. And I was like, suckers. You don't know who this is? But that shirt followed me all throughout [the] end of high school and in college, and then, it got small, and then I gave it away.

DBN: And you talk about a lot of your ideologies when you were in college. Do you feel like that's evolved over the year

CNG: Yes.

DBN: And how so?

CNG: For sure. Also back then, South America was having a moment, a communist socialist moment. So you had Evo Morales in Bolivia. He's the first indigenous president and he's socialist communist. And then you had Michelle Bachelet in Chile, you had Correa in Ecuador, and you had Cesar--no, *¿cómo se llama* [what's his name?]-Chavez. You had Chavez in Venezuela, so you were having like a huge moment. And so I remember, we had really great speakers come from different parts of South America and just explaining what the struggle, what was happening in South America, right? And I was like, "Yes, I get it, completely get it," and I was so in. But then I started learning that really, it wasn't rainbows and unicorns at all, like, it was a lie. It was a big lie. And that was so devastating for me to learn how corrupt communism or socialism in Latin America is, and I think I just loved the idea of socialism and communism. I loved it and I was in love with it. I was like, "Because it's a better world, really, we all want a better world." But then the more I learned, after college, I started learning about it. And then, yeah, and then I was like, "Okay, this sucks." But capitalism also sucks. Democracy also sucks. Like, it just sucks. Maybe we should just go to another planet [laughs].

DBN: And then, I guess towards the end of college, you said you went to Thailand right after, right? How did your family feel about that, you going away? [00:25:00]

CNG: Uff, they were so--the main thing I was going to do it, first of all, I just kept talking about it for a year and a half, I kept talking about the fact that I wanted to go away. And they were like, yeah, you should go to Bolivia. But I didn't want to go to Bolivia, that felt like going back home, and I wasn't ready to go back to Bolivia, yet. I wanted to do something different. I wanted to go somewhere that no one has gone to and I wanted to be free. That's what I wanted to do. Back in college, I visited a friend in Greece, this was my junior year in college. We were island hopping and it was so fun sleeping in train stations. And I mean, I wouldn't do that now, obviously, I'd get a hotel, but back then it was just so adventurous. I just felt so free. And that was like a very big moment for me. Because I realized that I want to keep doing that, I want to keep feeling free. And I had dreams about that ever since I got my green card. I had dreams about traveling the world, I had bought this massive map, and it was on my wall. And I would just stare at it for hours and thinking about how close we were, how close the world was, but how far and close the world was. And then, when I went to Greece, I was like, this is something I need to explore. This is a feeling that I want to explore. So I had been preparing my family for it. But then when I bought the ticket, that's when my mom thought, "Okay, this is real, she really is going," and I paid for a program because I was going through a program. And then that was set, there was no going back because it was non refundable. Like, I have to go. And my mom is such a big, like, she worries a lot and she also has the immigrant mindset, like, "Why are you going to move to another country when it took us so long to be here in this country. Just live your life here, you know, be like your classmates, get your Master's degree and then get married." My mom sort of wanted that, but I just didn't and I was fighting against that. And then, my sister was, you know, she was supportive, but she was also very scared. She's like, "You don't know anyone," like it doesn't matter, everyone is the same, everyone has the same needs. You go to any country, there's a supermarket, you know, I'll figure it out, I'll figure my life out. Just let me be free. And then I moved. And then I just remember like, wow, I just had this empowering feeling from head to toe as soon as I pushed the double doors and saw a glimpse of the city. And then yeah, that was the start of that feeling of feeling independent, feeling like, this is amazing, I'm by myself and it sucks here, there are cockroaches, but I love it.

DBN: So this is in 2012?

CNG: Yes.

DBN: Oh, Okay, and how long were you there?

CNG: I was there for a year. We had training in this little town. It was a beach town and there were people from South Africa. So my program got you ready for your TESOL certification so

that's like teaching English as a second language. And it was one month, it was a very intensive camp, it was like camp because we were learning about how to teach English to non natives pretty much. And it was amazing, because I knew the struggle. So I would always give my point of view, as a person whose language is not English, this is my point of view. And also, side note, the reason why I even got into this program is because of my passport, because if I had a Bolivian passport, and I had applied to this program I wouldn't [have] gotten in.

So that was huge to me as well, realizing that my passport was my entry to anything, my American passport really opened so many doors, because even with a green card, I would have gotten into the program, but it's harder for the Thai government to understand why I want to stay there, and I wouldn't have been able to stay for a year either. So that was also a big moment for me, realizing how you know how big my passport is. And I think that's the year that I also embraced being American more than being Bolivian because, when people would ask me like, "Where are you from", I would say Maryland or D.C., I wouldn't say Bolivia because I took too long for me. So yeah, so then that was like a year when I embraced my roots in D.C., because now every time someone asks me, I'm always like, "I'll give you the long answer." I was born in Venezuela, raised in Bolivia, and then came here when I was 11. Because I feel like I feel proud now to have these multiple identities with me, but back then it was like, people just want to know why I'm here.

And it was weird, because all the people from my program were all white South Africans and I didn't really know much about South Africa. It wasn't much of culture shock when I went to Thailand, because their markets in Thailand, it looks so much like South America. People are so beautiful, so nice. And it just reminds me a lot of home. So that was a culture shock. For me. Culture Shock was learning about South Africa in this little classroom and knowing how much racism is in South Africa. So we had four black men and then the rest of the people were white, but white people who had never left South Africa, this is the first time they were leaving. And they were so racist towards the black South Africans and calling them all these names that, I feel like they were banned in the U.S., in the 60s, and so there was always a discussion about race, and I was right in the middle. And so that was culture shock for me, as well, learning how much racism exists in South Africa and the world. But yeah, that was definitely something that I'm always amazed at, how I ended up going to Thailand, like my closest friends ended up being black, South Africans.

DBN: And with this experience, what were some of the key takeaways, besides, I think what you just described, and especially as far as eventually teaching here?

CNG: Yes. So the camp was one month, or the program was one month, and then we were shipped off to different destinations. And I really wanted to go to a small village and have a scooter because that's what you would see in pictures, girls riding scooters, and going to the

school and having fun. So that's what I wanted. But then I got placed in Bangkok, I was the only person who got placed in Bangkok because of my passport and because of my degree, because I had a Bachelor's degree. The rest of the people in my program didn't have a bad degree, they had a community college degree or some sort of degree. So that's the reason why I got lucky. The program ended and then supposedly we had three days to chill, but as soon as my last class, they were like, "Alright, you need to go now, take this bus, you have to go to the city." So I had to pack everything and then rush and then hop on that bus. But to me, that was so exciting because I was off to Bangkok and it was crazy. And I got dropped off at a very touristy block, it's called Khaosan Road. And I remember it was confusing. There was so much going on, it's like the Vegas Strip, pretty much. There's just so much going on, I didn't know where to go. And also starting my job, like my new job the next day, it was raining, I was so confused. I ended up booking a room, a tiny, tiny little room in this horrible hostel on the eighth floor. And I had to carry like three bags, like all the way to the eighth floor, but I was so happy because I was free. I was like, this is it. This is great. And I woke up super early, took a taxi and arrived to work. And when I went in, it was raining like crazy. So while I was taking a taxi, it had been raining and raining. So I got to work and my hair that I had straightened, an hour prior was like a huge mess. My dress was wet, I was just dripping. But I was so, so, so happy. And then I walked in and they were expecting me, finally they gave me my classroom, and then I had so many curious faces glued to the window, asking who that was. And that was one of the best moments, and then I opened the door and all these kids, it must have been like 100 of them. Students that weren't even my students, all lined up and taking their phones out, and taking pictures of me. And I was like, "Hi, I'm going to be your teacher," and they're like, "Hi, teacher," and they were so happy like the energy was just super high. And then yeah, and then that was my life everyday. And then I found a little studio, right by my right by work and didn't have a kitchen, didn't have a fridge, it just had a bed, like a really hard bed, and the balcony. And the balcony didn't face anywhere, just the street. But that was enough for me, that was best because I could sit in the balcony and then count Tuk Tuks, count multicolored taxis. So that's what I did for the first month, just like count taxis and count monks. Because the monks would come in the morning, like at 5am. And I was up at 5am, 5:30, and I would just keep counting on them. So that's how I entertained myself because I didn't have internet and I was too lazy to ask or I didn't know how to ask where to get internet. But then yeah, so like the second month, I was like alright, this is enough. I've counted enough taxis. I need to go explore. So I would get off work, and then I would take the metro and then because the metro was like 15 minutes from where I lived. And every day I would get off at a different stop. And then I would walk, I would walk, I didn't know where I was going, but I would just walk, walk, walk and I kept walking until I would find my favorite bench in the city. And then I would sit in the bench and then start writing what I what I was feeling. And then I would take public transportation to places and then I was just walking alone. And I loved it. It was so fun.

And then somewhere, I found out that there was this gym, I've always been like a big gym person. I've always loved gyms and boot camps and stuff like that. And I was looking for a boot camp. I was like, I can afford one, let's see, you know, let's see. So I found one and it was super expensive, like, my rent was \$150, this gym was \$200. But I was like, it's fine, I'll pay for it, it's worth it. And then it would take me like two metros and like a bus to get to the gym. But I loved it because we had international people at that gym. We had people from all over the world who were so interesting and I loved hanging out with them. So I was there from five until 10. And then I would go home, fall asleep and do the same thing again, but I loved it. So that was, I think, one of the biggest takeaways, just finding, learning more about me, being alone, being completely alone, learning to hold my own hand. I think that was something that was big. I was also facing a heartbreak, I had broken up with my high school sweetheart, someone that I was in love with since I was 16. And we had been on and off for a while. But then, he was supposed to visit me. And then he's like, "By the way, I'm not going. I think we're 23, we need to be free. You need to experience actually being free. And I need to be 23 and be with other people." And that was crazy to me. I think that definitely changed me in a positive way, looking at it now. But back then I was just so heartbroken because I loved that person, I had watched that person's growth and invested the time on him. And then, the fact that he wasn't coming anymore, that meant that if I went back to the U.S., I wouldn't be with him. And then, I remember thinking like a hurricane just took everything from me. And I remember thinking that was the only thing that I really knew, I really wanted to be with him. And now I just don't know anything at all. I don't know where I'm going to go now. And so he said, "Move on." And I was like, "Move where, Where should I go?" And then I was like, I'm not going back to the States. Hell no. There's no way, I'll go back and I'm going to remember your face like no, no, goodbye. And then I started planning for more trips. And then I ended up backpacking Southeast Asia, I ended up going to Cambodia, Vietnam, Laos, and then after that, I found another gig in Madrid, another teaching gig. When they moved to Madrid, I was like, I need to heal, let me heal in Madrid. But that whole year was just so beautiful and being alone, and being alone and heartbroken too has its beauty. And then I ended up moving to Spain and I was there for four months, and it was beautiful as well.

DBN: Wow. Yeah, it sounds like you traveled a lot.

CNG: [Laughs].

DBN: And I guess what was that, like? Did it feel you know--I guess you had spent so much time hoping to travel so what was that like when we were finally able to do it?

CNG: It was amazing. I just felt like there's so much that I was learning about, [00:40:00] like, there's so many people that I was meeting, and then I realized that human connections are so beautiful, because that would meet people that were sitting next to me and sometimes we would

have these beautiful deep conversations, and then, their bus stop was the next one was, and then they'd have to go, and then it's like, "Okay, it was so nice talking to you. See you when I see you." And I learned the concept of see you, when I see you. I was so used to just having my best friend with me, friends, and that relationship, I was so used to just being with people for so long. And then to me, meeting casual strangers and having casual conversations, and never seeing them again, that was huge, that was beautiful. Because it was the first time that I had to trust strangers for directions, for food, for blankets, for random things. It was the first time that I was trusting the world 100%. And then I was getting myself in all these crazy situations and then I had to find a way to get out of these crazy situations, because I was the only person that I had there. I didn't even know my own phone number [laughs]. I didn't even know my address, I didn't know anything, but I needed to get out of that if I was going out, for example, and I lived on the outskirts of the city. So no taxi driver wanted to take me that far and then I had like a printed index card that I carried with me, and I would show the taxi driver. So there was like a Walmart, it's called Big C. So there was that Walmart or that Big C place and I would say, "Big C, Big C," and show them the card and they're like, "No, no, no," like, and then just pass. So I would just wait for like an hour until a taxi would take me there to my place. And then that was also something that I learned, just rejection every step of the way. But also be kind and be nice and also give to receive, right. And that's something that I learned there. And I just learned that I love that feeling like that empowering feeling of independence, that you can do it. And that's something that I am always going to treasure because I learned it in Thailand.

DBN: And how much time transpired while we were overseas until you came back?

CNG: Like for vacation or for living?

DBN: I guess living there. Because you said you went to Thailand, and went to other places after that.

CNG: Yes. And then I traveled about and then I moved to Spain. And then I taught English in Spain, in this academy and also I was meeting different people, I started blogging about my experiences in Thailand, and traveling in general. And then I had strangers messaging me and they were like, "Oh my god, I want to do this," so I had all these random friends that I had met on the internet and then they were going to Thailand, because I had told them that they should come to Thailand, they had bought my words. And they were like, "I want to do the same thing as you did." I'm like, Okay, great," and I would do everything for them, I would plan their itinerary. And I would just like, "Do that." And I was like, This is cool. This is something I would like to do eventually in my life. And then one of those random friends, we talked for six months, and she's from California, she's like, "I can really relate to you," blah, blah, blah, and then I'm like, "Just buy your ticket, come here, I'll pick you up, you'll be fine." And then I'm like, "I'm going to go to Spain," and she's like, "Oh I also want to go to Spain." So we ended up

doing that together. And that was so much fun, because after that, we ended up going all over Spain as well and just having all these beautiful, random, poor adventures because we were broke. We had like \$10 to our names basically, and we had stretched those \$10. We were eating a bootleg version of Nutella on the beach with hard bread [laughs]. But it was awesome. It was like one of those things that make you appreciate all the little things. And then there's nothing like eating bootleg Nutella with a friend on hard bread, honestly, highly recommended. And also I was seeing the world from a very innocent perspective. I was trusting everyone. And I was finding beauty from things that may not necessarily be beautiful to the naked eye. And like that was so, so big. And I loved that. And then, I went back to Bolivia, my sister was pregnant. I thought, Okay, this changes everything because I want to be there for this little human, like I want to go. So my sister was living in Bolivia at this point. And I went to Bolivia to be with her for the first few appointments and whatnot. And then I ended up staying for three months and then I thought, I want to live here, this is a cool place, I want to come back here. And this is back in 2013. And I thought, Okay, this is great, keep that in mind, like, come back here. [00:45:00]

So mi sister--my brother in law, he owns a gallery in La Paz and then he was opening a gallery in Wynwood in Miami, and they moved to Miami and they were like, "Do you want to come until you figure your life out?" I'm like, "Yeah, let's go, I want to go." So I ended up coming back. And I ended up coming back to Maryland first after almost two years out. And I remember just feeling so lost, and I was wearing my elephant pants. I was like, peace and love, the world is so good. But I wasn't well received, everyone looked at me like I was this dreamer. Like, "What is wrong with her?" I was with my flower, like, "Life is great, *Kap khun krap/ka* [thank you]," like it was honestly one last thing, like I was on another level, and then my friends were like, "What are you doing? You're 24, you should get a job, get serious." And then all the people that were in college with me, they had serious jobs. They had babies, they had houses and white picket fences, and then I didn't have any of that. And I didn't want any of that. And every happy hour I would attend, they were like, "What are you going to do?" And I'm like, "I don't know what I'm going to do." And they were like, "Well, I can find you a job in my organization. We're looking for someone, actually." And I'm like, "No, I don't want pizza Fridays at work. I don't want to do spreadsheets. I don't want any of that. Thank you, but no, no." So then my sister's like, "Just come to Miami, and then figure it out." So I moved to Miami. I loved it, because I was with my nephew. And then that question wasn't brought up ever. But it was still in my head. You know, what am I going to do? I've been struggling, I love traveling, I love this, I love being free, where's the job.

And then a friend of ours had a company in Panama, like an up and coming travel company, and he also had different businesses and stuff. And he's like, "Do you want to work here? Like we're starting here. Do you want to do it?" I'm like, "Yeah, I want to do it for sure." But I was more in love with the idea of moving again, because that feeling made me feel free. That feeling made me feel empowered. The fact that I was going somewhere, not knowing anyone, not knowing

many people just made me feel so empowered. So I moved to Panama in late 2014 and then I get to Panama, and our friend, he's like, "Oh, the travel business didn't work out. But I sell koozies. Do you want to sell koozies?" Do you guys know what koozies are? These are like beer sleeves so that when you're drinking your beer, sometimes it gets hot. So you just put those sleeves, and then the beer remains cold. So we designed those in Panama, and then we shipped them from Kentucky. So then you would never know that their call center was in Panama. And I had no idea about koozies at all. And that's what I was doing for a year and a half. I was marketing, I was writing about koozies, I was obsessed with koozies to the point where now I hate them. I hate them so much. Every time I get beer, I chug it. I'm like, no, not using that. Trash. Don't buy one, guys, please don't, get away from those. They're horrible. And then it was so stressful. That was like a very stressful period of my life. Being 25 and working in a country where you, love, like, I love Panama and I looked at Panama like a relationship. Panama is such a beautiful country and city. And I had fun in Panama but I was working so much. I was 24, 25 and working crazy hours and I was so stressed out because we had high koozie season, believe it or not, it's a thing. And we had to be awake at 2am to do orders for koozies. It was just insane. And it just got to a point where I just couldn't do it. My family had an intervention with me. And they said, "You need to quit your job and do something that you love." And then my brother in law came along again. And he's like, "Quit your job. Come to Bolivia and work in travel the way that you want to do this. If you want to do this, I'll help you, I'll back you up 100%" So I did that. I quit my job and I moved to Bolivia in 2016. And I started working travel until 2020, right before the pandemic when I got back here. Or no, no just kidding. It started March 2020 when the pandemic hit and then I took the last humanitarian flight or plane to the U.S.

DBN: Wow. And then when you were--sorry, I'm just trying to figure out the timeline [00:50:00]--

CNG: [Laughs].

DBN: So what year to what year did you work in Panama?

CNG: 2014 to 2016.

DBN: Okay. And then you said you moved to Bolivia where your sister and her husband were?

CNG: Yes, they moved back from Miami and then they were like they were living in Bolivia.

DBN: And how long were you there for?

CNG: From 2016 to 2020

DBN: 2020, Oh, Okay. And the whole time you were working in the travel company?

CNG: Yeah, in the travel company. So my brother in law has this beautiful art gallery, his dad is an artist, and my brother in law represents his dad, and also a bunch of other artists. But his gallery is insane. It's like eight floors of contemporary art, it's a museum of its own. And it's so fascinating, because he's so fascinating with just art in general. So I've been to Art Basel multiple times, Pinta Miami, he would take me to New York when I was younger, when I was in college, for all the exhibitions they would have. So I was always involved in art, never really getting it, but I was always around it. And so he started this company, the travel company, because he wanted to show another side of Bolivia. We were so used to just seeing Bolivia from the poor perspective, like, "Oh, Bolivia is an impoverished country, oh, llamas," but now we wanted to change that image. And so with art, he started changing that, and then remodeling that. So our clients were journalists, people who were interested in experiencing Bolivia from another modern, contemporary perspective. And that was a big awakening for me, as well, because the Bolivia that I had known was the Bolivia that I had experienced as a child. This was me coming back after--I mean, I had been there on my summer breaks and winter breaks throughout college. But truly, experiencing contemporary Bolivia was just mind blowing, because I realized how rich my country is. I was traveling from north to south, east to west and getting to know the natural beauties and getting lost in my own country, finding myself by finding my country. It was such a profound moment for me, because I had traveled to all these places but hadn't actually traveled through Bolivia. I always stayed in my little circle. But this job required me to find the hidden gems, the hidden routes, meet people that I had never met before, try things, try food that I haven't tried before. And I really, really appreciated that. And then, at the same time, I co founded a platform, called How to La Paz, with my two best friends. And we also wanted to show the other side of La Paz, the things that make La Paz cool, our sayings, because every country has colloquial sayings. We wanted to show that and we wanted people to embrace that and be proud of that, be proud of your roots. Because it took me a really long time to be at peace with that. I was thinking yesterday how, for the longest time, being Bolivian wasn't cool. Like, in South America, I was always looked down upon, because we are an indigenous nation, we're 60 percent indigenous, which is a beautiful thing. You know, it's an authentic nation. But Chile, Argentina, and, you know, other nations, Brazil always bashed on the fact that we were indigenous, like, it wasn't something to be proud of. But Bolivia had its moment. And when I returned, I was just looking at that, at my heritage, at Bolivia with just fresh eyes and looking at Bolivia as a brand new country. And I realize that Bolivia has always been my love, and those four years or five, four years that I spent, were such an enriching, growing experience. And also like, returning back home, that was like, wow, all this time I was sort of dismissive or like, "Yeah, yeah, I'll come back," but to experience that culture again, that was seriously one of my favorite moments in life, I think.

DBN: You mentioned that it was almost like getting to know your hometown or your home country all over again. So what were some of the biggest changes that you saw from when you were a child to the present that struck you the most?

CNG: I think architecture wise, things were changing, buildings were changing. Restaurants had been changing, cuisine had changed. And also, I met people who were also on the same wavelength as me, like, they had lived abroad for so and so years, and then they came back that year, that same year that I came back, so we were all talking about the same thing. We were speaking the same language, we're like, yes, fascinated by this. So the conversations that I had were great because we were all having that desire to be part of this new movement and also improve Bolivia, change Bolivia through, like change its image. We don't want the world to see us as this poor little nation. We want the world to embrace our heritage, all the things that we offer.

DBN: And also, you talked a little bit about after college, becoming more and more aware of the bigger political landscape. So I guess, what were some of those things that you noticed, also when you lived there?

CNG: So Evo Morales was still the president. And at this point, he had been president for 10 years. And then, it was amazing, because when he came to power, there was a shift, because, as a kid, it was always sort of embarrassing to be indigenous, you know. That was not cool. But then as soon as he came to power, it was like everything changed, because suddenly we're appreciating our indigenous ladies beauties, we're appreciating the fact that we have 36 different ethnic groups, suddenly, there was so much gratitude and appreciation, and we're looking [at] it from a different perspective. But also, what happened was that he wasn't tackling racism, he was just making it--we were aware that things were changing, and that we were now proud of our indigenous heritage. But he wasn't necessarily talking about the fact that there was so much racism in Bolivia, and there still is, there's so much racism, and I think he helped put different band aids on this, but he didn't really explore it. And then, I watched how he manipulated, obviously, on the news and on his speeches and stuff, how he manipulated the masses. And I watched and I studied his marketing campaign, and it just makes me so angry, fake promises, and lies, just lies, ugh. So then realizing that and then just being like, Oh, my God, all this time I've been supporting this man, who is actually not helping my country, who's actually tearing us apart, it was very devastating. And then shifting that, and then being like, I don't want to focus on politics, because I can't change politics, right. Because whether you bring someone from the left or the right, they're the same *mierda* [shit], it's the same. It's so devastating. So I'm like, I'm not going to get involved, I'm just going to not even think about this. And I'm going to try to change my country from my perspective, and show how beautiful and artistic and raw my country is. And I'm going to show it by collaborating with photographers, videographers, and I'm

going to publish my blogs, and I'm going to write about La Paz. So How to La Paz, this platform has allowed me to just be vocal about how I see my city, how beautiful my city is. So that's what I mostly talk about every single day,

DBN: It's really interesting that you've always been a writer and like now coming full circle, and then doing that for a living too. And I guess what was that like, right, to be finally able to also write and really express yourself without somebody telling you, Oh, no, that's not--?

CNG: It was amazing, because my friends for the longest time were like, "You should open a blog." But I was so insecure. I mean, I had blogs, but I always kept them in secret. And then, all these, random people would find me and I ended up like a movement in Thailand. And I always thought I could definitely do the same thing. I could bring that energy and try it in La Paz, but I just didn't know how to get started. And then one of my friends said, we just have to get started. And we co founded that platform. And it was so liberating to see that people were resonating with that, resonating with my words. It was so beautiful to see people were resharing. And they had no idea that I was behind it. They had no idea. I'm never like, "Oh, yeah, follow me," No, it's the platform, we're focusing on La Paz, I'm just a medium, I'm just behind the screen. So a lot of people don't even know that I'm the writer. A lot of people think that it's a white person writing [laughs]. And it's kind of crushing, soul crushing because I'm like, I'm not white. I'm a woman-- It's like a white guy writing it, and I'm like, no, I'm not, [01:00:00] it's different. And we've had different interviews in La Paz about How to La Paz. But I feel like people still think that we're just white dudes writing the whole thing.

DBN: And I guess who's your target population for that, is it people here or just people anywhere?

CNG: So at the beginning, it was just travelers. We wanted to give tips on travel, like what to do or you know, how to do it in La Paz. And so at the beginning, it was that, but then, Bolivians from around the world started following because we had different pictures sayings, and they were like, "This is cool." And then the third wave was children of Bolivians who had never been to Bolivia, and then suddenly, they were like, "Okay, this is cool. I had no idea that this restaurant existed, I had no idea that this is what you eat," you know. So people who are trying to reconnect. And then we have Bolivians and people in La Paz, who love it and have friends abroad. And they're like, "Oh, yeah, I remember that thing that I wanted, that dish that, you talked about, for so long? This is a picture." So we have different people and then we have the occasional traveler who still wants to know tips and whatnot. But it's been very interesting to be also that bridge that connects people who are trying to find home as well, right. People who have never been to La Paz, whose parents are immigrants, are in the area, and they talk about the old Bolivia, and then here I am talking about the new Bolivia. I'm just happy to help them piece together a new image of what their city or what their heritage looks like.

DBN: And you said you were doing this for about five years?

CNG: Yeah. So we actually co-founded it in 2018. Yeah, so with the travel company, I had been doing it for five years.

DBN: Oh, Okay, okay. So did you ever come back to the U.S. during those five years or were you there the whole time? Or what was that transition from living there for five years and coming back?

CNG: Yes. So I was always coming back, like for vacays for a month, two months. And then at the beginning, also, I was like, is this for me? For the 2016, 2017 I was working, but I was also traveling. And then I also had Thailand in my mind, because I was like, Yes, I feel free in Bolivia, but I don't feel 100 percent free, like the time I went to Thailand. So I was always looking for a way out as well. I just wanted to keep experiencing that freedom. And then I went back to Thailand in 2017 for a month. And then, I did a beautiful project with a friend. I was like helping my friend. My friend has an English Program in Thailand, basically the program that I did. So he had that and I was helping him with recording and I was like helping him carry the drone. And I just loved all of that. I was like, that's so cool. That is something I would love to do in Bolivia. I would love to create educational programs in Bolivia. I would love that. And he's like, "Yeah, let me know, like, shoot me an email and let me know." So I went back to Bolivia and I was like, alright, now I'm 100 percent sure that I want to stay here, and I want to do educational-- I want to mix travel with education 100 percent. So I wrote my business plan. And it took me like, six months. So by the time I email it, he was like he was I don't even know, he was MIA. He had forgotten about it, but I still have it and I'm still like reframing it and trying to see how I can adjust it and how I can improve it. But yeah, that was one of the biggest lessons after returning to Thailand, being like, it was a beautiful moment, but it's over. I was 27 then and I'm like, Okay, now I want to live here. And also that friend ended up breaking my heart completely because I was so in love with that friend. And then I was heartbroken. I was like, he's not even looking at my business plan. You know, it was a bad time. And I was like, I need a dog. This dog will help me be here in La Paz and experiencing it from another perspective. So I got a dog, best decision of my life. And then and then I started exploring Bolivia, La Paz, with my dog, going on hikes, meeting new hikers, people who are taking me to mountains because La Paz is surrounded by mountains like everywhere you go mountain, mountain, mountain. So we would take these beautiful healing hikes, and I was discovering the ups and downs of what it is to be in La Paz. Yes, that was great. And then I co founded How to La Paz and I was coming back here for summer breaks and then my grandma wasn't doing well. She was here. She had been living with me in 2016 right when I moved to Bolivia. My grandma was like, "I want to be with her." I was her favorite grandkid. She's like, "I really want to be with her." So she ended up moving to Bolivia. She was, I think 92. And then she was my roommate, we were roommates.

And we would have so much fun and then mom missed her too much, so we had to bring her back. And then in 2018, she had an accident, it was just a minor accident. It was just walking, and then she tripped. And then it just went downhill from there. And then my mom called me one day crying, like, “You need to come, you need to come, I need help, because she can't get up. She can't clean herself.” So yeah, so I was like, “Alright, I'll be there. I'll be right there.” So I moved back here from 2017 until May of 2018. Just to help out around the house and you know, be with my grandma. And it was a very devastating moment obviously seeing my grandmother like that, but it was also like a very bad place that I was in, I felt captured. I felt like, you know, Tinkerbell when she's in, in that little jar. I felt just like I was Tinkerbell in that jar. And I couldn't let my light out. I couldn't be myself, I couldn't do anything, because my mom's sort of dependent. Because my mom thought if she kept me around, I would keep my grandma alive. And I had so many feelings about that, I was so angry, because I thought I was starting to do something in Bolivia. I was like, I had all these plans and all these things that I wanted to do but now I can't do them because I'm here, and I don't want to be here. And I hate it here. And I had conflicting feelings. And then in the meantime, my brother in law and my friends were sending me articles of journalists that were in Bolivia, and articles that have been written, and I had so much FOMO [Fear of Missing Out] but at the same time, I understood that these were my grandmother's last months and I should be grateful for that, so it was so conflicting. And then actually, my dog was with me the whole time, thank god and my dog really helped me through that period. And then one day, I woke up and I thought like, I really can't be here anymore. Like I am dying. I'm dying. I'm not myself, I hate it here. Yes, my friends are here, I'm talking to them every now and then, but this is not where I'm supposed to be, no.

I love my grandma. And then we had big clients coming in May of 2018. And then my brother in law, he's like, “Alright, time for you to go, you need to take care of these clients. And then after you take those clients, come back, be with your family,” but you also have to think for yourself and think about what's good for you.” So I went back to Bolivia, you know, took care of my clients, and then co-founded How to La Paz. And then my mom calls me, she's like, “Yeah, *la abuelita* [grandma], She's gone. And I was like, crap. I just felt horrible. But at the same time, I felt at peace because those months that I was here, I was here, I gave her my time, you know what I mean? But deep inside, I just felt like my mom secretly thought that I had killed my grandmother because my mom was grieving and she just really wanted me to stay here because she thought, you know, by keeping me here, my grandma would still be alive. So it was a lot of like, conflicting emotions and then I came back for the funeral. I couldn't really stay much longer because I had so much going on. I was doing stuff, I was excited, again to be back in Bolivia and I had projects lined up, I had things I wanted to do. And then my mom, I remember coming back for the funeral. My mom just made me feel so guilty about leaving again. She just really wanted me to stay with her. I just remember having that feeling. Went back to Bolivia, did a bunch of stuff and then 2020--Oh, yeah, so my mom always had kidney problems. You know her whole life she had kidney problems, but she never really paid attention to the kidney problems. She just

knew they were there. But she went through a bunch of different doctors that didn't give her good advice. And then that year that she had been taking care of my grandma, it was like such a difficult year for her because she wasn't paying attention to her mental health or her physical health. So her kidneys started shutting down [01:10:00]. And then grandma passes away, a year, and my mom went to Bolivia, visited us. And she just had all these like different problems. Her feet were growing like *empanadas* every time she would eat something and it was all because her kidneys weren't able to cleanse the food that she was eating and whatnot. And then 2020, early 2020, she's like, "I am on stage four of kidney failure." And it was like what does that mean? I was like, huh? "I have to start thinking about what this is. That's what the doctor said, at this point, it's unstoppable. I have to think about it." And I just remember thinking like, fuck, my mom is going to go through that? And then my brother in law, he's like, "Don't worry, it doesn't mean death. It just means that, it's just basically they're removing your blood, putting it back in." But I'm like, the whole process of it, what does that even mean? But then my mom was like, "But I think I can stop it for a day because I just need to eat better, drink more water, blah, blah, blah." And then the pandemic, well, February comes people talking about Corona, Corona this, Corona, that and then March comes along. And then my mom was like, "I actually have to start dialysis really soon, my doctor said that I need to start in the next few weeks."

And then I took the last humanitarian trip, I didn't take it because tourism was dead. I didn't take that. I took it because I needed to be with my mom, because I knew that if I wasn't able to travel at all, anything could have happened to my mom, and I would have felt so guilty being here, or being in Bolivia. So took it. And then she started dialysis like three days after I arrived. And then I remember dropping her off and then just watching her walk in like a soldier pretty much, ready for it. And then she's messaging the group, as she's getting all those needles in her arms. And she's like, "I think I'm gonna die today. This is terrible." And she's sending us voice notes. Just like, "Tell Julio *que lo amo* [that I love him]," we're dramatic, *pero o sea* [but I mean]. We're all praying, crying, you know. And then my mom had married someone as soon as I left to Thailand, she met someone that year. And I remember it was so new, you know, like new relationships, butterflies, everything was so new. And as soon as I left, the nest was empty. And then they started getting closer, and they ended up marrying, getting married. And he was a nice man and he was with us, or he was with her throughout the ups and the downs that they faced with my grandma. But then, when my mom told him, "Hey, I need a kidney." He's like, "I volunteer, I'm going to be your person. Don't worry about it." And we were all so happy. We're, like, "He's so selfless, God bless him." But as soon as I came back, everything changed. It was like he was just bothered by my presence. He was always so nice to me but as soon as I stayed there, he was so bothered by my presence. It was awkward. I knew that I was going to stay here in the U.S., but I just didn't know how long I was going to stay here. And in my mind was like, alright, the transplant will be like, in June, and then after June, I can take care of my mom, and then I'll be back in Bolivia in August, great. But the dynamics started changing, the roles started changing. And then and then I realized that the pandemic is going to go on for God knows how

long and then the borders were shut down in Bolivia, and I couldn't return to Bolivia. And travel was also at a halt, right? And then I wasn't getting paid. I needed the money. I thought, Okay, teaching has been on my mind for a bit. Let's do it, let's do it. Let's see if I'm good at this, whatever. And then I went on Idealist.org, started researching jobs for jobs.

[Pause] [01:15:00]

So yeah, I had been planning to be back in Bolivia by August and then continue my projects, continue that momentum, pretty much, but everything was shut down, there was no way I could return, no one was traveling, I wasn't getting paid. Started researching, like, what's the second thing that I love the most, teaching. And so, I applied, and they called me like right away. And then I got a job right on the spot. They were like, "Okay, you know, tell me about your--" And I was like, "Yeah, I did this and that," of course, I tweaked my resume, of course, I changed all my experiences, completely tweaked them, and then just add teaching into all of them. And they're like, "Wow, you've had 10 years of experience." I'm like, ish, you know, technically, yeah. Yeah. So then, hired.

And then I was so happy because I knew deep in my heart that that man, the man that my mom was married to, he was going to leave, I just knew, I just knew. And I thought, my mom is not going to be working soon, she's on dialysis, she's suffering. And these two people, they were arguing all the time. And I was right in between them. And I just knew, I need to get a job because this is not sustainable. Like, no. So by August, they had stopped talking, and then I had stopped talking to him, he was so rude. Because every time I was studying for my PRAXIS or lesson planning, or doing whatever, he would just come in, and just be so rude, and then turn the TV on, because we have this living room, dining room area. And he just turned the TV on like super loud, super disrespectful of me studying because I know that that's not a priority of his. When he sees a person reading a book, he's that guy, guy, you know, Matilda, in the movie, the dad. He's the dad who's going to rip the book and make you watch a TV show. He's that kind of guy. So by September, he had to do a bunch of tests. And then turns out that he had liver problems so he couldn't be a candidate. And that was soul crushing to my mom, because my mom was really counting on him to be the donor. And then we were also counting on him to be the donor, but I'm glad he wasn't the donor, because my mom felt like, because, also side note, [she] had helped him get his papers, he owed her a kidney [laughs]. There's so much imbalance like I can't even you know, but [she] just thought, I've helped him so much. And I've loved him so much. And he is like a resident of the United States because of me. I gave him so much, the last thing he could do for me is give me his kidney, whatever. So that was soul crushing to my mom. And I was like, "You need to leave him. There's no way." This dude needs to be out. I remember just bawling and crying like, "I'm gonna give you a kidney. Don't worry about it." And I was like, "No, no," but we just went back and forth and in November I signed up for it. And then and then, I was working at the school and whatnot. And then March, this past March,

we had the surgery. My mom and I are not compatible, but my kidney went on to someone from Utah. And then some other woman gave my mom the kidney so it was like a swapping thing. It was super cool. So now she has a new kidney. And it's not like we expected, it's not like rainbows or unicorns, it's a lot of pills. It's a lot of things. But she's doing a lot better. And I'm happy that I'm able to be here for her and also find my way to teaching which I love. It was also a very beautiful experience to be in this school, it's actually nearby, where it's 90 percent black and--no, no, like 98 percent black and like two percent Latino, so I work mainly with Latino kids who were born here in the U.S. but whose first language is Spanish because they spoke Spanish at home. And I wasn't teaching them English, I was just helping them through different things and also I learned that I really wanted them to be proud of their heritage, and they learned that they didn't know much about their own countries. They know food, they know this, but they don't know how their city looks like, the museum's their city offers, or who is the President. They don't know so many things. So in my classroom, we would do different activities to help them feel proud of where they come from. So that was beautiful. That was a really great experience as well.

DBN: What school are you teaching at?

CNG: I was teaching at Perry Street Prep Charter School. And I think the most awakening thing as well, last year because of George Floyd, God bless him, I remember feeling like I need to do something, I need to learn more, this is unacceptable what is happening, because between the pandemic and all the shootings, it was crazy not to be affected by it. But I remember thinking, I need to teach, I need to go back to teaching because A, I need a job, and B, I need to make some sort of impact, and I need to learn. And I need to be in an urban school where I can learn from kids who come from different parts of the world as well. We had kids from Africa and then I learned their perspective, you know, what I mean? What it is to be a child from Africa, an immigrant child from Africa, in the U.S. Completely different from an African American child who was brought up here in the U.S., two different experiences. So, getting to ask them questions, and ask them about their favorite ice cream in Nigeria, and how their house looked Nigeria versus how it looks here. It was such a beautiful moment. And that also connected me to my roots. And I realized, by the end of the year, I mean, it was over, like a few weeks ago, I realized that the heart can be in multiple places at a time. I think that sometimes we constrain our heart, you know, "Home is where the heart is." But what if your heart is in multiple places? What if your heart is everywhere? So that's one of the biggest lessons I took away from this year besides also learning about black culture, also learning and unlearning, and questioning my biases. I also learned our heart can be in multiple places at a time.

DBN: And now that you've been teaching for a few months, do you see yourself continuing to teach or for how long or you know, what are your aspirations?

CNG: Now, I am convinced, you know, so this is like in January, I was looking for summer opportunities, I knew what was happening or what was going to happen, whatever. And then I came across an NYU post, like they have a teacher residency program. And I thought, Okay, this is cool, get your MAT. I think I'm going to be here for another year, because my mom needs healing and all that stuff. So this is great. I'll get my MAT and then I'll move to Bolivia again. And then I went through the process, I got in, and then I have a two year commitment with the partnering school where I'll be doing my residency, which is fine. So that means a total of three years here in the States. And that's sort of like, took me by surprise, because I was like, I'm making a commitment to be here for three years. But now, I'm so excited for it because obviously, I don't know if I'm going to stay here for three years, but I do know that I'm going to finish the MAT.

And then I do want to be able to mix my love for travel and education, and I want to be able to create a program that combines those two in Bolivia and all over Latin America. I would love people to be more aware, culturally aware, learn more from other nations, and also people to go back to their roots. I think a lot of people fear, we all fear the unknown. And sometimes parents are like, "Yeah, but I don't want to send my kid to so and so because what's that kid going to learn?" So I want my program to be rich and have that component, that cultural component, that coming back home component. So those are my aspirations, like, yes, I love teaching, but I don't see me working at a school for 10 years. I see me branching out and creating my own thing. And I've been formulating and having all these different experiences. So being able to combine all of that into that, is going to be a dream come true.

DBN: And I'm sorry, just to clarify, what grades are you teaching?

CNG: Oh, so right now, until 18th of June, I was teaching kindergarten all the way to eighth grade. So it was like going in and out of classrooms and pulling students out. And yeah, that was mainly my role.

DBN: Oh, Okay.

CNG: But now I think I'm gonna be teaching, so I started my new job at the Latin Charter School and I'm going to be teaching I think 7th and 8th grade.

DBN: Okay. Great. And I think I covered all the questions I had [01:25:00], but if, Norma, do you want to ask a follow up?

Norma Sorto: Yeah. So I guess going back to your travelling journeys, you've been a year in Thailand. So what do you like most about Thai culture? And did you ever learn the language when you were there?

CNG: I didn't learn the language, I learned keywords, I learned how to say pineapple, I can't remember. But back then, every day, on my way to work, there was a pineapple lady, and she would sell me my pineapple. So I learned how to say that. And then I learned how to say straight, right and left because I could tell a taxi driver straight, right, or left. So I learned basic words like 1, 2 ,3 ,4 ,5. But it was also amazing to not speak the language and just get by with smiling. And that's the beautiful thing about Thai people. They are so welcoming and they have the best smiles in the world. So you just have to be grateful. And you always bow and, "Thank you so much. Thank you." You spend like two hours, just being like, "Thank you. Thank you." So I love that. They're so kind and soft spoken so you can just get by with pointing want, like food wise, right? Because I was eating on the street and street food is like, the best Oh My God. My mouth is watering. But I would just point like, rice, and then and then that's it. And I didn't have a smartphone. I still could have afford one but I didn't have one. Because you could just get by with just being open to life, you know. And I think that's one of my biggest takeaways, as well, be open to it.

NS: So you also mentioned that you would travel alone in the city. Did you ever get scared?

CNG: Yes, I did. I had a bunch of different incidents. I was like, crap, I should have probably been a little smarter. There was this one time that I was just walking. And I was like, "Ahh," seriously, so excited, like arms out and then there was a man following me. And then I was like, no, there's no way this guy's following me. There's no way, no. I'll give him the benefit of the doubt. I'm just gonna keep walking. And then I kept walking, I crossed bridges, I was walking around and then he just kept doing that. And finally, I just got so creeped out and then ended up running, chasing. I don't know what I did exactly, but I was so scared of that. And then there was another incident that I came home a little too late and I was taking public transportation. And I sat in the front of this bus ish, bus. It was a truck, but in the truck, they have a bunch of seats for people. But I sat in the front with the driver and then everyone hopped off. And then I still had two lights to go and I remember I was wearing shorts. And it was him and he was driving and then he put his hand on my leg, and he started like brushing his nasty fingers on my leg. And I was like, "This is how I die." And then like, it was red light, I opened the door and I ran for my life, yeah, that was one of the scariest moments and then I also experienced--someone snatched my purse. And then I experienced those moments and people just following me, not just in Thailand, but in Panama and in Madrid, and even here. It's insane that we have to go through that, you know, we have to be more careful, but you are careful. You're living your life. It's not your fault that people are following you, you know. So yeah, I did experience scary moments.

NS: So you also mentioned that you had a blog, what was the name of the blog? And was it like a website that you created? Or was it like, you know, back then Tumblr was huge?

CNG: Yeah, yeah, it was. It was called Gott Gott, my last name, Gott living in Thailand. And then it just talked about my frustrations and how it was to live in Thailand. And then I opened another one, it was called the Recipes for Bad Romances. It was just like people were telling me about their love stories. And I was like, “This is interesting, let me write a story about your story.” So then I would just write about different heartbreaks and my own heartbreak, and then another one called a Girl in Distress. I have so many and I never really stuck to one because I was like, there's so many topics that I want to cover and like I didn't really know how to do things. So yes, I opened like a bunch of different blogs never, really, truly stuck to one but I'm hoping that I'll start an actual website and then just be able to publish my favorite--Actually, I'm doing that right now. It's been a very reflective year. You know, going back to my notebooks, going back to like the things that my scribbles, the things I would write on just sheets of paper, like small sheets of paper and just gather that all together and being like, Okay, this is awesome. And I'm looking at this with compassionate and forgiving eyes. I respect where I was at 21 But I'm also [01:30:00] happy that I'm here at 31 and I can publish this and maybe someone out there will feel something. So I'm working on this platform where I'm going to be publishing, but also my other friends are going to be posting, people who feel you know what I mean like the feelers. It's called *Jarava ichu* [ph] and it means storytelling in Quechua. So we're working on the logo and it's just been so exciting. This, right now, is just so awesome. Because I've been on this journey, you know what I mean? Getting to do this interview is just so cool because it just means that I'm on the right track.

DBN: Yeah, I think we feel the same way. We're really excited to have you and thank you for connecting us to other people, too. Yeah, we really appreciate you doing this. And we'll definitely keep you updated about the progress of the project and what we plan to do with it in the future.

CNG: Yes, yes, yes. Yes, absolutely. I mean, I think it's such a beautiful project, and I really see it as, videos and everything. I mean, of course, you need a grant. But I also think that doing it privately, I don't know if, I can do this, but like doing it privately is also a good option. Because there's so much. And also, let me tell you, you both inspired me to do something similar in La Paz. So I'm thinking I'm going to be going back at the end of the month, and I have a bunch of videographer friends that I collaborate with. And I was like, “What if we tell the story of La Paz through grandmas, through grandmothers?” Because grandmas are dying, you know what I mean, my other grandmother, she's 95, 94. And we're not gonna have her much longer, you know, but what if she could tell us about how it was back then? Because it's a small city. So back then--I mean, right now, we have like 2 million people, but back then we had basically no one. So tell us about how it was on Sunday tea, show us your pictures, so I'm just really excited to be exploring that and I really just got inspired by this.

DBN: I'm glad, that's really nice to hear.

CNG: So yeah, I'll let you know, I know that's going to take a while because it's going to be privately funded, obviously. But I think it's so beautiful. And it just gives me also ideas on collaborations that we can do and I think sometimes the damn grants suck because they cut your creativity too, right? But I think we can definitely do something privately funded, something that touches immigrant voices or what it is to be an immigrant child, like interviewing immigrant children, you know, what I mean? Or following one immigrant child throughout 10 years, you know, something like that that is doable, and I think that you guys are in such a-- I don't even know how old you are. I haven't asked anything about you. But you're amazing.

DBN: Thank you.

[End of interview] [01:32:59]