

Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez Oral History Interview

DC Oral History Collaborative

Summary

Local DC middle school teacher, Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez, shares memories of growing up in La Paz, Bolivia and feeling connected to nature. She reflects on the ever evolving bonds with her mother, sister, and grandmother and describes growing up in a household composed exclusively of women who provided and inculcated strong values that focused on education, hard work and caring for one another. Having arrived in the country at an early age, prior to 9/11, she had the opportunity to adjust her status which opened up the world both in terms of borders but also professional opportunities. She speaks on issues that she became aware of growing up, both in Bolivia and the U.S., as well as thinking back on her sister's circumstances, which prompted her to find ways to get involved in the push for the DREAM Act. *Note: 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

Date of Interview: June 29, 2021

Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega; Norma Sorto

Interview Location: Columbia Heights

Length: 01:52:28

Neighborhoods Mentioned: Adams Morgan, Gaithersburg, Silver Spring, La Paz, Loreto

[Interview begins 00:28:00]

Delia Beristan Noriega: Can you start off just by telling us your full name and date of birth? And then a little bit about where you come from?

Carla Nicole Gott: Yes. My name is Carla. Carla Nicole Gott. Actually, no. Carla Nicole Gott Ramirez. I was born in Caracas, Venezuela but my parents lived there for 16 years. It was back in the 80s, back when Venezuela was booming and it was amazing. And then yeah, they just didn't have much family there and they moved back to Bolivia. And I moved there when I was two or three, I can't really remember. And then I moved to La Paz. And that was my home until I was 11 years old. And then I moved to the D.C. area, Maryland area when I was 11. I've lived here ever since.

DBN: What are some of your earliest childhood memories?

CNG: It's my grandma's house. It was this big house downtown. And my sister and I would play in that house. We weren't allowed to go to *la sala* [living room], the living room area because it was only for guests or special guests. Like we were never allowed to touch the good china or just go in there in general. When my grandma would go to the doctor, my sister and I would crawl in there like soldiers and then just look around. Then I remember this one time, we broke something and then we spent the whole afternoon trying to glue this vase together that was 200 years old. But we didn't. I mean, we were trying to glue it with gum, so it never worked out. And yeah, we had so many great adventures in the house. But downtown La Paz is very different from like the southside of La Paz. The south side of La Paz has more trees, more green. And then my mom bought an apartment and we moved there. And that changed my entire childhood because I had trees all around me and I had nature around me and I would spend much of my time just, you know, walking around amazing forests. I mean they're not forests but I thought they were magical forests. And I would be there jumping and running and being a kid, being a free child, and just letting my imagination loose there.

DBN: Who did you grow up around? You said your grandmother, your mom and who else?

CNG: My parents are divorced. They got divorced when I was two or three. And that's one of the reasons why we moved back actually. And I grew up with my grandmother, my sister, and my mom. So it was always the four of us. And yeah, it was so fun, honestly, growing up with them. I mean, we had really tough times, but we were this household of women. I was the beta, they were the alpha so they were always trying to order me around and do whatever they wanted but I secretly rebelled but they didn't know it was rebelling, but I was secretly rebelling.

DBN: And your sister is older?

CNG: Yes. She's five years older than me.

DBN: How old are you and how old is she?

CNG: I'm 31. And she is 36 now.

DBN: Can you tell me their names?

CNG: Of course. My sister's name is Daniela. My mom's name is Carola. My grandma's name was Josefa. But she liked to be called Chipita and sometimes she liked to be called Peipta. We would always go back and forth. And then sometimes she liked to be called Maria Jose but like that was never her name. But we would always go back and forth. And I was like, "What do you want to be called today?" And then she would say, "Pepita today." And I was like, "Okay Pepita." So yeah, I was her favorite grandkid. And she would say this proudly to everyone. She would give me everything. My sister would never get a Christmas gift. But I would get money. I would get hugs. I would get food. I mean, everything. Yeah, and I would, even though we lived in the South side, once we moved from her house, I'd still go on the weekends and spend my weekends with her. And I remembered you know just hanging out with her. [00:05:00] And watching *novelas* [dramas] with her. I watched Maria la del Barrio, Marimar. All the Marias. I learned everything I know from that those soap operas. Yeah, it was fun times.

DBN: And you mentioned you remember some of the things that you saw growing up, you're surrounded by nature. Maybe what are some of the smells and sounds that you remember from your childhood?

CNG: So the smells. There were so many different trees, eucalyptus trees around my house, so many of them. And on the weekends, we would go and pick up branches. We'd take these very long hikes and long walks with my mom. Looking back now, I think those walks and hikes are what made us bond more. I remember just talking to my mom about the things that were bothering me and there's something magical that happens, right? When you're walking around nature, you just let yourself be free. And so we would pick up all these branches and bring them back home so that our house could smell like eucalyptus. There were so many birds that were there. But I can't remember this bird's name, but it was brown. And it was always just flying around and it would always come to my window. So that was interesting. And then another smell was the smell of popcorn. There were so many kids in my neighborhood. We would often times be outside playing tag, playing freeze, I mean, you name it, we were playing it. And so we're staying outside until like nine o'clock, and my mom would make homemade *pipocas*, homemade

popcorn, and she would just throw it outside and we would all eat that in two minutes. Those are the smells that often bring me back to that particular place.

DBN: Sounds like you had a really warm childhood.

CNG: Yes.

DBN: Can you tell me a little bit more about the relationship, I mean, you already told us a little bit. Can you tell us a little bit more about your relationship with your sister?

CNG: Yes. So, my sister, she was my very first friend. She was a bit of a bully but a lovable bully, I guess. When things were good, they were great. But when things were bad, they were really bad. I used to have this massive crush on this boy that lived right across from my apartment, his name was Martin. I remember I would just stare at his window without him knowing that I was staring at his window. Then my sister noticed that I was doing that. Then she said "Do you like him?" and I was like "No, I don't like him." you know, flushed. And then obviously, she found out, and then she had that on me. So every time she wanted me to do something, she would say, "If you don't massage my feet, I'm going to tell Martin that you're in love with him." So I would just massage her feet. But one day, I just got tired and fed up with that. I said, "Tell him, go ahead, tell him." So she just ran to the window and started calling his name "Martin, Martin!" And I was like, "She's not going to do it, there's no way she's going to do it." The dude came out and he's like, "Yes?" and then my sister was like, "I just want to tell you that Nikki--that was my nickname--thinks that you are..." And at this point, I'm just hugging her legs and I'm like, "Don't tell him please, I'll do anything." Then she ended up telling him but I had to do just everything for her. That's the type of relationship we had. She was definitely someone that I looked up to. She was my partner in crime, someone that was with me on every road trip. We didn't have cell phones, we didn't have Gameboys. We didn't have any of that, we just had each other to get distracted in the car. We would play, we stare at each other like staring contests, counting trees, counting cars, we played everything. We would always do obstacle courses. Then she turned 15 and discovered that she liked boys and not Barbies. That was tough for me because my partner in crime wasn't playing Barbies with me anymore. She was outside with the boys and then I couldn't really join her group because I was her little sister. But we have a really tight bond. She's still very protective. Now I can understand why. My mom was going through a really rough patch and my sister wanted to protect my mom and protect me from pain. I think that's why she was a bully. A protective, nice, lovable bully.

DBN: What schools did you go to?

CNG: I went to a Catholic kindergarten. My grandma loved this particular kindergarten because my grandma was a teacher and her student was my teacher. So my grandma was so proud that I

was in this Catholic [00:10:00] kindergarten. She would walk me from her house to school every day and then just probably pick me up. She's like, "Oh, hello, hello, hello." She just knew everyone at that school. Then she wanted me to go to another Catholic school but my mom wanted my sister and I to be together. Once we moved to the south side of La Paz that's when we went to Loreto, we wore uniforms and we used to walk, it was a 15-minute walk. Every morning, we just walked to school. It was fun because you wake up early, put your uniform on. You don't even have to worry about wearing revealing clothes, just go with that. Then we would get out around three and then walk back home with our friends so that was always fun.

DBN: Who were your friends?

CNG: I had so many friends. I was a very social kid. I was always involved in different activities in school. I love acting, I loved singing. I loved running, I was always doing something. I was funny. I was named class clown, I was a very extroverted kid. I also removed myself from situations. But I was always let's do this. I had a band. I was 9, 10. I had a band and we would perform for kindergarteners and it was so fun. We'd had all these crazy adventures and prank call people. I had this one particular friend, her name was Michele [ph]. I've known her since she was three years old. She was always coming to my house. And we would just play all these crazy games. We would sometimes if we got bored, we would do dingdong ditch, if not we would just pretend we were beggars on the street to get money. It was so ridiculous like thinking about it, it's ridiculous. We just thought people know that we're beggars and they're going to give us money. But no one ever did. No one gave us money. Then my friends in school were in my grade, I had this one particular friend who was my neighbor. I would pick him up on my way to school and then we would walk together to school and just talk about our moms and what was happening back then. It was the year 2000 and everyone thought the world was going to end. We just talked about that a lot. 1999-2000 everyone thought, "Oh the world's going to end. It's going to end." So we would all talk about this or we would talk about what we are going to do now that the world is ending. And then one time someone told me that the world was going to end like the following day because of Nostradamus or something. I remember just going to my grandma's. My grandma had this huge Jesus statue in one of her rooms. I went to that room and I was like, "Please Jesus. Don't let the world end." I just prayed for like three hours straight and then I fell asleep. Then I woke up and was like, "Holy crap, the world hasn't ended because of me." And then I went to school and we had morning assembly, and I was looking around, like, all these people don't know that I saved the world. And then I told my friend, I was like, "I did this, I actually did this. Like you're here because of me." That was one of my earliest memories.

DBN: You mentioned all this religious symbolism. I want to know a little bit more about the role of religion in your life growing up.

CNG: Sure. My mom and grandma and her son are very Catholic. Actually, my dad's side of the family is also very Catholic. Ever since I was young, I attended mass in church but I was always bored. I remember actually enjoying going to church. I remember all the priests, all the churches that we would go to had foreign priests from little towns in Italy. They really couldn't speak much Spanish and then we would just have to sit there. Then do this ritual like kneel when they tell us to kneel. Do this when they tell us to do this. So I never really enjoyed it. We had children's mass so every weekend when I was with my grandma, I'd go to children's mass or like just a mass dedicated to little kids and that was fun because I got to walk from her house to church. My dog would walk me and drop me off and would pick me up after mass was over. He was so smart and [00:15:00] that's the part that I enjoyed the most, actually, just walking there. One time I had this dog, he was I think my best friend ever. His name was Brownie. He would walk me to church, drop me off and then disappear. He had friends and he was hanging out with his friends while I was in church. But this one time, he just came in, in the middle of the church, and then started looking for me and barking at the priest and I wanted to die. I was hiding. I was like, "That's not my dog. Who is this stray dog? Like eww no." But he was looking row by row, looking for me. And then just started barking like, "Where's my owner?" Then he walked out and then peed on one of the main tables where you put the *la ostia y el vino* [wine and bread]. He peed there, like, it was one of the most embarrassing moments of my life. Thank God, I denied him. I think that's the part that I loved the most. Back to just symbolism right, I just always got bored in church. But my grandma decided to put me in the choir. So I had singing lessons. And then I mean, I don't sing now. But like back then, I had to go to church because I had to sing. So that was nice. And then at some point, it just got really boring. I mean I've always felt that connection with God but I just don't like having to go to church for an hour and a half and listening to a priest that I don't understand in a place where everything echoes. I think that the Catholic Church needs to get their sound system together.

DBN: And you mentioned your dog, did you have any other pets growing up?

CNG: Yes, I have a parrot. So my mom was going to work and this man was selling a parrot in the middle of the street and in the middle of downtown La Paz. And then my mom was like, "Oh my god how much is this parrot?" This Amazonian parrot, a beautiful green yellowed feather parrot. And this guy's like \$100 and back then \$100 dollars was a lot of money. But she found the money and then brought it to work and then brought it to the house. His name was Lorenzo and he would speak to us. He would talk to us. He would yell things every morning between 8 am and 12 pm. He would say [inaudible] and he just started saying that and then he would scream someone's name like, "Pocho," just like scream, and people would come out and say like "Who is Pocho?" Pocho is my dad and he heard that name once and he was just like screaming that name. Then he would say, "Clarro," like he was so cute. He was the cutest. I loved him. Yeah and then one time in first grade, we were learning how to do the L's or something because, in Spanish, parrot is Loro. And I forgot to tell my grandma to buy fake feathers for this project

and it was 10 pm, 11 pm and I told my grandmother, “Oh my god, I forgot that I have this project. I have to put feathers on the L.” Then my grandma went downstairs and just start plucking his feathers. It was horrible. So I brought the thing to the teacher and I was like this is very special. This is very precious like these are real feathers. That’s the kind of grandma she was and thank you for Lorenzo wherever you are. I actually found out he was a girl like 10 years after because he never went to the vet. My mom never took him to the vet.

DBN: I know you mentioned your mom and dad separated. Do you know much about your dad? Or what do you know? I guess from what people have told you if you do.

CNG: Yes. He’s one of the nicest people ever. He’s so nice. And so my mom and dad had known each other since they were 10, 11 years old. Lie, they met in church actually. And he has these beautiful green eyes and back then I guess it wasn’t that common to have green eyes and everyone was like flocking towards his green eyes and loving his green eyes. He comes from a big family of five. My grandma is Brazilian and my grandpa is from I think Argentina German. So that was a crazy mix. Then my grandma didn’t speak much Spanish when she met my grandpa but they fell in love and ended up getting married. My grandpa was a police officer and then they traveled all around Bolivia. And so [00:20:00] finally they settled in La Paz. I know a lot of my dad’s childhood stories because my mom has told me a bunch of his childhood stories. But growing up, we weren’t super close. I think that he is a great person. He just wasn’t a great dad. I love him to death. He is my father and I love him but he wasn’t a great dad to me. But some of the things I remember just growing up was Father’s Day. He would come to my school and I would get to show him off, and I would get so excited because he was in my school like it was a rare appearance. It was like having Brad Pitt come to your school. So that was always fun. My dad has a sister, her name is Angie [ph] and she played a huge role in my life. I think more than my dad because she was always there. For every birthday, for every event, for anything that I needed. She was always there. And I think she took that role so seriously because I think that she saw that my dad wasn’t around much. So she decided that she was going be there forever. And I have such a tight bond with her. She’s awesome.

DBN: What are some of your fondest memories with him?

CNG: I remember just growing up and he would take me out. He moved to this other city in Cochabamba. And it’s a city that is four or five hours away by bus and we have to take the bus to go there. But once we got there, it was so tropical, it was so nice. He had a pool and it was awesome just to be around that space. He was always so kind and so sweet and always trying to teach me new things, wanting to teach me how to swim, wanting to teach me how to drive, wanting to teach me how to run. When we had those moments together, it was very short moments together. We really had a lot of fun.

DBN: I don't know if you mentioned this already but what were your parents' and maybe even your grandmother's profession?

CNG: So my dad, I think he studied business or marketing. My mom studied business. My grandma was a teacher.

DBN: And I guess did that influence you as a kid like thinking about what you wanted to be?

CNG: Yes. Oh yeah absolutely. You know, I went through so many different phases like one of the phases was, I'll be a singer. So I remember having this jump rope and then that was my microphone and I would sing. I would sing the entire day. I would sing for the parrot and the dog. They were my audience. And then I decided that I wanted to tell stories. So I wanted to be a reporter. And I went through this whole phase where I was asking everyone like, "Oh, you know, what's your name?" Like, let's start a newspaper. And then, when I start a newspaper in school, I would write different stories so that people would know that we exist, pretty much. And then I went through the teaching phase in seventh grade, actually, when I moved here and that's when I decided, "Okay this could be something, this could be interesting." We had an assignment in history class and my grandma was a history teacher. And I remember that the assignment was to teach your classmate or make a lesson plan or something. It was something like that. And I had so much fun doing that. And I was like, "Oh I could do this. I could become a history teacher just like my grandma." And when I told my grandma, I remember her eyes lit up, she's like, "That's amazing that you're going to be teaching. You'll love it and hate it" and I was like "Yay."

DBN: And you mentioned also that music was a big influence for you growing up and you know, you were singing, things like that, and involved in theater. Can you tell me more about what were some of your artistic influences? Like maybe of the artists that you listen to or remember listening to growing up?

CNG: Oh, yes. So there was always something playing in my house, the radio or *las novelas*. There was always something and one of my first, my earliest memories of an artist was definitely Thalia. Thalia was huge. I mean she was everywhere and I wanted to be just like her. And then Shakira of course. She was huge but not the blonde hair Shakira we know now but the darked hair, gothic Shakira, that was it. I was singing her songs before I even knew what love was. It's funny that you mentioned that because I was thinking about that a few days ago, her albums like *Pies Descalzos* and *Donde Estan los Ladrones*, those two especially have followed [00:25:00] me throughout my life and just different circumstances, and the albums have evolved into different things. When I think about *Pies Descalzos*, her first album, I think about when I was a kid and I was singing these songs and not even understanding what she was saying but just my entire childhood plays in my mind.

And then I listened to that album again when I was in my teens and when I was falling in love with someone, and that album has a different significance. And now I'm listening to that again and has a completely different significance. So those two albums have followed me around. Enrique Iglesias, Ricky Martin. Mercurio, there were the N Sync of the era back then like the Mexican N Sync. And Fey, I don't know if you know Fey. She was a Mexican Britney but she was huge. I loved her so much and I got to meet her actually. And then Gloria Trevi and Selena. Yeah so, Selena wasn't as big but I remember when I saw that she had died on TV. I remember loving "Como La Flor" but then when I found out she was dead, I was like, "Holy shit, she has died." So yeah there were definitely big influences. And when I hear their albums, I always think about them. And also my mom's music. Tango was huge in my household. And just old songs from the 90s like songs that she would listen to that I'm also listening to now and they hold a completely different meaning.

DBN: And aside from music, were there foods you also remember being really influential?

CNG: Yes. So Bolivia's food is very rich, very carbee and potatoes are a thing. Quinoa was a thing before it even became a thing here. So I grew up with just eating quinoa soups, quinoa tortillas, quinoa everything. So that was huge. And then we have so many intricate dishes like our food is very similar to Peru. More delicious. It's a secret. And yeah, so I grew up around that stuff. And then we didn't have a McDonald's in Bolivia until 1998. I have never tried McDonald's. When it finally arrived, it was huge like the whole city stopped for three days because everybody wants to go to McDonald's. And people were dressed nice to go to McDonald's, and we had huge lines like a massive four-hour wait to go to McDonald's. So that was huge too. Then I remember we were in that line, we were just waiting and waiting and while we waited there was a show playing, there were people marching, fireworks because McDonald's had arrived. And that to me, it just reminds me of the fact that it was an important place where people wanted to go and really wanted to eat there but at the same time it was so overpriced. Because we have such great street food that in the end, they ended up leaving, like, McDonald's ended up bankrupt in Bolivia because people realized that we have amazing street food. We don't need to be paying \$3 for a hamburger, like, no. But every birthday from eight to ten was spent in McDonald's. It was very like, it was one of those things that meant that you had money if your birthday was spent at McDonald's or if you had a happy meal. Then all the kids would save the box, the happy meal box, and just put their own sandwiches inside. They would walk around school with that. And so some people would think that they were eating McDonald's like how crazy, how crazy that McDonald's was such a staple you know. But now I feel like people know that McDonald's is trash. I mean, it's great but you know it's trash food, it's fast food. But yeah, that was 1998.

DBN: How did that make you feel I guess, because McDonald's was the equivalent of coming from money or showing that you could afford eating at nicer places. How did that make you feel growing up?

CNG: It made me feel like I knew that my mom couldn't afford every weekend. You know, it was just a special occasion type of thing. But it also made me feel, I never really truly asked for it. We would get ice cream from there sometimes, just the cones because that was cheapish. But I remember just treasuring that and thinking you know, my mom is making a sacrifice [00:30:00] to go to McDonald's for my birthday, of course, this particular special occasion, like it wasn't an everyday thing at all. Because when we moved here, we realize how cheap it was and then I was like, wow, the meaning of it changed completely because back home it was like, "I really need to treasure every bite, I really need to indulge every fry," just take my time and I would play with my toys. They had the Winnie the Pooh collection back in the early 2000s, 2000, or 1999. I would just wait every so and so. I would buy toys from friends and exchange them just so I could top the entire collection and play with them. But when I moved here, I wasn't even ordering Happy Meals anymore. It was just a burger from the dollar menu because then we realized how cheap it is here and how expensive it was there because it was the cost of living.

DBN: So you mentioned, also this being a sort of a sacrifice right?

CNG: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: Were there many occasions or other instances where you saw that your family was making sacrifices for you, your sister or just in general?

CNG: Yes. Always. Always. It was my mom, my sister and I and it was one salary. My dad didn't help much with it, with us, with expenses or anything. So it was my mom fighting for us, fighting for our school, fighting for everything. At first, my dad was taking care of my sister's tuition. But there were months when he wouldn't pay and then my sister would be called out from her class and then sent to the principal's office because my dad hadn't paid, and that was so embarrassing. The whole school would know that you were broke pretty much. And then my mom would have all these arguments with him like, "How come you haven't paid it?" and one day, she said, "You know what, don't even bother, I'm going to do this." So she had to work so hard and she worked downtown, and it would take her forty minutes. She had to take public transportation to go to work. So we could never get sick, you know, we can never ever get sick. And if we did, "I'm sorry but you still have to go to school. And if you are dying, then call me." You know, that was like the rule. So we could never call her, never get sick. But on this particular occasion, I was super constipated. And I didn't want to go to the bathroom in school because they were gross. I was dying like I was fainting because I really needed to go to the bathroom but I didn't want to go to that bathroom. So then I ended up just going to the nurse,

calling my mom and being like, “Please pick me up because I really can’t go to the bathroom here.” She was like “Alright, I’ll be there.” She came in two hours and I was dying. By the time she came, I was literally dying. But yeah, she ended up taking me. But that was the only time that she picked me up from school because she had to make sacrifices, right. She was skipping work like an hour, two hours of work to come get me and take me to school. And that meant, I’m not sure if she got paid hourly or anything but back then, you needed to work from 8am until the job was done.

DBN: And it sounds like she did put a lot of emphasis on your education and I guess what other values did you learn growing up?

CNG: I learned the meaning of hard work just watching her. Her job was so important to her and education was number one. I never doubted that I’d go to college. I never doubted that I would become something of myself. You know I wasn’t sure what I was going to become because I was always going through all these different phases. But I knew that was going to become something. So I think that was the most important value that my grandma also inserted on my mom as well because education was everything. My grandma would always tell me, “*Tienes que tener tu cartucho*,” [You have to have your degree]. You always have to have your paper, your degree in hand always. After that, you can do whatever you want but always have that. She would just keep repeating that, repeating that, and repeating that and so it was never a question you know that I was going to go to college. For me, I knew because these two ladies would repeat that all day every day.

DBN: Wow.

CNG: Yeah but I guess another value for me is save money, have savings. My grandma was also--my grandpa died early on and my grandma, she had three kids and she had to fight it alone. She had savings and because of those savings, she was able to buy a house and buy an apartment. Then ended up being amazing and helping my mom out [00:35:00] every time. It only came from one salary. So I think that value is also something that I carry with me, savings. And don’t trust people, don’t trust many people. Although I’m always arguing with that but yeah, they always said, “Don’t trust people, especially men. Don’t trust men.”

DBN: Do you know, what’s the highest level of education that they reached? Because it seems like this is something that is very important to your family in general.

CNG: Yeah, bachelor’s degree.

DBN: Yeah and I before I move on to your journey to coming to the U.S., do you have any follow-up questions? Maybe something that we missed about childhood or?

Norma Sorto: Just one question I'm really curious about. So you mentioned back in '99 or 2000 people thought the world was going to end. Was there a reason? Why, was there an event that was going on at that time?

CNG: So Nostradamus had a theory that the world was going to end the year 2000 and so yeah.

NS: Ah okay, I was really young.

CNG: Yeah but if you think about it, if you see music videos back then, they were very futuristic and JLo has that song it's like, "the end of the world" type of thing. Everyone was just preparing for the end of the world. But now you know that I did this. You know I saved it, I saved the world [laughs].

NS: That's interesting. Were people freaking out that time?

CNG: Yeah, a lot of people were freaking out and other people were just throwing Bible verses, making it really scary. I would listen to all these things and I was freaking out. But just like in 2012 right, the world was also going to end in 2012.

DBN: I do remember that. The History Channel did a documentary on that too.

CNG: Yeah Nostradamus but if not the Mayans, you know, there's always something.

DBN: Okay so moving forward. Do you remember when your family started talking about coming here? Or how that decision was made?

CNG: Yes. So my mom was in her late 40s and it's very bureaucratic--or like mid-40s. I would say bureaucratic in Bolivia, like if you don't belong to a certain political party then your job is at risk. So my mom did not want to affiliate to any political parties. But her boss was very political and she wanted everyone to follow that specific political party. My mom was like, "There's no way, I don't agree with that." So she ended up moving down, like having to leave the job that she loved and having to do something else because of that. But then she realized, "There is no way I can stay here. I want my kids to have freedom and grow up." My aunts, they lived here in the U.S. so they were like, "You should come here, you know, it's better here. Your kids will have a better future here." And we started talking about it in 1999. And then by December of 1999, we already had our tickets, and I remember it just happened so fast because it was just a conversation that I overheard her exchange, my grandma, on the phone. And then they were just talking about it so much. And then all of a sudden, we were packing our stuff. And then you know my mom was like, "Don't tell anyone that you're leaving because you never know. And so

we were very private about it. I remember just going to the American Embassy, having my passport stamped and having to take all these different pictures, and then finally it happened. It was weird when it happened because I really contemplated running away the week before. I really wanted to run away, because I couldn't see myself anywhere else. I had been here for vacations and stuff but it wasn't the same. I was so scared and I was scared that I wasn't going to have my dog or my life. And yeah and I had contemplated running away and I really, really wanted to, but I'm glad I didn't [laughs].

DBN: And what year was this?

CNG: I moved here on February 8, 2001. But they were talking about it in 1999, early 2000s. By the late 2000s, by like 2000, I'm sorry, they had made a decision that, Okay we're leaving. [00:40:00]

DBN: So you mentioned that it happened quickly and how did that make you feel?

CGN: It just made me feel like I didn't know how to process it. There was so much happening. I was 10 you know like 9 or 10 when they started talking about it. My 10-year-old mind was so focused on being a kid and I loved it. And that's my favorite year like that's my favorite year ever. Someone asked me what year I want to go back to my life, I would say 10, 100 percent because everything was working for me. I was getting good grades, I was popular, I was acting, I was doing so much. And I had the coolest dog ever. So it was everything, I was shining, pretty much. I had a boyfriend, all these things were happening. So I didn't want to say bye to my friends. I didn't want to say bye to anyone and I did not want to say bye to my dog. I was attached to that dog. Actually, my dad gave me that dog. So that's the greatest thing that he's ever given me, like this amazing dog, whom I had so many great memories with and I did not want to let him go.

And then we had to go. I remember we had two suitcases with all of our favorite things and then it was my sister, my mom and I and my grandma and my sister's friends. And we were all going up to the airport at 5am and I was still thinking, like, "What if I just run away right now with my dog?" Like I could open the door and just run. But I was like, "Where would I go? Where would I live? What would I eat?" [Laughs] So it never worked out. But once we got to the airport, I had forgotten my dog's leash. I had this scarf so I just tied it, and I have a picture of that I'll show you later. And I was just taking him around with my scarf and my grandma or my dad's mom wanted to hug me and I was like, "I just want to spend time with my dog, everyone let me be." And then we just hugged. Hugged everyone, hugged my dog extra tight. I was like, "You have to wait for me, you cannot die. You have to wait for me until I come back." Then we crossed the immigration line and it was my sister and I sitting and then just thinking about our lives and what that would be like. I remember getting to Miami and my sister spoke a little bit of English. I

didn't speak any English. And then we were just so lost in this huge airport. And we were so, so, so lost that we had our air stewardess helping us and whatnot. Then we hopped on to another airplane that took us to Reagan and then we came out and then our entire family was there from my mom's side. And they were waiting for us with balloons, with teddy bears, and that just made it more comfortable because I knew that it was going to be okay, at least we had them.

But we had arrived in February and it was snowing like crazy. It was my first time experiencing snow and then I realized that I couldn't go to school because it was very complicated. My mom needs to be here. So my mom was still settling some stuff back home. And so she was going to come two months after. So we were stuck inside. We couldn't go to school, we were watching *novelas* the whole day. We were eating cereal with bananas and everyone was out and working. We were just bored. So we started gaining weight. I remember my sister and I always laughed about this because we really started eating, we would eat so much [laughs] because we really couldn't go outside. And my aunts were paranoid that something would happen to us if we went outside, like, to Target so we just stayed home. And then finally one day my aunt is like, "You know what, you guys are not doing anything. Let me take you to the library." And then every morning before work, we would get ready and she would take us to the library and we would just sit there. I remember just devouring Dr. Seuss and devouring children's books and wanting to know more, wanting to learn more. Back home, we had a huge library in my apartment or a huge library which isn't big honestly, like looking back, it was very small but back then when I was a kid it looked huge. And I would just devour every single book and get lost in the pages. So when I was 11 and I was reading them in this huge library, I mean, I couldn't get enough. We had found our happy place. And McDonald's was right across the street. So my sister and I would count pennies and coins and we would get ourselves the number two, which was just two [00:45:00] burgers. And we would eat that and share that and then go back to the library and read some more. Also, they had a computer, so we could use a computer for an hour so we could tell our friends that we were fine, I guess.

DBN: And just to go back a little bit. When you got your ticket, passport and all of that, did you guys get a tourist visa or what kind of visa did you get to come here?

CNG: So it was a tourist visa but back in the 80s or 70s, I can't really remember, my aunts had, *mis tias* [my aunts] had become citizens to the U.S. and there was like a loophole where you could ask or where you could get your mom and a sibling, a sister or something like that. So we entered like we were in that loophole. And so that's how, but then we had to fight it. We had to fight so hard. We had to try that so hard and you know get a bunch of lawyers involved and it took forever to be legal citizens in the U.S.

DBN: Yeah, I guess part of this project is also exploring this concept of status, right?

CNG: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: And I guess, then when you were younger, were you aware that your aunts already had some kind of permanent status, or maybe what you or your mom were wanting to fight for once you came here?

CNG: Yeah, sort of. I knew that it was important. I remember you know--going back to the living room, to my grandma's living room--she had this huge table with different pictures and she was so proud of her daughters that had moved here and made it here. So proud of them. And one of my aunts is married to a *gringo* [white male] and my grandma was so proud that she was married to a *gringo*. So I was so proud that she was married to a *gringo*. You know, I was like, "Oh that's so cool, she's married to a *gringo*, that's awesome." So I would show him off to my friends and be like, "My aunt is married to a *gringo*, she made it," because my grandma made such a big deal and all that. I think that she never really liked that my mom was a divorcee. And so when we came here, I just couldn't stop staring at my uncle, he was super tall and wore these big glasses and didn't speak much Spanish. And I was like, "Wow, he's so cool. He's American. He's tall wow." And so when I imagine my friends, I imagined them being tall, blonde, blue eyes and I just imagined that because that's what we would get on TV. That's all we would get on TV. Yeah. What was the question? [Laughs] I'm sorry.

DBN: No, yeah that's okay. I was just asking about this side of knowing about status and things like that because I know some people aren't really aware of it until much later.

CNG: Yes, yes, yes. Okay. So I think it's confusing because I knew we weren't Americans and couldn't enjoy certain benefits. And then when my mom moved here, and, by May she was looking for a job, but she couldn't apply to a lot of jobs. She has Social Security because she had lived here in high school, she was an exchange student. And she stayed here for like two extra years. And she acquired a Social Security Number so she could find a job with that Social Security Number but she couldn't get a government job. You know it's the kind of job that she really wanted to get. So it took her a while to actually get into the groove of you know finding a job and all of that.

DBN: So you said that you all first arrived in Miami?

CNG: Yes.

DBN: That's where your aunts were living or?

CNG: No. It was just a stop just immigration and then we hopped to another plane and then landed in DCA.

DBN: Okay and your aunts were living here in D.C. or somewhere?

CNG: Yeah here in D.C. or Maryland.

DBN: Where in Maryland?

CNG: Gaithersburg, Maryland.

DBN: Oh okay. All right. Then just to know a little bit more about what that process was like, I guess what was it like for your sister? Or what did you notice from her and how she reacted versus how you reacted?

CNG: Yeah, she was five years older than me. I was 11. She was about to turn 16. She actually turned 16 here. And she was at her peak in La Paz. She was prom queen and you know she was super popular and everybody wanted to be around her and she had a really great group of friends.[00:50:00] She had a life back there. And it's a very awkward age to move. But then when we were here, she just felt down like I was her only companion like we were each other's only companion. We would argue so much and then *mis tias* decided that we needed to be separated because we would be arguing so much. But then we were like, "No, we can't get separated. We love each other like we cannot." But what they wanted to do was rotate us. Then we were like, "No, there's no way, we want to be together. We love each other." *Mis tias* got into a big argument with my mom and they were like, "We are fed up with your kids, they just argue so much. You know we can't do this," and my mom was like, "You're so dramatic." So we ended up moving to Virginia to my other aunt from Bolivia friend's house. Random. So random. So we ended up moving there for two months and that's when I started going to school. I couldn't go to school in Maryland because I needed a permit from my mom and all that and couldn't get that. But in Virginia, it was so easy. You just have to go and register and then we were in school. So yeah, we started going there and that was my first experience in an American school and that was the first experience for my sister as well. She was going to high school, to this huge high school, Garfield High School and it was massive. We went to a little school in Bolivia with 200 kids. This had so many kids and she got so lost. Her first week, she just didn't understand. She was so in culture shocked and she got pushed into a locker. And then she's like, "I'm never coming back. I'm never going to school." So she would skip school and she would go to Potomac Mills and just stay there for hours. And we had to return home. But it was really, really tough for her. She didn't have friends. She just felt very lonely, very isolated. And I felt her pain because we were going through very similar stuff.

DBN: Okay. What was I going to ask? So I guess going back a little bit, you said you guys argued a lot?

CNG: Yeah.

DBN: Do you remember what you were arguing about? Or what caused it? Have you always been like that or did it just start happening here?

CNG: She just wanted things her way. I was like “Okay, I’m sorry.” I would always argue and I was like, “No, I don’t know, this can’t be.” So because I wouldn’t speak up and because she would constantly speak or talk too much, people thought she was bullying me but it was only because I wasn’t really saying anything. *Mis tias* thought that she was being a big bully but I was just being quiet. I wasn’t saying much. But when I would say something, I would start crying. And then people would assume “Oh, she’s the evil one” you know but in reality, it was just that we were kids. We were trying to figure out our new environment and where we lived. I think we had \$50 we had saved our first month. I remember we went to Kohl’s like my aunt took us to Kohl’s and then we were like, “Whoa, the mall. This is amazing,” we thought the Kohl’s was the mall [laughs]. So we would just walk around and we had \$50. We started choosing a bunch of things that we wanted to buy like pajamas and shirts. And then we once had all the items, we were calculating it in this little sheet of paper, like how much if we actually had enough money. And then we did and we bought everything. We paid with our \$50 but the cost of everything was not \$50 because of tax. So we had to let go of a bunch of stuff. And then that’s one of my favorite memories of us just like being like, “Okay this is what we’re going to get. This how much money we have.” And then yeah, we had those pajamas for years like we never actually looked them up but I think we gave them away like two years ago because they were too old. [laughs] but we were very, very attached to each other but also we, you know because you’re with that person the whole day also get annoyed, we didn’t have personal space. We were just together all day watching *novelas*, reading books. Yeah, it was fun.

DBN: What was the space like that you arrived to once you came to live with your aunts?

CNG: So one of my aunts had a basement and so we were there in her basement. It was like a little apartment. It was awesome. We had a TV. We had a fridge. [00:55:00] It was like our own little space. Then my other aunt, we were staying in one of the rooms. It was a big house. Our cousin was my sister’s age and he was fun. And he was always on the computer. Every time we would go to him and be like, “Can I please use the computer so I can email my friends?” And he gets so pissed because he was in AIM and he’s like, “No, I’m busy downloading music from Lime,” or something and I needed to IM my friends. So that was always a big discussion. Like can you please let us use the internet so we can email our friends because we had to rotate. But yeah, it was a good space. My aunt also had foster kids and they were also around my age but they were annoying. They were really annoying. They would spy on us when we were changing and stuff. So that was awkward. Yeah, we didn’t like them. But then it got better obviously

because they became adults. And we got along just fine. They also had a dog. Her name was Princess and she was a golden retriever. And she was the cutest thing ever. She was our friend and she would always come with us. And I thought that if I spent time with her, and I believed, I truly believed that, I learned that if I talked to her, she would send out the message somehow that we were doing just fine. So she was really, really important to us.

DBN: And how long were you with your aunts before they sent you to your friend's house?

CNG: Two months and then they sent us to another friend's house and then we were there for two months, and then my mom and *mis tias* had been arguing so much but, finally, they all decided like let's be sisters, let's be together. So we moved back in June and then I got enrolled in school, all that good stuff. But it was summer so we couldn't really do much. And then I remember that coming back we were living in my aunt's basement and it was a big basement. But we had this tiny room. We had a big bed. It was a full-size bed. And then my sister slept in a futon. So within that room, we had this little window that led nowhere, it was just like to the backyard to a pine tree. It was so depressing. So we tried to just leave that room on the weekends and go to the zoo, go to the library. We've spent hours in the library, hours, hours, hours. And I really wanted to learn English. I really, really, really wanted people to understand me and I really wanted to understand people. So I spent that summer reading every book I could and writing and just practicing my handwriting, so that I could be ready for sixth grade. But by the time I got to sixth grade, I realized that I didn't know much English and it was tough.

DBN: And what are some of the books that you remember reading when you started going to the library?

CNG: So I would do like three Spanish books and like three English books, but the English, I was reading super basic like basic children's books because I needed to learn words and stuff. But I also wanted to read, read. So I read *Witches* in Spanish "*Las Brujas*," such a great book and I just I loved reading stories and novels. I really wanted to continue reading in Spanish because that was important to me. The books that I could understand. So I kept that and I would just read random books. However, my mom discovered *Harry Potter*. So she discovered it and then started reading it because she had to commute for 45 minutes to D.C. on the metro. She started reading in the metro and she fell in love with that story. She's like you are going to love this book, you're going to love it, you're going to love it. So she gave me the copy in English and I didn't understand. Then we rented it from the library in Spanish and then I understood it, and then I started reading it like maybe the middle of July, early August. Then I was just lost in those pages. I was like, "Oh my god, I'm *Harry Potter*, I'm about to go to *Hogwarts*," because I was about to go to middle school. I was about to enter this middle school. So that book, the *Sorcerer's Stone* was just amazing because it really made me feel like I was going into this magical place and I had all these awful teachers. I had a teacher that looked exactly like *Snape*.

[1:00:00] But not the Snape that I imagined. I had a teacher that was McGonagall, I had, I didn't have Hermione, and I was dreaming about Hermione. But in the ESL class, there was a girl who was Brazilian, we were on the same boat. She had just moved to the U.S. and she was also reading Harry Potter, but she was reading in Portuguese. And then, you know, when I saw her book, I was like, Okay, and then she's like, Yeah, and so we're like, "Oh, my God," we're just mesmerized by each other. I was like, "Oh, my God, you're reading this? Ah," so we were reading it in our separate languages, but we were discussing it in English. So that's how we would practice English. And that was in our ESL class.

DBN: Wow. It's interesting how you were able to connect.

CNG: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

DBN: So many people can connect to it.

CNG: So many people. It's amazing.

DBN: And you mentioned that it kind of also influenced your perspective on your outlook about school and entering this new phase and a new world. Right?

CNG: Yeah.

DBN: And looking at it in a more positive light.

CNG: Yes.

DBN: So what was that like at first when you started going to school here?

CNG: So my first day of school, I think it was actually orientation. Alright. We had orientation, 6th grade orientation. I hop in the bus. I don't know anyone. I'm just sitting in the first row and I'm just nervous because I have no idea what you know to expect. I hop out and then this school was basically for sixth graders. So there weren't many of us but it was still kind of crowded. And I remember lockers and I remember that summer I watched Lizzie McGuire. So I was like, "Yes, I'm going to find Lizzie McGuire here." Like this is it and I was so excited for that. And I was so excited for my locker and I was excited for so many things. And I had already classes, but I had ESL class because I don't speak English. And then in my ESL class, as soon as I entered, I just felt like I could be me, the whole day I had been rigid. But as soon as I entered that class, I was like, there's a Chilean boy, there is a Russian boy, there are people who don't necessarily look like the other kids in my other classes, but they look sort of like me, this is great. And I just felt like, I can be myself, I can sort of speak my language here. I can make jokes, and people will

laugh. And then that was orientation. And the first day of school, my mom was like, “You need to pick up your schedule. Remember, schedule, the word schedule,” so I was repeating it in my head, like schedule, schedule, schedule. And then I hopped out of the bus. And then there were so many people, it was insane. I knew I was supposed to go to the gym and pick up the freaking schedule. But I couldn't remember how to say schedule. And then I was just going to the gym, and I was just pacing around. It was like, what am I going to do, like, schedule? So I was like telling the lady, “schedule.” And she's like, “What? What do you mean?” and I was like, “schedule,” and no one spoke Spanish, no one could understand what I was saying. So then I was writing it for the lady, “schedule.” Like, this is what I need, like, “Oh, schedule, okay, here.” I went to all my classes that first week. And then, you know, seventh year came along, ESL class, and I found this girl, this Brazilian girl who was in seventh grade. And she was awesome. And she really helped me navigate middle school, and it just made me feel better. But my class was horrible. Everyone's name was Carly, first of all, everyone, and everyone had a Tiffany's necklace. And everyone was--or at least from my perspective, and from my diaries perspective, which I brought--and they were just mean and they would make fun of my accent. Every time I tried to speak, they would just make completely fun of my accent. So I didn't want to say anything. I wouldn't be there. When I entered the cafeteria, it smelled like rotten eggs. People were chewing with their mouth open. It was gross. I was like, no, this is not me. I would eat in the bathroom alone. I'd finish my sandwich and then just rushed to the library and just stay there and practice my typing. And now I'm a really fast typer because I would spend every lunch period typing and reading so the library was a great place for me to be there and just be quiet, you know? But I wasn't accepted by my peers. I felt rejected. I felt like they were constantly making fun of me. They thought I was Mexican. They thought I rode elephants to school. [Laughs] I mean, they just have this image like elephants. Like elephants don't even live in South America, they're not even from South America. [01:05:00] Or they would be like, “Where you from?” It'd be like, “Bolivia.” “Okay, cool. Mexico is awesome. Can you say something in Spanish for me?” And I'd be like, “*Estupido*” [Stupid], [Laughs], *tarado* [idiot], *imbécil* [imbecile].” Yeah. So it was that was definitely, that was a culture shock for sure. And then knowing that I would never fit in, and I really wanted to sit with the popular kids, but then it just felt like they were so far-fetched and so in their own little world.

And one day, one of the popular girls noticed me in the bus, and then she's like, “Hey, want to come to my house? I'll give you a makeover.” And I had no idea what a makeover was, I had no idea what that meant. But I just wanted to hang out with this girl because she was cool. So I said, “Of course, yeah, yes, yes, sure.” So we went to her house, and then she sat me down. And then you know, I have these thick eyebrows, bushy eyebrows. And then my mom has always told me, “Don't ever pluck your eyebrows ever, ever, ever. It's the only good thing you have in your face.” And I always assumed I would never pluck my eyebrows, but this girl comes and starts plucking my eyebrows. And I've just paralyzed in place because I want to be cool like her, you know, I want her to accept me. And I just think that if she plucks my eyebrows, and I'll get to sit

with her tomorrow. So I just sit there through the pain. And then I look at myself in the mirror. And then, my bushy eyebrows were gone, like this part was gone. And then she gave me unnecessary bangs and dressed me in really ugly skirts. And then I was like, "I think I have to go home now." After three hours of just being miserable. And then I went home and I started crying. And I had makeup on like that you don't need, you're 12, you don't need makeup. And then yeah, that's when I realized that maybe I don't want to be popular. Maybe I don't want to sit with this girl or be with this girl. Yeah, so that was my attempt to be popular or fit in in this crazy American school.

DBN: And what school was this again?

CNG: This was Robert Frost Middle School.

DBN: And where's that?

CNG: Rockville, Maryland.

DBN: Oh, okay.

CNG: It was predominantly white. And I made a vow in sixth grade, because people would make fun of me so much, and I vowed to stop speaking. And I would only speak in my speaking ESL class where I wasn't judged. And my ESL class had people from all over the world. And that felt more like home, it felt more like I could connect with these people, because they were facing similar struggles than me. We were on the same boat, we were trying to navigate American waters, and learning English along the way. So, we were dealing with so many different things. But back then diversity was not something that you talked about, inclusivity, that word didn't even exist. So I think now, I can reflect on that. And I can just channel those emotions, and just the better for my students.

DBN: And you mentioned, I mean, that you noticed all these negative perceptions and attitudes towards you, and maybe some of the other students who were new arrivals or were still getting used to a new environment. Was it something similar with your teachers? Or what was it like, what was that connection with your teachers like?

CNG: So Middle School was, I didn't really have much much of a connection with any of them, except for Mrs. Morrow, who was my ESL teacher. I had this science teacher [inaudible] who was very nice, she was really nice. And I think she meant well, but she just didn't know much about where her students came from. I didn't notice that there was much curiosity from people to know where kids came from, or where their students came from, or ask relevant questions. But Shakira came out with her album, "Laundry Service" in 2001. And I remember that my mom

bought it because it was expensive, and my mom brought it home. And I was so happy that and I was sitting there, we had a little radio listening to that album for hours. And then I had a CD player, and I played that. And then I took it so that people knew that, know who Shakira was. And then there was a kid who was like, “Oh, my God, that's Shakira. She's a hot lady,” and then Ms. Varghese [ph], I remember saying like, “Yeah, she's so hot. She's so wonderful. She's so beautiful.” And I was like, “Yes, she's beautiful.” And I was so proud because, finally, they could listen to my favorite artist, and I remember that was like a game-changer for me because I was like, “Yes, she's from Colombia. Colombia is really close to Bolivia, ish.” [01:10:00] But that just made the whole difference, changed everything for me because I could show people that there were Latin artists that spoke Spanish. But Ms. Varghese, on that note, we had to do a project about water. And I remember that all the kids were choosing the same topic, they were choosing the Potomac River, they were just choosing the same thing. And I went home and my mom was like, “No, we're not choosing anything from this list. We're going to do our own. We're going to show people Lake Titicaca,” because we have a Lake called Lake Titicaca that we share with Peru. And she said, “We're going to show people what it is.” So then we made this beautiful project and showing what Lake Titicaca was. I had written a speech about it, I practiced in the mirror, I'm so excited. And finally, I get to present in front of everyone, I'm not nervous, I'm excited. I'm chill. I have my index cards. I know what to say. I know everything. And I stand there. And then I'm like, “Okay, everyone. My project is about Lake Titicaca.” And as soon as I said it, the Chilean boy that was in my ESL class was like, “Haha, *caca* means poop. Haha.” And then everyone started laughing and like, even Mrs. Varghese started laughing and they didn't let me finish. I never actually got to present my project because everyone was so infatuated with the word *caca*. So yeah, shame on you, Mrs. Varghese.

DBN: Oh, before I ask the last question. I just wanted to check, do you still have to leave around 11 or?

[Side conversation]

DBN: And then, what were some of your favorite subjects in school?

CNG: History. Loved history. Loved English, ESL. We had special so we had to rotate, we would do art, we would do journalism, photography, we would do a bunch of things. But I really enjoyed writing. And I really enjoyed expressing myself through writing. So I was always writing and writing stories about people, writing stories about myself, or just basically telling that piece of paper what I was going through. So I was always doing that. And that was always exciting when a teacher would ask me to write a story about anything, whatever or give me a topic. When we were learning about the Greek gods, we had to create our own god, pretty much our own Greek God. And then I wrote this amazing story about it. And yeah, it was so cool. But once I got to eighth grade, I was in a regular English class, and I didn't really like that class,

because all the books that they chose were not--I just didn't feel I identified with Oliver Twist. I didn't feel like I was Oliver Twist. I didn't see myself in Oliver Twist. I didn't see myself in The Hobbit. Like The Hobbit is a great book, but I think when you're in eighth grade, that might not necessarily be a book that you should choose. And that's the summer where I read Harry Potter, the first time I read Harry Potter in English, and that changed everything because, in my head, it's Hermione [Spanish pronunciation]. But it's Hermione [English pronunciation], right? So trying to explain characters to English speaking people was very hard because I had Dumbledore, Voldemort [Spanish pronunciation], all these things in Spanish, I had to basically have conversations with people in English and tell them like, oh, what's interesting about Hermione--So that was the first time that I was doing that. And I was reading Harry Potter a lot. And I was seeking theater class as well. And I was getting out of my comfort zone, I finally had found friends in my grade. And we would go to dances every first Friday of the month. And that's the time that I was shining, that's the time when I would wear cute little outfits. And then, I would practice like my dancing was in front of the mirror. And I got to show them off. And then and then I felt like I was like a dance queen, you know? So it was always really fun.

DBN: And so you mentioned that you were taking regular English classes by then. So did you have to take ESL exams? Or how do they transition you into those classes?

CNG: Yeah, I never had to take any exams. I think that my teacher just assumed [01:15:00] that I just knew everything. And it was great because I wasn't--So when I was in sixth grade, I wasn't super low in English level, because I had studied the entire summer and I knew some things. So she put me on level two. And I was like, yes, level two, here we come. So we only have to do seventh, no sixth and seventh grade of ESL.

DBN: Okay, yeah. I was just curious because I know in some places you have to take exams to be able to move on.

CNG: Yeah. Now you do. Yeah. I don't know if I guess she just thought that, you know, good job, good job. And the books that we were reading in ESL was very interesting, about immigrants stories, people who were crossing the border, people who were in wars, it was really cool. So when I got to eighth grade, I thought we'd have this sort of diversity, but we didn't. I mean, we read The Giver, which is a great book. But there weren't books I could relate to or see myself, all the people that I imagined in my head were white, but the people that I imagined in my head in my ESL classwork, were from different nationalities and different colors.

DBN: And at this point, what was your mom doing? Because you said she came later, like, a few months later. So she started working right away, or what happened?

CNG: Yeah, she did start working right away, she was looking for a job for, for a good job. Or, you know, quote, unquote, a good job. And she speaks English and she has a Bachelor's degree and all that. And one of my aunts was like, "Yeah, you know, what you need to do is just go apply to 7eleven and then work there, it's going to be great." But then my mom was like, "Yes, that's a great option. But I really want to work at the Inter-American Development Bank. I really, really want to work there." And my aunt was like, "There's no way you're going to go work there. It's so hard to get in there. It's super complicated." And my mom was like, "Just let me try," basically. But yeah, she ended up working for the Inter-American Development Bank for 15 years. And it was because she knocked on their door and basically applied, but my aunts were such haters, and they were like, "There's no way you're going to get a job that easily there, this prestige institution, there's no way," but yeah, she was just working. And also, I couldn't get sick. I was in school all day. She would have to come from D.C. to my school, so I never got sick, ever.

DBN: What was she doing there?

CNG: She was doing different jobs. She was rotating. She was a secretary. And then she just had different roles that honestly I can't remember, she was always rotating, or assistant to this person, assistant to that person. She just carried so many, so many different roles.

DBN: And then I guess, did you continue going to school in Rockville after the eighth grade? Or what happened after?

CNG: Yes, I continued going, I went to Wootton High School. And, yeah, it was like a cicada cycle ago, actually, that was my last year in eighth grade. And I just loved eighth grade. It was so fun. And then ninth grade, it was really interesting, because we were in a brand new school for the freshmen. I still had my friends from eighth grade. And now I had new friends from other schools and I loved hanging out with them. But I would get bored in the cafeteria, I would be with them for like, 10-15 minutes, and then go to the library, and then read my books, do research or whatever, or just paint, you know, do whatever. I just really liked my alone time. I have gotten used to that by then.

DBN: Well, it's really interesting the way books always played a role in your life, that was one of the consistent things.

CNG: Yeah.

DBN: And I'm trying to think of some follow up questions but Norma do you have any?

NS: Yeah so you mentioned, back in Bolivia you used to watch *novelas* and stuff. But did you watch any American shows that you remember?

CNG: Well the Prince of Bel-Air, Moesha--we didn't have cable--Hey, Arnold, Rugrats, like a bunch of Nickelodeon shows that were on--we didn't have cable, we had just local TV that were translated in Spanish. But it's funny because we ended up watching a lot of *novelas* here. [01:20:00] I watched *Rebelde*, I watched *Un Juego de Amor*, something like that. And then like *Amor Por Primera Vista*. I would constantly, or that was also a constant. As soon as I got home from school, I just watched these *novelas* and loved them.

NS: Did that influence you to go into theater, or--?

CNG: Maybe, yeah, yeah, it did. I think it did. I just really wanted to express myself. But I stopped in eighth grade, I stopped acting because, I don't know, I think I just got insecure, because there were so many other kids that were amazing and so talented. And I was like, there's no way that I'd be able to do that. But I appreciate it. And I love it.

DBN: And then what was the transition into high school like? You mentioned that you did have a lot of close friends or were there subjects that you started liking more, or did you continue to have a passion for history?

CNG: Yeah, so by then, by eighth grade, I had a great group of friends. But all my friends were from different countries, and different colors, and spoke different languages. And I love that. So my table was a lot like the UN [United Nations] table, just people from everywhere. And I had best friends that were from Chile. And Chile, and Bolivia, have like, we don't like each other. South America usually does not like to Chile because they're very arrogant [laughs]. But I felt so connected with these friends. And we were also what we had, right? This is what you have, this is basically the nationalities that you have, you just got to learn from each other. And I learned so much. And, yeah, I loved spending time with them, but I also needed my time alone, and then they also made high school better, right? They made that whole transition a lot smoother, because I had my group of friends and they were athletes, and so I had something to do on the weekends and go watch some play football, go watch and play soccer, go watch them cheer. I always had something to do, they're always occupied, doing their particular activity.

DBN: And where was your sister at this point?

CNG: My sister was in Montgomery College at this point, she had graduated from high school. So she liked high school, it was okay. She also had different friends from different countries, different parts of the world. And she had a boyfriend from Colombia and we loved him. And then broke up with that boyfriend and then went off to community college because our status was

also in the limbo, right. And even though she really wanted to go to UMD, we couldn't afford it. And she couldn't get in because we were still waiting on her social. And that was so devastating for her because her dream was to become a doctor. And so she kind of had to figure it out and say, "You know what, I'm not going to be a doctor, I'm going to be a nurse, I'll be a nurse." But finding the pathway was so hard for her, because that pathway to being a nurse was so hard because we didn't have anyone advising us on what classes to take or what to do. She just had to figure it out all by herself. And the classes were so expensive. So she was taking two classes per semester, and then working, she was working at a plastic surgeon's office. So, the little money that she made, she paid for her classes, and my mom would also contribute. But, my mom also had to worry about paying rent and electricity and all that. So I think it was really, really hard for her. And she doesn't talk about this often but I know she struggled because it was expensive back then we'd have checked. Like we didn't have all the accessibility that we have now to study, the scholarships, she couldn't apply for scholarships because we didn't have papers. So it was something that was always on our minds. And by seventh grade, it was the only thing we would think about, how is Daniela going to go to college? Because we didn't have papers. So thank goodness, she enrolled and she wasn't paying out of state tuition or their international student tuition. But it was still expensive, especially when she couldn't get the scholarship portion of it.

DBN: And you mentioned that I guess for a period of time you were both in limbo. Can you talk a little bit more about that and what that looked like? Maybe what was pending?

CNG: Yeah. So From what I remember [01:25:00] my mom just calling the lawyers like every week and asking, "What's the deal? What is happening? When are we going to hear more," and it was like, "Yeah, soon, soon soon," Then the lawyer advised that we go back to Bolivia. But then another lawyer said, "There's no way if you go back, you cannot come back." And so, you cannot come back to the U.S., you are going to have to stay there and wait for another year. And then at this point, we already had built a life here. And it was just really hard for us to think about moving back when we were already here. And I think that was very troubling for my mom, because you really had to think about what she was going to do, how we know what was going to happen. And it was also something that I kept deep inside my soul, and it was something that I couldn't share with the other kids because they didn't understand even my group of friends. They were all diplomats or had been born here. So they didn't really understand the struggle. I think three of them understood the struggle because they were facing similar, very similar issues. But most of them were just so oblivious to the fact that we were illegals, you know, illegal aliens, and it was hard to describe that to them. I remember opening up to one of my friends and saying that this is the reason why my sister is going to community college, it's not because she's dumb. And this is back when community college was looked down upon. And I was like, it's not because she's dumb or because she didn't do well in high school, it's because she can't get into a real school without a Social Security Number, she can't get into a real school without that little

piece of paper, and it was so hard for him to understand the whole concept of why we were here, or why we would choose to leave our country and be illegals here. It was just so hard to explain that to him. And I hope he understands that now. But it's very difficult. It's very, very traumatizing. It just adds a burden on your back, because you constantly have to think about that. And so my sister was comparing herself to other friends who were in college and already on their third year and she had to take two classes per year. So it took her a while to like to finally graduate.

DBN: And you mentioned the term illegal alien, right?

CNG: Yeah.

DBN: It's a very government term. Do you remember when you heard that for the first time?

CNG: Yeah, I think it was 9/11 when I heard that the first time. I was here for 9/11. I think it was 11. I was here when that happened. I was probably in my third week in school. And I remember watching it on live television, I remember we were at school, and then all of a sudden, everyone's panicking, everyone's freaking out. And I'm trying to find the first person I know that speaks Spanish so that person can tell me what is going on. And then this person doesn't know what's going on. She's like, they're saying, "*Nueva York* [New York]--" And then I remember just watching all these different faces and like, what is happening. And then we go back home, and then my grandma's like, "Something terrible happened to terrorists." I'm like, "What is a terrorist? What is what?" And then I remember hearing, "Illegal aliens. They were illegal aliens. The people who were on the plane were illegal aliens." And I was thinking of a green person. You know? Like someone who was from outer space. But then I learned, I'm an illegal alien. I'm a person who doesn't have a status, I'm in limbo town. I'm not from here. I'm not from there. I'm in limbo town. I can't go back and I don't know if I want to stay here and I'm in limbo town. Yeah, it was odd.

DBN: And how did that make you feel?

CNG: It made me feel like I was different from the rest of the kids? Like, yes, I spoke Spanish. Yes, my skin color is different. My story is different. But then I have this too, I'm illegal. Like I probably can't go with friends for vacations, not that I was thinking about that. But I was like, I can't hop on a plane. I can't. And that was just very disheartening. I can't go back home. That was so sad. Because all I wanted to do was go back home, especially in my middle school years. All I wrote about in my diary was just wanting to go back home. I was so sick of the American way and the American system. And I was sick of adults telling me that I shouldn't be missing home because I was too young to understand what home was, but I knew what home was, and I still

know what home is. But I was so tired of the adults telling me these things. And then the fact that I just couldn't return [01:30:00] that was so heartbreaking. So, so heartbreaking.

DBN: And you mentioned that your sister ended up going to community college for that same reason. Did you also worry that you might end up going to community college and not to a four-year college? Well, like, what were your thoughts on that and continuing?

CNG: Yeah, I definitely worried a bit, as well. I worried that I would have to marry someone. I worried that at 15, I was just worrying that I would end up having to marry at 21 because I didn't have papers, right. And at this point, I didn't know anyone in my school, but we knew other people who were doing that, and I was so worried that I would end up doing that. And I was like, I can't imagine my life. I can't imagine marrying someone without love. You know, so dramatic, like so extra. But yeah, when we finally got out of a loophole--my mom, she just did everything in her power to get us out. But it took longer for my sister because my sister had, at that point, she was already 19. I was still a minor and I got it fast. I got my papers fast or faster than my sister. I got them at 15, at the end of my freshman, I got my green card. And my sister was devastated. And my mom was also devastated. Because she couldn't--I had like the world in my hands. And like my sister, she couldn't come back home with me. And I remember, sorry, [cries] my grandma buying me a plane ticket to go back to Bolivia for summer break, and then my sister was so sad. And she was happy for me, obviously, because I was going back home, but I couldn't go back with her. You know, it was so, so, sad. But then, also really exciting, because I was finally going back home. And then yeah, then I spent three months in Bolivia for summer break, and I saw my dog, I got to bury my dog. And it was amazing going back and getting recharged, going back to see my friends and seeing what they're doing, and all that stuff. And that gave me so much hope to what I can achieve and what I can do, because I finally had this card, that allowed me to just travel and see the world. And that trip opened my mind to so many things. I was so pumped. I was like, I want to keep doing this. But my sister was just still in limbo until she was 24. And finally, when she was 24 and a half, she was able to get that card and pursue her dreams.

DBN: And how long were you there when you went back?

CNG: Three months.

DBN: Three months, Okay.

CNG: Yeah. Three months. I was there like June. That was my *Quinceañera* gift. So it was amazing. I was just coming back home. It was just like I remember so perfectly just landing and being there, and seeing my dad seeing, seeing my dog, seeing all the apartment, rereading my old diaries. I know everything was as it was because we left everything in my grandmother's

apartment. My grandma had sold her house and we moved everything to her apartment. And then when I opened the closet, my old uniform was there, my old shoes were there. Everything was still there. It was as if time was still in that apartment. But I was obviously 15.

DBN: And what was one of the first things you did when you got there?

CNG: So there's this particular ice cream or sorbet. It's cinnamon sorbet and I had missed it so much. And I went on and bought one. And they have glass Coca Colas, Coke bottles, and I remember just buying that and drinking it on the side of the street, it's very common, all the cool kids do it laughs].

DBN: And were you staying with anyone in particular, was your grandmother there?

CNG: Yeah, my grandma was there because I was there to look after her. But not really, I was there to just live my life basically, be a teenager. And it was so different because teenagers here were so constrained. You know, we depend solely on our parents to give us a ride to the mall and hang out at the mall. But there, there was so much independence. [01:35:00] Kids were taking public transportation, they were partying, they had their own little lives. And I love that. And so it was the first time I was experiencing alcohol. The first time I had made out with a boy, the first time like, I was actually, to be 15, and to be in this, new space where I was reconnecting with my old friends and seeing them in a new light, you know, in a different teenage light. And, of course, I would compare them to my group of friends here, because my group of friends here were, even though they were 15, they acted like they were 13, and I was like, "Oh, my God, my friends from Bolivia are cooler, they're smoking and drinking."

DBN: And once you came back, how did you feel after when you were coming back?

CNG: I didn't want to come back. I wish I could stay like a year and be there. But I was also excited because it was sophomore year. And I was taking all these interesting classes like history was one of the classes and French. I was taking French. And I loved my French teacher. And I was just excited because that meant that I was graduating sooner, soonish, and I was running, I was in the track team. And I was playing soccer as well. So I was very busy. So yeah, it ended up being okay. And I liked someone. So, I started liking the Chilean boy who sat with me at lunch. I started liking him so much. And he started liking me too. And then we started going out and he was my first boyfriend. And he just played such a special role in my life because we met each other when we were in eighth grade. So between eighth grade all the way until I was 26. He played a really, really important role because, in a way, reminded me of home, he reminded me of who I was in the States, in the U.S. And I think that's the main reason why I felt so attached to this person for so many years, even after high school.

DBN: And I guess, what were the last couple of years of high school like, did you make a lot of plans in your head about what was to come now that the status part was resolved?

CNG: Oh, yes. At the end of sophomore year, I went to Brazil to visit my Brazilian friend. She also didn't understand why I couldn't travel. Because every year she would invite me. She moved back to Brazil, and she was in eighth grade. And every year, she would say, "Hey, I'll pay for your ticket, just come." And every year, I'd have to make an excuse why I couldn't go. And then finally I was like, "Yes." So she ended up buying me a ticket. And I visited her. And that was like, "Whoa, this is insane." This is just like home except in a different language, in Portuguese. It was so fun. And then I came back and I felt a little more liberated because I could dream. And I could buy things. I bought this huge map on my own, and I put it on my wall. And I pinned all the cities that I would go on there, because I finally had access to dream and I could dream about going to Thailand, I could dream about going to Russia, I could do anything I wanted because the world was finally mine. And I wasn't constrained to just staying in Gaithersburg, Maryland.

DBN: And I guess speaking about going to different places, what is your connection to D.C.?

CNG: D.C. is home. I think that when people ask me abroad or whatnot, where I'm from, I never say Maryland because I don't feel that connection to Maryland, even though I don't live here, I spent a lot of my time here, walking down the streets, getting lost in its neighborhoods, eating *pupusas*, meeting people from different nationalities, especially Central America, and getting connected to their stories. I think D.C. has so much of us, of our continent, and sometimes we don't necessarily acknowledge that, but just being here in D.C., when I think of D.C. I don't think of a blue-eyed, blonde woman. I think of colors. I think of *pupusas*. I think of Vietnamese food, I think of Ethiopian food. I think of different nationalities coming together. And yeah, that's something that I love about D.C.

DBN: And do you remember when was the first time you came here or when you started coming here?

CNG: Yes. So the first time I came here for vacation that I remember [01:40:00] was when I was nine. And I have pictures.

[Side conversation]

CNG: Okay. So this is the day that we left Bolivia. So this is me, this is my dog with my scarf, my mom and my sister. And then this, I went through a collage phase in sixth grade. So I would make collages of cut faces, collages. So this was on our fridge, if you want to see a close up. Let me see, *donde esta la abuelita* [where is grandma]. But my grandma, she really wanted me to have the best life and have the best education. So she really wanted me to come to the U.S. and

she really thought so highly of the U.S. And the first I came here that I truly remember was when I was nine. And I remember like seeing green everywhere, seeing parks everywhere, and it was something that you don't necessarily see in La Paz. And I remember just being so in love with all the parks and all the greenery that was here. And yeah, this is me when I was in second grade and we were doing a play, like an acting play. And I was the witch of the story. And I loved it.

DBN: That's the National Mall, right?

CNG: Yeah, that was 1999. This is my sister and me inventing selfies. In Bolivia, we always had these dances, national dances, and I loved those because we got to dress up. And it was so it was so fun.

DBN: Did you ever get to revisit those aspects of your culture while you were here?

CNG: No, not really. I feel like everything was so far away. Like if you wanted to experience that, you had to go to Virginia. And you know, and my mom couldn't take me to Virginia. This is our first car. We bought this green car at an auction place. And it didn't have many miles but it took us to all the right places. But yeah. Oh, this is like a typical birthday party in Bolivia. You see that bottle, that glass Coca Cola bottle [laughs]. And people wearing dresses. And this is my ESL class. And we have a Brazilian, Chilean, an Iranian and Bolivian. And this is right after I got my eyebrows plucked by that popular girl [laughs]. In retrospect, my eyebrows didn't look that bad, but my mom made such a big deal. But she's like, "You're losing your authenticity," and she was right, I was selling out. And then this is my friend from Honduras. One of my best friends.

DBN: How aware were you of the demographics around here in the DMV?

CNG: So my school was predominantly white, really. So I was always like, where are the other people? When I came here, when I would come here to D.C., I would see more colors, you know, more people and more of that. But in my school, I knew that there was a small percentage of Latinos, it wasn't as big as I thought. And also, I always felt mad whenever they asked you about your nationality or about your ethnicity and you had to put Latino. I always felt so angry because I didn't know I was Latina until I saw that box. Like I always thought I was just Bolivian, you know, my whole life I grew up thinking I'm Bolivian. I had no idea that I was a Latina until I saw that damn box. Yeah, so I guess they just love labeling us, you know.

DBN: Where was [01:45:00]the first time you saw it?

CNG: I think I was taking one of those sixth grade tests. I was taking a test, one of those sixth-grade tests to see what your reading level is. And then you had to circle, it was like white and I

thought that I was white, honestly, because in Bolivia, we don't really--you're either--because yes, I'm brown, but at the same time, am I brown brown? Because in the winter I get pale, you know? So like, what color am I, like what? I was so confused. I'm still very confused about that. So yeah, that's when I found out that I'm Latina.

DBN: And so what's race something that became more of a conversation once you were here? Or was it a conversation at all? Or was it just kind of understood? What was that like for you?

CNG: It was weird because we weren't having that conversation in middle school. But I think I was having an internal conversation. I was asking myself, what is happening? I was always asking myself that. And then by high school, I was having more conversations about race, and where everyone came from, because all my friends were from different races and different countries and different colors, and I think we could have a more open conversation. And we were immigrants or their parents were immigrants, but they understood the immigrant struggles. So we're speaking the same language. So whether my friend was from Iran, she could still understand the immigrant struggle, because we're still dealing with many of the same issues. And we would always talk about how back home was different from here, how the *gringas* were so crazy, but back home it isn't like that. So we were always comparing everything to back home.

DBN: And the other thing that we also wanted to ask about, because we know it has become a big aspect of the conversation about immigration and the immigrant experience, and especially about young adults who came here when they were younger, was about the whole concept of Dreamers, right? When did you become aware of that? And, and how did you feel about it?

CNG: So, the Dreamers as in the DREAM Act, or the Dream--

DBN: Whether it was the DREAM Act or just the term Dreamers.

CNG: So it was 2007. And my sister, she really made a big impact on me, because I just felt so mad that a super talented girl couldn't go to college or the colleges she wanted, she couldn't become a doctor, because she really didn't have that number. And she couldn't apply to grad school, to school. And really, I felt like she had so much potential, and I was so angry. And when I learned about the Dreamers, it was just beginning, like 2006, 2007. I started getting involved in different organizations in different places. I was like a junior in high school, and I really wanted to understand how I could help my sister go to the college of her dreams. So I went to this thing, I was junior in high school, and we were starting to look for colleges and whatnot. And American University had like an open house for Latinas, for Latinos going to college in the future. So I went there. And I ended up networking with a bunch of people. And one of the people that I networked with, I think it was Valeria. She used to work in Adams Morgan in a little, tiny office, and she was starting the Dream Project in D.C. And I was like, "Oh, this is so

cool.” And so she would take me to Baltimore, and in Baltimore, we would talk to all these different immigrant families who were dealing with the same things that my family was dealing with. And then that I think was the first time that I could put my guard down and be like, Okay, I can identify now, because in Gaithersburg, we had to put our guard up, and we had to pretend like everything was well and dandy. We had to pretend like my sister wasn’t in this horrible loophole. We had to pretend like we weren’t dealing with so much shit. But back in Baltimore, everyone that [inaudible] I could put guard down and we were on the same fight. And then I end up writing a paper in college about this. I was just really involved until finally, my sister got her green card. And then I sort of was like, Okay, I’m done helping, you know what I mean. But now, I’m like, I should have just kept going because this was big. This is bigger than us. This is bigger than me and any of us.

DBN: And what are some of the ways--you said you got involved. So can you describe some of the ways that you got involved?

CNG: Yes. Petitioning, so I would just canvass a lot and write emails to people and I really wanted, we wanted [01:50:00] to record, I think I was taking pictures. And she made me the unofficial marketing person, pretty much, back then there was nothing. So I don't even know what I was marketing for, but I was getting hours and stuff. Oh, and then I interned for the Hispanic Democrat Party in Silver Spring. And then I thought, Okay if I intern here then I can make a difference. And I can learn more about politics and then, that way, the DREAM Act can be passed. So I was just learning a bunch of things about politics in general and how this could be passed. But back then it was so far-fetched, it was just starting. But I really wanted to know, as much as I could, so I can really help my sister go to college.

DBN: And how did you learn--because you talk about the big picture right now that you're older and have realized the big picture. How did you perceive it, then? Did you think of it as a bigger movement? Or you know, what were your perceptions about it?

CNG: Yeah, I saw it as being a movement. I also had friends, at this point, I had more friends who were illegal, who were so smart, so smart, had 4.0 GPA, valedictorians and they couldn't get scholarships to go to college. They couldn't apply to anything. And I just felt so angry at that, because that's talent. Those kids didn't ask, they didn't ask, none of us asked to come here. Our parents brought us here for a better future. But what is the future? What kind of future is there if we can't go to college and pursue our wildest dreams, so that just made me so angry. It always made me so so so angry. It was just lost talent, you know? And then I thought that could have easily been me, like, Thank God I was born 1989 and not 1985. Because that could have easily been me. And maybe I'd be sitting here telling you a completely different story, a completely different story.

DBN: I think this is a good place to stop because I really do want to make sure that we photograph some of the things that you brought if that's okay.

CNG: Absolutely.

[End of interview] [01:52:28]