

Gerson Quinteros Oral History Interview

DC Oral History Collaborative

Summary

Local D.C. community organizer, Gerson Quinteros, reflects on his experiences growing up in a women-headed household where he was primarily raised by his grandmother who taught him everything he knows about food, and his mother who encouraged him to exercise kindness and humility. He thinks back on being surrounded by nature, being able to play outside with his neighbors, and traveling to the countryside in El Salvador. He shares his first impressions upon entering the public school system in D.C., and later attending Capital City Public Charter School, a brand new school at the time, where he was able to explore more interests and issues that mattered to him in an unconventional, small-classroom setting. Gerson shares how he grappled with what it meant to be undocumented and developing a political consciousness while figuring how he would move on to college and the opportunities and limitations before him. Last, he expands on his insights into organizing efforts, the DACA program, on becoming DACAmented, and the narratives that have grown out of the movement and how they are being shaped by current strategies. *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

Gerson Quinteros is a local D.C. organizer who came to Washington, D.C. in 2005. Originally from Usulután, El Salvador, he attended D.C. public schools and later graduated from the University of the District of Columbia with a Bachelor's in Computer Science. He coached elementary aged school children at Capital City Public Charter School through a program called DC SCORES and has continued to be a mentor and leader to local undocumented youth. Soon after graduating high school, he began to organize around immigrant rights with Casa de Maryland and then continued organizing with United We Dream. He remains committed to mentoring and empowering undocumented students trying to navigate institutions of higher education.

Narrator: Gerson Quinteros

Project: Hola Cultura - Dreamers: our voices and dreams

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Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega

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Neighborhoods Mentioned: Columbia Heights, Mount Pleasant

Delia Beristain Noriega: Okay, so we're here with Gerson Quinteros and he's a local organizer in DC. He's here to talk to us about his life journey after coming from Salvador to the U.S., and also to tell us a little bit about some of the changes that have occurred in the Dreamers movement in recent years. And to explore the term itself of Dreamers, right, and how some people have identified with this and how they have felt empowered by that term. So we just want to get started from the beginning, so can you tell us your full name, date of birth, and maybe a little bit about your hometown and what it was like?

Gerson Quinteros: So my name is Gerson Quinteros. My date of birth is December 22, 1994. And my hometown, I grew up in El Salvador and in a part of the state called Usulután. And I remember actually, the small town where I lived until I was seven. I remember a little bit about the school I grew up with. The school was only like two blocks away from me. I remember that I lived with my grandma, my mom, and my uncle. That was our home. Of course, there was family, close family there, and my two aunts who used to be living there. And my cousins, who are actually, they're older than me, one of them is older than me, the other one is younger. And we grew up together, always. So I remember all of them. And it was a small town. Really small, really poor. Not too much, a lot of, like DC, all the buildings like this, you don't see it like that. You do see [inaudible] houses. There was one public school there, and everyone went there to the small town in the morning. Inside, there was other schools, but it was mostly the people in my area would go to the one in the area, which was only two blocks away from me.

DBN: And can you tell us a little bit about some of the most vivid memories of growing up in that home.

GQ: I think it would be how I played with my neighborhood. I remember playing soccer in the neighborhood, I remember in the streets, we would come up together with all the kids in the neighborhood set up soccer goals with just backpacks or anything that we had. And we would play soccer there. I remember that it was always community, always being together, always spending time together. If you had to go somewhere, you could walk around with your [neighbor] because everyone knew each other. And so, they will know who we were. To the school, I used to walk all the time, no matter what. And I think it was always good, like a good neighborhood where you can just hang out and eat together with families and community.

DBN: And do you remember the schools that you went to, the names, who were your teachers and your friends?

GQ: In El Salv--

DBN: Mhm. [Affirmative]. Yes.

GQ: Yeah. The schools actually changed things multiple times. When I was there it was called Heroe de Chapultepec, Hero of Chapultepec. And it changed again. And I don't remember what's the name now, but it's a school that has been changing the name. But that was the main school that I went from pre-k all the way to fifth grade. Well, fourth grade, actually.

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

GQ: I always love fitness, P.E. [physical education]. But it was because of the teacher not because I love playing sports anyway, but I think P.E. was a way to just get out and just be outside. The other other one that I always like was science. I was always curious about things and science was the place where you can be curious and learn new things about it. So it was always science and P.E. that I love the most.

DBN: And what was your social interactions, whether it was your friends or family members, growing up?

GQ: So I grew up with a small town, [like] I said, everyone knew each other. In my house, in my family, I grew up with myself, my mom and my grandma. That was the main household. And then of course a few blocks down, my cousins. [00:05:00] I grew up with them a lot. They always used to say [to] us, we used to be dressed as triplets because we were almost the same age. But I always grew up with them. And they were the ones who like, my older cousin was the one who taught me everything when I was going to school, and he was the one responsible for us when we were playing around. And in my school, I always hang out with many people. I was always social, I always been a social person, but mostly, I grew up hanging out with only certain people, not with everyone. I love sports. And I never actually hang out with people who play sports in that point. I hang out more with people who were always like playing around, playing tag, stuff like that. I remember that it was rare when I play soccer, and which was something that came up in my rest of my life, that was the main thing. But when I was little, I didn't do that. I always hang out with females and other kids.

DBN: And what about your parents? What was that relationship like?

GQ: So my mom and my dad separated when I was younger. Before even I was four, actually. And so, my mom was the one who always took care of me, the one who provided for the household, the one who always came in, and actually, who worked ever since she was 17. So she was the one [who] provided for the household in our family, and the one who has always been working. And I remember growing up with her, she was the one who always came in and even if she had been tired, she would play with me or spend time with us, no matter what. And my grandma would be the one who would provide for the house doing everything else inside. So that was like I never grew up with my dad.

DBN: And what was that like for you growing up? Was it weird for you in any way to have your mom but not your dad? What was that experience like growing up?

GQ: I didn't even think about it, I think, at that point because I always grew up with mom and I rarely saw my dad, I think it was like once a month that I saw him more so often. I didn't see him that often because he was another city away. So he was like two hours away from our household. But yeah, and it was way different with like, I didn't even think about it.

DBN: And what were some of the values that your mom taught you growing up?

GQ: Always be kind, always be nice. She always taught me to always be a hardworking person. Seeing her, that always brought on into me. She was always a kind person. I remember one of the biggest memories that I have was us actually having a party and inviting the neighborhood. Of course, you know, as a little kid, you always expect gifts. And my mom used to invite this neighbor, who was poor. They had about three children or more. I can't remember how many children they had. But they were poor, and I think I said something to my mom about gifts. And my mom is like, "It's not about the gifts. It's about spending time with people and being kind to them." And I remember ever since then, I haven't ever actually cared about gifts. But I do care about spending time with people, enjoying family, enjoying family, friends, and always doing that. And always being kind, of course.

DBN: That's great. And then in terms of your house or being in that house, what are some of the things you remember seeing or hearing growing up, whether it was music, or types of food or just daily activities?

GQ: I think music wise, I don't remember music, actually. I think most of the time, I remember taking care of the pigs or the chickens. I grew up with bunnies so we were huge animal people. And then, I remember my grandma always cooking and teaching me about things like tortillas and what to make with foods, things that we had. So it was always new meals every day. Every day you would see my grandma making tortillas. And that was something that I grew up with. Or *frijoles*, beans, that would be one of the things that we would always do. But yeah, I think things we would do most would be the animals because the animals were always there. You always hear them. I remember one of the pigs was actually mine. And he grew up really big and I used to play with him since he was little. And then growing up, he was bigger than me and I [00:10:00] used to ride him as a horse, and it was just the funniest thing ever.

DBN: And well, you mentioned some of the foods, right. Are there any particular foods that you remember as being a staple, not just in your house, but in El Salvador growing up?

GQ: What do you mean like something that we--

DBN: Something traditional that you remember--

GQ: *La cuajada*--

DBN: *La cuajada*--

GQ: Yeah, the *cuajada* [fresh cheese] was something not just that we grew up with, it was just something that my grandma grew up with because I remember that we used to go to the countryside of [inaudible] where my my grandma grew up. And that's where my great grandma grandma was, and her family too. And that's where we always went to get food, *cuajada*, or anything that came from a cow, milk, it just was that. And I always loved going up there because it was more animals, you got to see more animals, you got to learn more about how you get food and everything. The cheese was my favorite. I always loved cheese, no matter what, two things that can't be actually missed in my household is cheese and *crema* [cream] because those things are always in my house no matter what. That's my favorite ingredients to eat.

DBN: And then can you tell us a little bit more about what your mom did, what your grandma did?

GQ: So my grandma was a stay at home person. She did work, like sometimes she would go out and sell things. If it wasn't tortillas, it would be fruits. And I have a number just from her how I used to see her; I used to also do the same inside my school. So sometimes when I didn't have any money to buy food or anything in school, I would take oranges or anything and sell them and the kids would buy them from me. And then I would just use that money to go to the store and buy things for myself. So it was like that. But my mom used to be the person who--the system here is different--but in El Salvador you have somebody who times the buses and they keep track of everything that happens, where the bus is going, where is it coming, at what time it left. So she used to be the transportation person for the system, in the city, in the state. So she used to be in the middle of the state and doing that main highway. And that was her first job, I think.

DBN: And is there something you remember growing up as a kid that you wanted to be when you grew up?

GQ: [Laughs] It was funny, because people asked me that question, and I always told my mom, because I was little, I was like five or six, and people always told me in El Salvador that I wanted to be a newspaper person. And that was something that I wanted to be. But once I got here, I started to change. And I started to think about being [in] criminal justice and thinking about the criminal justice system and thinking more about psychology and stuff like that.

DBN: And then, before we move on, were there any other people in your life growing up as a kid who were meaningful to you or played a big role in your life?

GQ: I think there's always, you know, there's always people that play a role in your life so much. I would say there's teachers that grew with me, that taught me so much and continued pushing me no matter what. I remember my pre-k teacher, I know her and I still communicate with her no matter what. And she always used to--when I was in pre-k, she actually pushed me to actually give a speech for the first time, and I'm not a speech person. I was scared. I was so nervous back then. And I remember that I got so scared. It was just a thank you, but it was a thank you speech. And I just got so scared and nervous and it was my first time, but she always pushed me to do things. And even when I was in first grade, second grade, she used to always communicate and push me, and encourage me to do things. But yeah, that must be when I think my aunt who took me in after my grandma died, was another person. But it's always people that always push you and help you out, even in El Salvador, there has always been people.

DBN: And did you already have family here in the U.S. prior to coming here?

GQ: Yes, but we didn't have too much communication with them. They would be like a lost cousin or a cousin [00:15:00] who was just here. Most of my family was, is in New York actually, Florida, or they were in different areas. But we didn't have communication with them.

DBN: When did it become a conversation, or even just an idea that you were going to come here? Or how was that decision made?

DBN: For me, the first person that came to the United States was my mom, after losing her job. She wanted to find a better opportunity so she came here. My uncle's ex wife was the one who told her about the United States, about DC and everything, and helped her come here. That's how she learned about the United States. Also, she had heard about the United States through one of my uncle's, my grandma's brother, because he had been here before, but I don't remember all the story. But yeah, I remember that. But when she came here, she was here and I stayed with my grandma. And with my grandma, the thing was that after a year she died. So the decision was made that if I wanted to come in here and reunite with my mom. And so that was the decision I made. And I wanted to come here and reunite with her. Of course, it was like she gave me a call and she asked me a simple question but at that time, I didn't even think about it. I just wanted to be with her. And she actually asked me if I wanted to have a birthday party or come here. And of course, I chose to be here with her because I hadn't seen her in a long time.

DBN: Has she ever talked to you about her journey coming here?

GQ: Yeah, we talked about her journey, the struggle that she faced, of course, because of everything she has had-- In El Salvador there was an earthquake around 2001, 2000s and she was affected by that. My great grandma had lived with us and she tried to rescue her. And the whole house came down on them. And so when she was traveling here, when she came here, she actually had an incident where she had the back pain again. And that's why she always talks about her story in a way like that, the whole suffering, and the back pain, and coming here. She tells me about that always. Because her journey was different than mine. Hers took about a month or two to come here while mine took a little shorter as a little kid, of course.

DBN: And what was the year like for you? You said that you were apart for about a year?

GQ: Yeah, it was different. I was with my grandma, of course. But I didn't get to see my mom. We talked. My mom started to give us more, like sending more money to support us. I remember for the first time we had cable in our house, we got a cell phone where I actually every day we would be able to talk to each other. And that was one of the things that I always did. My grandma was the one who always took care of us ever since I was little so I grew up with my grandma. So it wasn't like a big difference there but it was that feeling of, you know, missing your mother missing that mother figure. It was way different. And I remember that it was in a way I was still when I came here, I was missing her so much. And the first thing I did, I hugged her.

DBN: When you had that conversation over the phone about, yes, I do want to come here and be with you, what happened after that?

GQ: So my godfather and his wife, they decided, too, they were coming to the United States too and I came with them. I couldn't leave the country without actually getting my father's permission. So I had to communicate with my father. So I immigrated to Honduras where we met a coyote and the coyote actually took us from Honduras to Guatemala, Belize and Mexico. And yeah, that was the beginning of the journey with everything.

DBN: And how long did that process take?

GQ: So the whole thing was about, [00:20:00] actually, I don't know. It was supposed to take 15 days; I think it took a little longer because I remember in the middle of it, I got sick. And there was other things that happened in the journey. But yeah, there was time that I lost that I can't remember much. But yeah, there was something around like 20 days or 25.

DBN: Wow. And what are some of the things that were crossing your mind when this was happening?

GQ: I felt like it was just like us traveling. I remember that I traveled so many times. But I do remember missing like, leaving everyone behind. The night before leaving, I didn't tell anyone that I left. So I didn't tell my friends, I didn't tell anyone because in a way there was a superstition in El Salvador that if you told anyone, you would not make the journey. But I remember that I never told anyone, only my cousin, my close family, so my cousins and aunt knew, and, of course, my dad. But then, other than that, nobody I said goodbye to. And once I came here, I remember that being in Mexico, I got sick one time and I got this high fever. And this dream came to me. And I was just remembering the struggle of like go back and come back like traveling,, having superpowers, and teleporting back and forth, and thinking about whether I wanted to stay there and be there. I had a vivid dream of me being in El Salvador instead of actually being in Mexico. But thinking about that, I had the struggle of deciding, still, during that time.

DBN: And during this journey, what are some of the things that you remember seeing? Did you meet any people along the way or was just mostly like---

GQ: So yeah, I met other people. I remember that I met some another--I was always with my godfather and his wife, but I met another lady who was always with my godfather's wife and with me. So we always hang out, talk during the journey. I remember that one the biggest things was crossing in Mexico when it was raining. So that was one of the biggest impact because I remember that we had to cross this swamp area and on the other side we had to change and all of that. But it was a journey that was just with many other folks. And it was always like you had to be with your family, not with other folks because you couldn't be with other folks. You always stuck with the person that you were assigned, which was my godfather's wife.

DBBN: Okay. That makes sense. And do you remember the day when you arrived here and where did you arrive?

GQ: So I remember that I went to Rio Grande, across Rio Grande. And when I arrived to United States the first thing I actually saw was I.C.E. [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement], not I.C.E., Border Patrol. And I remember we went in a different route to actually avoid them. And I remember being lost in Texas for a little while and wandering around. Later on, I remember that I was actually helped in a mechanic area. We went to a mechanic and the mechanic was, "Oh, this person can help you," and I remember staying at a household. And then after that, it was these people I met and they were really nice. I remember we stayed with them for about a few days, five or so, and they were really welcoming. And they provided food and everything. I remember that I went to, it was around, I think it was around memorials or something because we went to visit a military grave. And we went to provide some respect there. And then after a while, I think my father's wife made a decision. And we were in front of Walmart and she was

making a call, and then a white van appeared, and it was actually C.B.P. [U.S. Customs and Border Protection] coming and arresting us, taking us to this cell.

DBN: And what happened next?

GQ: I remember that they put me inside the van and they took me to the cell, right? It was [00:25:00] just the size of this room. It was like a little tiny wall that separates you and the bench from the bathroom. And I was put there with my godfather's wife, I was fingerprinted, and then, I remember they tried to take a picture of me but I couldn't because I was crying too much. And so my godfather's wife came in and picked me up and actually took the picture with me, so picked me up to actually be able to take the picture. Then they took me to, after a while, they took me to a back room. And I remember being questioned, like, what was my name? How old was I? Who I'm with? And did I know my parents? Why was I here? Stuff like, just kept asking me questions. And somehow they got in communication with my mom and I remember they put my mom on speaker. They talked. I don't remember what we talked about. But then after that, they actually let us go during that time and my mom's coworker went and picked us up because she was a green card holder.

DBN: So at that point they let you all go--

GQ: They let me, they let us go and we were supposed to have a court date later on.

DBN: Okay. And then where did you go after that?

GQ: So I met up with my mom's coworker at a hotel and then from there, we took a flight to DC. And that was when I came to Maryland. Actually, I took a flight to Maryland, yeah, to Baltimore.

DBN: And then, what was that moment like, seeing her after all this time?

GQ: Yeah. So I came to BWI. And then I went to her apartment, not my mom but [her] coworker, and my mom came in the afternoon to pick me up. And I remember seeing her with her white shirt and black pants and a little hat with the letter M because she used to work in McDonald's. And I just remember hugging her and talking to her for the first time and just just crying together because it.

DBN: That's good that you reunited. And what were those first few days or even months like for you here getting acclimated to this environment?

GQ: So it was really difficult. It was not difficult, but it was new, like exploring. I remember exploring downtown, going to Arlington because my mom and dad used to love Virginia. So we used to go all around Virginia, buying stuff, buying clothes, signing up for classes. I remember that I had to take a ESL class [English as a Second Language], not a ESL class, a language exam to actually place in a grade. And yeah, just going through those, getting ready to go to school because classes had started and I came around October or so. So I was getting ready to get to school. And yeah, I ended up going to Bruce Monroe in DC. And yeah, that was the first time I started to get back into school and everything else.

DBN: And what year was that?

GQ: 2005.

DBN: 2005, Okay And what grade did you finish in El Salvador? Or what grade were you in in El Salvador and what grade did you start here?

GQ: So I was just finishing fourth grade when I left, so I started fifth grade here. So I had finished fourth grade and I was just right back to fifth grade because we were just about to go into break again.

DBN: And what was Bruce Monroe like?

GQ: So this was before they had the new building they have right now. It used to be in Irving Street and Georgia. And it was this huge school. It was not like my school, my school was huge in size, but this had different levels. And so I was just like, "Wow, the school is big." We had to wear a uniform that was just yellow and everything, green pants. I remember walking in and I just remember that one of the things that I did was get in the fifth grade line. My best friend in doing that--my best friend now, actually still my best friend--she told me recently that when I got into the line, and she's like, [00:30:00] everyone wanted to tell me that I was in the wrong line because I was so short [laughs] and they thought I was a second grader. So they were like, "We wanted to tell you, but we didn't tell you." It was something that she told me that happened, but yeah. But it was [a] new experience, I remember having ESL classes, learning with other students who were just like me, who had just came. But it was a school that also it wasn't just English, it was also students who spoke Spanish. My teachers spoke Spanish too. And it was new for me, a new experience.

DBN: Did you find it to be like a welcoming place? Or what kind of place?

GQ: It was welcoming, I love the teachers. The teachers always were welcoming to me. I remember one of the biggest teachers that was welcoming to me was Miss Burke [ph]. She was a

teacher in the school and she was always teaching me English, trying to get me to learn it, speak it, and do all those, and read it, actually.

DBN: And outside of school, in what ways did you find yourself learning English or trying to learn English?

GQ: So outside school, actually, PBS Kids was one of the things. I don't know if you know his but PBS Kids is one of the biggest things that I think people used to learn English. And I've never watched TV shows. Arthur was one of the biggest shows that I've watched and that's how I started to pick up words. Also, during that time, there was Halloween and the house my mom lived in, the lady had two kids. One was older than me, and the other was younger than me, and they taught me words, too. They helped me but I remember going to Halloween and them teaching me to trick or treat, too. So it's like teaching me words little by little. But that's how I actually learned English.

DBN: And speaking of the house where you guys lived, can you describe it a little bit more, like where was it located, what was it like?

GQ: It was located in Petworth area. It was by, let me think of that street, Sherman and what is this one, Park Road, I think, yeah. I think it's up a little more North but it's the Petworth area; it's three blocks away from the Petworth station. And I remember it was this household, my mom rented a room, a tiny room in there. And I remember just the bed fit there and we were sleeping there together. And yeah, that was our room. We had a TV was but I always could go out and play with the other kids. We could go anywhere in the household. I remember that I always spent time playing, either going downstairs in the basement playing--not in the basement, sorry. In the living room playing, or we went outside in the backyard to play because they used to have like a garage but they didn't use it for the car. They just had the garage and we played there together, all three of us.

DBN: I guess it's good that you have a company, right?

GQ: Yeah.

DBN: And other than that, what do you remember about the neighborhood, what stood out to you?

GQ: During that time, I think, I would say I didn't go out too much because it wasn't like--we usually, when we went there it was-- So, first thing that stood out to me in DC was the metro because you never actually see that in El Salvador. I never took the metro, especially the stairs. That was something new for me, electric stairs. Going to DC, taking the metro was always

fascinating to me. And I think taking the metro, too, because we always went to Arlington to stores over there. DC didn't have, like Columbia Heights really didn't have that store. That was after, years after. And so, I think it was just us traveling in the metro and just walking out. But yeah, that was mostly, I think, the metro or even, I think, just stores like the Panam. That was one of the biggest things in my neighborhood that we went to and buy groceries.

DBN: And were there other things that struck you not just about DC, but being in this new place that were different or similar to back home?

GQ: I think it was just the way we were, like [00:35:00] technology wise. I did have like TV. Video game systems, I never played video games and I love playing video games. When I was little, Kevin, who was the person who I stayed [with]--the little kid that I lived in the same house with--he used to play with me all the time. We used to play Pokemon. And so that was something new for me, playing Pokemon all the time in the system 64. And that was the thing that I was shocked with video games. And then, also just having in-classroom computers. Yeah, I think in El Salvador, we only had a few laptops, but here we had so many. Desktops, sorry. I'd like playing video games in your desktop and doing all those things in classrooms. It was something new for me.

DBN: And other than that, were there any other things that--maybe I should start by asking, did you have any perceptions about the U.S. or American culture before coming here?

GQ: I think the only perspective I had was from watching TV and watching the news. I think one of the biggest things that I always thought about was Miami. I remember that when I pictured the United States, I always pictured Miami because of El Gordo y la Flaca, or those TV shows. They were filmed down there and they only show Miami. And so I remember seeing Miami mostly. And I thought that was DC, for me. I thought that the beaches and all that. And when I came here, I was like, "What? Like, where's like New York?" Like you thought about New York buildings. And I was like, "what, what is this?" It was different for me. I think I had that perspective. And I think it was something that I didn't know, it was like DC was different, you know?

DBN: And going back to your new school, can you tell us more about the demographics of the school when you were attending?

GQ: So the principal was Doctora Palacios, which she was from El Salvador, too. It was a lot of Salvadoreans at the school. There was Mexicans, African Americans, there was a lot of African Americans in the school, too. So it was a diverse school. And I just remember it was white teachers. And I think I only had a few, I think I only had like two teachers that I knew who were not white. But other than that, it was diverse in some of the teachers because I think the lower

grades were more diverse than upper grades, I think the teachers I interacted with were white. But yeah, it was a little diverse, not too much.

DBN: And I know we talk a lot about diversity now, right? But growing up, was that a familiar concept in any way? Or how did you start to get more acquainted with that?

GQ: Meaning here in the United States?

DBN: Or in general?

GQ: I think, you know, growing up, in El Salvador you have other folks who are not that same skin tone you have. But I don't think you say, like you don't actually have like, 'African American' or all those different titles. I remember that we had one classmate who was darker than me, and he was one of my closest friends, and we never actually had those titles, right. But when I came here, that was a title, you know? Blacks, Latinos, Whites. And I never thought that, like growing up, I didn't think about it too much. But I think adults do think about it a lot. And I remember that I grew up with both. Some of my friends were black, in my school, and some of them were Latinos. More, when I got to learn English, it was closer then, more. But I think diversity growing up was different. I usually hang out with Latinos because I didn't know how to actually talk in English, communicate. And then, as I grew up more, I started to learn more about the culture and learn more about different folks. So it was this thing, but I think there always was this, also in adults, anti-blackness, I think it was. [00:40:00] There was anti-blackness. I remember the one thing that always, always talked about in our culture was that blacks are evil or like they do bad things. And I think I heard it in multiple adults' conversations, but I never actually thought about that when I was little. I was a kid, I talked to people, but this was something different. When I started to grow up, I started to reflect about that. And how adults used to say bad things.

DBN: Yeah, and I ask about that because yeah, you're right. When you're growing up, you're not necessarily thinking about that. It's really a learned behavior.

GQ: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: And so, you finished up elementary school at Bruce Monroe, or did they have middle school as well?

GQ: No, no. So I finished fifth grade, then I went to sixth grade. I actually spent most of my days in school. I didn't take a break. I actually took fifth grade summer, in summer school. And then I went to sixth grade right away. And I remember that most of my day was spent in school so from like, 7am, all the way to like--sorry, 8am all the way to like 6pm, I spent it there in school. So I

never took a break. And then I learned English by sixth grade; I actually started to be more involved in classes, especially the mainstream classes is what they call them, where everyone, no matter what, they don't have ESL classes. And then after that, I went to public charter school, which was my middle school. And it was uptown in Missouri Avenue. It's still there, actually. And that was where I took eighth and ninth grade--no, seventh and eighth grade. And that's where I learned other different perspectives from immigrants because that was more diverse immigrants. We had more folks from Ethiopia, I forget what other countries we had, but yeah, it was more diverse. Folks that were immigrants from other areas. Philippines was another one, and more African immigrants.

DBN: I know you mentioned some of your favorite subjects back home. And did those continue to be your favorite subjects or when did you start becoming interested in the other things that you mentioned?

GQ: Elementary, I think my favorite subject started to be math because I just felt like math was something that I could understand. Even when explained, I loved math. And I think that was always growing up. As when I got to middle school, I started to learn more about Greek mythology, which was something that I loved. I don't know why, I just started to learn it. And it was due to my teachers, some of my teachers taught it. And then, still, math was one of my favorite. I started to play the piano, too. Music was something that I started to do. And then in high school I think I started to learn more about criminal justice. I think, you know, growing up, you watch TV shows, and that's what I wanted to [do], especially when I got to high school, I watched Criminal Minds. And that was one thing that always, always taught me. And I started to get hooked into those things. And yeah, that was one of the things, but science, I think math and science has always been one of my biggest subjects that I loved since elementary and middle throughout the whole thing.

DBN: And I know you mentioned before that you've always been very social. Did that change at all when you came here? How were you in school with making new friends?

GQ: I was social in a way, differently. I think during elementary, middle school, I was more quiet due to the fact that I was bullied but I was mostly social with females. And the only time I talked to more males would be when we would play sports. So soccer became my passion too; I actually meet other folks, playing with males, so it was more like me playing soccer and going out to championships and playing. That was how I did that, but mostly more social was with females. And I think throughout my whole life you can see that but I was more social in middle school. I got more social in eighth grade and I think ninth grade it was more social than I thought. [00:45:00] But during those years, because of my English, because of everything that was happening during that time, the bullying, everything, I kind of was by myself or only [with] certain friends. It wasn't like before that I used to talk to anyone and talk to friends.

DBN: And since you brought it up, do you mind telling us a little bit more about the bullying and how you dealt with that?

GQ: So it was, you know, growing up, people get bullied, and I got bullied in elementary, I got picked on. I don't remember why, but I mean, I was the shortest one. But you know, I remember in middle school, I got bullied by this guy who always picked on me, and I remember running around the hallways getting tripped on and the kid was always picking on me. But yeah, during that time, I think he stopped after I stood up in eighth grade. But other than that, I think that the bullying stopped more when I was in high school due to the fact that high school was more closer, it was like a small group of classmates. But yeah, I think middle school and elementary school was just getting picked on during that time. I can't say why it was, but yeah.

DBN: And how did you get through that? Right? Did you talk to anybody?

GQ: No, I always kept a positive thing. I think I remember, during eighth grade, something that I used to do is go to home and just fall asleep in the couch. And my mom started seeing that I kept doing that all the time and I never actually did anything else other than that, just came out of school and just sat in the couch. But I think once I started in eighth grade, I started to get more involved, I started to play more sports, I think that was like a way to actually, soccer has always been a way to get me out of my anger and all those things that was happening. My like self care, it's always been that. And I think that was always a thing for me. And I think doing eighth grade, seventh grade, and even seventh grade, I played a little bit of soccer.

DBN: And I know you mentioned that your best friend from elementary is still your best friend, right? Can you tell us more about that person, if that's okay?

GQ: Yeah. So, her name is Ingrid. She's a close friend of mine. I remember in fifth grade, we always hung out. Me and her family, our families has always been close. And then in elementary school, we always hang out, fifth to sixth grade. In middle school, she left to another school. She's also Salvadorean. She is from La Unión. She also immigrated but she immigrated in third grade, I think third grade, yeah, third grade. And she was always with us hanging out. And when I was in like free time in our school, we always hang out with her. We played in the playgrounds, with other people, we played tag or anything. And then, once she got into middle school, she went to another school called Washington Latin. And she started to like, she loved Latin and started to learn. She loved sports, too, she played soccer. And then, we always grew up together; I was in her *Quince* [fifteenth birthday]. Her mom was always really inviting me. So I was used to hang out with her all the time, at her home or in just parks. She was also studying criminal justice at one point but she's now at Miami, in Miami in Florida. Not Miami, sorry, Tampa, and she's in Florida actually studying there. She was studying there. And then, she actually got into

recruiting. But she's always been like this person who's always been active, really friendly and a really smart girl.

DBN: That's great. And what was the transition like from elementary to middle school.

GQ: It was different because, you know, I had my friends in elementary school but I didn't get to see them in middle school. Ingrid was one of those friends because she was actually supposed to come to my school. We were going to go to the same school but then she decided to go [00:50:00] to Washington Latin and I remember I used to talk to her and be like, "They called you for a week in our school, you know, they used to be like Ingrid Medina, where are you, Ingrid Medina?" And I'll be like, "Where is she?" She was not in the school. So we used to always ask her why she had left us to school. But she went to another school and she hadn't told the other school. So it was just funny that we were supposed to go to the same school so I missed all my old friends. I had to get new friends, talk to new friends. And having that in those schools, elementary school, you hang out with the same group. In middle school, you didn't. You were with the same group but in middle school, you were put in ESL classes. So most of your classes will be ESL classes [away] from others. So you have science classes with an ESL teacher, you have history classes with an ESL teacher, not with other students so it would be like, all of the immigrant students together, always together, no matter what. So then, we kind of never interacted with the main students, mainstream students. It was this way of always, I didn't interact with the mainstream students, I interacted mostly with the ESL and we were close. And we grew up together, all of them. My friends were there, I mean, I still talk to some of them, and now we talk about like, we used to do trips there, too. Our teachers took us to field trips to the monuments and all of that. So it was a way different environment for us.

DBN: And you mentioned that you mostly were in that group with the ESL students, and didn't really get to interact much with the other kids. Did you think of anything of that at the time? Or what do you think of it now?

GQ: At the time, I didn't think about it too much. I just remember that I was like, "Okay, so I'm with this group." We used to go to English together and all that. I didn't think about it at all. Now, I think it was really weird because you would get all these teachers. Yeah, they would be more helpful but it created this, you know, for me, like the bully that I had was a mainstream student, not actually a ESL student. So I didn't have classes with that kid, only one class I think we took together and those will be science courses. And yeah, that's how I would interact. Or P.E., we would have together we mainstream students but it was just different, you know. You wouldn't ever actually see those groups. But now thinking back, he was just different. It did help in a way, but at the same time, it didn't help because now it created tension. Thinking back, it's just, it was the way it was created. And it was really, when the eighth grade, I just felt it was better that way because we had created like our own group. I remember I still have contact with

those friends because we grew up in touch, like helped each other with schoolwork and stuff like that.

DBN: And were you involved in any activities in school? I know you mentioned that you were still playing soccer. Were you doing anything else that really interested you?

GQ: In middle school?

DBN: Yeah.

GQ: In middle school, I think I didn't play any sports. I did start to pick up chess. So I started to play chess more. I think other than that, I wouldn't say after school activities, I didn't do anything. I mostly stayed for like homework assignments, just to do homework. I did spend more time going to my mom's job. So I would travel to my mom's job and be there after school, doing assignments myself or just spending time there while I waited for her to get out. And it was so new, like I learned a lot about just being her job and stuff like that.

DBN: And what did you think of her new job? I think I didn't ask you about that.

GQ: So her job was at the McDonald's, still, but she worked at the Air and Space Museum. There was a McDonald's inside the Air and Space Museum. And I remember just being there and learning about the museum and learning all the exhibits. Like I used to learn about the forces of flight, all of those things. I used to spend time with the security guards. I used to learn everything, just go with the people who do tours and learn about that. The people who had exhibits, I learned about their exhibits and I started to get to know them and I actually grew up [00:55:00] in the Air and Space Museum, actually, a lot.

DBN: What was that like, spending a lot of time there?

GQ: It was really inte[resting]. You got to learn a lot, you got to meet a lot of new people. So I remember I got to meet a few people who were college students during that time and they would explain the forces of flight, and I just used to come, always, to be there. They used to tell me about airplanes, but little by little, they helped me learn. They would be the one to explain this and I would explain it to the people. And then, learning about astronauts, it was just a cool experience learning about it. And the closer you get to people, you get to meet the security guards and I got access to the IMAX, which was the movie theater in there until I learned more about movies. And so you just met a lot of cool people and learned a lot.

DBN: That's pretty cool. And I know earlier, you mentioned that your mom had asked you if you wanted to have a birthday party here. Right?

GQ: It was back in Salvador.

DBN: Oh, back in El Salvador--

GQ: So back in El Salvador, she asked me, "would you have a birthday party in El Salvador, or you would like to come here and reunite with me?" And so those was the options because it was around my birthday. But I was like, "I want to come here."

DBN: Okay, got it. And so how did you end up celebrating, whether it was your birthday, or even just holidays here?

GQ: It was different. During that time, my mom was in a relationship and yeah, I celebrated with them, and the people who lived there. Small cake and just a small celebration. It wasn't like the celebrations we had in El Salvador. But it was a small family, more family, close friends.

DBN: Okay. And in that sense, did you miss the kinds of gatherings that you had?

GQ: Yeah, because you had more family, you had cousins who were there or anyone, your neighbors and stuff would be with you to gather and it would be bigger and more fun, yeah, more piñata, *todo eso* [all that] you know, have more celebrations.

DBN: Yeah. So that brings me to my next question. I think some of us have very different definitions of what community looks like back home.

GQ: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: So where did you find community here?

GQ: Community here, I think I found it mostly with close friends, I think. They would be the ones who we could go play in the playground, also hang out together, and building throughout my whole phases of like middle school, elementary school, I think I built different friends and groups, and that's how I build community. I think, even when I was in middle school, like I said, I hang out with a lot of like, explainers. And they would explain the program for the Air and Space Museum, and I used to hang out with them and I built community there, talking to them, learning about that. And then, even when I got here, I started to, in high school, I started to learn more about activism and organizing. And so, I got into building that kind of community. But it's always been like community through soccer or sports that I built. And then I think, you know, just growing up, that was my community. It was always close friends, and stuff like that.

DBN: And then, once you went to high school, well, I'm sorry, what high school did you go to?

GQ: Capital City Public Charter School.

DBN: Okay. And what was high school like for you?

GQ: It was actually, so it was a brand new high school; we were the first graduating class. So we were first, actually, here at CBS. If you know 14th Street and Columbia, on top of it, it has like a floor, and that's where our class was, actually. And we used to always come to school there. It was way different than my big school that I used to go to that had different floors and everything, that you had like 10 minutes to go from one site to another. In here you had like 10 minutes, but you still had like a small area to walk in and the classes were smaller. Usually, you had like 20 students; here you had like 10 or 15 students, it wasn't that big. And you have more one-on-one, the teacher talked to you. They have more interactive classes, like learning about-- Like one of my biggest experiences in [01:00:00] high school was learning about, what was it this class, the hierarchy in the Middle Ages, and it was just about the peasants and the kings and the nobles, learning about that. And the way we learned it was, they gave us jelly beans and then they gave you a card and they gave you this card and they give you a role. And then they started taking away your jelly beans and at the end, if you were a peasant, you didn't have any jelly beans. So, you know, you had a different way of learning, learning classes, and you have more community building, I think, for advisories. I think in middle school, even there you had, I remember building community with my advisory, with our members. But in high school, it was more like us interacting, more talking, more like, "How you feeling?" and seeing my teachers talking more. Even the teachers care more because I remember one of my classmates, he was an immigrant but he worked at night, and sometimes he would fall asleep. But the teachers would be calling him and trying to get him to come to class; they did the extra steps no matter what. So it was really more community, more close. And I remember we even did camping trips, stuff like that, that I've never experienced. Like, I've never experienced community like that before, but except we did in middle school, we did camping trips but not like the ones we did in high school because you build more community, and they had more fun, teachers, one-on-one stuff.

DBN: And what were those school trips? Like, what do you remember about them?

GQ: For high school, it was really fun. I remember we had to cook our own meals, like we had to cook. We were set into roles for those camping trips and some people would cook the breakfast, lunch, or dinner. Each one group would decide which one they wanted to pick, each advisory. And now, I remember we had to build a pizza and so we learned new skills. And like always, we play games--video games, I was going say--games with [inaudible]. It was some experience of like me feeling back in El Salvador, playing tag outside with your neighbors and all that, being outside, so it felt like that. But it was more community based; it was really good.

DBN: What kinds of places did you go to?

GQ: For high school, I think I don't remember the place we went to but it just was a campsite. We did went to Pennsylvania to go to--I think near Pennsylvania--to actually snowboard and ski. We did also go to Anacostia River in my ninth grade, actually, to test the pH system. So we did a lot of trips to go out and interact with the community.

DBN: That's good. And I know earlier you mentioned that it was in high school when you started to become more aware of immigrant issues and things like that, and organizing, right?

GQ: Mhm [Affirmative].

DBN: Can you tell us more about that, how did that awareness come about?

GQ: I always knew I was an immigrant. My mom never actually hid my status from me. She told me about being undocumented, but she didn't explain what it meant. She just said that I was undocumented. Well, she didn't say undocumented; she said immigrant. And I knew that, you know, being an immigrant, I didn't know what it meant, right? I didn't know what actually it meant that I couldn't do or what could happen. So in 10th grade, I remember writing letters to President Obama and asking them for citizenship, a pathway for citizenship for undocumented immigrants. Even if I didn't know what it meant, I actually just started writing letters and I remember sharing my story as an immigrant. And my whole class was doing that for their 10th grade year. Then in 11th grade I started getting more involved with one of my teachers. Ms. Widler [ph]. She was one of the teachers, and Miss Cook, who was also teaching us about--wait, that was 10th grade, yeah, that was 10th grade, Miss Cook came in 10th grade too. Miss Cook was the one who actually started to teach us more about like, she was a math teacher, but she also deals with social justice. And so we talked about immigration into a perspective, like how you test in the graphing, like, how many people have been in the United States? And so we did our whole research about the amount of people in the United States and graphed them and did all this portfolio, binder, with our research and who, where do we find our numbers and everything. We just started talking about that. And then in 11th grade, we started to talk about social justice and [01:05:00] immigrant movements, and, actually, about the DREAM Act because that was one of the things that was happening during 2011. And so I started to learn more about the DREAM Act, the immigrant youth experience and, yeah, that was something that came up a lot in researching about what could actually undocumented students do. What could undocumented [students] get, like, go into higher education. I remember trying to, I think we were going to--My friends were talking about doing immigration workshops, doing workshops and everything, and talking more about the immigrant experience. And that's where I started to figure out what were the obstacles undocumented immigrants experience, and even the fear of deportation, even

though I had had a deportation order, I didn't know about it, but I did have a deportation order, and I just never had that fear until I figured out what he meant.

DBN: And when was the first time that you remember that you heard the term “undocumented”? Or “illegal” because I know that got thrown around a lot too?

GQ: I mean, I had the experience of like “illegal immigration,” “illegal”-wise, would be 2005 because that's what they would say, “illegal alien.” And I heard that term with the Border Patrol, but even in the documents that they send, where I had a court order, too, that had me as “illegal alien,” [with] my alien number on it. So talking about that, I think I learned, I heard about it, but then didn't actually understand it. And then I think more, I started to hear the term “undocumented” more in 2010. I think even in 2006, I heard it [too], but I was passing by a protest of immigration and I remember taking a picture with my mom, but I was not there, you know, understanding why I was there, but it was a big immigration movement protest.

DBN: And when did you become more inclined to organize? Or when was the first time you organized, if that makes sense?

GQ: Yeah. So in 2011, like I said, I was trying to apply to scholarships, colleges. That year, I started to learn more about I couldn't apply to some scholarships, I couldn't apply to some colleges, like, you know, in Georgia, they don't allow undocumented immigrants to apply to the top five colleges. And so, I started to learn that and started to learn about Arizona law, and SB1070. I started to get more and more and being like, “Okay, I need to--” I needed to pick a senior project about a topic that I needed to do, and research it for a whole year and the topic I picked was immigration and the obstacles undocumented immigrants face while applying to higher education. And so I started to do my own research, I started to see what schools could be out there, what undocumented students could be eligible for, and I started to learn more about the movement as an immigrant. I remember I was there for the hearing of the DREAM Act, even though I didn't understand what, like I did know what the DREAM Act was, but I didn't know how impactful it was right. And it was the first time I just showed up and I remember being there and seeing thousands of people just lining up in the Senate building and it was a long line and I remember they filled out like three rooms for that hearing. But I started to get more involved in 2012, after DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] was announced. I went to Casa de Maryland, which is an organization here in Maryland, which was where they were going to help a DACA recipients--immigrant youth apply for DACA. And I was there just to listen and I remember hearing the stories of two youth during that time, Ricky and Claudia [ph], and they told me about, like they shared their stories of how they came here, how they immigrated. They were really powerful speakers, and I was like, “Oh my god, I need to meet them. I need to join them.” And I started to get involved with them in Maryland to fight for justice there because they were fighting for in-state tuition. They were fighting for Question 4 at that time. And it was just

protest after protest and I was joining in, going to them. They had a whole committee of youth where they met every week or so [01:10:00] and they would actually meet and talk about what was going to happen with the campaign, talk about what protests we can come [to]. They also had fun. They would like build, have dancing together, having fun together. And so, just that was the first time I built community and organizing together with other folks.

DBN: And you said this was 2012?

GQ: Yeah, 2012.

DBN: Oh, had you already graduated high school or were you still in high school?

GQ: Let me think, yeah. So I had just graduated high school. I had just graduated high school when I actually got into more organizing.

DBN: Okay, got it. And when was the first time that you heard or found out about DACA?

GQ: So the first time I heard about DACA was in June--actually I remember the date--June 14, when it was announced, actually because I remember going that afternoon after graduation, I went to my house, and my mom was watching TV. And they were talking about, like President Obama coming out and speaking about DACA and the program. And that was the first time I heard about the program and I was excited because I knew that I was actually eligible and I was like, "Oh, my God, this is something that could support me and actually help me out." I was excited to go out and go to Casa de Maryland and learn because they actually announced that after that, they were like, "Casa de Maryland, guess what? They're holding their information session." And I was like, "Oh, let me go."

DBN: And did you already know at that point where you were going to school? Or how did the whole college application process end up?

GQ: So when I was applying to college, I was scared about going out of state. There was offers of scholarships, but actually I didn't want to accept them because SB1070 was happening in Arizona, and other states were picking it up, and I was scared. So I didn't go out of state. That was my biggest fear, and with my mom and I'm her only child. So I was like, "Okay, I'm not going to be--" And I was looking for schools that actually were local, that actually accept undocumented students. And one of the schools in my research that actually did was UDC and was a public school, and they never had asked about the social security in them so I was able to apply, get in, and I was able to get into the school. I thought I was gonna pay out of pocket the whole time but I remember the first year, I got a few scholarships. My principal had given me

scholarships, too, and so I was able to pay my first year, but then later on, I was able to pay [for] my school working and studying.

DBN: That's great. And I know you had also talked about being interested in criminal justice and that sort of thing because some of the things that you were exposed to. So did you decide to pursue that interest or once you started school, did you decide to do something else? What happened?

GQ: So if you look at [laughs] my graduation--not my graduation--my senior year video, I say that I actually wanted to do criminal justice. But right after that, I actually started to reflect and think about what it meant as an undocumented immigrant to be in criminal justice and didn't actually was something that you could do, right? My counselor was one of them that told me about that and so I started to think like what to do, I started to research, and one of the things that one of my best friends, Jared, my close friend Jared, he was actually doing Computer Science during that time. And so, I decided to do Computer Science with him. I studied Computer Science, I think I started in my second year--second semester or third semester--in Computer Science.

DBN: And then just going back to DACA again, can you talk a little bit about what was the process for applying for you? When did you start?

GQ: So because I started to get involved with Casa [laughs]--I was about to say another organization--with Casa, I was getting involved with them, I was able to get into like, they were able to help me apply. They helped me fill out my DACA. They told me what documents I needed to do and it was a process that was really long because you had to actually, you have to go around and I remember going to my middle school, elementary school, [01:15:00] to ask them for documentations, to ask them about attendance, and gather all the documents to prove that I was here in the United States during those states, right. I remember going, even my medical records, getting my medical records for everything ready. And then filling out the DACA, paying the fee, of course, and it was just a long process. And I remember that me and Claudia, we were excited because we were one of the first in line to actually apply in Maryland and through Casa de Maryland, and we were actually ready to apply. And we were like, "Oh, yeah, we're going to fill it out." And then we go through the whole process that they're like, "Oh, you're missing this document, you're missing this, you're missing that." And we were like, "Oh, my god." We both came out afterwards and were like, "Oh, my god, we need to get more documentation." And we were just ready to go and get documents, more documents, and information. But then, I was able to send mine. Once it got sent, I remember that I had to wait a long time to get a response and the response was there for two months, they didn't know that I was in the United States, and it was due to the fact that I was out of school for that time. I didn't actually do any summer school during that time. The only time I don't do summer school, they get me. I had to go out again and

look for people who actually I talked to during the summer and get letters written and get more proof that I actually was in the United States for those two months. And so I was able to do that. And yeah, after that, I remember getting my DACA, I started to work as a soccer coach, and it was just amazing.

DBN: And what year was it when you--when did you apply and when did you get approved?

GQ: So I applied around 2012; I think I got approved, let me think, 2013, March or April I think I got approved. I think it was around that time because I remember I had already started my soccer season and yeah, I was working there. And I had to like do the whole paperwork of transferring that I was working with my social [security number] there.

DBN: And what was that like when you found out that--

GQ: That I got DACA? It was exciting, because you know, for people it's just like, "Oh, it's just an acceptance letter, it's just a letter, it's just a document, right?" For us, it means that it's protection from deportation, it would actually mean that you can actually be here working, opportunities to apply to other schools, apply to scholarships, it could mean more opportunities. That's what DACA means, right? And we know this. For me, during that time, I didn't know it was temporary, of course. So that's another thing.

DBN: And I know you mentioned, also, that you started coaching. So how did you end up coaching?

GQ: So after graduating in my high school, I used to be really active in sports, so one of the things that I was active [in] was with swimming and soccer. And, of course, I play softball too [laughs]. And I remember in soccer, the head department--the sports person--he asked me to come back in 2012, to come and coach for the elementary school there. And so I started to coach because Capital City is an elementary school, middle school and a high school. But I only went there high school year. So I started coaching third, fourth, fifth grade, yeah, third, fourth, fifth grade years, and I started to coach those grades, and that was the first time I started to coach with DC SCORES. I don't know if you know, there is a program here that teaches low income families to help them to play soccer.

DBN: And what was like for you?

GQ: It was my first job, in a way, because it was with youth, little kids, it was really exciting to teach. We taught soccer. The program is like soccer, poetry and community service, so during the fall, I had coworkers who--one of them was my co-ed coach, the other one would teach poetry and it was exciting to teach. It was a new experience for me because, you know, you had

the little kids who, of course, they would be like, “I don't want to do this” or “I want to win,” but you would get to have fun with them. They enjoy themselves. I started to build a team and then you're seeing them [01:20:00] grow up, it was just amazing. I think now, mostly all of them are in high school or, now, actually college students too. Yeah.

DBN: So was this, just to clarify, was this your first job because of DACA. Or did DACA allow you to have that job or did you already have the job before?

GQ: So I had my job before DACA. Yeah. So the way they were going to pay me, actually, that's how I got my college first semester. They would pay me as a scholarship. Being undocumented, they couldn't pay me. So they were like, “We'll pay your school, and you just do this.” And I did. I coached soccer for a whole semester, and then once I got DACA I was able to get paid through DC SCORES.

DBN: I got you, Okay. So, once you started UDC, what were some of the classes that you were taking?

GQ: So my first year, I was just taking general courses, English, Writing 101, Public Speaking, I remember, what else did I [take] that year, that was Intro to Technology. Let me see what else. And I think those were, I'm missing probably one more class, but I can't remember, but it was just regular, general courses.

DBN: And I know you had picked to study Computer Science, right? And how did you like that?

GQ: So the first semester, I didn't actually choose Computer Science, I actually just went on without a major and first year, I decided to go into--the end of first semester, second, I decided to go into Computer Science. And it was a different experience. I remember, in high school, I was in the robotics team and learning about robotics building. And I loved that, enjoyed that so I wanted to do something with Computer Science. That's what I think pushed me to pursue Computer Science and the first year I just remember learning about coding, and I was like, “Woah, this is amazing.” Putting my first program in, which was something like a calculator, making a calculator. And I was like, “Wait, I did this?” and it was just something, for me, exciting.

DBN: Wow. And I was also interested in knowing--the question just escaped. Sorry, I just had it. Okay, no, that's fine. So did you stick with Computer Science?

GQ: Yeah, so I graduated with Computer Science.

DBN: Okay, great. So did you continue to organize during all of this?

GQ: Yeah. So I continue organizing. I remember I was part of--with Casa for a little while until 2013, I think, or almost no, yeah. So I continued being part of the movement but I also started working on other projects outside. I remember, I went back to my high school during the daytime, to actually build a group to help other undocumented youth into school to actually apply to colleges, find them scholarship opportunities because through my senior project, I had a scholarship list of scholarship listings that they could apply to, colleges they could apply to. So I went back and helped them out and give them scholarships and give them more opportunities and guidance. And also through Casa, I was bringing them here to talk to the youth. I remember we did this like, a few workshops with them. And then once in 2013, I was part of a project called RISERS which was with Brenda--I think you've talked to Brenda before--and other DACA recipients and it was just us telling our story of us being in the movement fighting for justice and being part of going downtown, fighting for citizenship, fighting for things, for deportation cases and stuff like that.

DBN: Well, I'm glad you brought up RISERS. That's actually what I was meant to ask you.

GQ: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: How did you end up getting involved in that project?

GQ: That was a good question. How? Oh, yeah. I was in my freshman, sophomore year, I think. I met this youth, [01:25:00] another DACA recipient, her name was Aura, and she got me into the project. She talked to the director and she was like, oh, yeah, because he was looking for other DACA recipients. And she's like, "Oh, Gerson is another person coming." And that's how I started to interact and meet the director, actually here in Columbia Heights, and we started to talk more about the project and about telling my story, which I was more open, anyway, during that time. So before, I wasn't open to share my story, but now, during that time, I started to be more open about it.

DBN: Oh, Okay. Now that you bring that up, can you speak more to why before you were not open to discuss your story? How did you begin to open up?

GQ: It was kind of like, you know, I told people I was an immigrant and everything, but I never actually shared my story in a way that they knew that it could inspire, to help other undocumented youth. I always thought--I never knew what it meant to tell your story. And that was the first time I got the opportunity to, one, tell my story, of course, and to also understand that it can empower other youth because storytelling is a way you can empower other folks and inspire and people can connect to your story and understand what they're going through is not only themselves, right. So I think for me it was just that I didn't know I could share my story and

I just hadn't had the opportunity. And I think also from my end, like my family didn't actually want to share my story. So during that time I was filming, I could tell my story, but things I couldn't share was from my family's side.

DBN: How did your family feel about it or react when you told them this?

GQ: They were kind of scared because they didn't know what it meant, right? It was a film, of course, they had a lot of questions. We talked about--because he wanted to film at our place too--they were like, "What happened with this?" They would fear questions about, you know, that fear of immigration about being undocumented, and just getting deported and stuff. So those were some questions. But I think that--the director was Andy Fernandez--he was really good at helping that and like guiding through. I remember, he was like, "Okay, if you don't want to film this part, we're good." So it was way, too, like he was flexible with us.

DBN: And then going back to one of the main things that we also want to explore through this project, is also finding out more about changes in the Dreamers movement. So I wanted to know, when were you first exposed to it? I know you mentioned you became more aware of things in high school, but more specifically with the Dreamers movement, or even just the term Dreamer. When did you start hearing more about this?

GQ: So it would be around the 11th grade, 10th grade, I think. We did hear about the Dreamer narrative, and I think even during the DREAM Act, that was what they call immigrant youth, Dreamers, right. And I think that was the beginning when I heard it. Yeah, I think that was the time when I heard it the first time.

DBN: And what did you know about it then? Or how did you perceive it then; how do you see it now?

GQ: Back then, I just knew that it was something for the DREAM Act, and it referred to undocumented youth, especially people who were 3.0, like 4.0 GPA. Like it was this narrative, like this high, like high-performing undocumented youth. So that was the narrative for the Dreamer and I think that was always something that [we] talked about the perfect student, perfect immigrant, right. And for me, as I grew up, I did talk about being like talking about Dreamer narrative. At one point I did say I was a Dreamer, but as I continued growing, I understood that that was something, that was not a title that--it was the title was given to me, not a title that I wanted to identify myself as, an identity. I am an immigrant youth and I think the Dreamer is just a way to like sugar[coat] that kind of thing. It's just a way that I don't want to use [01:30:00] the title. It's not something that I define myself [as] because one, I remember, I wasn't always the high school student who would get 3.0 or 4.0, you know, I was never that, like the perfect

student. And also just the ways that [it's] now being used. It's used, but it's not what they mean. They usually talked about DACA recipients and it's not what immigrant youth are. Many, they're not just DACA recipients, they are not just dreamers, the Dreamer narrative, right? It's so many out there. And when they use it, and the politicians that use it to actually refer to the high performing, perfect immigrant. And so, I think, for me, it has changed to me using the immigrant youth and using that title instead.

DBN: Mhm [affirmative].

GQ: That identity.

DBN: I know you said you don't necessarily identify with that anymore, right?

GQ: Mhm [affirmative].

DBN: How do you see it as being a detrimental term now since it's still being used? It gets thrown around a lot when you read articles, or even in the news, you still see it a lot.

GQ: Yeah, and I think we see it all the time to refer to youth who came here as a young age, and it has changed so many times. Sometimes they say Dreamers and they mean DACA recipients, so sometimes it's not even used properly to refer to the right terms. And it's just the way that it has continued to also be this perfect student. It's just that it excludes others, and excludes many immigrant youth that are not identifying themselves as that. I think when it's used in other articles and stuff, they should say--it could be more of like, you know, they want to talk about the DREAM Act and the Dreamers. And it's like, well, there's more like, you know, the DREAM Act does not cover only Dreamers, it covers immigrant youth in general. There is more terms in general. It's not just what the old DREAM Act used to do, the Dreamers narrative. There's a lot of immigrant youth who are DACA recipients, TPS holders now, who are youth. And so there's immigrant youth and that covers everything, I think, for me.

DBN: Yeah, that makes sense. And what have been some of the organizing strategies that you've seen to kind of combat that? Or come up with, or I don't know if necessarily come up with new terms, but to change how immigrants or even immigrant youth are being portrayed?

GQ: Yeah, I think in a way, we started to talk, even in the movement, we started to say immigrant youth, not Dreamers. I think even for DACA recipients, yes, they define themselves as DACA recipients but they also say immigrant youth. And it has changed the narrative. You see in some articles, "Immigrant youth do this." The language has changed in a way but I think sometimes it's still being used in schools and I think having workshops and having to even--in my school, I remember having a workshop with youth in my club, and talking about the

Dreamers, DACA and TPS and undocumented youth, and defining it, so the school knows, like the teachers, the staff, the students know what it means. During that time, we were just learning about that and immigration, right. So I think it has been just educating again and uneducating what the term means. So it's been a whole workshop and everything like that.

DBN: One of the things that we also noticed is that the movement itself kind of presented this opportunity for a lot of people to feel empowered through sharing their stories. So have you noticed any other changes in the people themselves, of how they're doing that, maybe, how they're taking back the narrative?

GQ: Yeah, people, I think through art, through everything they started saying immigrant youth, whether it be, I know organizations themselves, have done that. [01:35:00] Even, I think, how do I say that--repeat the question again. I'm sorry, I've lost track of my thoughts.

DBN: Yeah, that's okay. So I just wanted to find out a little bit more about if you've seen any examples of how the people themselves, not necessarily organizers, could be too, but people themselves have taken back the narrative? How they want to be seen, how they want to be talked about, and what needs to be talked about?

GQ: Yeah, so even with youth that are not DACA recipients, they usually define themselves as undocumented youth or documented immigrant, because they know they're not DACA recipients or they don't define themselves as Dreamers because they, usually, when they talk about it in the media, they think about DACA recipients. So themselves, when they identify, they're like, "Undocumented immigrant" or "undocumented immigrant youth." So you can see it in the media and more people started, like, when they get interviewed, they say those things through, even in bills, they have started to write "immigrant youth" instead. You know, so thinking about that. In schools, some schools started to talk about immigration, in through just undocumented students instead of just saying Dreamers, right. So even that has changed because, you know, the definition, many people when they connected--when DACA came out, they connected the term Dreamers to it. That actually, even you, now, see that the DACA, like most of the DACA recipients are graduating high school, graduating college, they're already out of the school system, so a lot of schools are starting to see that there's not just DACA recipients, there's undocumented youth and immigrant youth in general. So that has been changed, too.

DBN: That makes sense. And speaking of defining these terms, since you were involved in the RISERS short film, can you define RISERS for us? Like what was the intent behind labeling the film with RISERS.

GQ: So during that time [laughs], I remember the director wanted to think about changing the narrative in Dreamers, right, and one of the things that he was thinking about was that, to instead

of actually used the term Dreamers, instead use the word RISERS as being awakened, being woke and actually fighting for the movement, that you're not actually just dreaming now, you're actually standing up and fighting. And so that's what was the new definition for RISERS. That was what our goal was, but it didn't pick up momentum and also, you know, the film was just a local thing too.

DBN: Okay, yeah. And then just going back to your experience going through college, I wanted to find out more about what happened after, yeah, like, what have you done since then?

GQ: So throughout my high school, my college years, I continued being involved in the school too. So like, changing things into schools, being the organizer inside the school, too, like talking to the president, talking to staff members about being undocumented. I continued doing that and I graduated with Computer Science; I also created clubs in there. And then afterwards, during that time, I started to work for United We Dream, too. I was recruited again by my friend and colleague Claudia and I was brought to United We Dream because they were creating a hub here in DC so we're going to create like a committee or group of youth they could actually meet. So they could actually create a space where immigrant youth could feel welcome and actually be themselves and feel empowered too. So I was part of that with them and it was just a new experience for me to just be part of it. And then with that, I continued, I got hired with them. After graduation, I continued organizing with them. I graduated with Computer Science, but I haven't actually been through my major and I'm now thinking about going to Master's degree and thinking about that.

DBN: And can you tell us a little bit more about that experience with United We Dream?
[01:40:00] What was it like creating this new hub for immigrant youth?

GQ: It was different because they created like a leadership group. I remember the first time they actually, we met up and it was all these immigrant youth from like DC, Maryland, Virginia, I think it was. Was there somebody from Virginia? No. So it was DC, Maryland, hh, yeah, we did have somebody from Virginia. And it was just youth who were here together, talking about the experience, or people who wanted to fight for justice for immigrants. And it was just learning about how to fight for--how to empower yourself, how to tell your story to make [it] impactful, not impactful, sorry. The ways to share your story to actually bring awareness to an issue. That's what I wanted to say. Because it was like a way to tell your story and that was [a] workshop, and you learn about other organizing opportunities, about how the Civil Rights fought for--the Farm[ers'] Movement and all of that. You learned it and everything, so you learn how to actually organize yourself. It was just youth organizing together. It was a lot of spaces where like, even undocumented immigrants for the first time came out in a space, saying they were undocumented. So you know, you got all those experiences. Plus, the folks who already actually

themselves, they were like, “Oh, yeah, I'm undocumented.” They were really open about it. But you had those folks, definitely.

DBN: And were you guys meeting in like physical spaces in a very specific physical space or did you just kind of, different spaces?

GQ: It's really interesting to start, we had different spaces, we, at one point, we met at a library, DC library, actually in Mount Pleasant but we had different spaces where we could meet. But I remember that when the new library, right here, we met at the library, we were able to bring food and have a space where we could do a workshop there and the library provided that because I had a library card, I could actually have that. And we were able to get that space.

DBN: And is this something that has continued like now with your current involvement or what is going on now?

GQ: So we continue meeting throughout the years, we have done what's called Summer of Dreams, which is a program and we continue doing a lot of meetings, working together, different youth, we actually have different schools that we work with, and it's just amazing.

DBN: And can you speak a little bit more about what are some of the current goals or some of the ongoing campaigns at the moment?

GQ: So United We Dream has many campaigns, one of them is Defund I.C.E. and C.B.P., which is to actually define the money that goes into I.C.E. and C.B.P. because those agencies terrorize our communities so those are some campaigns that we have. Nationally, we're also working on pathway to citizenship, we're always working on those different campaigns to get those, one of them is a reconciliation right now. And then locally, we had just passed the bill in the DC area, which was the Central Value Act, which stops any agency from working with I.C.E. Throughout the time, we knew that DC, the term sanctuary city was named as DC, but we didn't know that the Department of Corrections used to work with I.C.E. So you know, people were turned over to I.C.E. And so even though it was called a sanctuary city, that was still happening. So that was a campaign that started with called I.C.E. Out of DC, which was a coalition and I worked with different schools here in the area.

DBN: And you mentioned that you were now thinking about going for your Master's. So what are you thinking of pursuing this time?

GQ: I'm thinking of education. I've always been passionate about education due to the fact that I coached soccer, taught poetry and was always involved with youth, and even now I'm always

teaching like workshops and doing those. I always am passionate about education and I love thinking about policies and things like that. Even with my major, I'm thinking about what could be used with technology too. [01:45:00] So I'm thinking about going into a Master's in Education.

DBN: That's great. And I guess we're coming to a close so I just wanted to know a little bit more about what are some of the things that remind you of home here. And also do you stay in contact with your family in El Salvador?

GQ: Yeah, I keep in contact with my family in El Salvador. Of course, the things that remind me of our home are always the food. As you know, the DMV is a huge pupusa place. We have pupusas everywhere [laughs]. Things that also always remind me of home is always having conversations with people. Like I said, I didn't say goodbye to my friends when I left, but I was able to communicate back with them so talking to them, talking to, from my father's side, my sister, always have the opportunity to communicate with them. And even when we do celebrations, like what we're having right now which I was just telling you about, Fiesta DC, which is the festival here in DC, that always brings me like a community that is really just reminds me of home, having a festival, having food there, different cultures. It's just something that used to happen a lot in El Salvador with celebrations for fifteen of September and so things like that always reminds me of that. I think when I go out of the city, usually it reminds me of like the trees and how nature was over there. There was a lot of nature and it reminds me of that too.

DBN: And I also want to ask you, since you got DACA, have you been able to travel outside of the country?

GQ: No, I haven't been able to travel outside the country.

DBN: Do you want to? And if so, what are some places that you would want to visit?

GQ: Well, if I was able to, [laughs] I would go to, I want to visit, of course, El Salvador, even though I'm like, in a way, in fear. And I want to visit, I don't know why, but South Africa, it's been one country that I've always wanted to visit, due to not just the history it has, but it's just been amazing to see pictures of Cape Town and all of those. So I want to visit South Africa. And I would say, Japan, I'm a huge anime person. So love anime, love Japan and learning about culture over there.

DBN: That's great. And I guess one of my last questions is more general, like what are your hopes for the future?

GQ: I just hope that we have a way we can actually have everyone be able to travel in the world without actually thinking about documentations, papers, be free to move and free to actually travel around without any problem, without any fear. I think, I hope that we can actually live, like all undocumented youth could actually not be fearful of being deported or fearful of those agencies; and I hope that I could actually continue my education here and continue to get help back to my community, of course, because I want to help back in with the next generation.

DBN: And you don't have to answer this but do you have any plans in the future of starting a family?

GQ: At the moment, no, not right now. I am mostly focused on my education, my career. So that's my focus.

DBN: Okay, yeah. And last, I just wanted to know if there's anything else that you want to leave us with that you feel is important to share about your journey, or just anything that you want to tell anybody who might listen to this in the future since this is going to be a permanent record?

GQ: I don't think there's anything that-- I'm really just thinking about if I've missed anything. No, not at the moment, I can't think of anything.

DBN: Alright, well with that, I think we can conclude the interview and I just want to thank you again. And is it okay if we reach out if we have any additional questions or any clarifications that we want to make?

GQ: Yeah, you can reach out. Always available.

DBN: Great, thank you so much.

GQ: No problem.

End of Interview. [01:50:01]