

Maria Nunez Pereira Oral History Interview DC Oral History Collaborative

Summary

Local UDC student, Maria Nunez Pereira shares her early memories of living in El Salvador and playing outside with her friends and cousins during the first five years of her life. She reflects on the different ways she was impacted after moving to the U.S., which eventually led her to become more vocal about mental health awareness and seeking out resources by starting those difficult conversations at home. Her own struggles with mental health motivated her to pursue a career in Psychology, and she talks about the people and resources that made a positive impact throughout that journey, places such as the Latin American Youth Center, which provided a safe space. Maria also grapples with being undocumented while attending high school and analyzing the limited options available to undocumented students, something that propelled her to advocate for herself and others, and demand that administrators be proactive. She also discusses some of the challenges with qualifying for DACA and shares her concerns as she awaits a definitive answer regarding her own application process. *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

Maria Nunez Pereira is a Psychology student at the University of the District of Columbia. Born in San Miguel, El Salvador, Maria arrived in the U.S. at the age of five in 2001 and grew up in the Brookland D.C. neighborhood. Though her education began informally at a young age back in El Salvador, she has officially attended D.C. schools all her life, including BASIS DC and Paul Public Charter School. She participated in S.Y.E.P. throughout her high school career and worked at organizations, such as Marie Reed Center, as a teacher's assistant where she began to consider working with children in the future.

Narrator: Maria Nunez Pereira

Project: Hola Cultura - Dreamers: our voices and dreams

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Interviewer: Delia Beristain Noriega

Interview Location: Columbia Heights

Interview Length: [02:12:10]

Neighborhoods Mentioned: Columbia Heights, Brookland, El Canton, Chaparrastique

Delia Beristain Noriega: Alright, my name is Delia Beristain and today is August the fourth, 2021 and we are here with Maria Nunez, who is a participant in S.Y.E.P [Summer Youth Employment Program] at Hola Cultura. And she is here to talk to us about her life journey, her struggles, her aspirations, and visions for the future. And thank you again for participating in this oral history project. We appreciate it. We hope that this can contribute to construct Latinx history here in D.C. And we just want to start from the beginning. So, if you can tell us your full name, date of birth, and a little bit about what your hometown is like.

Maria Nunez Pereira: My name is Maria Nunez Pereira. My birthday is July 10th, 2001, and I was born in San Miguel. It's El Canton, Chaparrastique. It's just a little small, little, it's like a *calle* [street] There's like houses. It's not too big, it's a small little area.

DBN: And what are some of your earliest memories from growing up there?

MNP: There was a *solar*. It's like a little piece of land, and right in front of where I grew up. And I remember going with my grandpa and finding little, it's called *cusucos* [armadillos] They're like little animals that live under the soil. So, we would go there all the time and look for them. That's what's the biggest memory that I have.

DBN: So, who are the people you grew up around?

MNP: I grew up around my grandma. We lived in the same house. I had my two cousins, who are both girls. My aunt, my uncles. So yeah, it was a large family.

DBN: Can you tell me a little bit about them, maybe their names and how you got along with everyone?

MNP: So, my two cousins when I lived there, because now there's more, I have more cousins, but during that time, my cousin, both of my cousins, one was Susanna Pereira and the older one was Irene. My two uncles Jimmy Pereira and Pablo [ph]. And then my aunt, I keep forgetting her name [laughs], Lisania [ph] and my other aunt was Glenda [ph] and my grandma, we called her Concha. And my lovely grandfather, his name was Francisco.

DBN: And what are some of the things you remember doing with them?

MNP: I would remember every time it would rain, I would go over to my cousins' house, over Susana and Irene's house. They would always come when it rained, big turtles would just come out because it would be raining. So, that was like a memory that I have, just when it rained, I would always go there because that's what I wanted to see, turtles, just like walking freely. I remember my cousin Susana, she's one year younger than me. And we would always fight, like cousin fight since we were small. For some reason I think the way we fought was biting each other so we would always have arguments and end up biting each other. And it was this big [00:05:00] situation. I remember just being around them on a daily basis, I would be surrounded

by my family members. There wouldn't be a day where I felt alone or I would be alone. I would just be with my grandma, my grandpa, my cousins, my aunt, and my uncles.

DBN: And what about your parents, if you don't mind me asking?

MNP: My parents, they lived with my grandma and my grandpa. Actually, we lived in, it's like this big land. Our house was literally right next to my grandma's house. It's the same land, so it's like we just lived together technically. They were there when I grew up. They had a tourist visa so they would come from El Salvador, take a flight to here to the United States frequently, so during those times I would stay with my grandma and my grandpa. They were there but they were mostly flying.

DBN: And what were they doing? Were they working, or what were their reasons for traveling?

MBP: One, to visit my aunt, my mom's sister. Secondly, from what I've heard they were *vijeros* [delivery people]. They would bring packages that people from El Salvador wanted to send to the United States or from the United States to El Salvador.

DBN: That's interesting. What is your earliest memory, I guess, of making that connection between El Salvador and the United States that you remember? Or the first time you heard about it, I guess, when you became aware that your parents were doing that and traveling a lot?

MNP: I don't really have a memory, to be honest. I just found out when I was here. Growing up, I didn't even know. I always thought that my mom and my dad, because they worked in an office in El Salvador, so that's what I knew. I didn't really know that they were *vijeros* until later in my life.

DBN: Ok, I see. That's interesting. And then, I guess, what do you remember about going to school in El Salvador? What grades did you go to over there?

MNP: So, supposedly, I have the memory of me going to, I think it's Pre-k or head start? I don't really remember. But I do have that memory of me going to school. And recently I have found out that I wasn't really enrolled into school. I didn't have the age. They would just take me there because I wanted to go. So, it's kind of confusing, but I went to, I think it was pre-k. But I didn't really have the age to go there, but they would still take me because I wanted to go. And the teachers were like, "Yeah, just bring her. She could just play with the kids." [Laughs] So, that's what I know.

DBN: How old were you when you came here, do you remember?

MNP: I was five. Yeah, I had recently turned five.

DBN: And what do you remember about that? If anything, about how you came here, who you came with?

MNP: I came with my mom and my dad. I came in with a tourist visa. Well, I didn't really remember but there's always been, I feel like I have a memory, where I just remember it was really dark and I was in an airplane and all I just saw [00:10:00] was clouds and I was really scared of the dark so I would just have to, you know, be with my mom, cuddled with her because I was scared. That's what I remember, but my mom was telling me that I didn't really know because I actually didn't know that I was moving to the United States. I thought that we were just coming to visit. I didn't really know that we were going to stay. My mom had told me that that day where I was leaving it was really dark outside, and my grandma was saying bye to us. And then she said, when we were leaving, I turned around and I was like, "Don't be sad grandma, I'm going be back, don't worry." And then my mom started crying because [of] the fact that we weren't going to come back.

DBN: When did you start having those conversations with your parents about why or how you came?

MNP: I started having these conversations when I turned, I think, 15. Because, you know, growing up I didn't really talk about it. I think it was just, I'm here. I don't know how to say it. I felt like I didn't really want to talk about it, to be honest. I felt like during those times, I didn't even want to be here. I missed my family in El Salvador, so I never really had those conversations with my parents until when I turned 15 which was when DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] came into the conversation, and that's when we started having conversations about our immigration to here.

DBN: What are some of your earliest memories here once you started living here and where did you arrive to?

MNP: So, when we came to the United States, we went straight to Texas cause that's where my uncle, and my aunt, and my cousins live. We stayed there for a couple months and then we moved to Maryland. Stayed there for most of my childhood. So, I don't really have that much memory of when I went to Texas when I first came. I just remember a little bit of going to different places. We went to this boat thing in this river. That's mostly all I remember. But when I came here, I came to Maryland. I don't really have that many memories. I just have the memory of our first Christmas here. Yeah, first Christmas it was pretty cold, I was not used to that. And I remember having my first present which my cousin gave it to me. It was like a little snowball, and it had a Santa hat, and it had the two little eyes and then the carrot nose and the smiley thing, the smiley face and then his little arms and his little legs. I still have it to this day [laughs], I still have it.

DBN: When you say your first present, was it just the first present from celebrating Christmas here or first present in general of all Christmases?

MNP: First present of here. That was the first present I had ever gotten in the United States.

DBN: Do you remember any family Christmases or any other traditions back home that you celebrated? [00:15:00]

MNP: When we celebrate Christmas over there we do like fireworks and stuff. I remember everybody gathering up and doing the fireworks. They're called the sparkling sticks, I don't really know what's the right name, but I do remember we would do that every Christmas and every New Years.

DBN: What year did you start going to school here?

MNP: I think I was six, so I didn't go until after one year of being here in the United States. I remember it was pretty tough because I didn't know English. I was actually put into ESOL [English to Speakers of Other Languages]. And what also made it worse was I actually had surgery before I went into school and they still had to do accommodations since my surgery. For example, I couldn't sit down in the floor because they did criss-cross applesauce. I couldn't do that. I had to sit in a chair since of my surgery, so I feel like that also made it a little bit tough on me because of course I didn't know English, and on top of that I had these accommodations that I feel made me stand out which I didn't want to. [Laughs]

DBN: And what school did you go to?

MNP: It's called Thomas Stone Elementary School. I lived with my aunt during that time and that was the school that was in our area, so that's the school that I had to go to.

DBN: What was it like living with your aunt?

MNP: It was pretty good. You know, sometimes you want to have your own space but we had our own little room, which me and my mom and my dad would sleep. So, it wasn't like we had our own space. It was just the room to us. It was pretty cool. I had my cousin from my other aunt and my other uncle, they lived upstairs so I would go up and play with him. It was really nice to have family around me especially during those times, but it was tough at the same time because I didn't really know them. I knew them from pictures, and I would talk to them on the phone, but I didn't really know them like that.

DBN: What part of Maryland was this?

MNP: This was Brentwood, Maryland so like in Hyattsville.

DBN: Oh, okay. And now that you've mentioned having other family here in the U.S., can you tell me more a little bit about those generations, I guess. Like what do you know about your family background, and how long they've been here?

MNP: Well, I know that my cousin, his name is David. He came before I came to the United States, but his situation was different. His situation, he didn't have the ability to come over plane. He actually had to come crossing the border, so he had to go "in foot", as they say it. That was, for him. My aunt she came by a tourist visa and then got married to a citizen. Yeah, that's pretty much that I know. [Laughs]

DBN: Okay, I was just curious, going back to school, what was that like? What do you remember growing up here, like what other schools did you go to? [00:20:00] What were those experiences like?

MNP: I've only been to Thomas Stone Elementary School. Then I had to move to D.C. since we had to get insurance because during that time, I did start having mental health problems and it was something that my parents couldn't really afford without insurance, so we had to move to D.C. And then I moved. I went to a D.C. school which [laughs] it was different. Maryland schools, the environment is different from D.C. schools. I actually went, it's called BASIS DC. It's like a school without walls type of school. It was pretty difficult for me. I wasn't, how do I say this, prepared to go into a school like that. I had pre-algebra at like fifth grade, no, it was sixth grade. So, it was something that I wasn't mentally prepared. I had AP classes, so it was something I was not prepared for. From going to a Maryland school to that kind of school in D.C. So, that did mess me up and then after that I didn't want to stay there anymore so I went to Chavez which I stayed there from eighth to ninth. And then after that I went to Paul which is the school I graduated from.

DBN: And that's high school, right?

MNP: Yeah, that's high school.

DBN: Oh, okay. And now that you mention not feeling prepared for that environment initially what kind of resources, if any, were available to you that you know of? Or, if none, how did that affect you?

MNP: There was sometimes some resources probably like student hours where you would come after school, and they would try to help you. But I think that my, how do I say this, knowledge. I'm trying to figure out how do I say this. I just felt like, again, I was not, educational wise, I was not prepared for that. There were some things where I didn't understand, and no matter how I would tell them I really don't understand, and this is something that I haven't been taught. They couldn't really help me which also took a really big toll on my mental health.

DBN: Do you mind sharing in what ways or, if it's too personal you don't have to.

MNP: No, of course. I just felt like since I didn't really understand it, that I wasn't smart enough. That I wasn't good enough in a way. Especially I felt like what we sometimes don't really talk about is the pressure that immigrant children have to go through. Like I would feel pressured of trying to be good in school. If I wasn't good in school, then my parents would be upset. And it's understandable for them to be upset because, of course, we've gone through so much for them to bring me here for me to not do good in school and it was something they really wanted me to be really good in school. So, the fact that I wasn't doing good I feel like it was a lot of pressure.

DBN: Yeah, that's understandable. [00:25:00] And what did that pressure look like at home?

MNP: It was mostly like the teacher would communicate with my parents and like, "You know, Maria's not doing good in these exams. Maria's not doing good in homework." Having them tell that to my parents, my parents would kind of get upset and would tell me, "You have to go to these student hours, you have to." And sometimes it was like if I didn't go, they would get upset with me, and I didn't want them to get upset with me. But at the same time, I felt like even if I went to those student hours, I couldn't really understand what they were trying to teach me so then what's the point?

DBN: And was this connected to the language barrier, do you think? Or were there other obstacles in the way too?

MNP: I feel like that is a part of it. Until this day sometimes I do struggle, let's say for example, like reading, there's still some things that I feel like because of the language, that, you know, English is my second language, I still struggle with it. But definitely during that time I was struggling with it a lot.

DBN: Did you express that concern to your parents at one point, because you said you transferred schools, right? What was that conversation like and how did they react?

MNP: Because I wasn't doing good in school I had to stay back. I had to stay back once, and as much as I tried it just wasn't working for me. And I was going to stay back again so I told my parents, "Look, I don't feel prepared, I don't feel like I'm doing the best I can in this school, and I'm honestly not in the right mindset right now. So, I feel like I need to transfer schools. I need a change." They agreed with it.

DBN: How old were you or what grade was this?

MNP: This was eighth grade.

DBN: Over the course of those years, in elementary and middle school, can you talk a little about what your social life was like, right, because you were adjusting to a new environment so what new things were you exposed to, or did you make new friends? What was that like?

MNP: I was making friends. From elementary school it was kind of tough. My social life was not really that good. I was bullied. But I didn't really talk about it. It was like little comments or actions that people made that, but I didn't really talk about it. I would have a couple friends but in, well, middle school I did have several friends. Especially after I got out of that environment of elementary school, I was able to make friends like, to this day, I have a friend, my best friend, that I met in eighth grade.

DBN: Can you tell us a little bit about that person if it's, okay?

MNP: So, her name is Elisa [ph], and I met her in eighth grade. No, I met her in seventh grade. I stayed back seventh grade, so I was supposed to graduate in 2019 but I didn't. When I stayed back that's when I met her. And it was pretty weird how we met. [01:30:00] We just met in a music class. We bonded over Daddy Yankee. [Laughs] After that we just started talking more, we started hanging out and our situations with boy problems was something I felt like really bonded us over. For example, we would literally cry in the bathroom floor of school because of a boy. [Laughs] Sometimes we talk about it and were like, "Why in the world were we really sitting in the school bathroom floor crying about a boy?" So then after that, even though I moved schools, I was still close with her. Until this day we're still close.

DBN: And just going back a little bit, I'm curious about what things surprised you when you came here? Like what are some of the new things you were introduced to? Maybe now it's taken for granted but in the beginning, it surprised you or comparisons that you made between here and home?

MNP: I feel like, okay, for me, also the biggest thing was in El Salvador you really could just run around and I feel like you have so much more freedom over there. You could play soccer literally in the middle of the street and nobody says anything. In here, it's more people in just a small area. I feel like it's mostly the freedom. Especially little kids, it's more freedom over there. Here, technology is a big thing and over there it's really not.

DBN: Now that you mentioned technology, so when you came here what is some of that technology that you were more exposed to?

MNP: I think it was the cassettes that we had. I was kind of confused on how that worked. It was something that I hadn't seen especially over there, like here at school, in my ESOL class, they would do stories, but they had it in cassettes. Over there they don't have that. It's literally just you go there, you sit down, you talk, your teacher talks, interacts with you. No technology at

school where I was at. But when I came here it was the cassettes, I think it was the projectors, and I was like “What is that?”

DBN: Interesting. I’m also curious because talking to some of the other people we’ve interviewed they’ve talked about things that they watched on TV when they were growing up back home and things they started watching here. So, I don’t know if you were exposed to any kind of TV growing up and what was that exposure like?

MNP: I don’t really remember what TV shows I watched. I know for sure when I came here, I’d watch Mickey Mouse [laughs]. It was Discovery Kids, I think it’s Arthur, yeah. Shows like that, but I really don’t remember watching TV or what shows I would watch in El Salvador.

DBN: Yeah, that’s okay. Speaking of that, I’m also curious what were some influential figures or even in pop culture, music or anything like that, or even books that influenced you?

MNP: I don’t really think I had [laughs while talking] someone [00:35:00] who influenced me.

DBN: It’s okay, maybe things that you remember listening to at home or maybe even that your family members were playing when you were at home?

MNP: I think during that time, I would mostly rewatch the Selena movie. [Laughs]

DBN: Yeah, she seems to be a big part of pop culture even to this day.

MNP: Yeah, she is. [laughs] I still cry to the end of the movie to this day.

DBN: Have you seen the new show on Netflix?

MNP: Yeah.

DBN: I guess going back to school, what was it like once you transferred? How did things change for you, whether not just at school but at home, maybe?

MNP: When I changed from BASIS to Chavez it was also a pretty big change. The environment was way different. BASIS was kind of like white population, the kids were mostly white. And I went to Chavez, which is like literally in Columbia Heights, so everybody was either Hispanic or black, so it was a really big change in the environment. Everything was different. I think Chavez, my experience there was pretty good, well so-so. I still was struggling during that time. I had extremely bad mental health again. That kind of made everything worse in school. So, school wise it was pretty bad, but I did have a teacher that did really care about me. I forgot her name. She was a science teacher. But she would help me out a lot with all of the topics, so like: history, math, English, and science. If I would be behind she would help me. She was a pretty big part of the reason why I even moved on from the other grade.

DBN: What was that new environment like? As far as the students, you mentioned the demographic was totally different. Were there other significant differences? Maybe as far as resources or as far as the general vibe of the place.

MNP: I feel like BASIS, they have so much expectation from you. Especially having kids coming from Oyster Adams. I don't know what other schools, but they're schools that prepare students that have advanced education, and so, I feel like they already expected you to know these things and expect you, again, the expectation was way up. But here in Chavez I feel like it was easier for me and for other students to go to their teachers or an administrator and be like, "Hey, I have trouble with this. What can I do?" For example, I was pretty low on my math, it was my math exam, and I was having trouble in math. And they had this program called Math Lab so when they realized that I was having trouble with that, they put me there. I was able to focus, [00:40:00] to also, how do I say this, strengthen my knowledge in math. So that was something BASIS kind of didn't really have. Again, they expected you to know. And even if they tried and tried and you still didn't know they would just give up, and be like okay, I don't know what you want me to do.

DBN: So, you felt like there was more of a support system at this school?

MNP: Definitely. Definitely, I feel like especially the way that, I don't know how to say it. There was also great resources for families, which there was none in the old school that I was at.

DBN: And I know that you brought up mental health a couple times, so I just want to talk a little bit more about that if that's okay. I do think it's important to recognize that since I feel like it's become a subject that has become less taboo over the years, or in recent years. It's interesting that you said one of the reasons that you guys moved was to be able to get health insurance and access those mental health resources. So, can you tell us a little bit more about what that experience was like, and how did your parents maybe become aware that you were having mental health problems?

MNP: I don't know how to say this. In the Hispanic community, I feel like some of us are very religious, families are very religious. There were times where it's like if you are feeling some type of way, go to church and talk about and that should make you feel better, or pray about it. My parents were religious, but it wasn't to the extent to where if they knew I was feeling down or something, "Go to church and pray about it." They didn't do that. I know there are some families that do say that [laughs]. They didn't really know about it until I was at BASIS where I would the state where I was at, I was not okay. And they could see it, but I don't think they really knew how to approach it. Because again, it's something that people don't really talk about during that time. They kind of realized it until I became suicidal, and they had to call, it was the catholic, I forgot what it was. It was this organization where they come in and evaluate you. And they did that twice in BASIS but it was still something that I don't think they were really, how do I say it, concerned about until I went to Chavez. And even they saw that the environment was

different. They maybe thought, “Oh, we changed her environment so she’s probably going feel better,” but that was not really the case. I started having anxiety attacks on a daily basis and I would be taken to the hospital because people didn’t really know. I didn’t know I had an anxiety attack; my parents didn’t know; the teachers didn’t know. They finally diagnosed me with anxiety, and then from that day [00:45:00] on they started to talk to me about it. They went and reached out to different therapists and different organizations like LAYC [Latin American Youth Center], Mary’s Center, to look for programs. It was this intensive program where it was like I had a therapist and a, maybe it was a case worker or social worker, I don’t really remember, but it’s like a therapist and someone who helps you out in school, would go to your school, see how you’re doing, and if you’re not doing good, find you a tutor. Stuff like that. And then after that it did get a little bit worse, especially even after I went to Paul. I did start having, again, suicidal thoughts, I would self-harm, I would just have anxiety attacks every single day and it was really tiring. I was kind of tired of it, but I couldn’t really control it. It just kept coming and coming and then I think by that time, I felt like my parents were a little bit more supportive about the whole mental issues, yeah, my mental health.

DBN: So, you felt like they had taken the time to learn more about what was going on?

MNP: Yeah, there were sometimes where I thought they weren’t going to learn, especially my mom. My parents are divorced. My dad actually went back to El Salvador so I would just live with my mom, and so I would see her literally every day. My mom, she struggled a lot with trying to learn about the situation and the problems I was having but she did learn. So, it took a little bit, but she did learn.

DBN: In all of this, who did you feel like you could lean on? Besides your parents.

MNP: I would sometimes talk to my best friend, but the thing was, the problem with my depression was I didn’t really talk about it either. I didn’t really want to talk about it because I felt like I was putting my issues onto someone, and I didn’t want that because maybe they already had problems that they had to face. I didn’t want to put my problems onto them. I wouldn’t really talk to just anyone. Sometimes I would talk to my therapist, but it was an off and on thing for me. Sometimes I didn’t really want to talk. It was kind of difficult.

DBN: Yeah, that’s understandable. I guess what were some of your outlets when you were going through this?

MNP: I’m kind of sociable apparently according to my friends [laughs]. I am sociable so it’s kind of weird. One of my outlets was going out and being social, but then some of my outlets were staying home and watch movies. That was mostly my outlets, it’s kind of weird, it’s like an introvert and extrovert.

DBN: Do you have any favorite movies that you consider that got you through some tough times?

MNP: Titanic, I don't know why, sometimes I ask myself what is it about it that I literally could watch it a thousand times and I don't get bored. [00:50:00] Still cry to the very end even though I've seen it multiple times. And Cinderella. [laughs] These movies, I don't know, those were my movies that just comfort me.

DBN: Yeah, they're iconic movies. [both laugh] And I guess, I just want to go back a little bit, because you mentioned LAYC. And I've been finding that a lot of the people that we've talked to have had some kind of connection to LAYC. I mean, it is a big part of the Latinx community here in the district. So can you talk a little bit about what role they had in your life? Or maybe what was that experience like when you were in that intensive program that you talked about?

MNP: So, I was there for a little bit because of the program that they had. And I loved the program. Both my therapist and my case worker was amazing. Especially my case worker, she was a very interesting person. We would just sometimes talk about shoes, or just clothes or hair or, you know. So, in that program, you can literally just hang out with that person. So I feel like, that helps me a lot to have someone that I could literally call because they would have an on-call thing. So they would kind of switch around. Like one night it would be my caseworker. And then the other night it would be my therapist. So I felt like, if I needed them, they would just be one call away. So they played a huge role into getting better even though there was a point where, you know, the program ended for me. They would still call and check in. So that kind of made it better, you know, because there are people who would just see you as a case, like just the case. And like after you're done, they move on to the next. But I felt like they were deeply, you know, invested in trying to help me.

DBN: And what was the name of the program? I'm sorry.

MNP: I don't really remember. Yeah, I don't really remember what was the name of the program. But I think is like intensive.

DBN: That's okay. So how long were you there for? You said it was a little bit.

MNP: I was there for I think two years? Yeah, two years, or three years? I think, I don't really remember. But it was a long time. It was a while.

DBN: And did you stay in touch with your social worker or therapist at all?

MNP: So I think after a certain time, I stopped actually having communication with them. But I wish I still would talk to them. But yeah, I don't. I don't have communication with them anymore. Which sucks.

DBN: Okay. Yeah, just curious. And so when you were in that program, was all of that during middle school, or was it also during that transition from middle school to high school?

MNP: Yeah, it went from middle school to high school when I was transitioning. Yeah, I think it literally went until when I was like 11th grade.

DBN: Okay. Yeah, and what was that transition like, by the way, from middle school to high school?

MNP: So it was kind of nerve racking, again, like going into a new school. I didn't really know anybody. I only knew like two kids from Chavez because Chavez only went on to ninth grade. And after that, you will have to go to another school. [00:55:00] So it was kind of hard. I was really nervous. But at the same time, I was kind of excited. I made friends. I know everybody's experience is different, but overall my experience at Paul was good, I really liked it.

DBN: What were some of the highlights?

MNP: So, there was a principal from 10th grade to 11th grade. Her name was Miss Fisher. I've never really had a connection, a deep connection with an administrator before. But with her I have a huge connection with her. Until this day, we still communicate. She was someone that if I wasn't feeling well, I literally could just go in, like, "Hey, I'm not feeling okay." And she would tell me, "Okay, then, how can I help you with?" So she was very, very caring about her students; everybody loved her. And I feel like she made the experience fun. She would make different events for us. And she knew that there were kids that would come from hard families. There were literally kids that were homeless, that were in foster care. But she still cared about them, and treated everybody the same. So that was something. She was just amazing.

DBN: And I also wanted to know, did you have any favorite subjects or topics that really interested you growing up here, whether it was in middle school or high school that you started to realize, "Oh, this is something I really like?"

MNP: Well, no, I don't really have any subjects, well, reading was kind of in between. I think for a certain time, I think this was 11th grade. I really like math, which is weird. But the teacher that I had, I think, made me kind of like it. If I could say that, she really made me like it. And then after that, 12th grade, I had Pre-calc. And I thought I was going to do so bad. But the teacher that I had also made me like Pre-calc. But it wasn't something that I would be like, "okay, I want to

have that, I want to do something that has to do with math in my career.” I've always known that I wanted to do something in the mental health thing. Psychology was the career that I wanted to take. For a long time. I knew that for a long time, that's what I wanted to do.

DBN: Wow, and when did you start realizing that or looking into it?

MNP: I felt like, even though my experience, I know how things are for us, for people that do have disorders. And how even for my own experience, how I felt like, there was nothing that I could do, or there was no way I could get out of it. And during this whole process, there were some times where I had therapists or people in my team, where I felt that [they] weren't really there to help me, that they were there just there to do their job [01:00:00]. And that, unfortunately, is something that happens a lot. And that's why kids don't normally like going to therapy, not just kids, but even adults. So, after me acknowledging that, I felt like even if I can make a little difference and help someone, especially if they think, “you're just going to do your job and you don't really care,” that's not what I want to do. I actually want to make an impact on someone, and actually be there not to do my job, but to help that person.

DBN: That's great. And I want to know, also a little bit more, if it's okay, just to go back. Because you did mention that your parents when you were in El Salvador, they were *viajeros*, they were going back and forth. And so, once they decided to come here with you and decided to stay, what did they do for a living moving forward?

MNP: So my dad, he did construction until the day that he left. He had his own little company. My mom has always been cleaning houses, but she did get her CDA [Child Development Associate]. During this time, she works at a daycare sometimes. I think we had recently come in when she got her CDA, she worked at the Barbara Chamber[’s]. So she has done some things with child education.

DBN: That's good. Yeah, no, I was just curious. And I know, you mentioned that they separated, and if you're okay talking about that, can you tell us more about how that happened? Maybe? Or, I mean, what was that experience for you?

MNP: They separated because of a situation that happened with another lady. [Laughs] But, this happened in sixth and seventh grade, so I was still at BASIS when this happened. It was really tough. And I have always been daddy's girl so when I found out that that happened, that implied of him moving out. So, him not being with me all the time. I felt really upset because of the fact the lady had children. So in my head, you know, I'm like, “he's gonna give them all the attention Like, what about me?” So I was upset because of that, too. And, it was really, it was a hard time for me. I think that was definitely what really triggered my whole depression, my whole anxiety. Yeah, I don't know, I was just going through a bad time. I was in a really, in a bad place. I was a

toxic person. Me and my mom had issues on a daily basis. It was just not Okay. But little by little, I feel like both of me and my mom have grown. And now we have a really good relationship. [Laughs] So, yeah.

DBN: And you mentioned that he had to leave, of course, and what is your relationship with him now if any of you have one at all?

MNP: He had to [01:05:00] leave because he got a job offer in El Salvador to work for an organization. As I mentioned before he had a little company, but this was during the whole Donald Trump administration. So there was a lot of *redadas* [raids]. And after he left the house, he went and he lived in Woodbridge, Virginia. So it was really hard to know that he would be safe coming from D.C. to Virginia, like commuting, because you never know where a *redada* would happen? It was just nerve racking. I felt like he was more safe going to El Salvador, back to El Salvador on his own terms than him getting, you know, deported. But our relationship still remains strong. We call each other all the time. We video chat. Yeah, like our relationships still goes strong. Even though he's in El Salvador, I do miss him. Especially on the holidays and my birthday does get a little bit tough and I do cry. But I feel like he's way more safer in El Salvador than he was here, especially during that time.

DBN: And when did he go back?

MNP: He went back, I think, three or four years ago. I think Donald Trump I literally had just recently, did he? This was, no.

DBN: He was elected in 2016.

MNP: So [pauses to count the years] well he left in 2017. Yeah, so that's when, yeah.

DBN: Wow. And, I know you briefly mentioned religion, and I wanted to ask you, what role did religion play in your life?

MNP: When we had first came here to the United States, we did go to church. My dad almost became a pastor. It was literally all the time it was church. Bible study, church on Saturday or Sunday, it was meetings, it was retreats, it was a lot. But, I think, I don't know. After that it was, you know, we don't really. Well, sometimes we do go to church, but it's not really a huge thing.

DBN: You know, what, if you don't mind me asking, what religious affiliation is that?

MNP: Well, we went to first we were in Pentacostal. But then we now, we go to a Baptist Church.

DBN: Yeah, I'm just wondering. I know sometimes we grew up religious and, you know, that continues, or sometimes it's the opposite.

MNP: Yeah, I mean, I still, I feel like I do still have that relationship with God. But I feel like once I started growing up, I think, the way that I saw little things, maybe that wasn't just my thing. So [I] kind of distanced myself away from it.

DBN: Okay. And I also wanted to ask, I know you mentioned in regards to growing up here, one of the things that was very different was the fact that you didn't have as much freedom. And, you know, that made me think of what community looks like here, right, versus other places. So do you feel like there was a community here and if there was, what did that community look like?

MNP: The community here, it was mostly based on, again, [01:10:00] during that time, we were really religious. So it was like that community. So, yeah that was the community.

DBN: Okay. And were there any places here in D.C., or even in Maryland, that reminded you of home?

MNP: No, not really. I mean, sometimes where I would go to church, it would kind of remind me of the church that we would go when I was little. But then after that, not really.

DBN: Okay. Yeah. And going back to your years in high school, can you describe to us a little bit about what that trajectory was. You know, whether it was maybe challenges or things that happened, or even classes that you were taking.

MNP: So, when I was going through my high school years, I didn't really think about how my status would affect me as I went on. I just thought that everything was going to be okay. Like, I could just get a job and not really have to worry about me being undocumented. But as I started going through high school, there were situations where that kind of was an obstacle. For example, I think this was 10th, no, this was 11th grade. I was invited to this--it wasn't a retreat--it was a conference on how to make, because I was in this program, not a program, it was like this little group, where we talked about how can we as students make the consequences, let's say for-- Because if you do something, you either get suspended or expelled. Like, how can we change it? Especially for us, if we come from a different background? That may be our life isn't as nice, like, what can we do? So they had this conference in Colorado, and it was paid for. The airplane, the ticket was paid for, where I was going to stay it was paid for. They were even going to give me money if I wanted to go out and buy something there. Everything was paid for. And they wanted me to go. But I couldn't go because I couldn't travel. And I was pretty bummed out. So I think from that day, I think it kind of hit me that, "Dang, this is actually serious. I'm going to

have obstacles.” And especially in senior year applying to financial aid, I couldn't do that. Different scholarships, I couldn't do that, because I didn't have status. So, things like that. When people would talk about if they will have kids--I mean, not kids. They will have like people come from different colleges or something like that and would talk about. And I'm like, “Hey, can kids that are documented, like what do we have to do?” And they would tell us, “You would have to pay as an international student, or you will have to pay as a[n] out of state student,” because I was undocumented or I'm undocumented. So it was really tough. [01:15:00] I feel like it got to a point where I wasn't motivated to even go to school anymore. Like, what's the point? If there is nothing to help me, then why should I continue this. As much as I wanted to continue, I just got so unmotivated.

DBN: Did you meet anyone during high school or even before that you saw was going through something similar?

MNP: No. My cousin, he got DACA before he graduated high school, so he was able to at least get a little bit of help. But after that, no. I didn't really know anybody. So I felt like that's what kind of also made it difficult for me, because I didn't have anybody that I could turn to and be like, “Hey, I know, you've gone through this before. What should I do?” I didn't have anyone.

DBN: And was there anybody at school, I guess, talking to you about this? I know you said there were people you could turn to, like the administrator you mentioned. Was that a person that you ever talked to about what was going on?

MNP: I did talk to her about it. She was really upset because she was like, “I don't understand, you're so smart. You're capable of doing this.” I think she was really mad about the fact that I was [not] able to get any help. But I felt like, as I could talk to someone, I just felt like they couldn't get it. I just felt like they didn't really understand how I felt or what I've gone through like?

DBN: Yeah no, it makes sense. And as you were thinking of pursuing a higher education, did you start looking for alternatives elsewhere that you weren't necessarily getting at school?

MNP: Actually, I had a counselor. She was amazing. I told her about my situation. And she would still try to help me, which is something that I had to like advocate for at school because some of the resources that they would give us, it wasn't really meant for people who are undocumented. So, I had to advocate for that. I would tell them, “Hey, you know, there's people in this school who don't have anything. Can you help us find the resources? Because again, we're what, like, first generation of going into college. We've never really had anybody to help. We don't have anybody in our corner to really help us. Can you help us?”

DBN: And what was the response to that?

MNP: Well, she really tried to help us find different things. Well, for me, she gave me a waiver so I didn't have to pay for application fees, which is something I was like, "thank you," because I was not going to pay, I don't know, \$60. She found some scholarships that I could apply to. Yeah, she would talk to the admissions office of a college and explain the situation and try to see what could they do. So she was a big help.

DBN: And what schools did you end up applying to?

MNP: I applied to George Mason, I applied to North Carolina Central, I applied to UDC [University of the District of Columbia] [01:20:00], I applied to Marymount, I applied to, I think it was Virginia. I forgot what the name of that college. I applied to a Bowie State. I applied to other colleges, I don't really remember. I actually got accepted to most of the colleges. But again, it was just the tuition, and them having to tell me, "Hey, you know, you have to pay more since you're undocumented." But I got to stay at UDC.

DBN: And coming back to the question of immigration status, right. I know, you said that you didn't really start talking to your parents about this until you were 15. So can you describe what those conversations were like, and maybe who initiated the conversation?

MNP: So I had recently just turned, I think, turned 15. And DACA had come, was approved. And it was a big, how do I say this, it was a big deal. I didn't really understand what was a big deal about it to be honest, I was confused. Again, I didn't really know about it until my parents were like, you know, this is what DACA does. And I was kind of confused about it because I'm like, I didn't really know about this. They would tell me, "You're going to have a lot of obstacles, once you start growing up." And this is what I talk about. For most of us, we feel like the option for us, as teenagers, or as young adults is to get married with a citizen. That's like, the thing. And that conversation has been brought up multiple, multiple times. Which sucks because I'm like, I don't want to get married just to have that. If I want to get something I want to get it by myself. I don't want to feel like I am dependent on someone. So yeah, that was mostly the conversations that we had. If you're not able to get something, your only option is to get married.

DBN: And when DACA came about and your parents started talking about it, did you all seek out information or legal assistance anywhere or find out more about the process or what was that like?

MNP: We talked to people at Casa. As much as we wanted, we didn't really have the money, the funds to do it. So we weren't really able to have me apply to DACA. But recently, when Biden

came into office and he said that he reopened it, I was able to apply. But the situation right now, yeah.

DBN: Yeah, it got more complicated with the most recent court decision, for sure. And have you heard anything about that? I know you mentioned that you're in communication with your lawyer, right?

MNP: I don't have a lawyer. My cousin, he's a lawyer, but he filled it out for me. I technically have been doing it by myself. [01:25:00] I went to go put my biometrics a month ago, well, actually about to be two months ago because I went in June and it's already August. But I haven't heard anything so far. So, I don't know where I stand.

DBN: And I'm just curious, because I know you mentioned you found out about it when it initially came out. So when it came out, you knew you qualified for sure and you guys just weren't able to afford it at the time? Over the years did that, did anything change, or what happened in that period of time between the time it came out, and now that you're now more recently applying?

MNP: I think, my mom tells me that sometimes she feels like it's her fault that I wasn't able to apply because she says that she relied a lot on my father to pay for the application. And now that she's become more dependent of herself, she has been able to get that money and be like, "Doesn't matter if I'm going to go broke, you're going to get that, you're going to apply." So I think it's been the growing of her saying, "I don't care if we're going to eat *frijoles* [beans]." I don't know, just go broke. She doesn't care. So like, "I want you to apply."

DBN: Okay, yeah I was just curious. And going back a little bit to high school. Can you tell us more about maybe the events leading up to graduation and what was that like?

MNP: So, I was kind of scared about me graduating because I was able to get a scholarship, but I didn't know if they were going to pay for my whole tuition or if I had to pay most of it. Because, again, my mom is the only one that works in the family. She wants me to be a full time student. So, I was mostly concerned, like, what if we can't pay for it? What's going to happen? So I think I was really nervous about it. And plus the whole pandemic happened. It kind of sucked the whole graduation thing. We had to do a drive by graduation, which I don't know. That sucked. But after that, I think this was like two days before my graduation, I had found out that they were going to pay for all my tuition. I was like, Okay, so then I was okay.

DBN: Okay. And now that you mentioned that you're one of the people that graduated during this whole pandemic. Can you tell us more about what the pandemic has been like, for you and maybe your loved ones?

MNP: The whole pandemic it was, well, it's still happening. But it was pretty bad, especially during the middle of it. We had to stop going to school. And it sucked because again, that's my senior year. I wanted to do all the activities that we had planned. But for some reason, I didn't really mind being at home for school. I was able to get a 4.0 GPA during the pandemic, [01:30:00] I'm just confused because a lot of people struggled with it. And I'm like, I don't understand. My aunt did get COVID. We had a lot of COVID scares, especially during the middle of it. I wasn't able to go out because my mom, she has high blood pressure. So I couldn't go out, I couldn't have, I don't know. It was like my conscience, it wouldn't let me go out because just in case anything happened to my mom, I would just be a wreck. And it also took a really big toll on my mom's mental health. She barely went outside because she was scared. I felt like it was so much fear that it was causing, the pandemic was causing that. Well, for my mom, she barely went out. She got depressed for a while. I got depressed too because I couldn't go outside. I didn't have a social life. And yeah, it was bad.

DBN: What was it like having your graduation in the middle of all this? And when did you graduate, by the way?

MNP: I graduated in June of 2020. Honestly, I didn't like it because, again, I wanted to walk across the stage. It's a really big achievement, especially for me. I've gone through so much for me just to graduate on a drive by graduation. So I was really upset. And then on top of that, you know, you have people like making fun of it on social media. And I'm like, bro, that's not something you guys should be making fun of because it's actually something that people are proud of. And the whole situation of the pandemic and us not being able to have a normal graduation is not funny. Honestly, it wasn't really that bad. They made it special. They had all the teachers out. They were playing music and they will call our names. And then we were getting out of the car, and then pick up the diploma, and then take pictures, and then just get in your car and let's go. So it wasn't bad I mean, I kind of had fun. And to be honest, it was pretty fun.

DBN: That's good. And did you do anything special to celebrate?

MNP: Because of pandemic, a lot of things were closed. So we just ordered pizza and watched TV [laughs]. That was pretty much it. Which I mean, I don't mind. That was like, let's have pizza. I don't mind. And wings.

DBN: That's nice. And going back to one of the main things that we're exploring through this project is changes in the Dreamers movement. And also just to see the connection between identity and how people perceive themselves. And, this term Dreamer that has come about two decades ago and that has become often used in conversations about immigration, let's just put it

that way. So we just wanted to know what has been your exposure to the Dreamers movement, if you have been aware of it, how did you become aware of it?

MNP: So I wasn't really aware of it until--I would see it on TV. [01:35:] But I didn't really have the knowledge of it until recently, where I heard, how do I say this. Before, I was really scared to say that I was undocumented and that I am able to receive DACA. I felt like that was something that I couldn't really talk about. But, I've been getting lately, not lately, but for a while now, I don't have that mentality anymore. I'm proud of being undocumented. I'm proud of being, even if I don't have DACA, I'm a Dreamer. I have dreams. So I'm not afraid to say it. But I really do love the work they're doing. I've had help from the whole United We dream. I've spoken to, his name is Gerson, I think, yeah. He's part of it. And I see them do protests, which I really want to do one day, but I never really get the chance to. I really love what they're doing. I feel like it's, especially for us, we're here to work, we're here to study. Why can't we do it? You know what I'm saying?

DBN: How did you connect with United We Dream?

MNP: I don't know if this was like a month ago, two months ago where undocumented students were able to get help, financial help from the colleges and universities. And I was really interested in that, because of course, I need help, you know. So I reached out to the UDC Latinx organization, and Gerson, who is part of the United We Dream, talked to me about, spoke to me about it. And I went on Google and searched it up.

DBN: And what were those conversations like? And I'm curious, too, because I know you said that you hadn't really come across other people, growing up, that were experiencing similar circumstances. So what was that interaction like, meeting someone in this organization?

MNP: It was it was really nice to talk to someone who maybe isn't undocumented, but works with people who are undocumented, works with people who have gone through the same things I've gone through, or probably going to go through things that I've gone through and their experience, it felt nice to actually talk to someone who, again, hasn't really maybe gone through it, but knows people who have gone through it, and could probably give me advice on what to do. So it was really nice to have. I feel like I have someone that actually understood.

DBN: That's good. And I'm also curious because I know you mentioned, before, it was difficult to talk about this with anyone. So I was just wondering, what are maybe some [01:40:00] of the feelings or even mentality associated with that? Do you feel like it was because you were afraid or ashamed? Or what was that mentality like versus now and how you see yourself now?

Commented [1]: @jlmengom@gmail.com relevant quote
Assigned to Jose Mendoza

MNP: I was scared. I was mostly scared of how would people react to knowing she is not from here, she doesn't have a status. I was kind of afraid of what people would do, or say. But I feel like as I got a little bit more older, I kind of realized that that's part of who I am. That makes me me, that makes me Maria. Maybe the circumstances aren't that good. But the reason why I am who I am now is because of that, if I'm being honest. If I wasn't in this circumstance, I wouldn't fight to be good or to be something in life. I don't know if you can understand what I'm trying to say [laughs].

DBN: Oh yeah, yeah. And I'm asking because also, not everybody's the same. Even if we're in similar circumstances, that doesn't mean we've been through the same thing. So we do want to know more about how people see themselves. And, I mean, do you know where that fear came from, at all? Did it have anything to do with what you were told in your household or things you saw around you, or where did that fear originate?

MNP: It was sometimes what I was told in my household of, "you have to stay low key, you have to stay on the low, you cannot make yourself seen because if you make yourself seen, you can get deported. Or you can get your family members deported." That was kind of my mindset before that was, "if I talk about who I am, I can either get deported or my parents could get deported." And I felt like that created an immense amount of fear that I just didn't talk about it. Yeah, it was just something that I was scared to talk about. Especially around my friends. Some of my friends didn't, well, most of my friends didn't even know I was in this situation, until later on, where I'd be like, "I can't do this, because I'm this." They're like, "Oh, my God, I didn't even know." There were times where people didn't even know that I was undocumented because of the amount of English that I talked. They're like, "Oh, my God, I didn't even realize that. I wouldn't even know. You talk English so well." And I'm like, yeah. It was mostly that, it was the fear of people finding out and what can happen after that.

DBN: I'm also interested in the other family members that you mentioned, in knowing I guess more about their journey, if you know any of the details or have been told any stories? Because I know that there's a large Salvadorean population here in D.C. And, I mean, there are a lot of reasons, right? Not just from the Civil War, but also people who have come because of those familial connections they already have here. So I was wondering, do you know any stories about how your other family members have come or why?

MNP: Well, my aunt came, she came by herself. Her name is Liliana. She's my mom's sister. Love her so much. [Laughs] She came because she wanted a better life. She had a kid, my cousin. By the time she got here, he was I think, 10. She just wanted to be able to [01:45:00] take care of him, have money to buy him clothes, buy him food, things like that. My other cousin, David, he came with his family by foot. He crossed the border because again they wanted him to

have a better life, better education. I feel like most of the people in my family would come because they wanted a better education, better future.

DBN: And do you know if they all came or have come during, or after the 2000? Or before anyone has come before?

MNP: No, well, my aunt, I think she definitely came before the 2000s. My cousins came after? No, actually, they came [in] 2000s actually, because I came 2001 so my cousin was already here when I came, so it was like a year before I went so they came actually in 2000.

DBN: And you still have family in Texas? I know you mentioned you went to Texas.

MNP: Yeah, we still have family in Texas just my aunt, my uncle and my three cousins.

DBN: And what about El Salvador? Do you still stay in touch with your family there? And how often do you communicate?

MNP: I definitely have family there. We communicate technically on a daily basis. My grandpa has recently gotten diagnosed with lung cancer. So that's been kind of a reason why we've been talking on a daily basis. Just to check on him to talk about how his chemo has been going. So yeah, we still have communication.

DBN: That's good. And in those conversations, have you talked to them about maybe what things have changed over there?

MNP: For sure, I've heard that the whole, the buildings and everything has definitely changed. It's more modern, it's getting more modern than how it was before. So I know that has changed. But other than that, no. We really haven't talked about it.

DBN: And do any of your family members, they ever visit here?

MNP: No, they don't have a visa. My cousin, Irene, she's actually going to move here because she got married. So her residency, I think it's a residency. She's going to come.

DBN: Okay. Yeah, no, I was just curious about that side of your family. And one of the things I think I forgot to ask you, as far as school goes, was if you were involved in any extracurricular activities or anything like that, when you were going to school?

MNP: I was involved with dance. A little bit of dance, it wasn't-- I did cheer in middle school. I think that was mostly it. I think during my 11th and 12th grade, I was more focused on trying to

get better and do better in school because I was trying to kind of catch up from me not doing so well because of how bad my mental health was, that I kind of wanted to, how do I say this? Get better because a lot of people doubted me there, would be like, “Oh, you know, you're not going to graduate, you're not even going to do good.” So I felt like I was mostly focused on trying to prove people that I was going graduate, that I wasn't really [01:50:00] focused on something else.

DBN: And do you still enjoy dancing?

MNP: Sometimes. Yeah, I would do--I'm not Bolivian--but I was in a Bolivian group. But ever since I graduated high school, I don't really go because that takes a lot of time.

DBN: What kind of Bolivian group was it?

MNP: It was Caporales.

DBN: Would you do traditional dances or what did you do?

MNP: Yeah, it was like traditional dances. So we would go on parades and stuff. Have you heard about Fiesta DC?

DBN: Mhm.

MNP: We would dance there.

DBN: Oh, wow. Okay. So you performed in public and everything?

MNP: Yeah.

DBN: And do you enjoy that?

MNP: I enjoyed it. I loved it. It was, it was hard. But I loved it. It was really fun.

DBN: And now I just wanted to ask more about what your transition from high school to college has been like. I mean, I'm sure it has been tough with a pandemic. But can you tell us more about what this experience has been like for you?

MNP: To start with, I was nervous of going into college online, virtually. I wanted to go in person and have that first day experience. But I wasn't able to. But honestly, the transition did

really good. I didn't really have any problems with adjusting, I think basically because it was virtually. But now it's going to be somewhat in person. So there's going to definitely be a change.

DBN: And what degree are you going for?

MNP: I'm going for Psychology for my Bachelor's in Psychology.

DBN: And what classes have you been taking?

MNP: So my first semester I took the regular IGD classes, which is the ones that we have to take. Which is like, math, writing. I took principles of psychology, which is something that they were kind of surprised because freshmen doesn't take psychology classes. But for some reason, my counselor was like, "Take it," so I was like, "Okay." Then second semester, I took my reading, writing. It was Communications class. And I took Abnormal Psychology and I took Theories of Personality.

DBN: And how do you like them so far?

MNP: I loved my psychology classes. It's really interesting. I don't know, I find it is interesting to learn about different disorders. We were talking about it for my Abnormal Psychology. Unfortunately, our teacher every year, she would end up taking us to like go on to a jail, to a prison. And that would be our field trip. But since it was virtually, we weren't able to, which sucked because I kind of wanted to go. I'm still debating of being a Forensic Psychologist and a Clinical Psychologist. So my Forensic Psychologist came out when I was like, "I want to go to the prison. I want to go to jail, I want to see." I really liked them.

DBN: That's good. And I'm trying to see what other questions I had pending. Were your college expectations, well, first of all, I also wanted to know was college always an expectation from your parents, or in your family?

MNP: For sure, it has always been an expectation [01:55:00]. Until recently, I think my aunt has kind of helped shift that mentality a little bit. Because, for example, I forgot what we were talking about when we were having a conversation. And it was me, my mother and my aunt. And she's like, "Yeah, it shouldn't matter if you do go to college, as long as, if you don't want to go to college, find yourself a job that you want." So, I think after that, my mom started realizing like, it doesn't always have to be, college doesn't always have to be the expectation. But unfortunately, that is the expectation. And in the immigrant community. Yeah.

DBN: And you're an only child, right?

MNP: Yeah.

DBN: So, for this, it was always an expectation for you anyway?

MNP: It was definitely an expectation. My mom wanted me to be a lawyer. I don't know why lawyer and doctor is like the main thing that parents want children to be.

DBN: I think a lot of times that it has to do with not just the prestige of the profession itself, but also because they tend to be higher paying jobs. But I think some people don't realize that the cost of getting that education is also higher. It takes longer to pay it off when you take out loans. But yeah, no, you're right. And I guess, how did they react when they found out you wanted to study Psychology?

MNP: My parents have always been on supportive on what I want. Even though my mom wanted me to be a lawyer, or a doctor, she realized that it all depends on what we want to do because we're the ones that are going to school for it, we're going to work in that profession. So they've always been supportive on that. My mom loved the idea of that. First, I've always told her that, hopefully, one day, I will work in the FBI because that's what I've always wanted to do. So my mom's like, "Yes." So again, she's really supportive on that as well.

DBN: And when did you start realizing you wanted to work in the FBI?

MNP: I've always since I was little, I've always been interested in that. I remember when I was little, I would watch these shows. It was *Los Files del FBI* [The FBI Files]. I don't know, I would just watch things on TV that ever since that, I've always been interested about it. It's just something that I'm intrigued by, it's just interesting.

DBN: And I know you're doing a summer program this year. So can you tell us more about that, how you got involved?

MNP: I've always done S.Y.E.P. I've been doing that for four years already. So it's been a while. It was kind of random that I was put into Hola Cultura. I was supposed to go to Mary[']s Center, but they put me in Hola. And at first, I was kind of debating on it. But I'm just like, let me give it a try. Like, maybe something different, maybe I'll like it. And that's exactly what happened. I really love the program. Moira is an amazing person. I feel like she is someone that even after the program ends, if I need anything, I can reach out to her [02:00:00]. I really love the topics that we talk about. Because even if this is like a job program, I feel like it's something that we, as young adults and teenagers have to talk about, or need to talk about, it's something that we don't talk about on a daily basis. So, being able to talk about it there is really, really good.

DBN: And now that you mentioned you've been an S.Y.E.P. before, what other organizations or places have you worked at?

MNP: I worked for Mary['s] Center since the beginning. I've done the Embassy of El Salvador, I've worked at the Marie Reed, I always get confused on how to pronounce them, with their program, like their summer school. Last year, I did L.A.Y.C., and I did the call center. Because during the pandemic, we were calling people who have called before in the office to ask for resources. So, we would call them back and see if they needed any more help or if they got what they needed.

DBN: Wow. And what kinds of roles have you had at some of the other places?

MNP: So for the Embassy of El Salvador, not the embassy, I'm sorry, the Consulate of El Salvador, I was mostly helping around. Like the workers needed help. So for example, I worked with helping people with their applications. I printed things, I put information in the computer. And for Marie Reed, I was helping a teacher. So I was technically a teacher's assistant. So I help little kids. I think it was kindergarten. So I would help them with anything they needed.

DBN: Wow. Yeah, it looks like you've done a lot of different things.

MNP: Yeah. [laughs]

DBN: And also, I'm curious, what have you gotten out of those experiences?

MNP: Well, for the Marie Reed, it kind of got me thinking about maybe working with kids. So mainly being a child psychologist. Because I don't know. Being around them is just so adorable. They're just so cute. I felt like I really enjoyed that experience. I felt like I was doing something by helping them. It was just so adorable. The consulate was actually, honestly, it was really fun. I got along with a lot of workers there. They helped me out a lot. If I didn't understand something, they would come in and they would show me.

DBN: And let me see if there's anything else that I wanted to ask. I know I asked about the different things that you remember growing up and I think maybe what I didn't ask you about was about foods that you remember that were maybe like a household staple?

MNP: Not necessarily food. They're called *sorprecitas* [little surprises], where they're just little packets and they would come with little toys [02:05:00], and confetti. And for some reason, I was in love with those. So my parents [would] buy me packets and packets of those. And what I enjoyed out of it was just opening them. It's not necessarily food, but it's something that, you know [laughs].

DBN: No, yeah, I know what you're talking about. And the other thing I wanted to ask was about I know you mentioned that you lived in different places in the area, including Hyattsville. Can you talk a little bit about the neighborhoods that you lived in here in D.C.? Or have you only been in one place this whole time?

MNP: I've only been at one place this whole time in D.C. Yeah. It's always been there ever since I moved to D.C.

DBN: Oh, wow. So you said it's Brookland?

MNP: Yeah.

DBN: Okay, and what streets are those? What street is part of Brookland?

MNP: I live in front of the Turkey Thicket community center.

DBN: And do you ever go to other D.C. neighborhoods? Just to get out? Or what are some of your favorite places in D.C. to go to?

MNP: One of my favorite places is the wharf. I really love the water. I love being near the water. I love going to the beach. So that's definitely one of my favorite places that I love to go. I also like to go to Georgetown. I really like the environment. I loved the buildings like the houses the way that they are. I don't know, I just like it. I like the waterfront. It's really nice.

DBN: And have you traveled to any of the other nearby states or, you know, other states at all?

MNP: I've gone to North Carolina because my family lives there, and because of the Bolivian dance, I've gone to New York, I've gone to New Jersey, and I've gone to Philadelphia.

DBN: Wow. What have been some of your favorite places you've visited?

MNP: Definitely, Philadelphia. I feel like where we were. It was very, it was different. The streets were literally brick. Just something I don't see. I've never seen that. It was kind of weird. This is cool, but weird at the same time. Yeah, their Philly cheese steaks are the bomb.

DBN: And are there any places like you aspire to travel to in the future?

MNP: I want to definitely go to Italy and Greece. I love the scenery. It's so beautiful. I would want to go to France, Paris. I would like to go to Australia, even though they have different

weird animals, I wouldn't mind going. It's actually pretty nice. Pretty beautiful, too. Where else? Yeah.

DBN: And I think I've covered all the major questions I wanted to ask. I just wanted to conclude by asking about maybe your future aspirations or your vision for the future in general.

MNP: Well, I really hope that I'll be getting my Master's degree [02:10:00] after I graduate from my Bachelor's. And after that, maybe going into my PhD. And working at the FBI is my goal. But if not, maybe working at a clinic as a clinical psychologist.

DBN: And I know you're in a very particular situation with your DACA application, right. So I also wanted to know, if you could say anything to legislators, and basically the people in charge of making these decisions that affect a lot of us on a daily basis, what would you say to them?

MNP: To put themselves in our shoes. I don't know, we're actually here to make a difference, we're here, again, to work and to study and I don't know. It's hard. I don't know how to say it, but just to think about that. We're not here to, some people think, live off of the government. We're actually here to do what we have to do. Which is, you know, go to school and succeed.

DBN: Well, thank you so much. Do you have any final comments or anything else you want to add about your life or anything ?

MNP: That's all.

DBN: Alright. Well, thank you so much. [02:12:10]