

Transcript of Interview with Lorena

Interviewer: How was your childhood in Mexico?

Lorena: My childhood in Mexico was a little chaotic because, unfortunately, my family was very unhealthy. My dad used too . . . [or I should say] my mom endured a lot of domestic violence, so it was a little rough.

Interviewer: What else do you remember? Any good memories? Any particularly bad ones?

Lorena: Well, due to the domestic violence, the memories [that I have] are not very good. But, I feel like most of the memories come from like my siblings. We spent such a short [amount of] time together. The last time that I saw my brother, you know when that happened, he was seven years old and then my sister was 16 and I was 10 [years old]. That's when [my parents] finally got divorced.

Interviewer: Did your mother always want to come to America or was the divorce a deciding factor?

Lorena: No, the divorce was the . . . [deciding] factor why [we came to America]. [This was] because she, [my mom], struggled so much in Mexico. In Mexico, it's rough because there is a lower class and there is the wealthy class. There is no in between. It's really hard, especially being a female that is divorced and didn't really have any education. It was really, really hard [for her] to get a job. So, she got a job that was barely helping her pay for rent [and] for food. She struggled a lot in terms of money. At some point, I felt like she felt so desperate [about how] she can't support the children, that she was like, "I need to move and find a better place for my children to be able to survive". And [because she wanted to] provide a better life [for us].

Interviewer: Did you understand what was happening when the decision to come to America was being made?

Lorena: Yes, I was aware. She actually asked me if I wanted to come with her or if I wanted to stay [in Mexico] with my dad. But my dad is such a violent person that I said, "No, I'll rather go with you". So, I knew, I understood. I didn't want to come here, funny thing, but I was like . . .

Interviewer: You just wanted to be with mom?

Lorena: Yes, exactly. 'Cause it's really really hard to leave your place of comfort, your country, your language, your friends and family, and things that you know. It's really hard to get out of that life and environment, to go somewhere completely new. [The fact] that you don't have a penny in your bag, you don't have the language, you don't have friends, you don't have family, you don't have anything at all. You know? So, it's really really hard, it's really really a struggle.

Interviewer: How was the journey?

Lorena: It was . . . again my mom was super super poor and we didn't have anything, we did it like . . . the old fashioned way, we crossed the border. We didn't have anyone [in America] to help us. We didn't have family members [here] . . . [like how] politicians use the words "chain migration" [when describing the situation where] you have somebody that's going to bring the whole family. For us, we didn't even have that. We didn't have somebody to support us and say like, "Come here!". We didn't have that, we didn't have anything at all. So it was really rough. Yeah. So we crossed the border.

My mom [had] gathered a couple pesos and she was able to afford somebody to basically help us cross the border. Yeah . . . it was a rough journey, because I was ten . . . no, eleven and my sister was [around] fifteen-sixteen. It was one night, completely pitch black, walking in the desert. Not knowing if you're going to step on a snake or if you're gonna die because of [the] wild animals or [if] you're just going to get lost in the desert. You don't know *anything*. It was really scary.

Interviewer: Was it (the journey) long or were you [living] closer to the border?

Lorena: No, it was long. We walked for more than, maybe, 18 hours. *Walking*. We used to stop every couple of hours, rest a little bit, and then continue walking. At night it was super cold, and then the morning was super hot. It was not easy.

Interviewer: Who did you come with? Was it you, your mom, and just your sister?

Lorena: *noise of agreement*

Interviewer: When you arrived at the actual border, what happened? How did you come through? Did you just walk in?

Lorena: Yes because it's the desert. There's no wall. It [was] like a little town, a village. The desert . . . there's no wall in the desert. The desert is completely open, but it's really hard for you to cross there, because it's the desert. Nobody's going to walk in the desert. Only desperate people walk in the desert. You really have to have big struggles for you to do that.

It's so funny cause I always say that in this country certain people look at us badly, us immigrants. They say, "You know, the immigrants come here and they take our jobs and they take our . . . whatever."

And I say, "Do you even know that to be able to move to somewhere completely different. Completely unknown. Like you have to have big, big, big, big situations going [on] in your life. You don't come here because, 'oh my god! It's so much fun! I'm gonna go over there, take their jobs! Yes! It's going to be a blast!'. No. Somebody that is running from war, refugees that are completely . . . they have lost everything, they lost their jobs, their houses, their towns, their family. And they *have* to move. You know? Or people that are being starved in their own countries or people that [are suffering from] violence, they're struggling with drugs, with cartels. People that are coming and shooting at them every night. So, they have to move."

I feel like that's a little bit, part of, what people don't know about immigrants. We don't want to come here, like situations make you move. Situations make you try to find better places to live.

Interviewer: When did you arrive? What year, what month?

Lorena: September 1999.

Interviewer: Where did you live on arrival? What was the first thing that you guys did?

Lorena: So, we crossed . . . [which was] so scary, again, because you don't know what's happening. You have the smugglers moving you around, from hotel to hotel, until they finally deliver you to where you're supposed to go . . . or be.

We arrived in Arizona, then we move to California, then in California we took a plane to (our final stop) [New] Jersey.

We used to live in an attic and in there [there were] ten other guys.

Laughter at the interviewer's facial expression

So, it was ten males, and my mom, my sister and I, *and* one of my cousins. We all used to sleep on the floor. I tell Avril, [my daughter], that sometimes I felt like somebody was watching over me because if they (the men) wanted to do things to us. They could have done it and nobody was going to know. It was just three females with ten males in a room [discounting my cousin] . . . like . . .

Interviewer: And it's hard to report something when you're in that type of situation.

Lorena: Exactly. Exactly. But thank God *nervous laughter*, nothing happened.

Interviewer: Did your mom start working soon after?

Lorena: Yeah, she did. I was . . . we all do . . . we get like a fake social security card and that's it. You start working.

Interviewer: What [work] was she doing?

Lorena: She was working in the warehouses. Yeah. I think you go to these agencies, and they send you to different warehouses. That's where she was.

Interviewer: What happened to you kids?

Lorena: *Oh!* We were working with her. I was eleven-twelvish when I crossed. We got here in September and my birthday was in October. So, I remember turning thirteen here. And then at thirteen years old, I was working in the warehouses [using a] fake ID, stating that I was nineteen years old and so . . . I was working.

And people could see that I was a minor, because I remember, I met a lot of people there and they were like, "You're a kid, what are you doing here?"

And I was like, “I’m not a kid! I’m nineteen!” *laughter*.

I was working for a year, until we finally paid everything to the person that helped us cross [the] border.

Interviewer: After that, what happened?

Lorena: After that, my mom enrolled me in high school.

Interviewer: Was it difficult?

Lorena: Yes. Very difficult. . . because I didn’t speak the language.

Interviewer: Were you put in ESL or was it more like immersion learning (the language)?

Lorena: No, it was actually ESL, and that’s why part of why my English is not as good as it should be.

Laughter

Because everything was ESL, everything was in Spanish.

Interviewer: So, ESL is mostly in Spanish? It isn’t like . . .

Lorena: Yeah, it’s mostly in Spanish.

Interviewer: Were you lonely?

Lorena: Yes. Yes, very lonely. [It’s] because you have no friends. That’s like . . . you don’t have any support system. Right? Sometimes society, like; your peers, your friends, your neighbors, your family supports you. But at that time, it was just me and my mom, trying to survive. And also, my mom was going through her own things. So, yeah, it was very lonely.

Interviewer: Were you able to make friends?

Lorena: Not right away, no. I felt like that took a long time, and after that it was just a handful. Even, up to this day, I don’t have a lot of friends.

Interviewer: Who were they?

Lorena: It was, actually, all the kids that were in the ESL program, as well. That all came here for different reasons and so we [all] didn’t know anyone and we didn’t speak English. We only knew Spanish. So, I ended up with that little group.

Interviewer: Is that how/where you met your husband?

Lorena: No.

Laughter

I met him through other friends.

Interviewer: What was it like to become a mother in a foreign country?

Lorena: When I had my baby, or when I got pregnant, I got my husband. And so he's very, I have to say, he's a very very supportive person and he's a very loving person. So, it was not as bad. It was like, "Oh! Now I have you". You know? And he's a great father. He has always been a wonderful father. So, it was not too lonely.

Because I was a junior in high school, and so . . . whenever I had to do homework, he was like, "Don't worry, I'll take care of the baby." He used to carry his baby and cook dinner for us, and I was like doing homework.

Interviewer: So, you continued with high school?

Lorena: *noise of agreement*.

I graduated with Avril. She's in my graduation pictures [and everything].

Interviewer: I just wanted to say that that must have taken a lot of strength and effort.

Lorena: *laughter*

Like I said, to me it was even harder through like childhood and coming here. When I had my baby, I was like in a different world. I was so happy. I tell her (my daughter), that I didn't go to prom. I was like, "No. I'm going to stay with my baby". To me [motherhood] was the most amazing thing. It was like a little happiness, after all the struggle.

Interviewer: Were there any, specific to becoming a mother in America struggles that you had? Or maybe just being a teen mother?

Lorena: Right. Well, yes, because I was a teen mother, of course, you don't have all those fancy things.

We used to live in a one-bedroom apartment. Sharing with someone else, a family member. It was a tiny, tiny room.

My husband had a car, but he used the car to go to work. And I didn't have a car. So, I remember, I used to push my stroller for like 20 streets to take my baby to the pediatrician.

Like those kinds of struggles.

You don't have enough money, but again . . . to me, in my head, that didn't matter.

I tell Avril, I remember [that] I used to go to the 99-cent store and be like "Ooh! What can I get for my baby?".

But it was not, like in my head that's not a struggle. I got better things, so materialistic things don't matter. But that was mostly the struggle, like you don't have enough money to support this baby but you still will do it.

Interviewer: Did you move out of your home and then [in] with Avril's dad?

Lorena: Yes. My mom . . . I feel like my mom is . . . of course, we're Mexicans and we're very—my mom is very conservative and a little bit close-minded. And so she was like, “No, you're pregnant. You need your family.” And I thank God that my husband is really really good and he's like a really loving and supportive husband, because I feel like; what if I got pregnant [and] you know?

Interviewer: And it wasn't the greatest guy?

Lorena: Exactly! And he was like in drugs or something? She would've just thrown me out and be[en] like “Yeah, you have to live with your husband now.” You know?

So, I feel like that was wrong [coming] from a mom. But I guess she's also a mom. You don't really know what to do in certain situations so . . . it's okay.

But yeah, basically she was like, “No. You have to live with your husband now.”

And I was like, “Okay,” so I moved in with my husband.

Interviewer: Did you feel like you received support from the system? Did you give birth in the hospital, and what was it like?

Lorena: Yes! Actually, because the Medicaid¹ from New Jersey only covers pregnant females or children. I was pregnant and even though I didn't have a social security number, they (Medicaid) was able to cover me. And I think my mom's insurance covered a little bit too. I was not stuck with payments to the hospital, forever, no. It was covered, thank God.

Interviewer: Were you happy to have had your child in the U.S. or would you have preferred to have given birth to Avril in Mexico?

Lorena: No, it's definitely U.S. Well, because again, I struggled in Mexico. I used to see how my mom used to make, let's say, \$10 for a week. You have to divide that by five days, to be able to eat a little bit every day. My mom was working maybe 16-18 hours a day and my sister was trying to work as well, to help us.

So it was just me, eleven years old, trying to cook a meal for my family. But then, I was only eleven years old, so I didn't *know*. Whenever I burnt the food, it was like, “You're gonna eat that burnt food because you don't have any more money. Either you eat the burnt food, or you don't eat at all.” So, it was really . . .

I am grateful for [the fact that] my mom brought me to a better place. Even though I struggled financially, it was not like the struggle that my mom had.

¹ In the audio of the interview Lorena seems to be saying that Medicare insurance covered her for her pregnancy. Upon further investigation, it appears that she most likely received aid from Medicaid and not Medicare.

At least I got WIC². WIC used to give me milk and cheese and they give you those little coupons to buy formula or whatever.

My high school provided me with a social worker. She used to also help me with diaper coupons and little things like that.

It was not as bad as . . . you know

Interviewer: It could've been?

Lorena: Exactly. Or it could've been in Mexico. In Mexico people live on the streets. Little children beg for money on the streets. Mexico is rough.

I'm so grateful that we're here.

Interviewer: Do you feel like your circumstances forced you to grow up too quickly?

Lorena: Yes, definitely. Definitely. I feel like even though I was so happy and thrilled that I had my baby, you do miss those little things as a teenager, right? Like, I never went clubbing, I never did all those little things that you're supposed to experience when you're a kid. But it's alright, I mean.

Laughter

Like, I think about it and I'm like it's alright, I didn't miss too much.

Interviewer: What made you decide to become a hairstylist?

Lorena: Well, it was mostly because I already had my baby and I needed money. I felt like it was such a quick career; I was going to be able to finish [training] in less than a year, I was still going to be able to go to work and be back (to care for the baby).

It's very flexible. You don't have to be [working] 8 hours sitting in an office. You can go to the salon, run and go pick up your kid from school.

It was flexible, easy, quick money. That was the reason why.

Interviewer: Did you face any challenges in becoming a hairstylist?

Lorena: Yes because hairstylists aren't run by anyone. We are ruled by the state board.

But once you get your license, that's it. Usually [in] the salons, there's no one making sure that you're following the rules. There's no one.

If your boss says, "You don't have to follow the rules," they (stylists) don't. They won't.

² The New Jersey Supplemental Nutrition Program for Infants and Children. It provides "wholesome food, nutrition education and community support for income eligible women who are pregnant and post-partum, infants and children up to five years old" ([NJWIC](#)).

It's hard, because sometimes people/managers [won't] pay you. And what're you going to say? There's people paying cash, there's no way for you to prove [that] "I made this much money. You have to pay me this money." They (managers) will easily take advantage of you.

You don't get any benefits because you're a freelancer, you don't get any vacations or health coverage or sick days or personal days or holidays. You don't get any of the benefits of a . . .

You're just a freelancer. And if you get sick, you don't work, you don't get paid.

Those are my struggles as a hairstylist.

Interviewer: Now that your daughter's older and she has become an adult, has her own job. Do you think you'll change careers? Go back to school?

Lorena: I honestly considered it. Especially with COVID³ and the pandemic and the lockdown, I was [beginning to] question my life decisions.

I was like maybe I should do something else. Maybe I should go back to school? Maybe I should work from home?

But then, at the same time, I fell in love with the career. I really love what I do. It's very emotionally fulfilling for me. Having the power to make somebody feel better about themselves. Helping somebody struggling with depression. You have the power to listen to somebody, and just by listening, [listening to] ranting about a problem. You can make their day better.

It's so amazing to me.

I would like to . . . in terms of "I could be making more money," but then, again, the emotional part of it [has me going] "No, I really love what I do."

Interviewer: What should the public know about being an immigrant in the United States?

Lorena: Like I said, I feel like people see immigrants and their so afraid of immigrants; because you don't know them, because they come here with a different religion, different culture, a different state of mind, different traditions, and family [values].

Because you don't know who they are, you're afraid of them.

I feel like we are targeted because Americans live in a bubble (in my opinion). They think "This is my little bubble and there's nothing outside of this bubble."

I feel like that's why people get shot in parking lots on Christmas day because, "Oh, I cannot find a parking space to do my Christmas shopping, I'm going to shoot this person because this person took my parking spot."

³ Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is a contagious disease caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). It has spread worldwide and has led to a pandemic.

They (Americans) don't know what's out there.

And I'm like, if you travel, if you know other cultures, if you meet other people . . . You know [that] we are all the same. We're here for the same thing. To survive. To love your family. To provide for your family.

We immigrants are the same. We don't come here hoping to steal somebody's job. We come here to survive. To give my family, my children, my parents a better life.

I am currently a DACA⁴ recipient. That's all the protection that I can get from politicians.

I have been here since I was eleven or twelve years old. Been working for this country. Paying taxes, because my mom, since the first day she got here she got the ITIN⁵ number to pay taxes.

We have been paying taxes since Day One.

And I cannot get anything from the government, because the government thinks that I'm a freeloader or that I'm just here to get benefits from the government.

Like, I never had to ask for unemployment money; just until recently, right now, because of COVID. That was the only reason why, and only because my corporation asked me to apply.

Since Day One, we have been struggling.

I love this country, because again, my country would not be able to provide what this country is providing for my kid. With dreams, with hope, with opportunities.

We should be more understanding and respectful of immigrants, because at the end of the day, we are all here for the same reason and the same purpose.

Interviewer: What was the process of getting DACA like? I know that there has been some fluctuation, especially when Trump came in and he "repealed" it and Biden came in and re-instated it.

Lorena: DACA is a blessing and a curse at the same time. It feels like we're only pieces in a game that they're just going to shift us and move us wherever they (politicians) feel like it's convenient for them.

Just only for political purposes.

They don't think. They don't care about [us] being real people.

I finally got a social security number and I'm finally on the books, thanks to this program.

⁴ Consideration of Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) is the government program for "certain people who came to the United States as children and meet several guidelines [to] request consideration of deferred action for a period of two years, subject to renewal. They are also eligible for work authorization [through DACA]" ([DACA](#)).

⁵ Individual Taxpayer Identification Number

But they play with us. Saying “I’m going to take that away from you (Trump). Yeah, it’s canceled.” And then it’s not; somebody else saves it, “Oh but Texas sued again, it’s going to be removed, it’s going to be canceled. Just kidding.” And then recently Biden [said], “Don’t worry, I’m going to protect you, but JK, it’s going to be repealed.”

It feels like a roller coaster.

I hate to read [news on] it, but I cannot help it. I have to read about this news, but sometimes I hate it because I get so invested and I’m crying my eyes out, saying, “Oh My God, they’re gonna remove it (DACA)!”

It’s a roller coaster of emotions.

At the end of the day they (politicians) are going to do whatever they want with us.

We are just being used, as they wish, for political purposes.

Interviewer: Thank you.

END