

Interview Transcript

Key:

BN: Brenda Neary, Interviewer

CM: Carolina Moratti, Interviewee

BN: So, I'm here with Carolina, whose work here in Middlesex County is so inspiring, and I'm just honored to be speaking with you today. So, let's get to know a little bit more about you. Can you share a little bit about yourself, any personal interests, hobbies, anything you'd want to share?

CM: Thank you so much. I'm the one who's honored. I really appreciate that you decided to choose me for your interview. Thank you so much, Brenda. It's so nice to have you here, finally to talk to you. I'm so happy that you want to get to know more about me, and the community work that I do, I really appreciate it. We have a lot in common, especially food.

BN: Definitely.

CM: So, we're definitely going to talk about food as well. Things to know about me, I am a domestic violence survivor. I'm a single mom of a 17-year-old boy named Abraham. I'm a community organizer in Middlesex County. I have done a few things for the community, and I think we can talk about it for a minute.

BN: Okay, so I'd like to touch on your migration experience. Can you tell me a little bit about your reason for migrating here?

CM: Yeah, my mom was here. She came with a visa tourist, overstayed her visit with my brother and my sister, and she was always pushing to bring me here. Unfortunately, I didn't have a visa at that time, but some way somehow, I was a recipient of a visa lottery, and I was able to go. A lot of things happened in between, it took a longer process, but my mom was, with her generosity and strength to keep pushing, she was able to recover that visa lottery for me and bring me here. That was in 2005.

BN: Okay, so was she here in New Brunswick in Middlesex County when you got here?

CM: She was actually in North Plainfield, Somerset County. And then I moved here with Abraham after living with my mom in Middlesex Borough, but it was still Middlesex County.

BN: Okay, so you were here in 2005. Can you describe a little bit what those early years looked like?

CM: Oh yeah, I came here in 2005, no English at all whatsoever. I started working as a cashier, attendant on fine fur. Then I work as a house cleaner for my mom. I was a babysitter. I was a taxi driver. I was doing delivery of tires. I think I do all kinds of jobs.

BN: So, you did a lot of stuff. So, was that how you learned English, through some of those jobs?

CM: No, actually I learned English because my second job, my first job was the cashier, the second job was cleaning houses, and the third job was a nursing assistant for a minute and then I started to be a server inside an assisted living community. So that's where I have my 30 something English teachers. All the residents of that location taught me how to speak English. They made me repeat, they let me practice, they made me make sure I was saying the words in the right way. They made me bring the things and repeat, container, jugger, da-da-da-da-da. So that's what I learned with them. And also, that amazing group of that elderly community, it was the group who named my son Abraham. So, I got a lot out of that experience of working with that assisted living.

BN: Okay, and so what were some of the challenges in your early years here?

CM: I became a mom; I am a domestic violence survivor and a single young mom very early in 2006. I was officially a single mom in 2007 when Abraham was like probably six months old, with all give and take, trying to fix things. Officially, officially in 2007, before Mother's Day, I was a single mom. I was hide by my pastors for like three, four months, and then I was able to start getting out and trying to look for my life, getting jobs here and there, trying to provide for my son. And I ended up putting him on a Head Start school. And then I found a flyer for Promise Culinary School. Based on a promise that I made to my grandma on her deathbed that I was gonna finish culinary school. Because I have culinary school studies in Peru, but I wasn't able to finish. I went to Promise Culinary School here in New Brunswick, and that's how I ended up doing all the other stuff that I do in the community.

BN: So, your culinary school experience in Peru, it didn't translate here?

CM: No, because I didn't graduate there. Without graduating, even if you graduate, it's very difficult to come validate and bring the documentation and all of that. I have studies on tourism administration and culinary arts, but I couldn't apply that here, so that's why I went to Promise culinary school here.

BN: Okay, all right. So, I guess at that time were you going to school while being a single mother?

CM: Yeah, I think I was doing the taxi driver job on nights and also the weekends until like three, four in the morning to be able to work and go to school. I was going to night school, so five thirty or five in the afternoon to ten p.m. Yeah, and then one month before

finishing school, they gave you the internship, and they gave it to me at the Behavioral Center from UMDNJ, which is Rutgers now, and they hired me. So, I stayed with them for about two years, and then I transitioned to different companies. I worked for Bristol-Myers Squibb, The Kitchen, Compass Group, all corporate stuff, because I needed to stay with Abraham. So, I rather to go to work at five in the morning and be ready to pick him up from school.

BN: So, was that when your project Sisterwork started?

CM: No.

BN: Or were you more in the culinary field at that time?

CM: I was in the culinary field at that time, and one of my friends called me to see if I could do a culinary segment on her show, on her cooking show in Patterson. So, I started going in there every Monday, with my mom, we do this culinary segment, and then the culinary school called me, and they said, "I heard you are you doing a culinary segment for a show? What's going on?" And I said, oh yeah, we're doing that. "How come you didn't tell us?" And I was like, I don't really think I should have to tell you, but no, of course, that's big, blah, blah, blah. "Can you come? We want to offer you something." So, the culinary school offered me to be the culinary instructor for this program called Let's Cook or Vamos a Cocinar. Let's Cook was offering cooking classes for moms and their kids. So, we started doing that with the families and that opened the door to my community work because I realized all the things that I needed at some point, right? Finding out where to get services, where to get food, where to get dental, where to get anything. It wasn't so easy to reach. There was not enough information, or sometimes just because of the language barrier, women didn't want to ask. Because there is places that they offer Spanish translation, but they feel ashamed. And they also feel worried about the immigration part, more before than now, but they always, there's always that stigma of like, do not ask for help because immigration can come, and you can get in trouble. Or if you want to apply for immigration and you are requesting help, they're not going to give you documentation or whatever. You know, it's a lot of things in the air. So, people refrain themselves to ask for help.

BN: Was that something you ran into or that you've seen?

CM: Yeah, of course. I experienced that with the parent of my kid, he used to tell, "Don't do that. They're gonna take the kid away from you." He used to manipulate me with that because I didn't know. I didn't know the rules. I didn't know that we have rights. I didn't know that we're protected. I didn't know any of that. He knew, and he took advantage of that. So that was also one of the inspirations for me to do the community work, to make sure that women don't go through that. I mean, I cannot go through every woman and be

like, oh, but at least with the little that I can give or tell, I'm 100% sure I can make a difference.

BN: Absolutely, yeah. And was that sort of how you got involved with local strength?

CM: Yeah. So, all the community initiatives are like, it was like a window of time, right? Window of frame of time, right? So, the first thing I did was Let's Cook. From Let's Cook, Esperanza Neighborhood Project, or New Brunswick Tomorrow, called me in to start working in the very beginning of the creation of Mercado Esperanza.

BN: So, you were involved in the very beginning of Mercado Esperanza?

CM: Oh yes, absolutely, absolutely. I helped develop the structure, the backbone of the culinary part of Mercado Esperanza. I also created some of the stuff for the kids and the mercado. At some point, I used to work in the kitchen with the entrepreneurs, drive the van to bring the food to the park, drive them back because at that time, not everybody could have access to driver license. So, I had to drive them back and forth and all of that. And also, it was very important for me that the vendors and the entrepreneur of the mercado make sure that their recipes were like legit, and back to the sources of the original recipes, bringing back home, that was my whole intention. So, working with Esperanza, Esperanza was also working into collaboration with coLAB Arts. John Keller, the academic director of coLAB Arts called me and said, "Do you want to work? You want to collaborate with us and coLAB because we have a lot of stuff for the kids related to the arts." I was like, of course. I spend majority of my income tax return on paying for art school for my son. "Oh no, we have a lot of programs for free." So that's how I started working with them. Promoting and I kind of fall in love with the work of coLAB with the kids.

BN: So, what exactly is coLAB arts?

CM: coLAB Arts is an arts organization who works with one of the divisions, the Summer Institute, and the Winter Institute. They teach kids social justice through the arts. They learn a lot, and they also have another program called START, which they take to the kids to see plays or to do art-related stuff. But first, they take them to dinner. So, it's kind of, they show them the good life, you know? And you can have access to all of that and learn how to enjoy those things, art, music, theater. So, they do all of that and they also have work, they have another division that works with artists, local artists and they promote that, and they have another one that promotes content creation as well. So coLAB arts is very diverse, very welcoming, and open to anybody who would like to be part of it.

BN: Okay. And this was all sort of post-pandemic?

CM: All of this was pre-pandemic. We keep working with the community and trying to get more involved, trying to push some initiatives. At that point, it was more to collaborate in whatever was open. So, we have a conversation. I met Luisa Reyes through the Food Alliance and through Luisa Reyes, I met Sara Ferreira, which is like, they're backbones of the community here. Very young girls who do a lot in the community. We sit down on the table with another of their friends, remember, it was Chef Pearl, the director of Elijah's Promise at the time, home. And we sit down about a conversation on creating maybe an organization for women about domestic violence or kind of teaching them about how to identify if they're going through domestic violence or not. So, on the conversation, I was like, I think there is very reputable organizations who already do that in Middlesex County in New Brunswick. And I put on the table the fact that there was a lot of girls who only speak English coming from a Spanish background, and a lot of moms who are Spanish and they don't speak English, so it was not communication between them. So, I was like, I think that has to be the key for our program. Try to be that bridge of communication between moms and kids and daughters. So that's how we started Sisterwork. So now, again, Sisterwork have different divisions. We have the mom's division, where I push the moms and we work with them to push them to fulfill their own dreams. And another division of leadership with Rutgers University, where we push the kids to do leadership and be more involved with the community and do more things. So that's another part. And then we have the family events, which are the parties where the moms and families and parents come and enjoy a family party, all of us together, right? So, Sisterwork is very open. We have a lot of things to do going on with Sisterwork. So that was Sisterwork. And that was the pandemic. We're working with the kids. We're doing our things. coLAB is running. Sisterwork is running. And we are all good. I'm still maintaining my regular job, which is a phlebotomist. I work for a lab.

BN: A lot on your plate.

CM: Yeah. So, I was talking to John Keller and Charles Berkman on the fact that I was doing all of this while I was working in Spotswood, living in Middlesex Borough, and working in New Brunswick. So, it was like, driving and going here and there all the time. So, they were like, "You need to figure out a way to move and live in New Brunswick." So, we started apartment hunting. It took a minute, but we were fortunate enough to find a beautiful place in city center. I moved. It was a community effort. The woman from New Brunswick went to Middlesex and helped me out, bring their husbands with their trucks. It was beautiful. That was kind of the answer, for me to be like, oh, you know what? I'm doing the right thing by moving to New Brunswick. But I also had to let go of my two small businesses I have. The catering, and the candy tables, and the decorations, all of that was related, but I let it go.

BN: How was it to make that decision?

CM: If I was gonna move to New Brunswick, I knew I was gonna do more community. Some way, somehow, I knew. And I was like, I cannot hold community and the business. It's gonna be either or. So, I choose community, knowing that it's not a much financial reward, but I know it was more for my heart and for what I was passionate about.

BN: So, is that how the pandemic sort of shaped things? I mean, I see your drive to help the community. Was it the pandemic that brought that about?

CM: The pandemic also put me more on the map and make me work more. The initial idea of me doing the community work, the main reason is to inspire my son and to help people not to go through what I went through looking for help. If we have the resources and we know, our job should be to share it. Because I used to be, I used to get very upset when people used to say, why are you helping so much? They have to figure it out on their own. Why if I know the resources? Why if I know the answers? There's no need. So, that was the conversation, and you know. So, I move in December. The pandemic started in February pretty much.

BN: Yeah.

CM: So, I was like what I'm going to do. My friend Claudia was like, "Carolina, I told you, you like to talk, you already do cooking show cooking show before, you should go back to do that but you should do it on YouTube. I help you. I believe in you." I was like yeah yeah, we're gonna do it at some point. I'm trying to extend that time. I'm trying not to think about it as much, but then the pandemic is getting worse and worse and worse. So, we started, helping at Fish Incorporated. I used to be a client in there. I was a volunteer already before the pandemic, and I started going more hours in there and helping out more. So, they give us the stuff to give around New Brunswick and Claudia and I, some way somehow we became having like a full time giving that food away through the city, but we realized that the content of those boxes that we're preparing are not necessarily contain a lot of Hispanic products or milk or formula for the babies. So, we started to figure it out developing and asking for donations. So, people is dropping here and we're able to buy more food, buy more resources to be able to get boxes more like, with more Latino stuff in there.

BN: So, is this your initiative Outside the Box?

CM: Yes.

BN: So, can you tell us a little bit?

CM: So, Claudia and I were sitting down and she's like, and I was like thinking on this, but I don't know how to tell her. And she's looking at me like, I'm like, I think you're right. I think it's time to do a cooking show. "Yes," she's like, and I was like, doing what we have in the box and teaching how to do it with those ingredients. Exactly, so it was

like, both of us thinking at the same time. We came up with the idea. We dropped the conversation, we tried to plan ahead. How are we gonna do the recordings? Where are we gonna do the recordings? And all of a sudden, I get a phone call from Daniel Soren from coLAB Arts. He said, "The pandemic is getting kind of, we don't know. We don't know what world we're navigating. We want to know if you will be interested of doing content creation for coLAB Arts platform. And whatever you want, whatever you think is right, we can do. You can do whatever you want. It's a blank canvas for you." And I'm like, I just told Claudia about this, this, this, and this. I love the idea. Let's do it. Let's make it happen. So, we start making press. We start announcing the show. At that moment, Claudia's like, "I'm not going to stay in Jersey. So, you want to go on your own, but I'm going to support you." I'm like, but you just told me, you just told me you're going to support me. So, we started the show. A few months after that, not a few months, a few weeks after that, she's like, "I'm pregnant." I said, well, you cannot leave your house. I'll do the food distribution myself, and she's like, "You're crazy. I lose my mind if I stay home." So, she did the food distribution, her pregnancy with me, and the show. So, we did it all together. And during that time, we encountered an issue, having a mom needing to provide a birthday celebration for their kids. And how do you tell a kid, I don't have nothing to give you for your birthday. That's how I created birthday in a box project.

BN: So, it's all these sort of little box initiatives, one thing led to another.

CM: I think I have a little obsession with boxes. So, after birthday in a box, I mean, after cooking outside the box, we started birthday in a box project. We already had a few distributions going on, but we add this to our initiative. So now we're doing the birthday boxes. Initially, we're doing these boxes for every kid who needed in the city. Out of our capacity, sometimes we were having three, four birthday boxes in a week. Now, we only provide the boxes to the kids of a local shelter. We don't do it for everybody because it's a lot. So, while I was doing cooking outside box, John, the pandemic is kind of alleviating and we were able to provide a better quality of image, he can bring more cameras, and now we're bringing more local community people to cook with us. And I switched it a bit, I gave them the challenge of cooking a dinner with twenty dollars. So, we have deputy commissioners, committee women, community organizers, people from the hospital, dieticians, writers, you name it, people who are doing something in the community, we're gonna bring it to the show. So, we have every Monday, new people, entrepreneurs coming and cooking and talking about what they're doing at the moment. So, it was like an interview with a cooking show.

BN: So, it's almost like using your resources, but then also bringing in other members of the community.

CM: Yes, to be able to talk about what they're doing. It was like what's going on in New Brunswick plus cooking. Kind of like that. And then I got an invitation from the county to

do an episode about what I was doing already, like cooking, food insecurity, how to cook with stuff that we get in food pantries. What I was doing kind of similar, but with more with a twist of like legacy of cooking, legacy of food. So, they invited me to do one episode. So, I go with my bags of ingredients from one of the local food pantries, the host at the moment, asked me to cook something different and we varied. We make a salsa. It was very basic. I was like, I didn't feel too happy about it. I was like, I'm just like this, but I have my whole box and I can cook more, but we leave it like that. I'll just leave that. A few weeks after I have a call to see if I can do another episode. I said, of course. And another episode and another episode. But this time they want me to host. So now I'm the host of Share Your Foodways.

BN: Okay.

CM: Cooking outside the box is kind of on like a big, long break. The pandemic is more established, like more you know, almost gone per se. So, we kind of leave cooking outside the box of like an open door. We do maybe one episode here, one episode there, but it's not like every Monday like before. We're doing Share Your Foodways more now at this point, right?

BN: So, can you describe a little bit what Share Your Foodways means?

CM: Yeah, Share Your Foodways is like we cooked with local chefs or local people about putting more energy on the local, on the food history of what they did, the dishes. How do they bring the ingredients from other countries to here? How do they do to push cultural heritage through the food? And what we do and the partnership with Replenish is how do we do to bring food insecurity to the table on this conversation. So, all the recipes that we have had a food recipe card, and all the ingredients are inside a bag that Chef Sam prepared, and those bags get distributed by the local shelters. So, for every recipe we have 100 kits. And those get distributed like that.

BN: So, it's almost like one of these prepared meal services.

CM: And the reason we do this is to dignify the fact that you're going to a food pantry or a food bank. Because if you are going to a food bank, it's not easy because a lot of people try to make it look like it's bad or you are in a bad situation that you're going there. It's not like that. Things are tough right now. Times are really tough, and if we're able to use these resources to kind of help our families to eat better, why not?

BN: So, this is sort of helping remove stigmas, for people that just need help?

CM: Exactly. We're trying to take the stigma out of the picture, right? Bringing dignity, bringing respect to the people who is going to get resources or food to these places. I was a client. I'm still a client sometimes. I go get food on these places because it's needed. Sometimes we struggle. And if we need it, if the resources are there, we have to take

advantage of those resources to be able to feed our families, especially the way it is right now.

BN: So how does this tie in with the Cooking with Cans initiative?

CM: Yes. So, Share Your Food Ways had this part, right? So, we have all these episodes. We have three episodes that they went to the Library of Congress in Washington, DC. So, we have all these episodes already done. And Replenish invited us to cook with the cans that they have in Replenish.

BN: So, I'm sorry, Replenish is a food pantry?

CM: It's the food distribution of Middlesex County, the biggest one.

BN: Okay.

CM: From there, we went to all the other places. So, Jennifer Apostol is the director there. She invited us to develop a recipe and cook with those ingredients that they have on the food bank, on the warehouse. So, I did a few recipes, and they invite the food pantries workers or volunteers to be part of this. People from schools, people from local pantries, people from YMCA, et cetera. When I did the class, I think I did a soup. And what I did, I did the due date, before the due date and another one another recipe with the same ingredients but after the due date and I make them try it. I said do you see the difference? No, because as you know the due date is just a reference. You can use it after. Sometimes it doesn't taste the same but it's still good to eat. So, they really like it and some of the schools of the food pantry started requesting classes. So, that's how we started with the cans initiative, trying to teach people how to cook good food with the contents of the cans. Because people are very afraid of cooking with cans. They think they have chemicals, or they're not safe to eat, or if they're dented, you cannot eat it anymore, or if they're past due, you cannot use those anymore, et cetera. So that's my job right now, to teach them not to stop cooking with the cans they have at home. Work with whatever you have, vary the recipes, change the recipes, adjust your recipes to what you have in your pantry. Not necessarily go to get your food for whatever you want to cook following my recipe. We're kind of deconstructing cooking, right, in a way. So that's the new part, a new era of Share Your Foodways, which is very exciting. We're working with the greater New Brunswick Charter School. I have electives with the students over there. For about eight weeks, we're gonna be cooking with them. I have classes with the YMCA coming up. I did classes with the moms of the local preschool right here. They get food every week, and I grab one of the ingredients and tell them what to cook with each of the ingredients. So exciting stuff like that, that we're trying to, for me, it's like, maybe dignify my cans, because I think it's food at the end of the day. And if we're able to use them, give them a good use, instead of putting on the street, because a lot of the families, I saw that when I walk around New Brunswick, when they don't know what to do with the

cans, they put it outside the door or the streets for somebody to take them. So, if I can teach them how to use them instead of getting in the garbage, because if they don't use it, the garbage people come and they clean it up, they pick it up, and they're going to end up in the garbage. So, if we can skip that and make sure that these foods get eaten by the kids or the families, that's the whole idea.

BM: So, can we talk a little bit about Promesa Project and how that came to be? I know that you donate dresses to teens and how that's helpful.

CM: Yeah. So, I worked, before the pandemic with Mariam Merced from Robert Wood Johnson, on something called Quinceañera and Sweet Sixteen Comunitario, community, right? So, I was very passionate about the project. They created a Quinceañera and sweet sixteen all together for the kids of the community. And the parents were very pleased because a lot of them cannot provide for their families. So that was a very special moment. And I was always thinking on the dresses because a lot of us have dresses and we don't know what to do. We use them one or twice and we don't know what to do. So, in the back of my mind, I always have, we want to do something with prom dresses. And I met Aris Corcino, who was the manager at the building that I reside. And we always talk about, I'm always talking about the community initiative so I can bring them to the table. When I talk about what I do, she was very passionate. She said, "I really wanna do community. Maybe at some point we can do something together." She called me and she said, "Carolina, I do have a lot of dresses, I wanna do something." I said, I've been thinking of doing something for prom. She said, "Let's make it happen." She's like, "Yes, of course. Let's be partners." So that's how we became partners, on Project Prom, we call it initially. But we find out that there's a bigger organization called Project Prom already. They do pretty much the same, which is provide prom dresses for the kids in the communities who cannot afford a prom dress, because they're super expensive.

BN: They're crazy expensive.

CM: So, my intention was to work with the local entrepreneurs and ask them to help us out to put together a boutique. So, I have my friends from the Daniela Events. They brought glitters and flowers and everything and they put like a stage. So, when they try the dress, they can get on and everybody can see them. So, it was a store. And we did that at the coLAB location, which is the First Reformed church right here in Bayard. And we were able to provide 104 or 105 dresses for the girls.

BN: That's impressive.

CM: Any kid, any girl who came to get a dress, nobody left without a dress. I was elected one of the top three Latinos in the state. And I wear a beautiful black dress that I went to pick myself because I don't like to show my arms, and that was a special dress that I found. And we have a client in there, she came and she was kind of my weight. And we

couldn't find a dress that didn't cover the arms. I said to her, if I bring you a dress that is very special to my heart, would you put it on and wear it if you like it? She said "Yes." So, I came home grabbed the dress with happiness and sadness because it was a very important dress for me. I only wore it once, like I said, I really wanted to keep it because it was very important for me receiving that recognition and I put the dress on this girl. I zip her up and I saw the face of this girl and I was like you can totally have it, wear it enjoy it, embrace it. She was super happy and when I saw her, I saw myself back in the day when I was overweight, when I felt bad about my weight and when I felt bad because I didn't have the money or the knowledge to eat better and founding a good dress that fit me and made me feel beautiful could be a life changer. So, I saw myself into that girl and I was like, I gave her a hug, I packed the dress and I said, this is a very important dress. I hope you can wear it with a lot of pride. She said, "I promise." Because she really liked it. It was very special. It was a very special moment. And then I have another dress. Two days after, the next day that they were open, I was holding and holding waiting to be able to wear at some point. And I was like, I can't be holding for this for too long. If I ever get to the weight that I want to be, I'll buy another dress.

BN: Absolutely. But that's the importance of what that did was that it empowers people to feel confident.

CM: Yeah.

BN: So not just a dress.

CM: I went and I did the same with this girl. I put her on the dress. I said, I was trying to get into that weight, I didn't do it, so you can wear it. So, I did that too. And a lot of the other volunteers did the same. It was a very special moment of empowerment, of pushing the girls to their best of their beauty. Many of them came feeling like, you know, when you're a teenager, you feel like they're ugly looking. You're like, I'm not that pretty. Aris Corcino's sister, which, she's also an artist. She knows a lot of people in beauty because she does a lot of PR for a lot of organizations and companies. She was able to bring nail artists, makeup artists. So, we were able to send the kids of New Brunswick with her makeup and nails to prom. So it was, some of the kids have the complete package just because of the location where they live. So, it was very nice to be able to do that. Very, very powerful. We still have dresses and we started preparing for the next season, which is going to be in March. So that's the Promesa Project, which linked to people started asking me and they were like, "Are you taking donations? Because I know you're taking donations for dresses." I'm like, I might, what do you have? "I have a lot of clothes. We have a lot of baby clothes." And then Sally, which is the producer of Share Your Foodways said, Chef Sam, the one who does the clothes, she has a lot of moms because she has a baby. She has a lot of moms who want to donate baby stuff. So, I said, okay, let's do, like a yard sale inside coLAB, thanks to coLAB, and the First Reformed church

for letting me use the space all the time. So, we said, "Let's put a store together, like a pop-up store that people can come and buy for free." We just gave them a voucher that they can buy whatever they need. So, the very first time we were able to serve kids from pregnant women to kids 18, completely free of charge, we served 75 families. Each of them have a \$50 voucher.

BN: That's so interesting how it seems as though one project has sort of led to the next, it's just sort of been almost a big tumbleweed that continues growing.

CM: Yes, but I mean, it's always me kind of involved in each of the projects, but each of the projects have their own lead. Right? Will said that, for Birthday in a Box project, I was working with Chef Karima. She's the one who make the cakes. With Promesa Project, I work with Aris. She's the one kind of leading the project. With Local Strength, I have Chef Sam and Sally leading the project, because I can be back on it and be the connection and all of that and organizing, I'm involved in all of them, but I couldn't do it all on my own. I need to have people who is committed to do this work. And we're probably gonna have more programs coming up. Sisterwork; It's Sara, Luisa, Sara Ferreira, Sara Lundy. So, it's people behind all these projects. By myself, I wouldn't be able to do it. But it's just a community effort.

BN: Yeah, it shows the importance of community.

CM: So, like I said, I'm sure we're gonna have more programs coming up, and I would be more than willing to do so. It was more things that we did in between besides all of that as well. Yeah.

BN: So, in recent years, you've organized flag raising ceremonies. As you said, you've been voted as one of the top Latinos in New Jersey, and you were honored by the Peruvian Consulate for Leadership. So how did you transition from this community involvement to just full-on cultural ambassador.

CM: Thank you. I never thought of that like that, that extent, right? New Brunswick has probably one of the biggest Mexican communities in Central Jersey. Now I can say Central Jersey because we're official.

BN: Is it really?

CM: Finally.

BN: I'm like, it exists.

CM: Yes, it exists. So, I work very close with the Mexican community. And I was having a conversation with my friends Shara and Jenny from Patterson, because flag raising ceremonies are very common around Jersey City, Patterson, Mercer County, all of that, Newark, very common. But it's not as common around here. And they were like,

“Carolina, why nobody does it?” I said, I don't know, I've been wanting to do it for a long time. And they're like, “You should.” That's how I did the paperwork for the first one. So, we did the first flag raising for the Mexican flag. We do it together with a little celebration called Mexico En New Brunswick. That was the first year I organized it. And then the second year, which was this year, we're right here on city center. So, we're right next to Monument Square Park. We closed the park. Not myself. It was, again, a community effort thanks to Arts New Brunswick, the New Brunswick Cultural Center, Arts Middlesex County. They all collaborated with me and Dr. Rosabel Pastrana to be able to make it happen. So, it became a festival. Mexico En New Brunswick Festival, with the flag raising ceremony and the celebration of the 10-year anniversary of Sacred Heart Dance Group, which is led by Dr. Rosabel Pastrana, who is a doctor in Mexico, who is a very backbone of the community as well. So, we created the second one. And funny story, I am Mexican by heart, but I'm Peruvian by birth and I love my Peruvian culture and heritage as well. They were like, “It only makes sense to do a Peruvian flag raising ceremony as well.” Of course, so I put my efforts together. This was more of work with a few Peruvians in the city, and my friend Sally, my producer as well, who also helped me to put it together, and my friend Sarah, my friends from the New Brunswick for the Arts, New Brunswick Cultural Center, again, the county, all of them are the ones who helped me to make these things possible. A lot of things can happen when you put things to the table and you have people who is willing to support you and be like, “Oh, yes, let's make it happen.” So that's how all the flag-raising ceremonies happen. And I think, together with my community work, the flag-raising kind of put me on the map to be able to have. Somebody nominated me for this Latino, the U.S. Latino Affairs, who is the group who organized the top 50 Latinos. I think the first year it was top 100 on the whole tri-state area. And then the second year, I was number 51 the very first time.

BN: That's impressive

CM: Yes, I remember my father sent me \$51 from my country, he said, “Because you're number 51, 51 or 53, something like that,” I can recall, that was the first time, and then the second time, I was number three, because I spoke to him and I said, where do you do this? This is very important. It needs to be pushed more. And he said, “Well, the first time we did it virtually.” I said, bring it to New Brunswick. So, I spoke with my amazing New Brunswick people, and we were able to bring it to the State Theater. And that's when we have the big event with them, and I was number three.

BN: And what better place, really, than State Theater?

CM: Right? Yeah. Number one was a very good guy from New Brunswick as well, the leader of Me Sonrisas, which is another organization. Number six was also another person from New Brunswick, Rosabel Pastrana. And we have the friends of the Latino community, which was Gus Lehman, and we have Bobadilla, which is a captain of police

in New Brunswick. So, a lot of the recognitions stay home here in New Brunswick. It was a very good experience to be part, and I was honored to be the top three Latino.

BN: That's a huge honor.

CM: Yes, yes. Next to such important people, such important state leaders in the community. And yes, it's a very profound question because about 18, 17 years ago, I was just a 22-year-old trying to put together the little dignity and the little pieces of our life to be able to raise a baby and to be able to succeed in America with a lot of odds and a lot of people, a lot of people expecting me to fail. Because let's be real. People want you to do that. When they see you on the low, they want you to stay on the lowest of the low. And I think it was very powerful to be able to see that it happened. I don't talk about it as much because I think generally that I do the work that God just put me to do. I'm just a messenger. I'm just a vessel to be able to fulfill whatever God wants me to fulfill. And that's it. But if you see, if you go in retrospective in what happened, yes. It just happened from, a lot of work was required, but I will never expect all of this to happen. I know we haven't done, we're not even halfway of what is gonna happen and come, but I'm very proud of what we did, the work that we're doing as a community.

BN: So obviously your commitment to helping others, it's really, I'm inspired by it. I'd like to learn a little bit more about you, though. What do you like to do on your downtime when you're not out saving the world?

CM: I don't really have downtime. The other day my friend asked me, "How is your social life?" I said, I don't have a social life. Everything is related to work and things I do in the community. But I love fashion. I love crafting. It distracts me a lot. I love decorating. I like to decorate my house. I like to decorate for the holidays. I do love to cook for my house, for my family. I like to nurture my family with food. I like to explore. I'm also enjoying and learning how to get healthier. I went through my own personal journey because about five years ago, I was very overweight. I was 337 pounds, very diabetic, fatty liver, and I got very sick. I had a cold, but I was coughing. I was so overweight that when you cough, you kind of get cramps on your stomach and I couldn't breathe. The face of my son being so scared of losing me kind of woke me up to start my own journey. So, I started pushing up the fact of getting healthier. So, I did a few surgeries. I did a few diets and I keep pushing to be able to get healthier as well. So, I enjoy that as well. Trying to teach people how to cook, and eat healthier, that's what I do with AARP. I'm one of the culinary instructors with them. So, I cook with them, and I also do that with Robert Wood Johnson. I cook too, I work with a group of diabetics. They have a group of diabeticos in Spanish. I cook with them; I teach them how to eat and the low-glycemic content and food that they're not gonna spike their sugars. I'm not longer a diabetic, but because I'm familiar with what to eat. So, I like to teach people that too. So that's another part of another division of what I do with the community. So, eating

healthier and eating good and make sure the food that you're going to eat, it can, I mean, before it was a time that I really run out of carbohydrates, but I was able to learn, which ones are good and which ones are bad, and be able to share that with the community. So, I love to do that. Food, decorations, fashion, community, empowerment with the women and the kids. I like to make sure the kids feel like you're trusting them and making sure that you believe in them. So being able to empower the youth and inspire the youth make a big change.

BN: So, I don't see you slowing down anytime soon, given all your motivation. So, what do you have planned next?

CM: I always joke around of that I always said somebody's going to see me and I'm going to become the next Latino Martha Stewart. Without time in jail, I pay my taxes, I'm not serving, but I like to be able to see what more is coming into the table for Carolina as a person as well professionally. I would love to have the opportunity of creating content on my own to be able to do more of that. I love to do entertaining. I'm also an emcee for events. And I'm a wedding officiant as well. So, I love entertaining, the entertaining part. So, I would love to see if there's opportunities for me, if somebody wants to cast me, ha-ha. That and a lot of community stuff. We have more stuff coming up for the kids, for the community. Like I say, keeping with the project of the cans. And like in general, all of these, as you can see on the story, nothing was really much planned. One thing followed the other one and that's how it happened. So, I'm very excited to see what else is coming on the way because I know something is gonna pop. Every time that I see that, oh, things are slowing down, boom, something comes. So, I know it's a lot of things coming up, and I'm excited for it, and I'm ready for it, to keep working on it.

BN: So, here's a tough question. We touched on it a little bit, but I think people have misconceptions about immigrants. So, could you sort of dedicate a few words to people who might fear immigrants?

CM: Yeah. What we see on TV is not necessarily, I'm not saying all the immigrants are good, but I'm also not saying all the immigrants are bad. We're loving people, we're people who like to, we have different cases. The only difference with me, it was that I came, and all of this happened to me here, but there is a lot of girls who go through what I did on their countries. And if you try to, I escaped trying to save my son when he was five months old. I escaped this abusive relationship, and I was able to escape because I was in America. But if I would have been in another country, I would try to escape too. And that doesn't mean I'm a bad person, I just escaped danger. So, there's a lot of people who is escaping, honestly escaping, honestly trying to look for a better life. And its amazing immigrants who make wonders here, who were able to transform and become entrepreneurs and give back to the community. We are thriving, we are inspired, we're trying to help each other, help the community. So yes, I understand it can be intimidating,

but there is people who was born in here who also can be bad. So, we can never judge a people by their book, by their race, the how they look. We always have to learn how to go and look for the best of the people and give people chances. Sometimes you have to give two, three, four, five chances until people gave it, until people made the decision to be better and start. I escaped after the second time. I went through a lot before escaping. We have to understand how to be patient with people and see the best of them, because you can never know. Immigrants in general are loving, grateful, thriving. They love to eat. I work with different immigrants from different countries, Polish, Afghanistan, Hungarian, Mexican, in Haitian related food doing the cooking show and all of them in common is that I feed you because it's my way to show you love. So, I think we have to learn how to give chances and if you see that there is some immigrants acting bad or doing incorrect things just keep in mind that we're not all like that. I just apologize for that to begin with but just understand that we all not like that and sometimes when they going through that is sometimes it's pure ignorance. They don't know how things work in here. I saw a video the other day of a very young couple in New York and they're driving a little motorcycle, and they have a baby in between. I'm not justifying the action; I'm just giving it as example. In our countries, that's normal. Nobody told them, you can never put a baby. Common sense will tell you, but sometimes when you're young, you're just acting out of what you've just been seeing all your life. Maybe before judging them, try to explain them, hey, here we don't do things like that. It's a lot of teaching that we have to do, because the life in America is completely different. I remember when I came here, my son came one day crying, "I didn't have no Valentine's." I said, what do you mean? What is that? I didn't even know you have to send Valentine cards to the kids at the school. The next year I blew it. I make a picture. I make a picture of Abraham doing this. So, I make a hole and I put a lollipop in there. So, the next year and every year I keep blowing it up. But not everybody knows. We don't know the culture, so sometimes it's about understanding and learning the culture. So, before judging them just maybe try to put a little bit of effort and try to explain. If you don't speak the language, maybe try to see if you have a friend who can translate for you and try to work, coexist right?

BN: Yeah.

CM: Work together to understand and to get to a place you can be surprised. Sometimes people can look like they're very rough and disrespectful and rude, but when you get there and you try to talk to them and try to see what's going on, you'll be surprised.

BN: Wise words.

CM: Yes.

BN: Well, thank you so much. Is there anything else you'd like to share?

CM: Thank you for being here. No, just to say that keep dreaming, keep pushing, keep working hard, keep loving, keep eating good and just try to make it work, and as much as everything looks so dark there is always light at the end of the tunnel. It sounds cliché maybe but it's true. If you just keep pushing, it's gonna go away. And most important to me don't feel afraid to ask for help reach out whatever you need food, medical, housing There is always a chance. They say, no, it's impossible. It is possible, but you've got to keep knocking hundreds of doors. But do it.

BN: Well, thank you so much. It has been an honor talking to you. It really has been. Thank you so much. And thank you for sharing your story, it means so much.

CM: No, thank you.

BN: Thank you.