

Interviewee: Monica Salazar Carmona
Interviewer: Lucia Z. Knoles
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Transcriber: Lucia Z. Knoles for Clemente Course in the Humanities



Abstract: Monica Salazar Carmona, born in Colombia, came to America at the age of 27 to marry a man she'd met on the Internet. Although the man had promised to send her to college, Monica soon found herself trapped in a condo with an abusive husband. Her embarrassment about her situation and her limited English made it difficult for Monica to leave. However, after the birth of her son, Monica eventually confided in a neighbor who helped her find the community services she needed. As Monica supported herself and her child with a series of jobs, people sometimes seemed to mistreat her because of her limited English. However, today Monica is proud to empower others through her work on community health at the YWCA as director of health equality and community health. The education she has received through the Clemente Course in the Humanities has also taught her to believe in her own abilities. No longer a believer in the American Dream, Monica intends to remain in this country and make it a better place for her son to grow up in. Yet, when people complain about hard times, Monica thinks back to the difficulties she has overcome and thinks anyone can do the same with hard work and education.

LK: Today is Tuesday, May 23rd, and this is Lucia Knoles interviewing Monica Salazar Carmona for the Worcester Women's Oral History Project. So, could you start, Monica, by telling me when and where you were born.

MS: I was born in Pereira, Colombia. My city is a group of states that produce eighty percent of the coffee that people consume around the world. Colombia is a really pretty country.

LK: Have you ever been married.

MS: Yes?

LK: And the name of your husband?

MS: Ex-husband.

LK: Ex-husband?

MS: I prefer not to give the name?

LK: And do you have children?

MS: I do.

LK: And do you want to give the names?

MS: I have a son, Nicolas. So cute!

LK: Yes, I know Nicolas is cute. And how old is he?

MS: He's twelve.

LK: Where did you attend school?

MS: I finished high school in Colombia. I did the university, and a couple more things.

LK: So give me the name of the high school and the university.

MS: The high school's name is Christo Rey. After five more years of school I finished by bachelor's degree at the Technological University of Pereira [Colombia]. At the same time I finished a few diplomates and some certified courses.

LK: And what is that?

MS: I finished a specialization in Methodology and Didactics of Sports Training and I mastered in swimming.

LK: Excellent. And I know the answer to this one. Do you currently work in this country?

MS: Yes I am.

LK: And what do you do?

MS: Well, they call me Director of Health Equity and Community Health. I work here at the YWCA.

LK: Excellent. And did you work back home in Colombia?

MS: Yes.

LK: And what did you do there?

MS: I was a swimming coach. I did that since I was sixteen. I went through exhaustive training as an instructor, professor, and after passing all the requirements, I became a national swimming coach.

LK: So would you like to tell me something about the country you came from?

MS: Well, Colombia is a really pretty country. The people are really nice. You feel warm. They like to help each other, and the food is delicious. Fresh. It's not like—I didn't know then it was fresh because for me everything was fresh over there. I didn't know how you call it when you freeze? What is the name? Well, for us everything is fresh.

LK: Not frozen, canned, dried?

MS: No, well we don't use that.

LK: And when did you leave Colombia?

MS: I left Colombia 14 years ago.

LK: And how old were you then?

MS: Twenty-seven. Twenty-eight? Yeah, I'm going to be 43.

LK: And who did you bring with you? Your son?

MS: No, he was born in this country.

LK: Yes, I should have known that. And why did you leave?

MS: I met my ex-husband by Internet and, well, I came with the promise of the American Dream.

LK: That answers a lot. And what were conditions like in Colombia when you left? Was there anything going on in Colombia that made you want to leave?

MS: No, actually I had a really comfortable life. My family lived comfortably, and I had a job. I worked for the government. I wanted a family, and a good guy, and that is why I decided to come to the United States of America.

LK: I understand. How did people react and how did they treat you when they knew you were leaving?

MS: People thought I was crazy. They were concerned because they didn't know what to expect here and how I could handle myself.

LK: Were they concerned about you coming to meet the man, or were they concerned about you coming to be on your own in America?

MS: Yes.

LK: The second one?

MS: Yes, the second one. I was overprotected, and my life was fixed. I didn't have to—just go to school, was my job. My mom was always—you know, even when I was older, she was the boss.

LK: But you didn't let that stop you?

MS: No, I didn't. I decided to come here.

LK: Was any of that decision because you wanted to start making your own life?

MS: Yes, actually, because our cultures are a little different than the culture here, and sometimes you cannot think for yourself. You have to ask for permission.....

LK: Is that because you're a woman, or . . .

MS: ...because I was a woman. I didn't see my mom asking for explanations to my brother.

LK: I understand. Did anyone come with you?

MS: No. I came alone.

LK: And who did you leave behind?

MS: My whole family.

LK: And who besides your mom would that be?

MS: My mother, my father, my brother, my nephew, my aunt, my grandpa that was alive, my grandma that was alive, my whole entire family.

LK: Have you seen them since?

MS: Yes.

LK: Do you go there or do they come here?

MS: When I get the money, it's kind of expensive to go there. I go once in a while. At least once every three years or every two years.

LK: So how did you get ready to come?

MS: This guy paid for my school. I always liked to go to school my whole entire life. It's still a part of my life. He enrolled me in school here. I went to Dean College.

LK: Where?

MS: Dean College in Franklin.

LK: And what did you study there?

MS: Well, I came as an international student to study English. The promise was that I would finish, and I would stay in the university. That's what I was told. My ex-husband told me that if I would come here . . . After a month, he took me out of the school. It was a private school. And obviously I came here with a visa, and they gave me a visa for many, many years. And I came here that way.

LK: Okay. So what was your first impression of the United States?

MS: That it was pretty. Actually, not really. When I came I came to the Atlanta airport, it was huge. I was so scared, extremely scared because my international airport is like Worcester size. That's my international airport. So it was a struggle the first time because I didn't speak English, and I didn't know where to go. I didn't know—I was trying to ask people how to get to the place that I had to go. I didn't ever have to take the train.

LK: It must have been terrifying.

MS: I was scared. That was the scary part. It was beautiful, but the feeling was really [makes a gagging sound.]

LK: And then where did you come to when you arrived?

MS: To Boston. I arrived at Atlanta, and after that I had to transfer from Atlanta to Boston airport, to Logan.

LK: Right, but you came into Boston. So then did you live in Boston then or did you come to Worcester?

MS: To Milford.

LK: To Milford, and then how did you end up in Worcester?

MS: Well, my ex-husband decided that. Well, then we were supposed to be married, and all that stuff, and he got something little for us, and he got a condo. And he got it, actually, and we moved.

LK: So what changed in your lifestyle, in the way you lived, because you moved to the United States or when you moved to the United States.

MS: Everything changed, literally.

LK: So what comes to mind?

MS: My freedom that I was thinking that I had in Colombia was complicated because I didn't speak any English. I couldn't get out from the house. I didn't want to cross the streets. I could spend two weeks stuck in my house without getting out from the house. I was scared. I was scared to go to the store. I was scared to answer the phone. I only recognized one phone number, and that was my ex-husband's or my aunt's. She lives in New York. Those are the only people that I talked to. But I could just stay at the house. I think I went three weeks without getting out of the house because I was scared.

LK: Wow. When did that change, and why?

MS: Everything changed since I came here. I was promised to be in school, and in the time when I was in school, school was frustrating because I couldn't communicate with them. But the school was part of the experience. Dean College was beautiful anyway, and the people were nice. But after that I—well, that guy that I married wasn't the guy that I had in mind that he was. It was more complicated. Everything changed; I started to be beat up. He was hitting me and threatening me to call Immigration, and I was scared. And at one point I wasn't scared anymore. I said, "Okay, if he calls immigration, I will go back to my house." But he started threatening me with my aunt, and she didn't have a green card at that time. He said, "If you leave me, I will call Immigration on them," and that was another thing. Yeah, I couldn't eat whatever I wanted to. I don't drink—still, I don't drink sodas or anything like that. I was drinking milk. But I couldn't drink more than two cups of milk a day. I couldn't move anything from my house. And if I cleaned, I had to put everything in the same place. Well, everything was really, really, really bad.

LK: How did you get out of that situation?

MS: It took me a lot of time, a long, long time to get out of that situation. The situation was really, really bad. I had every type of abuse that you could imagine. And I didn't want to tell anyone. I was embarrassed because I had really high levels of education and I was embarrassed that someone would know.

LK: But it could happen to anyone.

MS: But I didn't know that. I know that now. But I didn't know that. I was scared because I didn't know what to do. I got pregnant because I decided to get pregnant.

LK: So why did you decide to get pregnant, considering the situation?

MS: It was eight months after I was thinking that I was old at 28. And I got married and I said, "Well, I didn't want to get pregnant. Now I'm going to be pregnant from my husband." And I really want something that would make me feel alive. And my son was conceived because I

decided so. Not because of something else. That was the beauty of all this. And it was really difficult to get out from that situation.

LK: Did the abuse continue while you were pregnant?

MS: The only time he stopped was during the nine months that I was pregnant. During the pregnancy he didn't do anything.

LK: And so what happened after your son was born?

MS: The first day, the night he was born, I had a C-section, an emergency one, and immediately obviously I was with the surgery. He started yelling at me calling me lazy and stupid, and "Get up from the bed. Help. I am tired. You take care of that kid, the baby." Since then I was crying in the hospital, the doctors were thinking that I had some type of like post-partum depression. But it wasn't that, it was just that I didn't want to tell them. That he was verbally abusing me. I had doctors coming in to check on me because they knew they saw me crying, they were thinking I never said anything, but I knew that the doctors were really nice trying to talk to me and see why I was crying. And I said—well, I tried to tell them. But I didn't tell them why. I told them that I was tired. But I didn't tell them that . . .

LK: So when and how did you finally leave? How did you manage to do that?

MS: I'd been in this, my workplace, for eleven years.

LK: Here at the YW?

MS: Yes, and they remembered that during that time I had a neighbor. She was mean, but she told me something that made me realize that I had—I had something to offer. And she brought me to Centro de las Americas [CENTRO offers social services to the community and focuses particularly on the needs of Latinos, immigrants and the underserved]. And I brought all my certificates with me, and they made a resume. I started to send resumes to everywhere where I saw something close to what I did. Like sports science or related to fitness, something like that. And I sent one right here [to the YWCA], and the lady who interviewed me is still the human resources person. I remember perfectly well that the only thing that I understood: two I.D.s.

LK: You needed two I.D.s?

MS: That's the only thing I understood because I didn't speak much English.

LK: So how did you get through the interview then? How did you get the job?

MS: Because of my resume.

LK: Did she speak Spanish?

MS: Nope.

LK: She must have been impressed by you.

MS: Yes, I have a good background.

LK: But I also mean by the person she met.

MS: Yeah, I am pretty sure. Well, I'm still here.

LK: So how did you end up learning English?

MS: Because I had to. They gave me a job watching the gym. I was working four hours a week. In that shift I didn't know even how to say words that I use in my profession. I didn't know how to use them. I was learning first how to talk to people.

LK: So you were picking it up on your own?

MS: Yes. And I've been picking it up on my own since then.

LK: Have you ever gone to classes?

MS: No.

LK: You've learned English on your own?

MS: Mm-hm.

LK: That's amazing.

MS: I still have a lot of—many, many holes in the English. I'm the (_____???) But I still have—and I asked for help when I couldn't speak English, and I had to have a job before I tried to leave my ex-husband. I started to look for—and I asked my supervisor I told her that I needed help because I was being abused at my house.

LK: What made you decide to tell your supervisor when you hadn't ever told anybody?

MS: I was getting cuckoo. I was getting—I hated that guy so much. My son was there. He was forcing me to have sex. And I was disgusted, and I was disgusted with myself. My self-esteem was [makes negative noise] terribly . . .

LK: Were you worried for your son?

MS: I was worried about myself because I could kill that man. I hate him, I was so angry at him. And obviously I didn't want my husband, to deal with this guy, but I was really, really angry, and I was in a situation that not just abuse but verbally threatening me. I couldn't eat food in regular places. Well, anyway . . .

LK: And it changed the way it looked at yourself.

MS: Actually, I couldn't dress. I didn't have much clothes. He was buying whatever he liked. I was wearing like old person's clothes. I remember I couldn't—I didn't wear clothes.

LK: So what did your supervisor say when you told her?

MS: She contacted me with one of the apartments that we have here at the YWCA it is called Daybreak. They assigned me a counselor then walked me through for two years. And, I'm thinking, not for two years, for how many? For a little while, I don't remember exactly how long, they walked me through the process. Obviously, they tell you but I had to figure it out myself.

LK: You're the one who has to do it.

MS: Yeah. In the meantime, I had people working out here, and I was friendly with—well I was friends of—not friends, but we talk a lot and I didn't know who she was and they gave me—they gave me—I got a job, I got a fulltime job. They interviewed me too, but I passed because I was strong too, I couldn't speak much English but physically I was doing whatever they asked me to do, and it was really dramatic that I got the job.

LK: So where did you go to live? How did you find a place to live when you left your husband? Did you set that up before you left?

MS: The YWCA gave me the first month of rent. I didn't have a place, I didn't have anything. I didn't have anywhere to sleep, I just slept on the floor. I had an apartment, but I didn't have anything besides. I had food, and I had a few things for cooking. I had a different person who helped me with the job. Because this woman was only for days. And she was moving where her boyfriend was or she was moving with her boyfriend or something like that, and she gave me her old living room, and now I had a living room. And in the apartment, the guy who was cleaning that building was a Christian, and one day he just knocked. And my mom came from Colombia because she knew it was a really risky situation and she was scared that something would happen to me. And she came and the guy knocked on the door and she let him in. We do that in Colombia, she doesn't know you cannot do that here. And that guy helped; he gave us some pans to cook. And one day when I came home they have a room—like a bed, I had a bed. And . . .

LK: That was a surprise, hmm?

MS: That was a surprise. Looks like I hid it, whatever. I don't know why he did it, but he got a new bed. And I got it—and when the YWCA helped me, I had to figure it out after. That was

really, really traumatic. Really challenging. I didn't speak English. I didn't know how to drive. I didn't know how the system worked. I didn't know how the system works. I didn't know where I was. I was scared before to get out from my house, and obviously this one was extremely—I didn't speak English. Here this was comfortable because I am not the only one. But in the job I had to do tapes, welcome patients, and I didn't know how to speak English. Obviously, I didn't know how to read, and I didn't know how to write down English. And it was really traumatic, but because of the training that I have I was forced to write down things, and then because of the training, the medical training that I have it was easy for me to figure out what the doctors wanted. What I did was to take two different files, analyze the patient that I had, the actions of the stuff, analyzing and in my head, translate it. And I took files and words from this file to this file and then I put it together . . .

LK: And you wrote kind of a summary?

MS: Yes.

LK: What are you responsible for you doing?

MS: Many things.

LK: What were you doing for the doctors?

MS: This was another job. And this job right here I was supposed to take care of the client, make them more comfortable. But another one I was a clinical counselor, I became a clinical counselor. And obviously, I was treated really poorly. I was called "stupid," "idiot," and in my head I had more education than you and you're calling me an idiot. But I said, "Oh, you cannot do this." Yes, it was a challenging thing for me, and I start to learn. And I said, "I'm going to be the best." And I ended up doing the best without even knowing how to speak or write English. I was because I knew what the doctors wanted and the nurses. I knew what they wanted. What type of information they needed. Because that is something I will look at. And I did that for three or four years.

LK: Now, you came to America because you were hoping to have . . .

MS: A better life.

LK: Love and a family and a better life, and it turned out that the man you came to be with wasn't who you thought. It turned out that he was abusive. It turned out that you ended up doubting yourself. You were put in all these difficult situations. Are you glad you came?

MS: I'm glad.

LK: Could you explain that?

MS: I came to America because I was hoping to have a better life. I'm glad that I came. You cannot imagine the changes I had to pass through. I rebuilt myself. I am not even close to the woman that got out of Colombia. I am stronger, and no one is going to tell me I can't do something because I am doing it anyways.

LK: How did that turn around? How did you do the rebuilding? When did it start?

MS: Inside the sight of view of my ex-husband. I didn't know how to drive. He had a lawyer. He is the change [the cause of the change.] He did that the worst, obviously. He kept a condo, and I kept our car, and I didn't know how to drive. I signed a paper. I didn't know how to read. And I start to build myself that way. One day the bus left me, and I didn't have money for a taxi, and I grab the car key and I start to drive. I drove without a license for six months. Nobody taught me how to drive. I had to.

LK: And meanwhile you're a single parent? How is that going?

MS: Really frustrating too because I had to pay. I was getting little, little money from the salary from the job. I couldn't even make it enough to pay. My ex-husband for a little bit was paying half of the child-care because I start to get a job and do things around he decided to don't do it anymore.

LK: Doesn't pay child care?

MS: He decided to dump his child care. Obviously, that was more complicated for me, and I had Nicolas for many years here, struggling because I didn't have child care or anything, struggling to pay the rent, struggling to buy food, struggling to do everything. And Nicolas came to [work], and then he had to go to school, to preschool, that was easier because he had to go to school for a little bit.

LK: So you had the time to go to work and not worry about him?

MS: Yeah, and I start to build myself since then. I had to figure it out myself. And my son, as I said before, is the best gift. He is my everything, he is my best friend, and the kid is the love of my life. I promised myself that I gave for this kid, he is going to feel proud of his mama. And I want my son to be proud of me.

LK: That's wonderful. How do you feel like you are treated in America now?

MS: I rebuilt myself, as I said before, and I don't feel—I don't let people make me feel mistreated.

LK: Do you feel like there are times when people . . . [End of question is interrupted by the answer.]

MS: Yes, when I got another job, a full-time job, I was called different names. I was called "stupid, idiot." People were nasty to me. I was cooking all the time. I was supposed to do other things and they were keeping me cleaning or cooking because I could not communicate like the other employees.

LK: Low level things that weren't part of your job?

MS: Yes, they were part of my job, but they were supposed to rotate but I was always doing it. Because I was really poor. I didn't feel it all that much because, as I repeat, I rebuilt myself and came back. And I am stronger. After a while for work I decide the YWCA offer me a full-time job and that was when everything changed in myself because they empowered me. literally. I started—they started to feel—I started to feel more confident.

LK: Because you had a new job?

MS: A job that I felt comfortable with.

LK: And felt respected?

MS: And respected. Little by little because I learned—I started to work here from basic. I did every single type of job here. And first I start to step up little by little. Step by step. I did a few things before to have the position I have right now. It's been a process of believing myself, being able to do things myself, being able to do things I didn't know that I could do. Two times I got members or people who were prospects who said, "I don't want to speak to you, I want someone who speaks American." I have to remind these ladies that English is spoken here and not American. American is not a language. Also these ladies said to me, "This is why you came to America, to take American people's jobs." I also remind these ladies that this country's name isn't America, but United States of America. They also remind me that O don't look American. Well, proudly I look like an American and also I am a United States of America citizen since two years ago.

LK: What else has given you a sense of being empowered or has given you more faith in yourself?

MS: I think that all these processes of—like the responsibilities that I have here are good responsibilities. And I have been able to do that, go to the community, help others, empowering other people because no one else is going to tell me you can't do it because I know you can do it. Helping others. Being able to speak, communicate, don't be embarrassed of myself, don't be embarrassed of how I sound. It's all the feelings that I even had a sense at one point I didn't have any feelings. I had to work. And I had to get things done. And I am a strict disciplinarian, and I was like a horse, just straight, and discipline has always been part of my success. And my son, I have to see that kid. I have to. I have to educate that son, to try to educate my son. I have to. Even if I had a good education before, I had to start from zero because I didn't have any.

LK: Now I know that you've just graduated from the Clemente Course in the Humanities. [Clemente offers a free college-level course of study to selected low-income adults.]

MS: I love that.

LK: Has that been part of your empowerment?

MS: It is.

LK: So can you talk for a moment about how you got involved in that?

MS: One of my friends came to my office, her name is Kenza, she is a good friend—I love her so much--and she came to my office. [Kenza Dekar, a Worcester resident who was born in Algeria, is a 2016 graduate of the Worcester Clemente Course in the Humanities.]

LK: Kenza is not from Colombia is she?

MS: No, she's from Algeria. She came and she said to me, "Have you been thinking about coming back to school?" I said, "Of course!" "Do you want to try?" I said, "Of course! What do I have to do?" And when I sent the application to the Clemente Course I had this hope in my heart that I could get in because I really wanted to come back to school. And, oh my gosh, I am so grateful with that program. Yeah, it's making me feisty.

LK: How does it make you feisty? It's courses in philosophy and history and literature and art history.

MS: It's about the sense of justice. No, no, no I love philosophy. That's my main thing. And when we start to read Socrates and Nietzsche, I got so excited. It was the sense of educating myself. And I write down things, and I even knew that I could do it in English. About justice, and a perception of what is good and what is not good in the sense of philosophy and in the sense that I fully enjoy.

LK: What is one thing, one idea about justice, that you want to remember from the course or that you figured out while you were taking the course?

MS: Justice has so many faces. It depends who is taking that word. Justice is—I have to use my philosophy brain to answer that question because my sense of justice is different than yours maybe. And justice for me is to do the right thing to the right person in the right moment at the right time and to do it without hurting anyone. Just to do what is right. Justice is a word I noticed is being used in a good way and in a bad way depending on who is using it.

LK: And when is it used in a bad way?

MS: Well, it depends. If you apply that word about justice, let's say about the political situation that this country's having. Justice is taking people away from their families—is that justice or is

that injustice? Depends on how you see it. Separating people—is that doing justice or are you unjust? Depends on how you see it. It depends on who is interpreting that word and that situation.

LK: Have your ideas about what America is changed in the time that you've been here?

MS: Oh my gosh. It's been changing, but you know what made me think about America in a different way was the history class. I was so traumatized. In my head after all those years America was different until I knew the truth.

LK: Is it better or worse to know the truth?

MS: I don't know. But I want to teach my son the truth. I think the truth is always good.

LK: American historians have sometimes said—certain American historians would say that what makes America great is when it's willing to tell the truth.

MS: If you don't tell the truth then you're keeping people ignorant.

LK: And you can't solve the problems you don't admit.

MS: And if you educate people that way it's dangerous. And that's why they want to keep people with a blindfold because it's the only way they can control them. When I notice that America wasn't—I got so traumatized with Pocahontas!

LK: What traumatized you about Pocahontas?

MS: Ever since I was young that was a wonderful movie that Disney made. When I came here, when I got the class I said, okay, now you traumatized me. How dare you! But the reality is how dare people make a movie and make it look that way. Make things that kids think is a love story. How dare they teach wrongly to the kids. I don't want my son to see any of those movies. When I talk to him—because my son was with Elizabeth [Elizabeth Bacon, Coordinator and Leader of Children's Classes of Clemente Course in the Humanities, Worcester]...

LK: In the children's classes [of the Clemente Course in the Humanities].

MS: ... I was, "Nicolas, come on, we have to talk." I was telling him, "Come on, we have to talk about history because Pocahontas..." "Yes, Mommy, what happened to Pocahontas?" "Well, you know what happened to Pocahontas? This . . . this . . . this . . ." "Yes, Mommy, I know that." I said, "Who told you that?" "Well, somebody taught me." "What did they teach you? What did they teach you?" "What I told you. And they said that she was not a teenager, she was only ten to twelve years. Those guys did that bad stuff to her." And oh, my goodness, he knew about that already. [Pocahontas was kidnapped by the English and, according to some reports, raped.]

LK: So how did you feel about the fact that you son knew all that?

MS: It's great!

LK: So I want to come back to the question, so America is more complicated than you thought.

MS: Oh yeah.

LK: How do you feel about it now?

MS: I still believe that we can do better. I still believe in teaching people the truth. [That's what will] make America better. It's the only way to really move people—not fight—I don't want to make it sound like I want to fight everything all the time, but the only way for people to make a real social revolution is through education. You cannot blame people and send them to the streets to yell and strike without educating them about why they are doing them. History is so important.

LK: That's lovely.

MS: It's the truth. And not because you are a part of this project. I am not telling you that. It's because I really believe. And I really regret it and I feel really ignorant when the professor was teaching us, and I said I was always proud of my education because one of my hobbies is reading. And how is it that Monica didn't even . . .

LK: There's a lot to know!

MS: And I say, "I doubt it sometime." I question him and I say, "This cannot be true," and so I Google it. And I say, "It looks like you're right, professor." I question everything. But I was questioning how all those bombs and Vietnam and all the stuff, ooh, ooh. I don't use emotions often, but one of the videos the professor showed really broke my heart. And it was really difficult but I believe—I decide to stay in this country because I believe I really want to build a better country for my son.

LK: They call it—people like Abraham Lincoln have called it "the American Experiment" because we're always trying to live up to our ideals. Our ideals are good. Well, that leads to the next question, which is how have you been involved in your community, and what's your vision of what you want to give back and how?

MS: I think I am in the right place [the YWCA] and the right position because I noticed that helping people made me happy. I had to figure out what made me happy in this country because I don't have more family than my son. I didn't have a normal life. And something that [I] started to realize that good things made me happy and it's helping others. I help others and see other people happy and that made me happy—and in a good way. It's not like driving and traveling and taking pictures—that made me happy. But I worked with the community. I oversee nonprofits. We're talking about obviously businesses too, but my main area is non-profits. I

work with every single type of population. We're talking about drug addicts, prostitutes, shelters.

LK: And what do you do with them or for them?

MS: Educate them too, differently. Give them the opportunity to have a different place to come and to have a social life, but educating them in a different way. Obviously, I don't have the position to, but I wish to have more knowledge about how [to] teach people. But I do it in my way. With my profession and with the position that I trained and I got.

LK: Now that you're empowered you're empowering others.

MS: Yes, and that makes me happy

LK: That's lovely.

MS: But I still believe that if you teach people, if you show them the true way, not all the way because if not they will not figure it out and they will not do much for themselves.

LK: Right.

MS: I noticed that I wasn't given anything. And I had to figure it out myself, and that's why people say, "Oh, you're a superwoman." And I say, "No, I had to figure it out myself. Is why I got selfie-stick. Because I don't want other people to take pictures, because if I can take them myself why I have to ask other people to take pictures?"

LK: [Laughs.] Is there any—what does your culture mean to you? When you think of your culture do you think of Colombia or do you think of the United States?

MS: That's a problem now. I, I adapt myself a little to here. I miss still a few things. I like my personal space. I don't like to go to Colombia and see all those guys like hugging you and putting—you know they (_____???) this stuff in you? That's normal there. I don't like that anymore. I think it's somebody [hears a phone ringing]

LK: I only have one more question

[Short gap in tape because of malfunction.]

MS: I don't go to church. I don't have problems with that guy. I have problems with religion.

LK: You don't have problem with you have problems with . . . [Interruption as someone else accidentally enters the room.]

LK: You're not saying you have problems with religion, you're saying you're having problems with the institution--with the church.

MS: Every church. I have to go to a luncheon with that guy over there. [Points to a poster with a picture of Pope Francis.]

LK: So here's my last question, is there anything I didn't ask you about that you'd still like to talk about? Anything you'd still like to say?

MS: I don't know. The American Dream doesn't exist.

LK: Doesn't? [Phone rings]

MS: Doesn't. You have to make—you have to (_____???) I see people complaining and I say, "Why are you complaining?" Complaining about—people complaining about everything. And I just look at them and I say in my head, "Why are you complaining?" I see people, American people, native American, how do you say it?

LK: Born in America

MS: Born in America. Complaining about life and I say, "Okay. Are you working? Are you looking for a job? Do you go to school? Do you try to get better every day?" "Oh no, we get some help with money." And I say, "Really?" And I see people from other countries associating, and I got to this point because I work so hard. Nobody's giving me anything. I had to with my hands and my brain after I made that decision to, and I have to be somebody in this country. I had to remember that I had that brain. It is funny, but it is not funny sometimes because I forgot that I had to pass through all what I pass through. Because it's not whatever I just told you, it's been a really difficult time for me. And . . . and I know that everyone can do it too.