

Interviewee: Ivy Velez

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Abstract: Ivy Velez was born in Puerto Rico and currently lives in Marlborough Massachusetts. She is an Intensive Care Coordinator and works with deaf families with children as part of a bicultural, bilingual health care program. In this interview Ivy discusses what it was like growing up deaf in the United States after her move from Puerto Rico. She shares her educational experiences, the differences between Puerto Rican Sign Language [PRSL] and American Sign Language [ASL], and how she assisted her deaf parents with translation.

Susan: Hello, What's your name?

Ivy: Hi, my name is Ivy Velez

Susan: It's nice to meet you, I'm Susan

Ivy: It's nice to meet you.

Susan: Thank you. Where are you from?

Ivy: From where, oh depends on from where. I've been all over. Well currently, where I live right now, I live in Marlborough, [Massachusetts] and some people say Marlborough this way some people say Marlborough like the cigarette. However, if you ask some strong grass streets deaf people they'll definitely say, "Hey, saying it that way ah blah ra ra, we don't say it the way the cigarette, we say it this way"

Susan: Oh

Ivy: So the ... way of saying, Marlborough is this way.

Susan: Where'd you grow up?

Ivy: Growing up, okay, well I was actually born in Puerto Rico and when we move to America I [was] actually only five and we lived, we moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut.

Susan: So I know you sign a lot with ASL, but do you know—since you're from Puerto Rico—do you know Spanish or Puerto Rican sign language, any other languages can you name them?

Ivy: Well before I actually answer that, know that my entire family is deaf.

Susan: Oh okay, and both her parents?

Ivy: born and raised in Puerto Rico and they use a lot of Puerto Rican sign language.. ASL so...Most my family actually used that at home growing up that's what we used. Oh, when we went out into the community and socialized and went out we would use ASL. What's interesting, what's funny is that my sisters and I actually taught my parents ASL later on in life and they originally picked it up.

Susan: Oh wow

Ivy: But yeah, day-to-day, we use ASL

Susan: Okay. Do you have brothers or sisters maybe that could explain your family for me?

Ivy: Sure can, I'm the oldest and I want a brother so bad, but yeah no. I have two sisters. There's quite a significant age difference between my sisters and myself. I'm the oldest, and my litter sister actually is in the... and my youngest is at Rochester.

Susan: And the two of them are deaf, right?

Ivy: All of them, my entire family is, yep.

Susan: Right, they all know Puerto Rican sign language?

Ivy: Yep, all of them. Well, the two younger sisters they knew some.

Susan: Some okay.

Ivy: Yeah remember when I mentioned that there is significant age crowd? I am the oldest, and between myself and my next sister down actually, were seven years apart. And between myself and the youngest were eleven years apart.

Susan: Ah okay.

Ivy: And because of being the oldest I was responsible of the communication—PRSL [Puerto Rican Sign Language], but yeah they predominately use ASL.

Susan: So how old were you when you entered school?

Ivy: Uh, entered school I was five.

Susan: Five okay

Ivy: Well let me back track a little bit, in Puerto Rico I actually went to the schools that are the deaf schools there. Their approach was actually oralism. And my mom actually went to school in New York and she was there until about the 8th grade and then when back home to Puerto Rico. Married my dad and I when I was born they actually felt oh, they thought I was deaf they thought there would be better opportunities in America for me. Work life, etc. So they decided to move back to the U.S.

Susan: And, the two youth sisters, were they the same as you? They started out orally or...?

Ivy: No they were born here I am the oldest one.

Susan: So in America did you start in a school for the deaf, or in a mainstream?

Ivy: Yes, a residential school, the American School for the Deaf, in West Hartford Connecticut.

Susan: Oh right. I know that. Okay

Ivy: First deaf school in the country

Susan: Yeah, so your experience in school was it good was it bad? Were you able to interact with deaf people? Or did you feel isolated? What was it like?

Ivy: Well in the beginning, when I first moved to America my experience really was awful. There's language barrier, you know, I only knew PRSL, didn't know ASL, definitely didn't know English. So, two things were really important. Well my parents didn't even know English sign so that made it harder. So I went to school, well you know at that time—during my time the residential schools all [had] a large number of deaf students. So being within the system I was feeling completely lost. And yeah, so I actually lived on campus and, staying on—in the dorms actually helps a lot. Because I would stay in school throughout the week Sunday through Friday. I would go home and learn a little bit and yeah there were those moments where I felt completely isolated. And people would look at me because, you know, Spanish kid

Susan: mhmm

Ivy: And I lived in Bridgeport, Connecticut. The social economical class is really not the same at all. And you know between Bridgeport and Hartford they were, it just wasn't the same. And you know they look at me—the girl, Spanish girl from a deaf family, so it, it was really tough in the beginning and I really just had to be patient and once I picked up ASL, oh I fit in much

better. Both my parents actually learned after I taught them ASL they fit into the community too, so it was great.

Susan: Oh wow.

Ivy: It was great!

Susan: So, if the communication was hard for you how'd you make friends?

Ivy: Well in the beginning I actually remember gestures, pointing, a lot of motioning and like I said we became a large deaf family. So, they helped us socialize a lot better, going deaf clubs, I mean were we completely clueless, no. But oh we gesture a lot, we figured oh okay what does it mean in English ASL then translated it to PRSL so we could understand it. Go back home, discussed it with our family, say, "Hey what did this person say?" "What does that mean?" And once you would figure it out we would go back socialize and hang out more and then I would pick up more ASL.

Susan: Okay, yeah. So did you have any kind of like services to help you? Maybe technology?

Ivy: No, technology did not happen back then, no. Did the TTY [teletypewriter].

Susan: Oh right, that's right I forget.

Ivy: When TTY was popular, my family didn't even have because we simply couldn't afford it. We were poor and when we saw that big, you know, TTY we were waiting in there so excited but you know it's a way for dad to find the work and then finally when he did we finally got the big machine, it was great. And then when the new portable one came out, we were like oh we were waiting, so excited to wait and it just took time, it took a lot of time.

Susan: Okay, so did you have any services there that were offered to you in school since you were from another country?

Ivy: Services offered?

Susan: Maybe an interpreter since, you know, your Spanish or Puerto Rican sign language anything to help you?

Ivy: Absolutely none, are you kidding me, absolutely nothing.

Susan: Nothing, okay.

Ivy: I was the interpreter for my parents. You know in terms of English, "What did the doctor say, what did the bank say?" Bank loans, car loans, everything I was the one running back and

forth communicating for mom and dad. Often times you know dad would have health issues going to the doctor's office because he was diabetic. And so, remember how I said I would go to school Sunday through Friday? I would take Mondays off because I would go to the doctor's appointments with my dad, and then later on that evening he would drop me off and bring me back to school. So, Mondays yep he book appointments just to be with his doctor and I helped dad with that. There was no human resources provider there was no life center at the time I mean absolutely nothing. I mean there was one location rehabilitation center that would help but I mean that's it.

Susan: So the two of your sisters

Ivy: Yep were born in America

Susan: In America, like was their experience different here form yours? Was it good was it bad?

Ivy: Completely different, once we were established it literally was easier for them. Completely easier yep, absolutely

Susan: Communication was easier.

Ivy: Yep, absolutely.

Susan: So you went to the institute? Who made that decision to go? Was it your decision was it your mom and dad's decision? Who made, who made the decision?

Ivy: Well mom and dad decided for the residential schools because well from Puerto Rico, you know my dad look at America and say, 'Ah Connecticut,' and the reason being was because it was well known as having the first deaf school in the country. And from the island they just saw that, they are one of the best for me. And you just have to understand on a side note, on my dad side strong deaf generations in our family. So you know no school, no work, only works on farms. And when he saw that they only want the best in the course you know the ASD, American School for the Deaf was well known for ASL. And when we moved you were like, "Oh my gosh here we go, here we are."

Susan: So you must have had a lot of different experiences going to the oral school in Puerto Rico, then going to the school for the deaf in Connecticut here in America. Which one was better? Which one was easier for you?

Ivy: I was really too young to even really recognize. I, didn't even notice really cause I noticed saw a lot of signing growing up, I saw a lot of mouthing movement growing up a lot of Spanish

being used in signing oral ASL I didn't even recognize, I mean moved here I was fine and I just kinda got put into the scene so I really don't remember.

Susan: Do you remember any stories? Any experience?

Ivy: From my experience moving here?

Susan: Whatever, it depends it could be in Puerto Rico, here in America, whatever you remember?

Ivy: One funny thing I actually remember, the clothes. Coming from Puerto Rico, the island warm, the beach the sun and then coming here to America winter time, being able to use coat a jacket and you know I remember wearing cute skirts, you know with those sweaters little girls would wear. The shoes with the lace on them, and it was a complete cultural shock, completely different.

Susan: Oh okay right

Ivy: So that really impacted me. Communication really took a toll too. So a lot of various things, you know, feeling welcomed and just kinda falling everything just falling into place. Of course there are a lot of differences, there's a lot of things that didn't help. But deaf clubs helped, going every Friday was amazing, Sundays were always open captioned movies. Deaf people would just go hang out and what a wonderful experience to go hang out socializing pretty great experience.

Susan: Okay Thank You, I think we're finished here and were going to switch and then we're going to come and interview this. Okay, thank you.

Ivy: Hi

Erin: Hi we just changed [interviewers] My name is Erin and you're Ivy, I know that. Nice to meet you

Ivy: Yep nice to meet you.

Erin: Okay, so you went to residential school for the deaf and you know now looking back on that experience do you have any favorite teachers that you remember or anything that was your favorite?

Ivy: Oh my, I had many favorite teachers throughout the years and dorm supervisors too. But I think the ones that had the most influence on me were the deaf ones.

Erin: The deaf teachers? Yeah.

Ivy: The deaf teachers, the deaf dorm supervisors we use to call them house parents but now they are called dorm supervisors. But throughout the year it was really the deaf people who had the most impact on me. At home it was normal to be with deaf people but it was great to be out in the community and being living with deaf people too.

Erin: Okay, so you made relationships with them. So do you remember any sort of stories or you know one teacher that really impacted you?

Ivy: Mhmm.....

Erin: Anything?

Ivy: Hmm.....

Erin: Well maybe, maybe like something somebody told you, and you know now you'll remember that.

Ivy: Well I do remember my, one class, history American History and I think for me it would've had an impact. I wish it was different. It—I wish it was more inclusive of all the different cultures. I know for me when I got here to America I felt like my identity as a Puerto Rican, I had to just throw that out the window. I couldn't be that anymore once I got here there was no bilingual no bicultural they expected me just to be a deaf American now and I just didn't quite know what to do with my identity so you know I was from Puerto Rico but now I'm here and I have to be deaf American. And so now I look back and I really wish that, that could have been incorporated into who I was. I felt like I—I was almost having to be ashamed of who I was but now I'm not.

Erin: And now you're not!

Ivy: But now I'm proud deaf Puerto Rican

Erin: Right

Ivy: I wish back then, that I didn't have all that emotional conflict.

Erin: Mmmm

Ivy: You know in Bridgeport and going to school in Hartford...

Erin: Well, were you confused or..?

Ivy: Well it was, I was proud, but it was—I wish I had the support

Erin: Okay.

Ivy: You know, to have the support in my community, to have the support at school there was all the big houses and the white picket fence everything was perfect and that...

Erin: The American dream...

Ivy: It was home, it was very it, very Spanish culture, very Latino. We had Spanish food, we had Spanish communication. It was very Spanish culturally and so it was very different for me for when I would go home, when I would go home I was like okay I am this person here but then I go back to school I wish I had more support for who I was and that could've been more proud about it.

Erin: Okay so I know before, you know, we were chatting about, you know, Puerto Rican sign language, ASL, and differences between them. So I am wondering like is there a word in ASL like the word school that, that this sign for school, how is it?

Ivy: The word your so, you do this.

Erin: Okay so is there anything else like....

Ivy: This would be school yeah so.

Erin:children?

Ivy: Children is about the same.

Erin: About the same, okay.

Ivy: Grandmother would be like this.

Erin: Grandmother, okay.

Ivy: They would sign aboula, like

Erin: Oh, abloula.

Ivy: or abulo like this.

Erin: Aboulo

Ivy: And grandfather and papa...

Erin: Oh okay.

Ivy: ...would be different. Mother would be about the same...

Erin You know I'll kind of explain more. The languages are—have—pretty much the same foundation and Puerto Rican has borrowed a lot from ASL. It's interesting a lot of the graduates from Gallaudet end up going to Puerto Rico to teach and so they brought a lot of their language there and a lot of the ASL influenced that and then the missionaries would come to the churches and spread throughout the island and they would be using ASL . So they would use some ASL, some Puerto Rican sign language, and eventually they would just blend together.: Brother and sister? Oh

Car...would be like this and car would be like this.

Erin: Okay that's cool.

Ivy: There, there's other similarities.

Erin: Books, what about book?

Ivy: Books and book are the same

Erin: Same okay

Ivy:

Erin: So now do you use Puerto Rican sign?

Ivy: Well they, they both blend together.

Erin: At home do you use it with your family?

Ivy: Me personally I use ASL. My parents use to use Puerto Rican sign language. Puerto Rican sign, of course. [natural language]

Erin: So like when you're with your friends from home, from Puerto Rico, do you use Puerto Rico sign ever?

Ivy: Well, no all of those relationships have dissolved over the years. Now I'm still involved in the Latino community especially on the national level. I end up travelling around—I speak at conferences and so when I go to those event it's great because I can catch up with my friends and, and speak Puerto Rican sign language with them.

Erin: So do you prefer ASL then over Puerto Rican Sign Language

Ivy: Well.....

Erin: yeah

Ivy:I really use ASL at home, that's what I use now.

Erin: So you know we have different emotions like we can be happy, sad, angry—would you use Puerto Rican sign if your maybe angry?

Ivy: No

Erin: Some other emotion. But your father does right?

Ivy: Now my father definitely does. When he gets going he—it all comes out Puerto Rican sign language that, that's him.

Ivy: I really use Puerto Rican sign language for enjoyment. I use it [to] communicate with my deaf family members and, and deaf people in my community who are Puerto Rican, but I would—my parents they really use the sign, the Puerto Rican sign language when they get emotional.

Erin: Yeah, okay.

Ivy: But now it's forty something years we have lived here they really use ASL exclusively now.

Erin: Do you have any friends here in America that use Puerto Rican sign, from Puerto Rico?

Ivy: Yes, a few. Yep, yep a few

Erin: Okay that's cool.

Erin: Okay so now let's talk about your identity. For instance, you know, do you consider yourself deaf first or Puerto Rican, American, a female what's the order for that?

Ivy: You know so many people ask me that question and I never really know how to answer it. It's funny for me it's just natural to be deaf. I suppose if you were from a hearing family then you might want to identify yourself as deaf but for me it's just who I am. I don't really notice that I'm deaf. It's just part of who I am. For me everyday identity if I have to say, I guess growing up I was Latino.

Erin: So Spanish first, okay.

Ivy: First I would have to say I am Spanish and then I would say I am a girl or a woman and then, then third I guess I would deaf...

Erin: Wow, so you're deaf third?

Ivy: ...and then work my way down the list.

Erin: Wow

Ivy: Everyday, but now at work it would be totally different, deaf, at work I would definitely would be deaf, that's cause that has a big impact on what I do.

Erin: So maybe at work maybe you're deaf, first?

Ivy: Yeah, yep deaf.

Erin: And then Puerto Rican?

Ivy: And then Puerto Rican and then a woman.

Erin: Okay.

Ivy: Yep, and those two could switch if they wanted. It's funny [to] have all different identities. I feel like depending on where I am I have to switch them around it feels like some kind of game.

Erin: Okay, so what are you, what do you do for work now?

Ivy: I am an Intensive Care Coordinator and I work with deaf families with children, and in the head house start program. It's a bicultural, bilingual health care program. It's called the wrap around program....

Erin: Do you like that?

Ivy: ...and we promote stability for the families and I just absolutely love my work. It used to be the case workers who would control everything and they would sort of just tell the families what to do. But now it's a different perspective. Now, we actually look at the kids and look at their needs and what they need and what, and we start with the family first. It's a totally new approach to how we go about it now. Now we try to get all the information, give it to the families, we let them make their decisions as opposed to the caseworkers making the decision.

Erin: Okay, so you helped them.

Ivy: And we now, we look at their needs.

Erin: Oh cool.

Ivy: Instead of the provider's needs.

Erin: So maybe your experience growing up has affected you now in your job?

Ivy: Oh, big time. It was just I was always the caregiver growing up. I had to take care of the car loan, and the banking, and all those different things for my family. It was just who I was, it became a part of who I was. It just really created my trajectory in life. It just had such an impact on who I became. I couldn't imagine becoming a teacher or an interpreter or CBI never. It's just—I am a service provider that's who I am

Erin: Alright that's pretty cool. Okay well I guess were finished. Anything you want to add, anything else?

Ivy: Hmm.....

Erin: Anything you want to tell me?

Ivy: I think we covered all the important things. I guess the most important thing would be to go out into the Deaf community and really listen to the stories of the deaf people and just listen to the stories of their lives. There's World, there's sign, there's main stream, there's residential schools. There's so—it's such a culturally rich community, it's just amazing there's so much to it. The history to it is amazing so to go out and spread awareness is so important.

Erin: Actually I go to the Learning Center, to the school for deaf children in Framingham and, you know I see a lot of different deaf kids you know maybe they're, they're completely deaf and they use sign or, or their parents are deaf. Some have hearing aids or implants.

Ivy: There are so many differences. There's so many different, there multiple identities and it, and there's so much diversity, there's so much diversity in the language. It's such a beautiful language, it's so expressive, it's so beautiful.

Erin: Okay, want to add anything else?

Ivy: No.

Erin: Were done! Thank you.

Ivy: Thank you

Erin: Anything else? Common anybody else? Anybody else?

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