

Race and Oral History Project, UC San Diego

Narrator: Maria Elena Alvarado

Interviewer: Leslee Soria Alvarado

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Leslee: My name is Leslee Soria Alvarado, today is the 2nd of June of 2022. I'm interviewing Maria Elena Alvarado via Zoom for the University of California San Diego race and oral history project. Do you give the University permission to archive and publish this interview for educational purposes?

Maria Elena: Yes, yes

Leslee: Can you give your name, date of birth, and place of birth please?

Maria Elena: My name is Maria Elena Alvarado, I was born the 11th of May of 1978, I was born in... the State of Mexico

Leslee: Okay, and can you describe your childhood and where you grew up?

Maria Elena: I grew up in the city of Queretaro in a little ranch in Queretaro, Mexico. I grew up in a ranch... a little ranch with my parents and siblings... very poor because we didn't have water or light. We had to walk like 40 minutes to get water. And... sometimes we didn't even have anything to eat... we had to light ourselves with candles, we didn't have a stove, they didn't pass... we had to walk to the store like an hour to get food. We grew corn, and we survived off of that, but sometimes when the corn or what we planted didn't give, we didn't have anything to eat, and we were a lot of siblings. And sometimes we only ate tortillas or what we could because... well my parents didn't have money to feed so many. We were 9 siblings, and with me we were 10. We were a lot of family.

Leslee: Okay... can you talk to me about your relationship with your parents and your siblings?

Maria Elena: Well with my parents one can say that I had a good relationship, but my mom was very hard on us. Because I was one of the, of the siblings, one of the oldest, well I had to take care of my siblings sometimes, if we didn't do things right then we were punished because in Mexico well it's a different education, more in a ranch, where we were away from... we practically lived on a mountain. Well yeah... my mom was very hard on me, on my older

siblings, she punished us, she hit us, we had to take care of my younger siblings, cook, clean, well yeah she was very hard on us, on me especially.

Leslee: And your siblings? As in how did you get along with your siblings?

Maria Elena: With my siblings I got along really well. Well, we fought like siblings but I always took care of them and protected them.

Leslee: And can you tell me about your adolescence?

Maria Elena: We when, on my siblings who lived very poor, well I left to the city when I was 15 to work to help my parents and so my siblings wouldn't go through... so the little ones wouldn't go through what I did... hunger... and that's why I started to work as a nanny at the age of 15, and well yes... thank God my siblings didn't go through... the younger ones didn't go through what us older ones went through.

Leslee: And why did you decide to immigrate to the United States?

Maria Elena: I decided to come because my sister the, one of the youngest ones wanted to come here and I wanted to take care of her because I was scared something would happen to her and that's why I decided to come with her. So she wouldn't be alone in this country. That's why... for her.

Leslee: And can you describe what it was like to cross the border? How was your journey?

Maria Elena: Well it was really hard because... I did know it was hard but when I came well then I knew in reality what it was like to come here. When we got to Tijuana we stayed in a hotel that was really ugly, really ugly. The person who was going to bring us told us to arrive at that hotel and that's where he came for us. And we had a group of about 10, 11 people. I don't remember. When we were coming the Tijuana police got us and they abandoned us in a mountain because we didn't want to give them the contact that we had for... they thought that someone was going to pay for us here and um... and that's why they got mad and they dumped us in the mountains and the person who was bringing us... kept walking and well I was really tired and I he would say, "We're almost there" but because I had no more strength to keep walking the only thing I wished for was for immigration to catch us because I couldn't walk. And then well we got to where there were like some dirt roads and there... immigration got us. And they... we spent a night in some like immigration cells. And from there they returned us to Tijuana the next day. On the third day that we got to Tijuana we came back but then the walk was like two days and almost two nights and well, it was really hard because it was really hot and we didn't have water or food because we ran out of water and food and well yeah, it was really hard to walk in the

heat... and I just saw mountains and mountains and I didn't see houses and I just felt like I was just gonna stay there because I didn't see the end, like I didn't see houses or cars.. Just mountains and mountains...

Leslee: And how did you start your life in the United States?

Maria Elena: Oh well when we got here at first I saw everything so pretty but then I started missing my family in Mexico... I started... I came to an acquaintance here and... she found me a job, I started working in the harvest of persimmons like... I don't know, some days or months, I don't know... and then I got a job in a factory and I stayed more time there... and after I started we were able to get a room to rent and to live, with my sister... and then I met your dad... and we got together.

Leslee: And what has been the hardest for you to live in the United States undocumented?

Maria Elena: Well it has been difficult but I the hardest part is when after you were born and I went to work and many times I would find immigration or I would see them and that was the hardest part because I would think of if they were to take me and they sent me out to Mexico and I had left you in the care of a friend, I would leave you in the care of a friend, that was the most difficult thing, that I would say, "oh and if the send me away, and my daughter is waiting for me" well that was the more difficult that I... and not be able to go see my parents. But the most difficult thing was that. That if they sent me away and I didn't know if they were going to lock me up or that was my fear... of how much time... like to... as in I couldn't... that you would wait for me in the afternoon and I couldn't... that they would get me... because I would see in the news that they would send away people and their kids would stay at school or daycares... that was my biggest fear, that it would happen to me.

Leslee: And how has the legal immigration process been for you?

Maria Elena: Well yes, the wait has been very long, the wait has been very long but a lot... we have spent a lot of money on the lawyer and it has been a very long wait but it has been worth it, the wait. But it has been a very long wait. And now well I'm still waiting for my appointment to do my interview and I'm super anxious that it's going to come any day now but for now I have my work permit at least and my social security and well now I can work here legally. The only thing I'm missing is the residency and that's what I'm waiting for and I'm super nervous because it's going to come any day now.

Leslee: How is your long distance relationship with your parents?

Maria Elena: Well I talk with them like every week... or sometimes two per week by phone or video call. Ad it's been beautiful because being here I can send them money for them in Mexico so they can live better and my siblings, well when they have parties, I can help them with something for their party and it's beautiful to be able to help them and my parents, more than anything to be able to send my parents money from here to help them and I get excited even though I can't be there but the fact that I can help them, I can talk to them and well yes, I would like to be there when they have their parties and their weddings, quinceaneras and parties but I can't. But at least being able to help them economically brings me joy and well, being able to talk to my parents even though it's from a long distance.

Leslee: And what difficulties have you had for not being able to speak English?

Maria Elena: Well yes, I've had many difficulties because of the language barrier because I can't help my son with his homework much because I can't speak English... when you were little sometimes they had conferences and there weren't translators and I had to be figuring out with the moms that spoke English and Spanish what the meeting was about and in the stores sometimes when I go I ask if they speak Spanish and many of the times they don't speak Spanish and it's been hard... or finding a job where I would like to work but because of the fact that I don't speak Spanish well I haven't been able to find a job that I would like to have. Well yes, it's really hard not knowing the language and mainly not being able to help my son with his homework because everything's in English... everything's in English... the meetings are in English... Well now there's more translators but it's very difficult more than anything being able to find a good job because of the language because I can't speak English and I don't know how to speak English. I would like to have a better job.

Leslee: Okay and thank you for your time and this concludes our interview.