

JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Lilian Elizabeth Amaya

Interviewed by Serena Si Pui Chan and Natalie Rivas

April 8, 2022

Johns Hopkins University
Oral History Collection

Interviewer: Serena Si Pui Chan (SC)

Interviewer: Natalie Rivas (NR)

Interviewee: Lilian Elizabeth Amaya (LA)

Subject: Life of Lilian Elizabeth Amaya

Date: March 8, 2022

SC: Hi, everyone. Today we're going to conduct an oral history. The project specifically is aiming to focus on the queer oral histories of people in Baltimore or D.C. and our specific focus is the intersectionality of these issues. So, I'm gonna introduce myself first. My name is Serena. I'm one of the interviewers today.

NR: My name is Natalie. I am the other interviewer today.

SC: And great so we have Lilian here. Could you introduce yourself? Just tell us just like your name and also any identities or experiences that you feel like are the most important to include.

LA: Okay. My name is Lilian Elizabeth Amaya. I'm 33 years old. I identify as a lesbian. First generation American. My family's from El Salvador. I've lived in Baltimore City for about ten years, and I am the oldest of four, and I have three younger brothers. Hmm. What else can I tell you? I'm in school right now for a nursing program. It's terrible. But you gotta do what you gotta do. But yeah. *[Laughter]*

NR: Thank you, could you tell us about your childhood starting with where you grew up and how it was like for you?

LA: Yeah. So, I was born in Washington D.C. And my parents, so my mom and dad met in in Washington D.C. And they're both from El Salvador and my mom had just gotten here like that year. So, when I was a kid, we moved around a lot. And so, we lived in different parts of Maryland with a lot of different family members. Lived in a lot of rooms to rent. And for a lot of my childhood, we lived in Houston, Texas. So, a lot of my childhood memories are actually from Houston, Texas.

And like Selena – *[laughter]* – is the greatest person in the world someone I admire, and I know a lot of people my age admire her too because she

was the first, probably the only person that looks like me, and was famous, and singing and successful. And then we moved back to Maryland. So, growing up was, there is constant change, and having to adapt, and move around. I never expected to stay anywhere too long so I had created this kind of guard around friendships. But I also kind of looked forward to moving around because I knew it was going to happen. Yeah, so lots of moving, lots of I guess instability.

And so, my parents ended up settling in Frederick, Maryland, which is like an hour from Baltimore. And I grew up in Black and Brown communities. So, Frederick is the complete opposite, lots of farms. And so, when we moved there, I was in high school so that was around tenth grade. And that was hard because I was really a minority, and I haven't ever felt like a minority before if that makes sense. So that was that was tough.

Yeah, so I know when I was really tiny, we lived in Friendship Heights in D.C. I think now that's a very trendy place, but it's come a long way. We lived in Hyattsville; Silver Spring, Maryland, different parts of Montgomery County; Rockville, Maryland; Frederick, Maryland of course, and yeah, Houston, Texas.

NR: And where do you live now?

LA: Now I live in Baltimore City. I actually just bought a house with my wife in 2020. I live in Hampden. And prior to that, I was living in Mount Vernon. And prior to that, I was in Brewers Hill, which is right next to Highland Town. Yeah.

NR: What made you want to settle down in Hampden?

LA: Yeah. So, lots of reasons. But so, like Hampden just kind of feels like still, it's part of the city still but it's a little bit more distant and feels, you get a little bit more space and quiet. Being in Mount Vernon was really fun and cool and right in the center of everything, but starting Thursday, things get a little rowdy and *[laughter]*. And yeah, things get loud on Charles Street, so it was time to move because I'm getting older, and it wasn't gonna be fun anymore.

But the part about living in Hampden that even though it's very I want to say hipster, queer-friendly, very family oriented, there's not a ton of diversity. And so, living in the Highlandtown area, I really liked that because I could walk to the Latino market and pick up the things that you can't find at other grocery stores. And I don't know, you just see like everybody walking around, and music and stuff. It just felt more like a, more like home. So, I'm still kind of trying to make Hampden my home, but it's a lot more peaceful and quiet than Mount Vernon.

NR: And can you tell us more about your family members and your relationships with them?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. So, I have three younger brothers. The older one is 30, and he has two kids and he's married. And then the other one is 24, 23-24, and then the youngest one is 19. So, I basically – I grew up a lot taking care of them. My parents both worked a lot, so after school I was babysitting a lot. I love my brothers. My mom and dad, so my mom, her highest education is a middle school, and her mom died when she was nine. So, I didn't get to meet my grandmother, but I got to meet grandfather. And then my dad is one of one of ten, so I have a really big – we grew up mostly with his side of the family. And he has a college – he says he has a college education, but I don't really know for sure.

They have a cleaning business now, so they they're doing really well and pretty stable but. But growing up, my dad worked in construction and my mom stayed home. And then she ended up working in a hotel and then getting part-time work together. So, growing up was, literally growing up, like no childhood. Taking care of younger brothers and being the older person and more responsible one. My parents were also really, really strict, so I wasn't allowed to have any sleepovers or hang out with friends after school.

And school was tough for me, so I didn't get great grades. And with the language barrier, it was hard for my parents to help me or support me with schoolwork. Yeah, but Houston, Texas was probably the most fun I remember because there was a little bit more freedom. Just in the community that we lived, we could go outside, and the apartment complex was really like a circular thing. So, all the kids would go in the middle and play all day long. And then moving back to Maryland and more of like a metropolitan area, there's less freedom.

NR: So, you mentioned that your parents were from El Salvador, but I'm curious, do you think growing up in Hispanic family in particular affected how you experienced your queerness?

LA: How I experienced my queerness?

NR: Yeah.

LA: Yeah. So, I didn't really know I was queer until I was like a – maybe – yeah, a teenager. When I was younger, I was obsessed with novellas, right, all the beautiful dramatic women in them. And I never really had crushes on any boys, and I pretended to be obsessed with the Backstreet Boys

because all my friends were. But I didn't understand it. I just knew that I had to do it. Right? *[Laughter]*

And so yeah, I remember my cousins saying homophobic things, and saying think things about more masculine presenting queer women just really mean things. So, I knew it was something that was inappropriate, but my mind never even related it that I'm lesbian until I was like 18 or 19 or something like that. But yeah, I think growing up in a Hispanic household didn't even make me question my sexuality or whatever. Like I'm supposed to like boys. I don't know why I don't have crushes on boys, but I know I should. But I never even thought about how obsessed I was with all the novella ladies and actresses. *[Laughter]* Yeah.

You know what? So, Lady Gaga, she won a video music award. And that was a moment for me, that's when I realized I was gay because she said – and I was watching the Video Music Awards with my parents, and she was like, “This is for the gays.” And I felt like I was in trouble, and she was talking directly to me. *[Laughter]* And my parents were like, “Oh god she's disgusting. Goodness. Ah.” And I was just like oh my gosh. *[Laughter]* Like do they know what's happening? So, I'm not sure. That was a moment that I realized like, oh, wow, Lady Gaga just spoke to me. I'm not sure why that moment was so big for me, but yeah, that's when I knew. *[Laughter]*

NR: So, you said you didn't realize until later on. Do you feel that like maybe your parents', like, values kind of had something to do with that or kind of like made you internalize certain things?

LA: Yeah. Well, I think also just my childhood was very hectic, traumatic, unstable, so I didn't really think a ton about like who I am, or my identity, or my attraction. I feel like I was trying to maybe escape from whatever was happening. And so, I'll share when I was – I was sexually-molested for a lot of my childhood by a family member. So, sexuality, thinking about it, I think I've mostly tried to block it when I was a kid and even into the like young adulthood. Yeah.

NR: I'm sorry to hear that. I guess moving on. You said you moved around a lot, and that kind impeded you from creating friends just because you know that you're probably going to move anyway. Despite that, do you have any particular people growing up that you still did consider like friends throughout like the – even with moving through various locations?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah, I still keep in contact with some friends that I made in middle school, one of the middle schools I went to. And my cousins from Texas, we're not close but we still keep in contact. But I always think it's so interesting how people were born in one place and grew up there and

have known people from kindergarten to like high school. My wife grew up in the same place and just went to the same school with a ton of people, and knows like embarrassing stories, and has her own. So, I think that's really fun interesting but to me it seems so like different and that the experience of that sounds wild. Yeah.

NR: And the topic of your childhood, is there any other like important experience that you wanted to include that may be influenced your identity and perspectives about the world?

LA: About my childhood? I think I mean family is very important to me. My brothers, even though like taking care of them wasn't what I wanted to do, but I did have a lot of fun doing it. And I always wanted to be a positive influence for them and someone that took care of them because of the things that happened to me. So just being a good role model and a fun sister was important to me. And I have a niece that's 12 now, and so it's been cool just seeing her grow up and my brother being a parent. That's been interesting and cool.

NR: Serena, is there anything else you wanted to add to that?

SC: Yeah, I would love to hear about your relationship with your parents or even like your siblings, especially with you kind of figuring out, and you now have a wife, dealing with like, or working with your queerness, and I guess like with like their values or anything. Do you feel like – were there any issues there and how did that like resolve?

LA: Absolutely. Yeah.

SC: Or has it resolved?

LA: Yeah. I guess I should tell you my coming out story. So, I didn't come out until, hmm, I think I started coming out to my friends when I was around 22. And I initially came out as bisexual because it was more accepted in my group of friends. And I did try dating men, and it just, I could never connect with them in like a romantic way. I developed feelings, but never – even holding, I tried holding hands with boyfriends and it just felt, ugh, uncomfortable. I gave it my best shot.

But once I felt – I don't know if I ever actually felt comfortable exploring my sexuality or if it just kinda happened. I want to say it probably – yeah, I don't even remember. The first memory I have with like being romantic with a woman or a girl was at a party. And a girl just kissed me on the lips, and I was like, wow, this is amazing. This is what it's supposed to feel like. *[Laughter]* But so that that's kind of where things started off. And eventually my friends were like, "Okay, Lilian, you're a lesbian. We know

you're not interested in men. You can stop pretending now." And my friend and I downloaded a lesbian app, and this was – mm-hmm?

SC: Can I ask where were you? Like were you in Baltimore at this time or when did you kind of start exploring like figuring things out?

LA: Frederick, Maryland, so I used to go down to D.C. a lot and go to clubs there with friends, but I think actually that that experience was in Baltimore. I wouldn't come to Baltimore a ton when I was younger but some. Yeah, so I lived in Frederickville with my parents, and I didn't go to college after high school, so I stuck around and worked. When I was 18, I got a job at Sheppard Pratt in one of their residential rehabilitation programs. So, I did that for I think five years. But I didn't come out to my parents until I met Megan because I felt like I was hiding her then.

SC: Is Megan your wife?

LA: Yes. Yeah, Megan is my wife. And I met Megan on this app, this dating app for lesbians before it was –

SC: What app was it?

LA: – before dating apps were cool or appropriate, or a thing where people meet. I think it was called L. And it was, yeah, it was long, long before dating apps were as popular as they are now. So anytime someone would ask us how we met, we'd be like, oh, you know, friends, somehow, some way. I don't know. But yeah, so when I met Megan, I decided to come out. Not right away though. I waited until I moved in with her and then I came out.

SC: Do you remember who you told first?

LA: I told my brother, the 30-year-old brother.

SC: What's his name?

LA: His name is Alex, but we call him Chonde. So, I told Chonde first. I took him to Chipotle, and I was like, "I gotta tell you something." And he was like, "Oh my gosh. What?" And I was like, "I'm a lesbian." He was like, "Oh, that makes sense." And that was that. That's it. He was just like, "Oh yeah. I get it now. Like it all makes sense." And just all the thoughts started connecting in his head as he ate his burrito. It was funny.

SC: Would you say that was a positive experience?

LA: Absolutely. Yeah, it was a really positive experience. And then my brother, so he – it was ten years ago, so he must have been like 20 years old, and the other two brothers were a lot younger, but I told them too and they were very accepting also. And even Jason, the youngest one, he must have been like eight or nine years old. And I remember him like smiling and giving me a hug, and being like, “I accept you, Lili. Like it’s okay.”
[Laughter]

Yeah, so my brothers were always really, really accepting. My parents had a really difficult time with it. And it wasn’t easy for me either. My dad was my best friend before I came out. I used to call him every day. He’s a lot of fun, very social and charming and makes friends with everybody. So, I had this, I mean, I guess my hope was that he would just be fine with it, but I think deep down, I knew that it wasn’t going to be okay.

So, I told him first over the phone, and the first thing he said was, “Well, I always knew, but you should just keep it a secret. Like why did you have to tell everybody or anybody? You could have just lived your life and not embarrass us.” So that that wasn’t fun.

SC: How did that make you feel in the moment? Do you remember?

LA: Yeah.

SC: Any thoughts or feelings that were going through you at that time?

LA: I remember it was, I remember like building up my confidence to tell him and trying to figure out a way to make it easy to say it to him. And then just kind of blurting it out like over the phone. And when he said, you know, like that he always knew, I was surprised. Even though he was very strict and never let me – even though I wasn’t interested, never let me have a boyfriend. Didn’t want me to go out with friends. Always said, “Be careful. Men only want one thing,” blah, blah, blah. So yeah.

And then he also, I remember him saying that he always thought that I would get married and have kids. And that’s a lie because I remember my whole childhood, him being, “Never have kids. Don’t get married. Men are the worst. Think of your brothers,” you know. *[Laughter]* Yeah, it was hard. And then after that, our relationship changed a lot. And so, when I told my mom, she started crying. It was very emotional, and kinda like, “How could you do this to us,” like I was doing something to them. And I remember my cousin Jenny, she’s maybe ten years older than me, but my parents are really close with her. And she called me and said that my parents were having like a meeting with the family, and they were going to pray for me. And so, it was like family drama now. And they were – to me, it felt like my dad was making it about himself, like, “Poor

me. My daughter is a lesbian. Goodness.” *[Laughter]* Yeah, and I can laugh about it now, but back then, I was like what is happening? Like this is terrible.

So yeah. And all of the cousins, and aunts and uncles who are drama and like to gossip about family issues, like this was the center thing. “Lili is a lesbian. Aha. Like let’s all talk about it and pray,” I guess. But my mom eventually ended up coming around and talking with Chonde, the older brother. And he told me that he spoke with her, and she was upset. Like, “Can you believe this? Lili is a lesbian.” And Chonde told me that he told her, “Well, she’s fine. She still Lili. It’s not like she’s like dying or anything. Like she’s still the same person.”

And that did something for my mom because she ended up calling me and telling me that she accepts me and that I’m her daughter. And so even though it was she didn’t take it very well initially, her coming around and just saying she loves me, and she accepts me meant a lot. For my dad, it took a long time and going over to the house with Megan was very uncomfortable.

And both of my parents would ask me to avoid touching her, being like affectionate with her when family members were around, or their friends or their neighbors. And it’s still not the greatest relationship, but I’ve had to set boundaries with them and let them know that I’m just going to be who I am. And I’m not gonna pretend like Megan’s my friend. *[Laughter]* Yeah.

SC: How old were you when you kind of came out? Like was that a long time after you kind of like started dating Megan or like what was like the time frame?

LA: When I came out to my parents?

SC: To your parents.

LA: I was 24, and I met Megan maybe like six months before. Our relationship moved very fast. Yeah, really, really fast. So, we met. I got a tattoo with her like that month. We moved in together like a year later. It’s ten years later and we’re still married so it worked out. But U-Haul lesbians. It’s a real thing. *[Laughter]* It’s a real thing.

SC: That’s amazing. Natalie, do you have any questions about like her coming out or anything? So actually, this is a perfect segue because I was interested in kind of your romantic relationships and like your partner. So, could you tell us a bit about Megan and kind of your relationship with her?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. So, Megan, so Megan is White. And I don't know why I started off that way, but. *[Laughter]* But I think being a biracial couple has – it's been like I've learned a lot from her and getting to meet her family and the way that they do things in their traditions. And she's learned a lot from my family and our culture and stuff. But so, our relationship is a lot of fun. She's my best friend, and we do everything together. I often describe our relationship kind of like having a slumber party every night with your best friend.

We've grown up together. We learned how to live independently in the world together. We've had career things together, and family deaths and grieving. Yeah. And we've moved across state lines together. And when we first got married, it wasn't legal yet in Maryland, so I remember we went to D.C. And like we made like the plan and everything in D.C. And then at some point, it did become legal in Maryland, but we already had it planned in D.C.

SC: How old were you?

LA: When we got married? I think I was 25. Maybe – everything happened so fast, so...

SC: Around the same time?

LA: Yeah. *[Laughter]* Yeah, I think I was 25. Yeah. And my credit was terrible. I think that's one of the biggest things that I learned from Megan is like credit, and paying your bills on time, and responsible things. My family, we all use each other's Social Security numbers because not everyone has one. And the second I turned 18, my dad was like, "Hey, listen, so-and-so needs your Social Security number to go and see if we get a car. Like we're gonna start doing this, this, and that." So, my credit was terrible.

And so that's something that I've been able to teach my brothers and make sure that they build their credit. I can't teach my dad anything, but I've encouraged them to set boundaries with him and other family members.

SC: Yeah, awesome. I'm interested because you said you started – kind of like you met her through a dating app.

LA: Mm-hmm.

SC: And I guess is it correct that that was part of your process of coming to acceptance with your sexuality?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. So, I have – I had a friend who identified as bisexual back then, so we would do all kinds of silly things. Like would go to D.C. to the gay club and just hit on girls for fun. It didn't matter who was, just approach any woman and be like, "Hey, you're beautiful. Want to dance?" And so yeah, just going out and kind of being silly and engaging with other queer women was how I started kind of exploring my sexuality. Yeah.

SC: Would you say that – like could you describe to us kind of the – since you were going to like the clubs in Washington...right?

LA: Mm-hmm.

SC: So, could kind of describe like the queer scene or the like the queer woman scene in like D.C.? And especially because you're Latino and you're from El Salvador, or like your parents are from El Salvador, did you feel any like belonging or kind of disconnect to the women that you were meeting?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. So, my friend Nancy, she was also Salvadorian, and we're kind of cousins. We are cousins and we met in high school, but that's a different story. But so, it was cool that she, you know, also was exploring her sexuality and we could kind of do this together and hit on women in D.C. *[Laughter]* But I remember going to a gay club for the first time, it was "Town", which I don't even know if it's still open, but back then it was a huge club. And it was – I felt like I was at home, accepted.

Like it felt so natural and exciting that there was a place where there's queer people and it's accepted, and there's not any shame or sort of like judgement. And just seeing drag queens for the first time. And people, I mean there were very feminine women, and very masculine women, and gay boys. And just people from all walks of life, it looked like. But I don't remember seeing a ton of Latinos. But I also don't remember having a problem with that because I was so excited about just being able to be gay freely. Yeah.

SC: And since you're currently in a biracial like relationship, has your identity ever come up at a point, like has like the difference in your identity, or background, or family upbringing ever been a point of contention, or even – I guess you like you said you learned a lot from her, has there also been any type of like exchange that has been?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. So, we talk a lot about race. And when we first moved to Baltimore, I really wanted to connect with the Latino community, and I really wanted to like kind of build roots here and make it home. And one of the things that stood out to me was that there was no LGBTQ Latino

support sort of situation, or thing, or anything, or presence, or representation. And Megan, at the time, was working on getting her CPA so she didn't really have a ton of time to spend with me. So, we were each other's support, probably too codependent.

SC: What's a CPA?

LA: The accounting, accountant thingy.

SC: Makes sense. Gotchu.

LA: Yeah. *[Laughter]* Certified public accountant, I think it stands for. Yeah, so a really hard test that's really stressful, and I would never want to do that, but. So that's when I started asking around and kind of trying to build sort of support networks for LGBTQ Latinos like myself, and I got to meet some really cool people. But through that that experience, Megan, I think, started to learn more about me and the Latino community.

And we talked a lot about race, and she started recognizing like her privileges. And those were hard conversations to have because she had a hard time recognizing that she had privilege because she grew up in poverty, and you know, like whatever else. But she recognizes now the differences. And I mean even like when we go to the store, she's approached first. People assume that she's going to pay for the check. Just little things like that, I would start pointing out like, "See? See?" Yeah.

And initially it was hard for her to understand why my parents were so not great about me coming out and the way that they responded. And I think a lot of that is just the culture that they grew up in. And like they're Catholic, but not really. But like they – yeah. Yeah. Race comes up a lot and just kind of understanding the differences in our culture has been hard sometimes. But also learning experiences. Yeah.

SC: Yeah. Awesome. Thanks for sharing.

LA: Mm-hmm.

SC: Just because you mention Catholicism and also that like your parents kind of prayed for like your sexuality to go away, I'm interested, I guess this is kind of going back, but I'm interested in what role religion played when you were growing up? Was that a big part of your family or was that something that maybe was like culturally there, but not something that you were very invested in?

LA: It was it was more culturally there. My parents weren't super religious, but always, like they identify as Catholic, but they don't go to church every

Sunday, or really actively participate in church things, or our church members. But they did make me do my first communion and the other thing. And I did go to Sunday school. And in Texas, I remember my mom tried to go to a Christian church. So yeah, religion has always been a big part of their lives and mine, but not...

SC: Kind of like main part.

LA: Yeah. Yeah. But it's there and it does impact like life. I don't know if that makes sense.

SC: Yeah, definitely. Natalie, I feel like this could transition well into like your section so you could ask any additional questions you have, or transition.

NR: Yeah. So, I just wanted to get more of a sense of your experience with the Latino community in Baltimore, like outside of, I know we talked a lot about like maybe like queer Latino spaces, or kind of lack of representation of that, but I'm kind of more of more curious about the general kind of Latino community.

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. So, the Latino community in Baltimore, a lot of people automatically just jump to, "Okay Highlandtown," that's where the majority of the Latino community lives. But actually, there's a lot of pockets of immigrants in general in Baltimore City. And there's a really large growing community of Latino immigrants and newcomers in West Baltimore in the Brooklyn area and even in like Baltimore County borders.

So, I think there's – it's a growing community here. And there's, I think it's gonna continue to grow. And that's most exciting, but also there's not a ton of support. And I know that the city knows that it's gonna continue to grow, but I think we need to build more immigrant-friendly, and open and welcoming spaces for newcomers.

NR: Great. Do you have any particular experiences with the Latino community that you wanted to talk about, or –?

LA: So, I mentioned earlier that it was really important to me to have like a queer Latino space for support. And so, I ended up meeting with a few folks from the community, and we tried to organize a Latino support organization or something, whatever it is. There was not a ton of organization to it. It was just like a something. And it started off as a support group and then it kind of molded into like an event sort of thing, and then it kind of became like a representation thing. And then it became like do you have a speaker for LGBTQ Latinos kind of thing.

And so, it was a lot of different things, but there was not a ton of support. And there was just a small group of us that were trying to create something, but we couldn't really figure out what sort of thing it could be. And so, we called it "IRIS", which stands for individuality, respect, integrity, and sexuality. And what it is now is just a Facebook group. And I think that it's something where LGBTQ Latinos in Baltimore City can go and sort of find some sort of community, and updates, and can post things and share.

But we were hoping to create some sort of representation and support for the Latino community. And what I learned was that there was a lot of, how do I say it, like there was a lot of talk, but not enough people willing, or dedicated, or you know, like kind of time, or wanting to put in efforts, or not knowing where to start, or how to do what. And there was also some disagreements from community members around coming out and having a presence.

So, I remember when we first started, we met with a lot of people, a lot of LGBTQ Latinos, and there was a larger group. And one of the people there thought it was silly and that it wouldn't get anywhere, that it would be embarrassing, and that there's no need for it. So, people had mixed feelings about kind of being out and present, having like LGBTQ Latino representation. And so, to me, that was the first time I heard something like that. And it kind of shocked me. But this is also a community that is kind of for some immigrants, they live in the shadows and have to kind of stay under the radar just to get by. So, I respect that and learned a lot about Latinos and the community in Baltimore City in general through that experience.

NR: Great. So, for the time that it existed that, I know you said it's kind of taken on several forms. Do you feel that it has still accomplished its missions to an extent of like creating community for LGBTQ Latinos in Baltimore?

LA: I think my hope for Baltimore LGBTQ Latinos is to have more support or have a support. I think a Facebook group is a tiny little shred of platform or something, some sort of something that maybe a teenager or an adult can find some sort of sense of support, or group, or community. But aside from that I'm not sure what, I don't think there's anything else. There's churches. I know that those churches that have Latinos in them that are very supportive. But my hope is that that something larger is created with physical support like an office or something, or an agency, or even an agency that has a program that's for queer people who identify as Latino as well.

NR: You said that it allowed you to learn a lot more about the Latino community in Baltimore. Could you elaborate on that?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. Just the kind of – I guess when I started kind of exploring and trying to create something, and meeting other queer Latinos in Baltimore City, I wanted to create something because I felt, like I felt lonely and I wanted community and support, and I wanted to be around people like me. And through that, I learned that there's also – not everyone wants to come out of the closet, or it feels safe. And I mean that was probably the bigger thing is like safety is a huge concern.

And back then Trump, I think was president or was becoming president, and there were a lot of people, ICE and immigration was a lot more active and present, and picking people up in the streets. So, there was a lot going on. And I got to meet a lot of people who had different experiences from mine. And yeah. Yeah, that's – yep. *[Laughter]*

NR: So, in our pre-interview, you talked about feeling that there is a disconnect of cultures with queer Latinos that are born here, and those who are immigrants. Could you elaborate on that?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. And I think that sort of speaks to like not wanting to be out and present and kind of living under the radar. And I realized back then that that I, you know, in wanting support and presence, I was coming from a place of privilege because I don't have to live under the radar or worry about ICE coming to my house or being deported. But that is the reality for a lot of people is having to be deported, or the risk of being separated from family members, or not being able to provide for family members back home. I forgot the question. I know I was – this is what happens. I ramble and then...

NR: It was just about like you said that there was a disconnect of culture with the queer Latinos born here and *[crosstalk]*.

LA: Yeah. So, I think that's where the disconnect. And just like so I was raised in a Salvadorian family. I'm Salvadorian. That's how I was raised. Like that's what I know. That's who I am. But my family members who were born and raised in El Salvador, when I meet them, they don't consider me the same. And like the same goes when I meet people in Baltimore City who are born and raised in their country come here, and I'm like, "Oh yeah, I'm Salvadorian too," and they're like, "But you were born here." Like what?

So, there's like a disconnect there, and so I think being bicultural, being – kind of is you're walking in a different world or perception from Americans and Latinos. Like you're in the middle and you kind of

understand both, but you don't really fit in quite into either. And then on top of it, you're queer. *[Laughter]* It's just a lot of things. Yeah.

NR: And you said that IRIS Baltimore has now, it's just kind of like a Facebook page now. Are you still involved with it though to an extent or is that kind of like almost like a thing of the past for you?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I'm still involved, myself and the other two or three people that kind of created the group are still the administrators for the Facebook group. And I remember way back when we first started the Facebook group, we had a big debate about if we should make it private or public. And because of like there was so much hesitancy around coming out, or presence in the community, and we really wanted to be like a support for queer Latinos, we decided to keep the Facebook group private so that people feel more comfortable sharing things.

And we still all share the responsibility of approving posts just to make sure that like there isn't anything, you know, messed up, or judgmental, or terrible that people are posting. So yes, still involved. And there have been discussions randomly about like creating something or participating in Pride again. So yeah, still there.

NR: So, does IRIS Baltimore plan to, you know, make it more of a physical space at all, or is there any talk about that, or is it just kind of still more just like a Facebook page?

LA: For the moment and for a few years now, it's just been a Facebook page. And we kind of decided that like our energy wasn't really moving anything anywhere, and the Facebook group was producing what we had hoped for it even though it wasn't the way that we visualized things. But I think Baltimore will get there, and younger generations are gonna want something. And hopefully people will feel safe, you know, being themselves and embracing their sexuality and identities. Yeah.

NR: Thank you. Serena, is there anything else you wanted to add?

SC: I'm interested how did you end up meeting, I guess, your co-founders or like the co-admins that you're in the group with?

LA: Yeah. So, I used to work for House of Ruth Maryland. It's a program that serves victims of domestic violence. And that that's actually the first job I had when I moved to Baltimore. And I worked out of the office, the satellite office in Highlandtown. And one of the directors there was really supportive of me and encouraging.

And so, I was telling her about, you know, like creating a Latino support, or asking her, you know, if there was anything for queer Latinos in Baltimore City because she's a native Baltimore City person. And so, she said no, but you know I know someone who is a leader in the community and might be able to help you. So, I met him. His name's Alfredo Santiago. He's Puerto Rican. A super cool guy. But I met him with Lisa for coffee, and I talked to him and asked him if he was interested in, you know, creating some sort of support group or something.

And he was sort of hesitant at first. I mean I had just met him, right, like we were just having coffee. *[Laughter]* And so he said he was open to it as long as he wasn't the one in charge or anything. And I was like, well, I mean we can do it, and we can just see where things go. And he ended up being super committed to it. And he knows a lot of people and is incredibly social and has been around Baltimore for a long time. And so, he was a big part of building community and inviting members of the community who trusted him and also felt the same way.

SC: That's awesome. I'm interested in what type of support or what would you say are the types of things that are posted in the Facebook group? Like are they kind of just like connecting or talking to people who have similar experiences, or is it also like monetary support, or like social support? Like what type of interactions happen in the group?

LA: So, there's a lot of sharing events. There's one church that's pretty decently active on there that shares like when they're doing events.

SC: What church?

LA: I think it's the church Alfredo goes to, but the pastor is a woman. I don't know if she identifies as queer, but very LGBTQ-friendly and wanting to be supportive. It's a Methodist church in Highlandtown.

SC: Awesome. That's great.

LA: Mm-hmm. But yeah, it's mostly sharing events and resources, and there's also people who are sharing their events. So, in Baltimore, the Latino drag community is – the way I see it, from how I see it, it is kind of separated from the American, I guess, drag community. And so, the Latino drag community is more like a pageant, and they do their own thing, and like it's amazing but they share things on the group too. So yeah, it's mostly events and sharing resources and information.

SC: That's awesome. Is there anything that has like made you particularly proud or any achievements within the group that you were like, wow, I'm

really glad that we did this, or like something that like you find as like a core part of like your experience with the group?

LA: Mm-hmm. Honestly, I had really big hopes for IRIS. When it first started out, I had really big dreams. And then I realized that I was being selfish and kind of pushing my own agenda. So, I stepped back because I realized that, and was disappointed for a really long time. But in reflecting, I think I'm happy with it being a Facebook group because there is something, and one thing that we always said when we were meeting regularly was that we want to make sure that we create something that never goes away and is always available. Because there's going to be young people, and older people, and just people who are seeking support. And I think that it is fulfilling that, to whatever extent, I don't know. But I am proud of what we did in and what it is now.

SC: Yeah, it sounds like a great place of support and like community. I'm interested in kind of you talked about like grassroots activism and organizing, and partially that's with IRIS.

LA: Yeah.

SC: I'm interested do you have any other experiences in grassroots activism or organizing?

LA: So, IRIS was like the main thing. We rallied for immigrant rights. We advocated for policies to support immigrants...

SC: So, could you elaborate a bit more about that? Did you plan the rallies then?

LA: We just participated –

SC: – You participated.

LA: Yeah. So, it was more support. We also got opportunities to speak on panels for different things and work with organizations that wanted to be supportive of people of color, and kind of bring together people of color in general in Baltimore City. So, like the Black LGBTQ community and the Latino LGBTQ community kind of coming together. I think that was something that was really beautiful. And I really appreciated, I don't know, that experience, you know. So yeah, that's where the grassroots advocacy is just through IRIS, kind of advocating for policies and rallying. Yeah.

SC: Since you talked a bit about kind of the black queer community and the Latino queer community coming together, was that at like a physical panel? A conference?

LA: Mm-hmm.

SC: Could you tell us a bit more about that and maybe any personal experiences that like really – moments that are highlighted in your head?

LA: Yeah. So, one of the things that came from it was Black LGBTQ individuals wanted to be supportive of IRIS. And we did have people come to IRIS meetings that just wanted to be supportive and a part of it. So, people of color who are also queer, not necessarily Latino, just wanted to be supportive. So that is so meaningful. And yeah, and being on panel discussions for people of color, queer people of color, and having representation from across different – sorry, I'm moving.

SC: You're good. *[Laughter]* You can repeat that if you want to.

LA: Having representation from different races and that sort of diversity was really cool.

SC: That's awesome. What role does activism like play in your life? Do you think it's something really important to you, or how do you like think of activism?

LA: So, when I was younger and full of fire, and active with IRIS, it was a big part of my life and something I would never change. And so, I'm not – I don't do a whole lot of activism anymore because I'm in a nursing program and working full-time. But I still work in and advocate for my community wherever possible. I think it's still something that I feel very passionate about.

And when I think of activism I think about advocacy in general and using the privileges that I do have to elevate people's voices and experiences. I've gotten to meet a lot of individuals through my work and my experiences in the community, and IRIS. And so just advocating and bringing attention to underserved communities is something that's really important to me.

SC: That makes sense. I'm interested where did this passion or interest come from towards activism or even you've talked about, or we talked about in our pre-interview that you've had over like 13 years of experience in the human service or nonprofit field, like sector. So where did the passion or interest towards activism or kind of working in the nonprofit sector come from?

LA: Yeah. So, I mentioned earlier that when I was 18, I started working for Sheppard Pratt for one of their housing programs that serves people with severe mental illness. And I was 18, I don't know how I got the job. I mean they must have really needed somebody because – yeah. But I stayed there for around five years. And I got to meet people who were severely mentally ill, recently discharged from psychiatric facilities, but not exactly able to live independently on their own and didn't have any family support, so would have been on the streets if it wasn't for this program. And so just kind of building relationships with people, seeing how they live and supporting them there was a start. And then I moved to Harrisburg with Megan and got a job at the YWCA. And so, the YWCA has been around for a long time. I hadn't heard of them before, but their mission is to empower women and eliminate racism. So that is where my passion for activism started because it was just such a bold mission, and just they had it plastered everywhere in the building. It was everywhere and I loved it.

And I was only at that job for like ten months, but it was such a meaningful experience because it really felt like everyone there was family and supported each other, and everyone was so passionate about the mission. So that's where it started. And so, I took that with me to Baltimore. And then Baltimore's where I really got an opportunity to learn how to public, speak in public and like advocate and push for things. And I guess I kind of felt brave enough to do those things at that point. Mm-hmm.

SC: That's awesome. Including like those moments that you talked about, were there any other important experiences or moments within your career within the field that have changed your perspective or thoughts about your identity or anything?

LA: Yeah. I mean, and that's the other thing is my experiences growing up and my identity as a lesbian are also part of the reason why I feel passionate about advocacy, and just doing – working with underserved populations. What was the question? Sorry.

SC: Just kind of were there any other moments because you talk about working at Sheppard Pratt...

LA: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

SC: And then after that, afterwards, like YWCA, and then you also mentioned you worked for it like House of Ruth. Were there any specific moments in your career or like interactions with people that really changed your perspective about the world or anything like that?

LA: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I mean I've got I've gotten to meet so many interesting and incredible people, whether they've been clients, people that we serve, or coworkers, or colleagues, or bosses. And one thing that always – I feel like I'm always thinking about the populations that we serve from this lens, which is Latino queer, and often that lens is forgotten. And just meeting people that are coming into services that identifies either/or, or both, and the experiences that they've had, or the difficulties, or the barriers, or the additional layers of barriers that they've had because of who they or where they come from, or whatever else.

And particularly House of Ruth, so I was a service coordinator. My job is to help safety plan with victims who were in imminent danger trying to get away from their abusive partners. And although I didn't get to work with a ton of LGBTQ victims, the ones where they get to work with had like very violent, and aggressive, and scary situations and that were – that did have additional like problems that heterosexual couples wouldn't experience.

SC: What were some of those problems?

LA: So, there was, I remember there was the lesbian – my client was a lesbian, and her partner managed to kind of say that she was the victim. And so, they both got arrested because she – in defending herself, she scratched the abusive partner. And so that was traumatic for her, and she didn't trust the police...initially to begin – you know, in general. And so, this experience, you know, that experience had made her feel like, well, you know, no one's going to believe me now.

And that's something that I think heterosexual couples probably wouldn't experience like, "Who's the victim? You're both women. Like how violent can this really get?" And I learned that 50 percent of lesbian couples experience domestic violence...or women.

SC: Wow. That's definitely very interesting to learn about.

LA: Mm-hmm.

SC: Also, so now to shift into your current position, and correct me if I'm wrong. But I think you told us that you were the Coordinator of Community Health and Outreach for Healthcare for the Homeless. Is that correct?

LA: Yeah, that's correct.

SC: Okay. So, I'm interested in what is the mission of Healthcare for the Homeless, and how or why did you start working for them?

LA: Yeah. So, Healthcare for the Homeless' mission, their mission is a little bit longer, so I don't know it word-for-word, but our CEO always says: "Housing is healthcare." And so, the mission is to bring access to healthcare for people experiencing homelessness, and ultimately eliminate homelessness, right, and create avenues of stable housing for people. And what was the other part of the question? Sorry.

SC: Oh, and why did you start working for the organization?

LA: Yeah. So, when I was at House of Ruth, I felt, at some point, I felt like I was ready for something new. I had learned a lot. But after a few years, I felt like I was ready for something new, and I became really good at my job and really good at safety planning because of domestic violence. And that never gets boring. But I just, I wanted to expand and kind of bridge over into something different. So, I wanted to cross over into healthcare but still work with people in need, or like have that human service kind of thing.

And so, Healthcare for the Homeless was the perfect kind of organization. And I happen to know the director of HR. So, I don't have a college degree, and it's always been very difficult for me to find work because a lot of places require bachelor's degrees in social work, or human service, or something like that. And so, I got a shot thankfully. They gave me a shot. And so through working there, I got to work really closely with the nurses and admire them. And I've always said I don't know what I want to do when I grow up even though I'm 33, but I finally do. I want to be a nurse. And yeah, that's thanks to my experience there.

SC: That's awesome. As your current role, as Coordinator of Community Health and Outreach, what type of responsibilities do you have or what you do every day, I guess?

LA: Yeah. I oversee the community health worker program and the outreach program, and I'm also on the pediatric and family care team. I serve as their community health worker. So, our pediatric and family care team, the majority of the families that we serve, it's 90 percent actually I just learned, 90 percent of the families we serve are immigrants and newcomers. And my team consists of, I think right now there's seven people.

So, the community health workers are helping people access care, bridging care, and social needs, helping people connect to shelters, meeting people where they're at, supporting people getting into treatment programs if they want to. I've helped people who are wanting to get abortions, younger

people. And I have used the knowledge I gained from House of Ruth in my current role a lot. So that's been great.

And then the outreach team is in actively in the streets engaging individuals who are living in encampments or on benches. And so the work there is to just build trust and consistent support for people whether it's connecting them to Healthcare for the Homeless or whatever else they need. It's truly about serving the individual that's in need. So that's been a really great experience for me. I've gotten to visit encampments in different parts of the city that go without any support, and just meeting people and supporting them through there. Yeah.

SC: Wow. Have you worked with clear queer clients as your role at HCH? And also, do they face any unique challenges due to their queerness?

LA: Yeah. Yeah. So, I've worked with queer clients, so yeah, all the time. *[Laughter]* And I am thinking about one situation in particular. So, I saw on Facebook, someone posted on a queer group page that they were looking for help with mental health services, and they were experiencing homelessness. So, I sent them a message and I was like, "Hey, come to Healthcare for the Homeless. I think we can help you." And it was a transwoman.

And so, she ended up following up and coming into the clinic. And she presented in a very masculine way. And she even told me that she didn't feel comfortable like really expressing and dressing the way that she felt most comfortable because she was homeless. And it wasn't safe for her. And so, she really needed to get into mental health services is what she was looking for. And so, she got connected. And she's still seeing a therapist there. But she sent me a message after her first appointment, and she said how she was really nervous, and you know, wasn't really sure.

But she was really happy with her interaction with the person she met with and was really hopeful for whatever's next. But yeah, so I try to like actively like seek out places where queer people are and are experiencing homelessness, in addition to all the other things. And we've had a lot of young queer people who are experiencing homelessness coming through services, and that speaks a lot to the issues that young queer people face when things happen, you know, the family isn't accepting. You get kicked out, or, I don't know, things are just hectic. Yeah, but we're there –

SC: – Definitely. Natalie, I'll hand it over to you.

NR: Okay. So, stemming off of that, just from your own perspective and experiences, do you think that queer individuals in Baltimore face like unique health challenges due to their identities?

LA: Unique health challenges? Yeah, I mean there's differences in healthcare challenges based on what neighborhood you live in, and then there's challenges based on identity. I've had clients who are trans and have to do sex work, and it's something that they feel, I mean that they have to do because they haven't been able to secure employment or other opportunities. And so, they run the risk of STIs or even being killed or murdered.

So yeah. And I know I've talked with younger people who are queer about PrEP and using protection. And in talking to younger people, they think HIV doesn't really sound like a big deal because people aren't dying anymore from it, and you can live a healthy life. So, educating people around that has been something that I try to do often. Yeah, I mean I do think that identity impacts people's health and where you live. Yeah. I can answer this question in so many different ways that I don't even know where to start.

NR: That was good.

LA: Good. *[Laughter]*

NR: So just like your last section since we do only have ten minutes. I am interested in learning more about your nursing career. I know you kind of talked about this briefly already, but what drew you to nursing, and how do you feel that your past experience influenced this decision?

LA: So, working in Healthcare for the Homeless, and working more closely with the nurses, I got to understand how many different roles and how diverse the field is. I used to always think that nurses work in hospitals, or you know, there's just kind of in a room and working with the patient, or filling medications, or helping someone get cleaned up or something like that. But there's so many different roles and ways that nurses build new jobs.

And one of the biggest reasons that kind of influenced me wanting to be a nurse was, and I didn't know this before, was that they do a lot of advocacy for policies, and they advocate in general a lot for their patients, and it's a part of like the nurse position is to advocate for your patient and speak up for them. So that's something that really, I don't know for me was important. And I had no idea, nurses, I mean I don't know why I never thought of nurses in that way. Yeah.

NR: Is there a specific way that you plan on going about being a nurse, like a specific field or something that you want to do with it?

LA: I'm not 100 percent sure yet what I want to do. I would love to stay in my current role at Healthcare for the Homeless and do street medicine. And it's something I've been advocating for, for a long time, is to have a nurse with us in the streets because we see so many people with open wounds, or who just are not wanting to come into the clinic or not ready to see a doctor. But if we had someone there with us, it would make a world of difference.

And there's so many times where we're just like, "Oh my gosh, like this person's dying right in front of us and there's nothing we can do, and we're not professionals, like ah!" So yeah, it would be cool to be like a street medicine nurse. And I've also thought about maybe doing hospice. I think that would be a really fulfilling role.

NR: Can you explain more about what street nursing is?

LA: Yeah, so street medicine. So, street medicine is basically having a medical provider in the streets with limited supplies and things to be able to provide some sort of care for people right then and there. So, there are mobile clinics and things like that, where someone could step into like a little mobile place or some sort of set-up, where it's like where the people in need are.

But street medicine is more about the specialist or the individual physically coming into the space where the client is, and having that presence, and trust, and partnership, and being able to provide some sort of care to hopefully help people recognize, okay, like I can trust this doctor or nurse, or whoever. And the outreach worker is also here who I know and I'm familiar with. So, it's kind of bridging together all of the things and building trust with individuals most in need.

NR: Great. Is there anything else you wanted to add, Serena? Okay. So that kind of wraps up all the questions that we had prepared. I just want to leave like space for you if you wanted to add anything else about anything that we talked about today, like closing thoughts.

LA: Yeah. I think being queer and Latina is probably the two biggest ways I identify, and I'm proud of who I am. It wasn't always that way because of how I grew up and the way society kind has viewed queer people and people of color. But I think I also would like to be a role model to my niece and my brothers, and that's important to me too. And I guess that's it.

NR: Okay. Thank you so much.

LA: Thank you.

[End of audio]