

Race and Oral History Course, UC San Diego

Narrator Name: MILENIA ROCIO QUINTERO SERRANO

Interviewer: Lorena Gonzalez

Date: May 15, 2019

Location: Barrio Logan College Institute

Collection: Race and Oral History Course, Spring 2019

Length of Interview: 00:40:17

Lorena: So today is May 15, 2019 and I'm here at Barrio Logan College Institute to interview Milenia for the Race and Oral History Project. Can you please state your full name?

Milenia: My name is Milenia Rocio Quintero Serrano.

Lorena: Perfect. Ok Milenia can you begin by telling me a little bit more about your upbringing?

Milenia: yeah, so I was born in Mexico, in Manzanillo, Colima. My family is from Guerrero but my dad was in the Marines, actually. In las fuerzas armadas Mexicanas. So, I was born at the military port in Manzanillos, so right by the beach. But when I was two years old, my parents decided to come to the United States. So, I got to the United States when I was two years old, 2001, 2002 sorry, and we've been here ever since. We lived in Logan- in Lemon Grove and eventually moved to Logan Heights and have been here ever since. Yeah.

Lorena: That's so cool. So, can you tell me more about living here in Barrio Logan?

Milenia: Yeah! So for me growing up I was, like, undocumented. I am undocumented. So growing up in this particular part of San Diego was-is crucial in my identity. Particularly as a Chicana because I was able to identify with the Chicano struggle. What it meant to not be from here or from there. Like *ni de aqui ni de alla*. And, like, being undocumented it was always in a limbo. And it still is, but, I think, this neighborhood particularly filled me with so much pride in my culture back at home but also in identifying as an American as well and having a term that encompasses both identities in kind of a concise way.

Lorena: Could you tell me more about that struggle? Maybe like the specific instances where it really affected you?

Milenia: Yeah, well for me being undocumented particularly like my whole life has just been. It's never been hidden from me, I've always knew I was undocumented in some way or another. My parents-you know a lot of people have their story where they find out they're undocumented

when they go get their driver's license and they can't get one. But for me, I always knew it, I always knew that my family might not always be here with me. But I think I felt it especially hard in high school, just because I was going to high school in La Jolla. In, like, a one hour to an hour and a half drive every morning out of Barrio Logan to go to La Jolla and go to, like, a prep school that serves, like, the 1%. So it was really difficult in having to hide who I was because I'd never done it before, especially with like my status. And in high school, nobody ever found out that I was undocumented. Like one friend knew but that was it. But now, being in college and looking back at that experience, I think the legacy of resistance, resilience, of everything that's been going on in Logan, like gentrification. As part of BLCI, being at like the forefront of fighting for our community, has really allowed me to go out of my way and be like "Hey it's not right, but like this is who I am. Like this is what I stand for and I fought for it in my community so why can't I do it for myself?" So, like, high school was, like, high school. I think it's just, like, difficult for everybody but I think it's really shaped me into the person I am now and in unison with my community especially. It's just made me realize how much power I have as a person and how much of that I can bring into this new space that I am in at. Yeah.

Lorena: Yeah, so that sounds so powerful, I-I would like to hear more especially about your high school experience and how-like why did you feel like you needed to hide this part of your identity?

Milena: Yeah, so. I went to high school, like I said, I went to a high school that serves the, like, 1% of, like, American society like in La Jolla. I had friends who, like, lived in mansions and, like, who took family vacations every, like, summer to some exotic part of the world. And I went to high school in 2016 when it was the election. The 2016 election. Donald Trump got elected President and for people at my high school, it was ok to express their racist, like, bigoted views. So it was really out there for me, like, people's hatred of me and the identities that I encompassed were visible. Like Trump gear when I walked-like when I got to school every morning. Town halls talking about politics but like erasing who I was and like what I believed in. Like who I am as a person. So that was very difficult but-and so that is why I knew I couldn't say my status because I knew that if I-if I told people I was undocumented it would-like, it would put me in a potentially dangerous situation being in that space. But also a part of me also feared the connections that these people had. Like could that reach back at home and put, like, my family in danger. Which is something that I would never, like, do or try to do purposefully. So I chose to like not say anything. But I do remember an instance where I was about to. I was going to tell. They were doing, like, this big all school assembly on immigration and somebody asked me to share my story. And like at that moment I was really decided like "yeah, it's about time. I'm a senior. I'm about to graduate in like a little bit. Why is it like-why is it stopping me now?" I think is what the question, but it actually came to a point where administration didn't allow me to share that with the campus for- I-They said they prioritized my safety and like my family's

safety, but I also think that in institutions that are so like-like white-predominantly white institutions that serve populations that are, like, “controversial”. I think who I was as a person was threatening to them as an institution. So, high school was full of ups and downs, especially with, like, claiming who I was. But then, I went-I eventually came out on social media and like I had a whole bunch of comments from like my friends. People who I wasn’t friends with, but who still commented their like support for who I was. But you know with that was also a lot of hate and lot of people who just didn’t agree with that. But that’s a whole other story because now as I look forward like we’re in the same places. Like, we are both at top universities in the country, like, why-you know why does it matter anymore? So like that experience really taught me that my identity is more-like what I think about my identity is more important than what other people think. And so now it’s like nothing that I hide because I hid it for so long I don’t think its necessary anymore. Yeah

Lorena: What helped you through all of this? Because I know it’s really hard having to go through all of these ups and downs in high school because, I mean, in high school you are also trying to figure out who you are in, like, a very cheesy way. So what helped you throughout all of it to stay so positive?

Milena: I think people. I am a very people person. So, there were certain members of the community who really served as my anchor and who really, like, made sure I was ok. During high school I was also leader of, like, affinity groups. Which are cultural assemblies at my high school campus. So I was surrounded by people who, even though, didn’t know of my status knew, like-I knew what they stood for and that was very comforting for me. I had great friends who are still my best friends. Who really supported me through the ups and the downs. But it was ,like, the diversity officer at my school was the only person who knew about my status and he was there every step of the way. Just checking in on how I was doing. Like, what I needed to be ok. When Trump rescinded DACA, like, he was the first person I went to because I was-it was during the day that Trump made that announcement, that addressed the rescindment of DACA. And I went to this persons office and he just like sat me down and we just watched together and then he was like “Ok you are not in a good place to go to class so I will make whatever you need happen.” So it was really people like him and just coming back home and seeing who I was doing it for. Like all the kids at BLCI, like, they’re my inspiration because I know that if they see that I can do it, like, why can’t they? And, yeah, just my community. I love seeing the elders. Like, the power of Chicano park is just present in this community all day, like, all the time. So now when I come back home it’s the same thing. I like to come to BLCI because I like to be reminded of, like, who I’m doing it for and I can gain energy from, like, going to the park and like seeing la kiosko and the murals and like all of that fills me with joy. So it really is what got me through high school and like what’s getting me through like college now I think.

Lorena: Yeah. I wanted to ask you. Why is it that you, and from what it sounds like your family as well, pushed education on you?

Milenia: Yeah well. Where-well for me particularly I think it's all-like I've seen what my parents have sacrificed for me. Like, my parents haven't gone back to Mexico in 16 years. My Dad since he left Mexico, he didn't see his mom ever again. Like, she passed away two years ago. And I see the like sacrifices that they've made in order for me to be here and, like, speaking with you. It's a lot. Like, I am so grateful for them and I think in some ways it's like paying them back for that. But for-I think for them it's just about making sure that we are secure. Like, that we have a future that we're ok with and that we are doing, like, what we love. So, yeah I think that's why they pushed education so much. They want us to be secure. They want us to be stable. But I think most importantly they want us to do something with our lives that we look forward to doing every single day. And they've seen how much I've struggled in like high school, but they also see how much I've enjoyed school and much,like, how important it is for me to have, like, higher education and to, like, pursue, like, the community organizing efforts that I've done. And so they've always been there, like, every step of the way. So I think it's because they see how much I enjoy it as well.

Lorena: That sounds so incredible and powerful.

Milenia: Thank you.

Lorena: Can you tell me more about your community work?

Milenia: Yeah, so my community work is based in two locations now. So basically in high school I did a lot of organizing at my high school. So I helped organize the walk outs for March for Our Lives that happened with the school shooting in Florida. So I was the lead on that organizing a school-wide walk out. I did a lot of town halls about gun violence and what the means especially out of campus. I was the leader of the Latin American student organization where I helped students like me who identified as Latinx or Chicanx, navigate that institution as well. And then towards the end of my high school career, I was leader of the Student Diversity Alliance, which was an overarching affinity group that served to anyone interested in learning about diversity issues in my high school campus. In Logan, I was involved with the communities converse conference that BLCI puts on every year, which is youth led and youth organized. So was on the committee for that. It turned out amazing. I have some great memories. And then, I am also a danzante. I do danza Azteca. So, with my danza community we're always at protests. We're always, like, standing up for the community, preserving our traditions. Which I think is very important in a lot of the community organizing efforts in Logan particularly because of the context that we're in now with gentrification and with the, like, right attacks on the community.

And then in LA, I'm doing a lot of organizing on USC campus to establish a DREAM Center. So an Undocumented Student Resource Center because our school does not have one yet. And then I am also doing some immigration work. I work at the immigration clinic at USC campus. So helping people with citizenship applications, helping, like, translating for lawyers. All that good stuff. And then I will also be the director of internal affairs for the Latinx Student Assembly under the Student Government to have meaningful programming for the Latinx community on campus. Yeah.

Lorena: That sounds, like, a lot. You must have a really busy schedule.

Milena: Yeah [laughs], my calendar is my best friend.

Lorena: Yeah I can imagine. But how do you balance all of this? How do you-you know given the context we are in in this country and in this world where we have a lot of resistance, but also a lot of attacks against people of color. Like how do you-how do you keep yourself sane?

Milena: I...danza is my outlet. Like, that is something that I love. That fills me with so much joy. The energy that I feel when I am dancing is just-like you hear, like, the ayoyotes, it's called the drums. Like, it's amazing. It fills you with so much energy. For me, that's my break. I remember, like, Chicano Park. Whenever I'm home that's the first place I visit. Like, that just fills me-like re-energizes me. But I think, it's a lot of work that we're doing and it helps to know that I'm not alone. So, I have so many incredible peers who are doing great work alongside me. And I have great mentors who are also my peers who have guided me and who, you know, are also graduating. So they serve as an example for me to see, like, this is do-able, like, you fight for our community in these predominantly white spaces. And still make it and, like, beat the system because, essentially, like that is what it is. At USC, I should have not-I should not be returning next year because they do not have the resources that I need to be successful. But, like, a lot of students like me, we make it through because we have each other. So, I think that's what it is. It's the energy from the people I love. It's the energy from, like, my peers. It's the energy from, like, my community all the way over here. And yeah, I think it's just that. And it's nothing that I don't love doing. So I love everything that I'm doing which makes it so much easier and it keeps me sane because I know this is what I want to do, like, the rest of my life. Yeah.

Lorena: And why do you think you want to do so much community work? Like, why do you think you want to come back and help your community so much?

Milena: Because I owe everything to them. So, my community, like since I got to the United States, like, I don't remember Mexico much. Like, I don't know. Like, I know we have a home there and I know we have family there, but since I came to the United States, like, my family was

built here. And, like, I never had, like, the stereotypical Mexican family where you have, like, all the tios and tias, and the grandparents. And it's just like a big family reunion every time. For me, all those people were, like, our neighbors, or, like, my friends that we met at, like- that I met at, like, school. So I was never-like, I never had a strong family presence other than, like, my immediate family. Like, my brother and my sister, and my mom and dad. And that was it. For me, community was really what brought me up. Like, it's BLCI and the work that I-they have been doing for me. That we have been doing together since I was in the 7th grade. It's the work that they did with my family when my sister was here since the third grade. So we've been here for a really really long time and it's all those people who have encouraged me, who have watched me grow. Jose who, like, saw me since I was, like, really small. So yeah.

Lorena: And whose Jose?

Milena: Jose is the executive director of BLCI.

Lorena: Can you talk about-can you tell me more about the role that BLCI played? Not just with you, but also your family because it seems like-it played kind of a big role right?

Milena: Yes, so where do I start? So my sister graduated from BLCI in 2012 from high school, but she was here since the third grade. So if we do the math, 2008, 2005, 2003, right? Yeah?

Lorena: Yeah

Milena: Maybe like around 2003, we've been a part of BLCI. So, that's from when I was, like, four years old. So if we think about it in the context, like, I was four years old when we were first at BLCI with my-when my family set foot on BLCI. It wasn't what it is now. We were in a warehouse. We all shared one room and, for me, BLCI was always part of that family. So my sister would go to class, but whenever we would take her people knew who I was and people knew who my parents were. And we had friends who had also gone through the program, who are in the program. My sister came in and out of the program like a few times, but eventually she graduated and, while she was here, I was also here in Middle School. And now that I've graduated, like, my little brother, is an eighth grader and he's been here for two years now. So they've really shaped who we are. They're really supporting me in, like, not only financially with my college education but emotionally. Like, they were my biggest advocates throughout high school. They were my biggest advocates in middle school. They are always fighting for my parents and we know that if there's something we were ever to need, this is the first place to stop. And it's such an integral part of this community. Like, no one knows what Barrio Logan, or what Logan Heights is without BLCI. So for me, just seeing the generations of students and how people come back. My godmother graduated from this program. My godmother's sisters

graduated from BLCI. The first graduate of BLCI actually went to Bishops as well, which is where I went to high school. So, it's just a legacy of people who have done so much work in so many areas and this network of students who are constantly uplifting each other. And I know just how I can count on the older generations of BLCI students. I hope that the younger ones know that they can count on me and it's just that emphasis on family. So, for us, for my immediate family, BLCI was always those, like, tios and tias and cousins. Like, it was always this program who made a difference and made sure that we had all the resources that we needed in order to be where we are now. So it's been a huge part of my life. It's been, like, they're always there, they're always checking in. Even coordinators who lead-like were my middle school coordinators, like they still check in and they're like "oh hey, how are you doing?" or even if they've left the program. So it's just, BLCI stays with people. And whether it's an intern or a, like, tutor, a volunteer, a student, an aunt, an uncle. Like, it's so ingrained in our family and I like to consider all of us as a family because that really is what we are at the end of the day.

Lorena: That is-that is so beautiful.

Milena: Thank you. [giggles] Thank you.

Lorena: Thank you for sharing. Let's see, ok, so we talked a bit about high school, let's go a little bit more to college.

Milena: Ok, ooo.

Lorena: I-like how was the process of getting into USC? Cuz it is a very prestigious school.

Milena: Right.

Lorena: Predominantly white as well. So, like, what was the process like? What was the college application process for you? Not just, like, all the paperwork, but emotionally too and what it meant for your family.

Milena: Yeah, so in high school, like, if we circle back because I think it all starts-it all started from when I-we got to the states. My parents goal was always college, college, college. I always knew I was going to go to college. Like, that was never the question. BLCI helped reinforce that I was going to go to college and they gave me the tools that I needed to go to college. But once you're applying for college, it's a whole different story because now you're actually, like, behind the scenes, like, filling out those applications, getting accepted, getting rejected, finding out that you can't go to a school because the money's just not there. And for me it was a very different process. I had my college counselor at my high school, whose an incredible human being, but

she wasn't as qualified to, like, cater to my needs as much as people at BLCI were. So, I had a little team, I had team Milenia for my college application process. So my college counselor in high school really went out of her way to, like, keep in contact with BLCI, keep in contact with a few other programs that I was a part of in order to make sure that we were making the right decisions for me. Yeah, so it helped me with the search. It's really hard when you're undocumented because you don't qualify for a lot of aid. So at the end of the day, while my classmates were just waiting for the acceptance letter from, like, their dream school. Money didn't matter to them, it was just getting in that was the hard part. So, for me it was a lot about not knowing until that last day. Like, nothing was certain until I said yes to a school. So, eventually it came down to UCSD and USC. But because UCSD is a public institution, I didn't qualify for the federal aid. Which, like, cut off-like, the cost was just too great. So when I got-first of all getting into USC was like "Wow", I never could have imagined. I never submitted my test scores because I thought that it was way out of my league. Like, I didn't think I had the grades, I didn't think I was a good student, but I didn't think I had the grades for what I think USC would be. I didn't think-I-I didn't think enough of myself at that stage of my life last year exactly.

Lorena: Why do you think?

Milenia: I think it was because I just didn't-like, in high school I was so focused on, like, finding myself and making sure that people saw me and that people knew who I was outside of this academic context, that I didn't-I was a good student all the time. I got good grades, but I think I could have done better. So I think when it came down to the application process, a lot of my peers were dealing with, like-where-had like these exceptional grades. They didn't do much, like, extracurricular-wise, but, like, they had incredible grades. Like, they were national merit scholars and they graduated like Magna Kum Laude, I think is what it's called. Something like that [laughs]. Yeah, so for me, I think I was really set back by that. I was like "Wow, they got these incredible grades" and I was taking myself out of the context of who I was and the work I wanted to do and the improvement that I'd done on myself, and I was comparing myself to other people. So-I think that's why I was very unsure of myself and not confident in my potential to get into a place like USC. So I never submitted my test scores. I don't know who submitted my test scores up to this day. But I just remember giving up on USC and then getting the acceptance letter from USC a few months later and that-like, it was a box, it was a cardboard box in a red envelope. It was not something I was expecting. So to see that there it just everything so much realer and, like "Wow, in a few months, like, I'm going to college". And I don't know what college yet, because at that stage I didn't have my financial aid package. But simply the fact that I had gotten into USC. Like, that was huge for me, it was huge for my sister, it was huge for my mom, and my Dad, who didn't understand what USC is. But they were happy because they knew how much it meant to me. So now, like, if you flashforward. Like, making the decision between

USC and UCSD, it really, like, came down to the money. Like, it wasn't about where I wanted to go. Like, that didn't matter anymore. Like, it was about what can I afford? It was also about the programs that they offered for undocumented students in particular. UCSD has great support, but USC gave me the money that I needed to go into that space. And even though they didn't have the resources that I wanted or needed to be successful, I figured that I'd made it that far at high school. Like, USC was just, like, the next thing I needed to conquer. So yeah, I ended up deciding on USC. They gave me a full ride, an almost full ride. I don't pay anything thanks to the help of BLCI and USC. So, it's really great to know that programs like BLCI can make that happen for people like me. And yeah, it's amazing. I love school. I think it's the best choice I've made. I was a little uncertain, but then coming and finishing my first year now, it really is the best choice I could have made. Just like choosing the high school that I did was the best choice I could have made back then.

Lorena: Ok, well your first year, I feel like, was, like, a big year for you right?

Milena: Yeah

Lorena: Like a big transition because I think Barrio Logan and USC are two very different spaces.

Milena: Right.

Lorena: So, how was that like? How was the transition like?

Milena: It wasn't as bad as a lot of people would think and I think I've been really fortunate in that, like, I was able to go to the prep high school that I did because it really prepared me. The people I was surrounded with in high school, were a lot of the same people I was surrounded with in college. Like, it was the same environment. It was the same group of people, kinds of people that I was with. But now in college, being at USC, I also had the ability to choose the spaces that I wanted to be in and choose the people that I wanted to associate with directly. So, it really gave me a lot of freedom to build community as I have with, like, BLCI. And form those connections in this new space. That even though is very different, you are able to find people who identify like you do. Who have the same goals as you do. And yeah, it was really great, but if we think outside of USC. USC is located in South Central LA, which is a neighborhood that's very similar to Logan Heights. So I've been able to find a home in the community as well because as soon as I step off of campus I see murals and I see people that say, like, "Hey mija como estas?" And it makes it all just that much better because its not only a community inside of campus, but also outside who I know are, like, rooting for me and who I know, like, their goals are my goals. And, like, when I see little kids around USC, like, I know they can be like the kids

at BLCI who are just waiting for that opportunity to be able to get in a space like the one I am in. So it just makes the whole-like, again, these people, like, their energy, their hard work, it just makes me being at USC that much more powerful and much more encouraging to keep going.

Lorena: This is very inspiring.

Milena: Thanks.

Lorena: And-So what are you studying at USC?

Milena: I am double majoring in Sociology and Non-profits, NGO's, and Social Change.

Lorena: And why did you choose that focus?

Milena: Yeah. So, I think-Well, I know sociology. I chose that because I am really interested in studying how people interact in those everyday interactions with people. I do know I want to go to law school one day. So when I first applied to USC, I went in as a Political Science major, but then I found out it was really detached from the everyday lives of everyday people. It was very focused on, like, the books, like by the book, and I didn't want that for my college education. Like, I wanted to be able to talk to people and to learn what their struggles were and to learn how I could help them. And I think sociology really encompasses the needs of people like me. And I've taken courses in sociology, in upper division-upper division courses in sociology and, like, I've been reaffirmed that that is, like, what I want to do. Like, it is the right choice for me. And then the other major, Non-profits, NGO's, and Social Change, is because I owe who I am, now and me-my space at USC, I owe it to a lot of the non-profits that helped me get to where I am. So I think one day I'd really like to come back and maybe do non-profit management or towards the end of my career, I don't know, like, be the CEO of an organization like BLCI. And just give back to communities like this one who have given so much to me.

Lorena: Yeah, that is so-again, I love your story.

Milena: Thank you.

Lorena: I think from here I just-I'm sorry I'm collecting my thoughts.

Milena: It's ok.

Lorena: But, how is your family going through all of this. Like, do they know what you're studying? Do they know what you want to do and, you know, how do they feel about it?

Milena: My family has always told me that it's what I want to do. So, for me high school was always-my family was very detached. Like, they knew, like, I-I was on it, like, my whole high school. They never checked my grades online. They trusted in me to have good grades. And when I got into college they told me the same thing, like, "You study what you want to study. Like, you'll make sure you get the grades that you need." Like, I was very kind of-I don't want to say on my own because they were always there supporting me, but those decisions were always up to me and not to anyone else. Which was something really unique. Like, in my high school, like, I was,like, kind of making decisions for my own. My parents weren't making them for me. So, they're really happy. I've told them what I wanted to do. They know what I'm studying. They always ask because they forget. But they're really happy that I'm doing what I love and I think that's what's most important to them. And they're just happy. They love USC more than I do. They love going to visit. They love looking at the roses. They do the little fight-on. Like, they're more in love with that campus than I am and that's, like, the only thing I could ask for because I know that as long as they're happy, I will be happy. Yeah, but they always go and tell people-when people ask them what I'm doing, they're like "Oh va ser abogada." Like, that's all-that's kinda what they have in mind because I've wanted it for so long. So that's, like-that's their mentality and I think they're really looking forward to that and they're really rooting me on for whatever I choose to do.

Lorena: Why do you want to be a lawyer?

Milena: A lawyer? I'm doing some immigration work now. So I work at the immigration clinic at USC. And I've only been there a few weeks, but I am in love with the work that the immigration clinic does. And so, you know for me and coming from my background, I know how much citizenship is and how important it is for people. And it's a social construct because I'm a sociology major and you gotta acknowledge that, but I think it's very important for me to give people who have the opportunity to gain something so powerful and so meaningful. Like, if I could give it to them or help them obtain it, I think, just makes me so happy and it makes me, like, really cherish the hard work that people put in. Like, how unfair our system is yet, like, they were able to do that and they are able to travel back and forth and visit their families and come to the United States and build a life here. Without having to sacrifice, like, so much of their lives to do so. So, I want to be a lawyer because I want to give people-I want to be an immigration lawyer because I want to give people a second chance to be able to live in both worlds without having to sacrifice a huge part of their lives to do so.

Lorena: And why do you define obtaining citizenship as a second chance?

Milena: Because-well I think, once you obtain citizenship is, like-the day I obtain citizenship, hopefully, I think it'll be a second chance for me to, like, make more connections and to, like, make a bridge between, like, my two worlds. And, you know, I don't think it'd be like a second chance in that sense, but I think it is a second chance to create meaningful connections and to create bridges that I can give to other people as well. So, like, I know when I have citizenship I will be able to do so much more work. So much more meaningful work. Like, I will be able to, like, run for office, you know. So it gives us a second chance to be able to fight for communities that aren't able to fight for themselves quite yet. Yeah.

Lorena: Do you see yourself being in office one day?

Milena: Oh yeah. I gope so. My little brother is going to be President, so I can't take that one. But, I think i'd really want to be in the House of Representatives or doing something in education. So, I dont know, but I think I'd really like to run for office one day. Maybe start local. Yeah.

Lorena: That sounds awesome.

Milena: Thank you.

Lorena: And I think that brings us to the end of the video-I mean end of the interview. Is there anything else you would like to add or clarify on?

Milena: No, I think we're good.

Lorena: No? We're good. Ok. Well thank you so much for your time.

Milena: Of course, thank you for having me.