

Narrator: Clayton Haglund

Interviewee: Carmen "Mela" Hernandez

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C: So, we're here at Barrio Logan College Institute in Barrio Logan, San Diego. It's May 14th 2019. My name's Clayton Haglund. And we're with Mela Hernandez. And that's about it for the beginning. Thanks again for taking the time, and I'm really excited to get to know a little bit about your story. Since you are a Barrio Logan College Institute (BLCI) graduate, I already know a couple unique things about you, like: you are a first generation university student, right?

M: Yep.

C: Cool. That's awesome. And are your parents immigrants? Did they immigrate to the United States?

M: Yes. They're both from Mexico. They're both from a small little town in Mexico, and they came here over thirty years ago. They came here, first illegally, and then they were able to get residency and now they are US citizens.

C: Wow, that's awesome. What state?

M: Michoacan.

C: Oh, cool. Can you tell me a little bit about your upbringing and maybe some things that you see as make you who you are as a person?

M: Yeah, so I grew up in City Heights. You know, back in the time when it was still, I mean it still is up in coming, but it was a very low income, high violence, I would say, community. Even though I never really saw it myself, but you would hear things especially in the community. I grew up with a big family. In my immediate family is 5, but I grew up in a duplex with my uncle and his family. So, it was like us, our family, and then it was his immediate family which is another 6.

C: Wow.

M: Yeah, on one property. So, grew up very social and outgoing, close with family, things like that. Then we moved when I was in middle school, and my parents got their own house, and whatnot. Then, I ended up getting accepted... I always did really well in school, in elementary school, and things like that, which lead me to the... It was suggested that I apply for the Preuss School UCSD (University of California San Diego), which at the time I didn't know what it was.

C: What is it?

M: The Preuss School, UCSD. So, it's on the UCSD campus. And it's a middle and highschool that preps students on the college track. And it's a very intense, like you start working on scholarships, personal statements-- 6th grade. So it's that kind of "You're going to college. You're going to college. You're going to college."

C: So it was serious.

M: Yeah it was serious. So, I got accepted. And then I remember not wanting to go because obviously you want to go out with your friends in middle school. And I ended up going, because my parents told me it was best for me. I started going there for 6th grade. And it was in La Jolla, so I remember commuting from City Heights. I would wake up like 6 in the morning, get to the

bus stop, and then I would be there until like 5 o'clock and then I would get on the bus for another hour. And then come back. So, it was like one of those, traveling every day. It didn't feel like it, but looking back I was like, "Wow, I was commuting an hour to school every morning and then coming back." That's in middle and high school, so I was there for 7 years. And it was a small class of like 90 students because up until freshman year people can come in. But once in 9th grade no one else was accepted, you can only leave. So, the numbers kind of dwindle a little and so I think I graduated with maybe 90 students, like a family. And I think that very much prepared me for this growth mindset, and wanting to go into college and really besides my house that was like my second home. And then it was actually in high school where I heard about BLCI. So, on top of that, "You're going to college. You're going to college," you're already like, by 11th grade I already had 4,000 in scholarships. I had my personal statement written. And then, yeah because you're just brainwashed into... Which is a good thing! And I think BLCI really honed it all together. What was different about BLCI was it brought in the family. Whereas, Preuss was really about the student, but here it's like the family finally gets to understand what's going on, and what does it mean to be a student going to college when you're a first generation and low income. And I think that's what's very unique about BLCI. And all of that kind of together has made me who I am now. You know, that I was able to go to... I went to UCLA and then I graduated in Anthropology and Disability Studies. And then I moved to Connecticut for a couple years. Did social work there for a little bit. And then I moved here, and got a job here at BLCI! I needed to move back.

C: Nice!

M: Yeah, it's been a journey.

C: You must have had, like your dream job when you were thinking about college in middle school already.

M: Umm, I thought I was. I was very interested in therapy, of some sort. I just wasn't sure which route to go into. College was actually very difficult for me, despite how prepared I felt I was. And it wasn't necessarily the classes, it was more the big campus. I came from a class that was 90 students, and then getting to UCLA, which is a huge campus. It was difficult to navigate the resources, and then advocate for myself. I think that's like, with my students now I'm a huge advocate. I'm like, "You need to be able to advocate for yourself. That's the one thing I want you to walk away with from here. Because no one else is going to help you but yourself." I think a lot of it was because I had mentally told myself, "Everyone thinks I can do this on my own," so I went and kind of thought I could just do this on my own. It was very hard for me to ask for help, to people who might have given me the advice of, "Advocate for yourself," because I felt like it would be a disappointment to ask questions and things like that. So, I think that was the one downside to all of it.

C: That's a lot of pressure.

M: Yeah, there was definitely a lot of pressure to being the first one to go to college, and get into UCLA, and go to a school like Preuss, and be part of a program like BLCI, where they're like, "Oh, you can do it." And not to say there wasn't support, it was just that I think for me it was hard to ask for extra help. I felt like they had done everything that they were supposed to for me. Which is not true. I mean college was a bit hard, navigating resources and understanding

that there are different things that I should have asked or done differently, to make it more successful.

C: That's great that you're teaching that to your students.

M: Yeah, I wish I would have kept a notebook of every small thing. Like now, I should have a diary of every little moment that would be teaching. But the big ones that stand out you definitely want to pass those on to, like the little things that they didn't tell you.

C: In some ways, for me, I returned back to school like I was telling you before and some of the getting into school is almost harder than the classes, just navigating some of the logistics. It's almost more trying, because in classes you just know when everything is due. It's regimented.

M: Yeah, and even then, a lot of the classes are even just meant to weed you out, and you don't even realize that. I'm realizing I'm taking freshman courses of 300 people and the goal is really to just be like who is going to make it through these chemistry courses? It's meant to-- if you're going to do Biology, "Are you really going to do Biology? I don't know. Are you really going to do Chemistry? I don't know."

C: My Pre Calc teacher said that at the beginning.

M: I definitely had to switch my major because I did struggle. I got my first C- in my freshman year, and I was freaking out. And like for me that was brutal because I was always like an A student, and you know, "You did so well." And so I think that really put me on a path where I saw myself as a failure all of a sudden. Like, "I'm not going to be able to do this. Is this really for me?" Like, "I don't belong here." And so that led me to change, and really explore and change my major a couple times. And all of a sudden this idea of what career I wanted was like really wishy washy, and I wasn't sure. And so I was just in survival mode. Just one class at a time, and figure it out. And just, you know, hope for the best. You know, as time goes by then you're kinda like, "Ok, this is what I want to do." And, "How do I make it happen?" And, "How do I get there," and you kind of learn. But I mean, yes, I thought I knew what I wanted to do and then I didn't. So, I thought I wanted to do therapy in the sense of physical therapy, or occupational therapy. I was actually, I did everything for physical therapy. I took all the classes I did everything I needed. I did a thing in Costa Rica where I worked in on this... in this slum area. I did pre-P.T. stuff. I was an intern for sports medicine at UCLA.

C: So, you kept going.

M: I kept going, but when it was time to apply, I just wasn't sure after all that work that it was what I wanted to do. It just felt like it didn't come naturally to me, as it did for other people. Like, having to take the physics. I struggled through the physics. I struggled through the physiology. I was like, "I don't know." And so I looked at other options. And I knew I wanted to work in something like services, of some sort. So then I gravitated to the Occupational Therapy. And I did that for a bit. And I applied to school, and I got in, and mostly to prove to myself that I could do it. But I couldn't afford it. So like, that's why I didn't end up doing it. But I'm ok with that because I ended up finding my niche in social services. So I was a coordinator in Connecticut for social services for students who had -- umm children, who had gone through trauma, and providing families who are in need of financial resources, and things like that. A lot of case management. And I loved it, loved it, loved it. So that's where I was like "Ok, ready to shift." And I made that decision and I was ok with it. So that's how I ended up back here in this kind of field. In education, and coordinating, and still working, just a little bit less trauma.

C: What is your title here?

M: I am the Upward Bound Coordinator for the Upward Bound Program here at BLCI. Basically I'm coordinating. [laughs] That's really what I'm doing. Today I was interviewing for a summer program, which I'm also planning. I work with the students to do academic assessments, and provide extra support where they need it. Help liaison between the school that we work with and us, which is King Chavez High. Really, support the director with whatever she needs. Work with the mentors.

C: Sounds perfect.

M: Yeah, it's great. It's still working with the students, but it's a little bit in the background, which I like, behind the scenes coordinating, because I've always liked that kind of stuff. But I still get to have that interaction. And, I feel like there's a lot of growth here. And seeing a lot of success with their students, which is always nice. That's always cool. And, like I said, giving back some knowledge that I learned, as a first gen., low income, and going to, you know, going away from home.

C: That's awesome. So, going back, how did your parents take the move to UCLA?

M: Not very well. BLCI was fundamental in me leaving, because my older sister actually went to college before me. But she dropped out. She went to SDSU (San Diego State University). My parents did not want her to leave. And they did not understand the difference between, you know, "SDSU is a good school. Why not just go there?" and it took a-- she ended up staying, and didn't leave. Which I think, now looking back was not the best choice. But, my parents, with me, because I applied to UCSD, I applied to SDSU. But, mostly because Preuss makes you. Like, "Oh, we're part of UCSD. You should apply." I knew I wanted to leave a little bit far, but not super far. So, all the schools I applied to were in California. 'Cause I am close to my family, but I wanted to go. And even UCLA was a fight.

C: Sure.

M: Like that was, "I don't understand why you want to go." I remember having to bring my parents to a meeting [to BLCI].

C: I hear that's a common issue.

M: It's super common. Yeah, the cultural stuff. At the time Jean, I don't even know what her title was, it was different from what it is now. But, essentially what Ana's job is. She helped have a conversation with my parents know why it was okay and things like that. And then I had a professor from where I was in high school who my parents knew very well come and talk to them, too. And they finally were like "OK." But I remember my mom passed out the day I moved out. Like the day where we packed up the car, my sister took me and mind you, it's only a 2 hour drive, but my mom was just hyperventilating, crying, and like hugging me. She hugs me and she was fine, and then you just felt the whole body kind of hyperventilating. And my little sister had to come in and hug her, so that I could leave. And then my older sister who was driving me was like, "Just go. Just go. Just get in the car and go." So I got in the car and then I get a text from my younger sister who's like "Mom's on the floor crying right now and I'm trying to hold her. I think she might pass out." And I'm just like, "I think we should go back." And [inaudible] was just like, "We can't go back. You can't go back." And, "She'll be fine." And even then they suggest don't come back for like 2 months. Like don't...

C: BLCI said that?

M: I don't think it was BLCI. It might have been just friends. "Just don't do it because you want them to get used to the fact that you're not going to be coming down every weekend." And I remember being like, "I'm not coming down for a couple months guys, and it's going to be ok. You'll survive."

C: Stay strong.

M: Stay strong. And then you can visit me. It's fine. They struggled.

C: Did they get used to it eventually?

M: They did, but it took a while. They understood what I needed to do and things like that. But they, you know, my mom is still very much, even now, "Call me every day. Let me make sure you're alive," kind of thing. And even if I don't call her, it's still like, "You don't love me," kind of thing. And that's kind of a cultural thing. Such a huge cultural thing.

C: Do you mind talking more about that? Especially with the school and moving away?

M: Yeah, so my parents are both very religious. Catholic. They grew up in the same small town. And their, my mom's highest level of education is high school. And my dad's is middle school. Or the other way around I can't remember. So their knowledge is founded in their religion. And to them that is their one thing that they can pass on. Like, they were never able to help with homework and things like that. The one thing that they felt really knowledgeable about was religion. So, I've tried to take that perspective and just be respectful of it. 'Cause I'm not super religious and I'm okay with that. But if I'm at their house and they say, "We're going to pray." Or, "We're going to go to church." Then, I will join along because, out of respect. But that has carried a lot of their decisions, in terms of like how they've raised us, and things like that. With them I think that, with the whole, "You're not leaving the home until you're married," thing I think that's a big deal, and that's why they had such a hard time. It was also just us 3 girls, so it was just my dad. And the whole, you know, that was difficult. Very guarded about us and things like that. And just you know my mom is a housekeeper and my dad is a cook. My dad has always worked 2 jobs, my mom, you know, her job is very physical labor. So, I think they just always wanted to make sure that we didn't do that kind of stuff. But, at the same time they wanted to keep us kind of safe. So I think in their mind, they wanted to just keep an eye on us. I dunno.

C: That makes sense. So, by proximity.

M: Yeah, by proximity, so I think that that's where a lot of decisions were based off. I think religion definitely had a big.... They're belief system has a lot to do with me leaving. And their assumption that I was going to move back in right after college which was not the case. Things like that, they had a hard time with that, too.

C: Is that a common cultural...?

M: I think so. I think it is. I think it is also that even in my extended there isn't really that many people who went to college or experienced that so I think that they aren't really-- like they don't even see it in the family. So, it's not like they have something to compare it to. Like, "Oh, well this person did this," and so like, "Ok, it should be ok for you to do it, too." I think they see it as a totally other cultural thing, you know, "At 18 their kids get to go away, but we're not doing that." Because, "Only a certain culture does that."

C: That's one issue that I didn't foresee that BLCI would be dealing with.

M: Oh, yes. Even then like with Upward Bound, because we had our first graduating class, and we had some parents who had difficulty. We had one student who got into UC Berkeley, and her

parents were like, "I don't understand why you want to go so far." And, like that's hard. "What's the difference between UC Berkeley and SDSU?" Even UCSD, it is like a name thing, and it depends on what you want to do. And having to explain those differences because, just like my parents, "Well they are all universities. They're all good. And you're going to graduate with a degree." Which, to some degree that's correct. That's not wrong. That is a 100% a correct statement.

C: But, it's Berkeley.

M: But there is still a little, "Not everyone gets into Berkeley." We can use all these stats, but at the end of the day it's, you know.

C: That's interesting.

M: It's definitely the thing, why BLCI brings that unique aspect of incorporating the family. Which I think sometimes the schools don't have the ability to do, because of how large the schools are.

C: And even Preuss, they don't see it as something they need to do?

M: I think they try and I think they can. I think that the, and this is from when I was there what like 7 years ago? So I don't know if that has changed since. But I think that, looking back, my teachers, I don't think there were a lot of teachers who spoke spanish. It's interesting because the school was I think 80% Latino. And then African-American, and Asian. And I remember there was one caucasian person in my class who I think ended up leaving before. Not to say that there aren't, but just the demographic that they're going for.

C: You would think there would be more spanish speaking...

M: Yeah so I think we had the spanish instructors who did the specific classes. But, history, math, science, a lot of them were not spanish speaking. And we have, which I think is a great idea, an advisory with each class, who is specifically to follow you, ideally, to 12th grade. It's a period you have 2 or 3 times a week, and that's where you're working on all your college stuff. Like, building up to the college stuff. And you stay in the same class, with the same students with the same teacher throughout middle and high school to prepare you for that path. And they're supposed to be the mentor. A lot of times that person is not spanish speaking. The turn over, naturally, they're be there for 4... I think I had 3 in the 7 years I was there. So it's not bad, but only maybe 1 person I can think of, one or two classrooms, I can think of that had someone stay the full 7 years. But that's a long time nowadays for someone, you know.

C: It's true.

M: So I think that's the kind of thing where those people that parents would probably go to. But sometimes that communication thing isn't there for those kinds of conversations. The comfort level. The counselors are ok, but they don't know the student the way the teachers do. And they don;t build the relationships. I don't think it comes as naturally wheresas here there's definitely a lot more of, I think a lot of our staff speak spanish. I think all of them speak spanish. And then because it's an after school program the parents can come in whenever. Pop in, pop out. And you know that's important whereas in school you can't do that. So I think the relationship's easier to navigate and build. And to have those conversations.

C: So how long have you been working here?

M: Oh, I just started in January. I mean, it feels like its been longer.

C: How has it changed from when you came?

M: So, when I was in BLCI, and even when I left BLCI, they were operating down the street, out of what was like a garage. My class was maybe 8 students. It was still elementary, middle, and high school. But definitely smaller. Definitely. And even the location, like it was probably the size of this and that room. Maybe a little bit bigger. You know, no A/C. Nothing fancy like that. We had tables, we had boards. So, it was definitely different. And the classroom size was smaller. Everything was integrated.

C: You had 8 of your peers?

M: Eight of my graduating, like in my graduating class. So there were more students. But now there are 18 here, in one class. And I think some of the classes have 20 or 30 students. So it was significantly smaller. And we didn't have, I mean now we have more grants, so there's definitely different positions that didn't exist back then. One thing is we used to you know, for cena, which is where the parents switch and bring food for the students. So, back in the day...pizza. Everyone brought pizza. I guess when I came back, the parents weren't allowed to serve pizza, because everyone would bring pizza every day. I was like, "Oh my god. That's all we survived off of. Pizza and soda every day." But now like they have to cook.

C: I actually had pozole for the first time.

M: Yeah exactly, so now it's super diverse, what they're bringing. But back--it was like pizza, like all the time. And things like that. But definitely expanded. I think there's more of a classroom vibe. Like each-- has a classroom whereas over there wasn't a classroom. There was workshops every day.

C: It was kind of all ages?

M: It was all ages, so you had the younger students and then you'd have the high school students. And the high school students, we would have a day of the week where we would have workshop kind of like they do now, but it was kind of like, "Let's fit you where we can," kind of thing. And I remember for tutoring, we had a lot less tutors, we would be like "I need to work on this." And you had to like hog your space. [Laughs] Because it was smaller, and we'd be showing up. Like, "I have a final, and I need that person to help me." And, "I already told him." Things like that.

C: Now it's, I forget the ratios, it's on the website, but it's commendable, the amount of advisors, teachers, tutors per student is awesome.

M: Yeah, there's definitely a lot more-- it's very accessible for students.

C: You don't have to fight to get a tutor, hopefully.

M: And then with our upward bound, we actually are different because we hire staff to do the mentoring and tutoring, to do one on ones, and things like that and they are only with our Upward Bound program. So it was designed a little bit different than BLCI.

C: Could you explain Upward Bounds.

M: So Upward Bound is housed in BLCI, but we are funded separately. So we are a grant funded, federally funded program that works specifically with one high school, only. Whereas, at BLCI, you'll see that it's all diverse schools. And we work with King Chavez High School, downtown. And that's our target school. That's what the proposal was. Because they need the extra support. They are one of the lowest performing schools in San Diego. And so, we found that they needed more academic support and more resources to prepare the students for college.

C: Yeah. That's amazing.

M: So we partnered up and now we have workshops that are in school. After school there. We can send tutors and mentors on location to participate in some of the classes, to be a little bit more familiarized because it's one school. Whereas BLCI can't really do that. And then we offer after school tutoring. We go on field trips. We do a summer program. Where they take summer classes and we have different instructors for different subjects. And kind of expose them and prepare them for high school, graduation, and college prep. To improve their writing skills, their math skills, things like that. And sometimes do a second language. Or a third language. So, sign language is the one were picking this year because we think that a lot of students are interested in the kind of social services route so that might be very helpful. So that's kind of what Upward Bound is. So very similar to BLCI, but it's a little bit different in how we function.

C: OK. That's awesome. I'm in Economics Of Discrimination right now, an interesting Econ class and they just talk about how for some marginalized communitites the price of education is just higher, kind of like what you're saying with King Chavez being lower funded and just like a harder school to navigate. So, the fact that you're kind of I guess in economics terms bringing down the cost, and increasing the returns, like the gains from the time they're spending on school is really helpful.

M: Yeah, I would say so. And I mean we have students who are really engaged in the program and come to a lot of things. And I think we have a lot of students who before Upward Bound weren't really sure if they were considering going to college. And now it's kind of a possibility. But were also kind of working with financial, what's feasible, and like it might not be the dream school but it's you know, things like that and navigating those conversations and I think that really defining success differently for each student, but that it is, at the end of the day a successful goal to get in, or even apply to college. Even some students weren't even considering.

C: Honestly, I've had those conversations with myself Like with homework and stuff. Like makybe it's not perfect, but the job that gets done is... So, is there anything else that you want to say just about just your dreams, and maybe anything-- we've talked a lot about BLCI, but personally?

M: Personally, since I just started here. I kind of want to see where this job takes me, because I have done a lot of, they're all kind of similar but I've had different roles, like from working with kids in trauma, to working here with students.

C: It's a little more background.

M: So it's a little bit, in a sense it's still serving, but it's a different population. With a lot of growth. So I want to see where this takes me. Because I want to definitely decrease the amount of trauma that I was seeing. That really was a life changing experience . But I do want to go back to school. I want to get my Master's. That is the goal. But I just think that there was definitely a pressure to know what I wanted to do, and to succeed in whatever it was. And even until 3 months ago I was still feeling that pressure of like I need to get to college. So that's why I applied to 2 programs, but I was kind of like, "I don't know if this is for me. I don't know if this is definitely what I want to invest in." And so I think now it's like that self realization to slow down and that there is time to do a Master's, and that things will be fine. And doing a little bit more sort of... So, that's kind of where I am, in that self reflection. Like, ok it's ok to take your time and



figure out what you want to do and then apply versus like just apply apply apply and then just “Ok, then what are you gonna do?” Which I think was what I was seeing myself in. I definitely want to stay at BLCI for a bit and see how things go. I think it’s a good stepping stone in whatever I want to go into. And Upward Bound has a lot of possibilities there, too. And I think definitely there’s potential for growth here. I definitely want to see what happens. I’m still fairly new here, so..

C: Hopefully BLCI keeps growing too. That’s kind of what we’re hoping with the Alumni Outreach. Because the better the graduates do, kind of hopefully they come back. We’ve had a lot of responses that want to come back and do workshops or tutor.

M: Definitely. I mean for me it was interesting because I did. I mean I was close to BLCI even in my Bachelor’s when I was an undergrad but then I kind of lost touch a little bit, especially junior, senior year, trying to just survive. SO I kind of did just lose touch, but when the opportunity came back it was just so easy to be like, “I definitely want to do that, and give back in some way.” And come full circle, I guess. So that’s exciting.

C: That is! Thanks again.

M: No, thank you.

C: That was awesome.