

Race and Oral History 2020
Interview with Cristina Gonzalez
Interviewer: Bruna Perestrelo Faria

Interviewer: Oh I'm not hearing you Oh, I'm not hearing.

Cristina: There we go. Hi!

Interviewer: I'm so sorry because I sent you emails, but...

Cristina: Oh! You sent the link. But yeah, I was...I must have just seen it. And I was like, Oh, well, and then I tried logging on and there was no one there. I'm like, well, hopefully she responds soon.

Interviewer: Yeah, because then I started doing something else.

Cristina: You're fine. Let me put in headphones because that's usually a better quality audio.

Interviewer: Do you still have time ?

Cristina: Yeah, I have time you're fine, and your name is Bruna? Is that how you say?

Interviewer: Yes, Bruna!

Cristina: Wonderful.

Interviewer: How do you say, Cristina?

Cristina: Yeah, Christina, you're right. Okay, let me put these, all right. Is this sound okay?

Interviewer: Yeah. Really good.

Cristina: Okay, perfect. So my internet here where I live is so, so. So...

Interviewer: I think it's working.

Cristina: So if it cuts out for a minute, we'll just like wait and then.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah. Now it was cutting. I am not hearing you. Now it's fine.

Cristina: Oh, can you hear me now?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Cristina: Okay. Right. Perfect example. One second at a time (laughs).

Interviewer: So my name is Bruna. I'm an exchange student from Switzerland. So I'm currently in Switzerland in my hometown. I was doing an exchange semester in UC San Diego.

Cristina: Oh, okay.

Interviewer: Yeah, I had to come back in March. So I went there in January, and I had to come back in March. So it was very short. But it was very beautiful. And I didn't plan to come back. But yeah...

Cristina: Yeah, nobody planned any of this (laughs), right.

Interviewer: I agree. And so I'm taking a class that is called oral history. We basically volunteer for organizations like Allies to End Detention or other organizations in San Diego that are working with migrants or asylum seekers or refugees. And so we have to do an oral interview and we ask very basic questions. I don't know, I think I already sent you the type of questions.

Cristina: Yeah, and I read through them. So I'll do my best (laughs).

Interviewer: It it's ok for you, if you don't want to respond to something feel free.

Cristina: I'm a pretty open book. So I'm ok (laughs).

Interviewer: Me too, I'm very transparent.

Cristina: (laughs) people always say that I don't have much of a filter. So I don't know.

Interviewer: Yes, that's my problem. Sometimes I talk too much. And then after I think, and I'm like, oh, why did I say that?

Cristina: (laughs) I call it I call it delayed embarrassment. Like in the moment, I'm not embarrassed at all. But what I said and then it's like, and it doesn't have to be when I get home. It'll be like a week later and I'm like, oh my god. Why would I say that to anybody ever?

Interviewer: (laughs) I never heard of this delayed embarrassment.

Cristina: (laughs).

Interviewer: (laughs) Okay, so I'm gonna just, I have to start with an opening statement.

Cristina: Yea you're fine.

Interviewer: So I'm recording it, is it fine for you?

Cristina: Yeah, let me blow my nose really quick (laughs).

Interviewer: Because I'm gonna have to transcribe it. And I hope Zoom can transcribe it, but I'm not very good at technology.

Cristina: (laughs) You'll figure it out it's okay.

Interviewer: Yea, and so that's why I have to record it so we can transcribe it.

Cristina: Yeah, you're fine. You're fine. That's totally fine.

Interviewer: Okay, so I just have to say, My name is Bruna today is the 15th. Okay, also for you.

Cristina: Yes.

Interviewer: Yes. The 15th of May 2020. And I'm interviewing Cristina Gonzalez Cole. Right? Throughout Zoom for the UCSD Race and Oral History project. Could you just please state your full name, date of birth and place of birth?

Cristina: So my name is Cristina Gonzalez Cole, I actually go by Cristina Gonzalez now, I'm going to drop the Cole soon (laughs). But yeah, so Cristina Gonzalez. I was born March 7 in 1989, and I was born in Glendale hospital in Arizona, in the US.

Interviewer: Thank you. Okay, so, um, let me start with some introductory questions. So what would you like to tell me for an introduction, maybe more about your family background or so now I know where you were born, but...

Cristina: Yeah, definitely, um, my background is a little interesting. So I was born in Arizona. And I was raised, I was actually raised Mormon. In the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. That's kind of their big switch. They want to use that name now. So, I was born and raised there. No, they do not practice polygamy. That's a whole different break off. And my dad was a bishop. And in 1999, I think it was we moved to Utah, and my dad worked for a Mormon University there, BYU, as a fundraiser. And so we moved on when I was 10 years old. So I, I mostly grew up in Utah, which was an interesting experience. It's predominantly white by like something like 56 or 60% of the entire state is white. And it's predominantly, actually I think it's more than that. The 56 or 60% is predominantly Mormon. That's what it is. So, most of the people there are LDS, it's another acronym they use. So it was an interesting place to live in, especially because even though I was raised Mormon, like, when we lived in Arizona, very few people, and in our area were Mormon. So, I think I had like, there was like, maybe one other family in my elementary school who was Mormon and everyone else was not (laughs). So, when I moved to Utah, and we literally had two Mormon churches, like two or three houses down from ours on either side (laughs), and every year was kind of alternate which building we went to. So, that's kind of an interesting way to be raised. You know, we don't drink, we don't do drugs. We are allowed to dance. Some people think we're not allowed to but you know, we're encouraged to dance in not dirty ways only. We don't have premarital sex. And so when I was there, I met my almost divorced husband in 2011. We went to Utah Valley University, another school out there, not a not a Mormon church school, but just a state school. And we got married in the Manti Utah, LDS temple. So, I've done all of that. And in 2017, our marriage wasn't doing very well, and things were really really hard. And my grandmother needed somebody to take care of her and I've been in health care for over a

decade. I was a CNA for most of that, and then I switched into recreation therapy and became a director of a sister facility that I worked for. And I loved that job.

Interviewer: What is actually a recreation therapist?

Cristina: What is a recreation therapy? So, a lot of people call it activities, and I got a lot of feelings about that one. But, so, I was a recreation therapy director, and though a lot of what we do is, you know, Bingo with the geriatric residents. It's also about creating plans to help their quality of life when they're in nursing facilities, because most of the care there is focused on just physical care, and a lot of people have high depression rates and things like that, high pain and when you can help somebody learn how to build tools and skills that they can enjoy while they're there, whether it's for short term or for the rest of their life, they do better, they're happier. And, so, we do lots of games, but we also work with outside vendors to help connect them with other services, like therapeutic services. We do extra things. They call us the Disneyland of the facilities, and it wasn't always easy and fun, but I loved connecting with the residents that way. So, I, yeah, I really loved that job.

So, my grandmother needed somebody to help her because she had had a stroke a few years before. So, it was kind of a perfect opportunity. So, I moved to Fresno, California, and I would not advise people to go there. It's dry and hot and lots of dirt. People think California is just coastal land, and like beautiful sunshine and everything and Fresno, is not any of that. We're three to four hours away from pretty much everything cool that people think about in California. Like, you're in the middle of a desert, and unless you really like agriculture, which is like, it was actually one of the biggest ever agricultural areas in the entire US. They produced a lot of the produce for the entire US. But so I moved in with my grandmother and helped her, and that was a bit challenging to be a single mother with a then two year old with somebody who had dementia, and on treated mental health issues. She had severe paranoia that we were trying to work with, and at one point, she had to be admitted to the hospital, and tried to escape and beat me with her EKG Wires because she was trying to escape. Like, it was a whole kind of dramatic (laughs). I kind of laugh, because I've been in that space. Maybe it's not super funny, but to me, I'm like, I'm over it now.

Interviewer: I guess you can make fun of it when you have been in that space.

Cristina: (laughs) Anyone in healthcare is like, yeah, we laugh at those things, because what else are you supposed to do? So I was able to help her manage her medication and all of her doctor's appointments, and get her stable enough to have a life saving procedure done for her heart, and after that she transitioned into...

Interviewer: So, the caring of your grandmother was also your job ?

Cristina: Yeah, so it was my job. So I lived with her and I mean, basically I got paid a little bit, but mostly we just kind of lived in, you know, room and board, and things like that there. So, I didn't get a whole lot of payment for what I did, because what I did was very extensive, but I got enough to live off of and things like that. So, once she went into a nursing facility, my husband had come out in August of 2017, and in December of 2017, he decided he was going to move out into his own place close by. He had a hard time holding jobs and things like that, and so, in 2018 at the end of April, I filed for divorce, because I had done literally everything I

could and it wasn't gonna work anymore, because my husband didn't want to do the work. And, so, in 2018 I moved on May 10. I had nowhere to go, and I'm not close to my parents, because I'm not active Mormon anymore. I was getting divorced, and there had been some childhood abuse and trauma that they refuse to acknowledge. So there's a really messy situation. So, I went to Utah for two weeks to stay with a friend and see family who I'm still very connected to besides my parents, and I in the meantime, I was trying to find a place to live and I found out my sister, Jennifer Gonzalez, who's the co-founder of Allies to End Detention, had a friend who was willing to let me live with them for two months in Palo Alto. And then I was looking for an apartment, and I found a place in San Diego, like the only place that was willing to take a single mother with a young child, and I had terrible credit, and I only had money for like, the first two months or like, I was not a good person to rent to. And my landlord Mia, she had been a single mother, and she said, when she saw me, she was like, I had to give you the stability that I had had when I was a single mother. She was like, I saw you and your skinny little quiet kid, and my son had like, thrown up right when we got off the exit to like, drive to their house. I'd cleaned him up. She's like you walked in smelling like puke. You know, this little kid. She's like, we already had a family lined up, and she's like, when I saw you, I knew we had to rent to you, and it helped that I came with a check (laughs). But, so, that's how I ended up in San Diego. And from there, I, for like two months, I couldn't get my stuff out of storage, because I couldn't afford to drive up to Fresno. I was very poor. So, I was trying to find a job. And, so, we lived with two suitcases and some kids toys and we didn't have beds, so they let us use a cot, and they eventually had extra mattress that they brought down, but for a while I shared a cot with my son, and we had no furniture and that was two or three months, and then finally I was able to get some help to get my stuff and finally had things in my apartment (laughs). And I was able to get a job, and after a year I started school at a community college here, and it was about in September, I got a job working in a doctor's office and my sister, they had established Allies to End Detention, at the end of June or July. So, right when I'd moved to San Diego, and she had been telling me about it, and I, I was not in a great space. My marriage had failed, I was a single mother, I was so poor, and I was just trying to survive, and she kept telling me to come and I was like, when I have a job and things are settled, like, I'll consider it, and I had never done activism before. I was, I tried to be the perfect little Christian wife, like, you know, I had to work and things like that, because my husband really struggled. But like, I was all about having babies, and not having a future. Not that every Christian wife is that way, but that's what I was taught, and that's what I leaned into, and so, in about the end of September, I finally came to a meeting, and I was really depressed and all I did was stamp envelopes. I didn't want to do anything else. People talked about the letters and I couldn't engage. I couldn't read the letters, too much, but since I've been in that community, it has changed my life. After a year of working and being with Allies, I started going back to school to finish my degree. And I got really involved in it.

Interviewer: So, you didn't finish your degree, but you could still work without finishing your degree, and then what did you do to finish it?

Cristina: So, I had been certified as a CNA, but that's a little, it's a technical license. So you go to school for like six months. I had gone to universities before, but because of mental health issues it had been really hard, and I didn't have the support I need, so I had dropped out for a little while. When I got married, I tried to go back to school, but then I got pregnant with my son and I was horribly sick. So, I had to drop out again, and so, then, when I was finally on my

own again, I really wanted to go back to school, like, I had taken care of myself, even though things were really hard and stressful, it and didn't seem like we were, like stable, like, I was much more stable and had the support that I needed. And so I went back to school, and I'm actually working on a Religious Studies degree, that's what I want to do. So, I went to a two year college, and want to end up transferring, hopefully to a four year next semester. Fall semester, I think is my last semester I hope to finish again (?).

Interviewer: You kept on trying, one time, two times, three times, and now it's working. So, it's just about you know, in the right time in your life.

Cristina: It definitely took that. It really took believing in myself. I didn't believe in myself. I wasn't raised to believe in myself, and that's not just Mormonism. That was my parents, but Mormonism is very much about, women can go to college, but your main goal is to become a wife and to have children, and to just plan activities for the church (laughs). That's what a lot of women do, and I realized after a while, I'm like, I actually don't want this life. I never wanted a tiny life. I want, I've always wanted adventure. I always wanted to move out to California. I always wanted to do all these things, and I loved the work that I did, and I wanted to find new ways to do that kind of work, and so when I moved out here, I was like, well, nothing else works. So it's time to invest in myself, because what else am I supposed to invest in? And I also made a very conscious choice when my son was born. I realized I didn't want to raise my son in a community that has a lot of racism, that has a lot of classism, and it's just a messy history with Mormonism, and even within my own family.

Interviewer: In Utah, you mean ?

Cristina: In Utah. I'm half Mexican, but there's a lot of drama there in our family. My dad very much assimilated to white culture. We weren't really allowed to be Mexican. So, I wanted my son to be able to be raised, to be proud of that side of himself, and so, when I moved to California, it was so amazing to come to a place that was so diverse, and I love that even though my kid is very white, like, he is not growing up, I mean, he's five now, but, he's not growing up in a world where everyone looks just like him, and I think that's really important for people. Um, so yeah, so, I went back to school. I've worked with Allies, and I just knew that if I was stable and happy, then my child would have a healthy mother, and that's not something I got growing up, and that would mean that it would also work towards his benefit and has because, I fight for him all the time. He has level one autism, so, quote unquote high functioning. I don't really love that term, but, so, he has a lot of emotional needs. And he's, he's very bright, and he's super funny, very energetic. He loves colors. His favorite color's rainbow. If he has to choose then it's blue, but if you initially ask him, it's rainbow (laughs), and he loves monster trucks, and dinosaurs, and like, he is just full child, like he's just a kid, and I tried to let him be a kid. I was telling a friend, I totally respect my child, like a lot of people have children and they feel like, they have children in a way to kind of feed who they are, as an expression of who they are. I'm a really good parent, because look how good my kid is, and I'm like, I'm a good parent, but also, it's not, it's not about me, it's about my son, and, so we have a very interesting relationship. Like, I'm still mom, there's still rules. But there's also rules that he's allowed to keep on me. We made a rule that there's no spankings in our family, and because, that's something that was done to me and it wasn't healthy. Like, some people might want to disagree with that. That's fine, but, it wasn't healthy, and so, like, early on when he

was young, sometimes I'd spank him if he was naughty, and I just realized that it wasn't useful, and so we made this saying there's no spankings in the family, and so even I really don't use it at all anymore. But as he's gotten older, if I even threatened, he's like :”Mom, there's no spanking in this family” (laughs). And, like, yeah, he's allowed to call me out if I get upset. He's allowed to say: “Mom, that wasn't a nice way to communicate. Can you try again?”. And he's super empathetic, and he loves Allies. We joke that he's kind of our mascot.

Interviewer: How does he know Allies?

Cristina: He comes to every meeting. He comes to every meeting. So, one of the big things, my sister lives down here too. She lives in TJ. She's living with me right now during quarantine, but she's my only blood relative here in San Diego and has had a similar interesting journey to end up here as well. Um, but, you know, there's not a lot of spaces for single moms in activism. It's not that people are rejected all the time. That can happen, but it's just not a space that welcomes children all the time. Because, you know, we're doing meetings, we got to focus on big important things. And I, we very much push back on that, and, like, if we want people to be involved, we need to make space for children, and if we want to change the world, we need to teach children young to be prepared to help the world, right? So, my sister takes him to very important meetings on SDSU campus, like throughout San Diego County. She has taken him to very important meetings with very important organizations: SDIRC, she's met with like, the ACLU, like, things like that with my son with her, and I go with him to all of the meetings that I can attend, especially Allies every single Monday night, and he loves it. He's like :”oh, are we going to a meeting?”, and he calls it “our meeting”. He's like: “Are we going to our meeting tonight?”, because, he just loves it, like they're our family, and, so, I really love that he's being raised in this world where activism is just part of the week. Like, it's not a big thing.

Interviewer: Yeah, I think it's gonna be normal for him.

Cristina: It is. It's totally normal. It's totally normal for him, and he's a very empathetic child, and we recently found out that one of the people that was in Otay Mesa Detention Center passed away from COVID, and the people who were in detention with him, I had written a letter being like: “We need to get him out because he's very sick, and they're not giving him the care he needs and we're very concerned”, and we found out he died. It was really, really, hard, because we knew when this started that, (cries) they're caged birds. We knew that we would watch them die, and a lot of these people we've become friends with, over the last almost two years, just shy of two years, they're very important to us, and every new person that comes, like, we put our heart and soul into Allies to End Detention and we love every person that writes to us.

Interviewer: This person who died, what failed? What didn't go right?

Cristina: I mean, there's articles about it. At the end of the day, he just didn't receive the care that he was supposed to receive. They didn't take it seriously. They didn't make sure that he was in a hospital, like they, they do what they always do for people who have medical illness like, issues and necessities, and they do the very bare minimum, if anything. And that's it. And, if somebody dies, then they have to deal with that publicity, but they don't care inside, those guards don't care, and yeah. It's, it's a really ugly place, but my sister was, my sister was crying

when she found out, and my son went up to her, and he was like: "You know, Jenni", he calls her Jenni, he's the only person in the world that gets to call her Jenni, and he goes: "What's wrong?", and she's like: "You know, how we write those letters and, you know, for our meetings?", and she's like: "one of our people died", and he got really sad and he gave her a big hug (cries). And he's just like: "it's gonna be okay. It's okay to be sad". And they just like, hugged each other and cried a little bit, and that just meant the world to me. That as a little child, that he understands that the thing that we're dedicating our life to is important, and that he understands like, that if somebody is hurt, that it's a sad thing and that, you know, that he sees that, and he respects that, and he's there to grieve it too, as a five year old, which is amazing to me. Um, so yeah, my background is kind of all over, but...(laughs).

Interviewer: That's amazing. I think you carry so much. I think we all have something to carry, very heavy.

Cristina: Oh, yeah.

Interviewer: I also have myself and sometimes it helps you to externalize things that happen in your life, but I think you are someone who, who doesn't have a problem to externalize, and maybe with your sister and I think your son is gonna take everything that he sees from you. And that's the best example he could have, I think.

Cristina: Yeah, and we, last summer, went to a march to close the camps, down in San Ysidro, California, to the border, where the border crossing is, and we have a picture of my son holding a sign. In his super, hot, pink, unicorn shirt with his, like, tie dyed pants, and he's just shouting. Like: "let the children be free", and I mean, he was four at the time, and I just love that picture. It's just so my son. Every word, like he wants to fight for people. He is happy. He loves the world, and he is, we call him a walking jazz hand, because he's just so out there.

Interviewer: We need these positivism.

Cristina: Well, and that's part of why we've pushed for him to be in those spaces. It's a very dark place, and children bring a light to that space that is needed, and when we make space for children to be a part of it, like, we don't just teach them but they teach us on how to keep going, how to have light through the darkness, how to love endlessly, like, children just love people without even trying and we have to teach them to have boundaries, but, like, it's amazing to see my son. And we have another family part of Allies who joined this year, and they're also LDS. Not everyone in Allies is LDS, but they're also LDS and so, that's kind of fun, to be able to, like, even though I'm not active and they are, like, it's just fun to be able to you make morman jokes, and we all understand each other. And they have, one, two, they have four children, and they come every Monday night, and with all of their kids, and their kids have gotten involved in their different ages, so my son gets to play with the younger kids, and he loves that, and the older kids, I think, the oldest is something like 12, but the two older children sit in on our meetings. They give input to our meetings, like, we see them as adult in that space, like they're allowed to give their input. They're allowed to help on projects, like, we do not limit their willingness because, I'm like, if we want to encourage all people to be involved in and enjoy, that has to include children. And it's amazing because they're facing really dark spaces and they're giving a new, they're giving us breath, they're giving us a new

light to it, and they're taking it seriously, like, it's amazing what you can give to a child and see that they're willing and capable of taking it on with a little bit of helping guidance.

Interviewer: They have their imagination that sometimes we don't have. They can learn very quickly, they also have this innocence that we have some way lost. So that's the simplicity of the innocence.

Cristina: Right?

Interviewer: That we need also, like sometimes when I'm writing a letter to respond to someone for the organization. Sometimes I'm like, oh, what should I say? It's, it's despairing and I don't know what to say. But then I try to, to think about simple things in life like the birds, the simple things that make me feel alive. And so I think children can see those things maybe.

Cristina: Oh, yeah, and they have written letters. They've colored pictures. One of their children is an amazing artist, and so she's drawn and colored pictures, and they're just absolutely beautiful, and yeah, they're huge integral part of our organization, like, being 12 and 11 or 13, and they're really close in age, like, being pre-teens doesn't mean that they're incapable, and we see them that way, and Joanna Brooks, the other co-founder, and Jennifer, we're big on like, we allow them to have a voice here. We allow them to take up space. We allow them to be a part of this, like, we do not cut out voices just because of age, and that's been huge transition, like, for organization to have children there and take part, and I think that's made a world of difference. And, and even just the Monday night meetings like, I adore having those people there and letting them take part, and they, like, have tried to get their school connected, so the kids can write letters. They were like: "No, no we can be a part of this", like, "we will spread the word, we will get students to be involved", like, we want our peers to see this work and to be a part of it", and I just think that's amazing.

Interviewer: So maybe, if I come back to your work for Allies to End Detention. Can you talk more about how it started? And now what you're doing? And also then maybe with the pandemic, did you have to adjust some things?

Cristina: Definitely. Yes. So, Allies to End Detention started in 2018. I can't remember the exact date, but it was in the end of June or early July, and Joanna Brooks, actually it's really funny because Joanna Brooks, well, my sister had been down in Mexico doing an immersion program and was like, "I don't know where I'm going to move next". She has been working in the space for a long time. She's like, "I have an idea for a project and I, you know, but I, I just need space to figure it out". And they had connected and Joanna is like, "just move to my house", like, "just move in with me for a little bit and we'll figure it out, and we'll get you connected and, you know, go from there", and so the day that Joanna picked up, my sister Jennifer, she was like: "Okay. So, I'm having a bunch of my neighbors come over who are all freaking out about, you know, this policy and people who are in detention and you know, we're all freaking out and, and we want to be able to do something. And so, when we get to my house, you're gonna talk about the legal work that you've done in immigration and kind of help us figure out what we can do." (laughs). Turned out we had no prep on this, she was stuck in the car (laughs). So they had that first meeting, and it was a lot of people, and it's always the same first questions: "Can we get food, can we get blankets, can we get necessities?". You know, you want to be

able to give something, and you can't. People send things back. They throw them away. It's hard to send actual things, and there is all those rules around stuff. Finally they came up and said: "can we send letters?". And I'm like, "yeah, you could send letters" and we had recently, at that time, there was a group of individuals who had released a statement about, like what was happening in there and wanting support, and they put their numbers, which is what you need to be able to write a letter. So, it's something like 38 numbers on that release statement. So, we contacted, like, the organization, or the news outlet that had released that article and been like: "Is it okay if we use these?", and they're like: "yeah, I think it's fine". So we just sent out like, something like 30 letters, and just said, "We see you. We're angry with what's happening and we just want to show you that", you know, "there are people who care and that we are fighting for", and that was the first establishment of Allies to End Detention. At that time we didn't even have a name, we were just like, "we're just a group of people who want to connect". And we sent the letters in and it took about a week or two, and Joanna's neighbor, Rosanna, who has been a big part, especially early on, and she went to go pick up the mail, and she's like, "we have letters". And so Joanna, and Jennifer, and Rosanna, ran over to Joanna's house, and they opened these letters (cries).

Interviewer: Wow.

Cristina: And they had people they're being like : " Thank you so much for writing us" and started telling us their stories. And the best part was that they started sharing a numbers of their friends, like "my friend really needs a letter, please send a letter into", you know, "my pod mate, to my friend" or you know, whatever. And that's how we started, we just started writing letters. And as it grew, I mean, Joanne has done organizing for such a long time, and so, she reached out to all her people, and she's still very connected to the Mormon community, and so she reached out to those people and her husband is Jewish, so, they reached out to their synagogue and we started getting a small group of people together from SDSU and UCSD professors, to people from the synagogue, to people from Mormon church, from friends who just heard about it, and we just had this tiny group of people that started coming every single Monday night to process mail and talk about the issues, and write letters and it just kind of exploded from there. And the most amazing thing about Allies is that we are 1'000% based off of word of mouth. The only reason we get letters is because other people tell other people that : "you should write these people" or "I have a friend you should write to", and they give us their number, because there's not really any other way to get that information. And so, it's 100% based off of word of mouth. And I wish I asked my sister, I mean, we're in connection with something, gave her this could be wrong, I should have looked up the facts, but we're in connection with something like 20 different detention centers in the United States, and we have like over 1'000 letters that we have received in the last few years. And we have, currently in contact, of like, about 200 people, currently we're consistently in contact with and sending out letters to and receiving letters back, and we don't get 200 letters every week, we usually get 30 or so letters, but like, we're in contact with 200 people give or take, um, and it's completely word of mouth. It's completely word of mouth. Um, so that's kind of how we started. And as we grew, and we got more involved, Jennifer started, kind of, Jennifer and Joanna both, but especially Jennifer, started working with other organizations and trying to build relationships with them, because we're not the only organization out there, and we want to make sure that we're building positive relationships with other people doing the work, so that we can give them support, so they can give us support. And so she's built that. She's

worked a lot with students at UCSD and SDSU to get them involved in the work and bring them into what we're doing, and we worked with SDSU for a little while to have an archive of the letters through them at their library, which got a little tricky there at the end, and we ended up taking letters back. That's a little bit of drama (laughs). I don't know if I should be talking about that, but that's all I'm gonna tell you (laughs). Oh, and so we're going to be working on creating a new database and another archive, but the point is, we want people to be able to see these letters, to have these stories told out, like these people want people to see their stories. They have told us they want people to know what's happening inside, and so, we want the public to have access to be able to see those stories, and we're very careful about making sure full names are not released. We redact very sensitive information, and we do very, like we make sure that we protect these individuals as best as possible while still allowing the public access to be able to read, because otherwise why do we have these letters? Like, it's not just about writing them, it's about giving space to their story, because a lot of these people are going to be sent back to Mexico or further, it's like, Guatemala, I can't remember right now. where they're deporting people to. A lot of these people get sent to different detention centers, and we try to locate them. If we get a letter back, we try to locate them through ICE to see if they've gone to some different detention center. And now with COVID, a lot of these people are going to die. So, we need to share their stories. People need to see what's happening. Um, they are important people in the world and we need to make space for them, whether they get to be free in the US or not, like, their story matters. Yeah, so, that's kind of how Allies started. We eventually got too big for Joanna and Roseanne's dinner table. That's where we met every Monday night, it was at a dinner table in somebody's house. And we were able to work with a local church to meet in their room, and in their building, and that was really great to have that space. We started having something like, 20 or so people come every single Monday night, sometimes new people, sometimes a lot of the same people. We got more professors involved. We got the kids involved, and most of our Monday nights are processing letters, writing letters and working out kinks. Trying to figure, I mean, we're a grassroots organization. So, it's, it's just us and we're trying to figure everything out and connecting with other organizations, and making sure. One of the biggest parts is case management. So, when we get a letter in that talks about medical neglect, sexual abuse, you know, when they're not given proper supplies to stay healthy, like all the different issues that can exist, we send those to a lot of times, like place like the ACLU. We try to send those on to somebody who can help connect to that person and help them get what they need, and help fight for them in that way. So, that's a big part of what we do, and it was really great because it was chugging along, we were starting to make really great progress and kind of, because this is grassroots and it's two years, like we're not an organization with a bunch of money. And so, we're trying to figure out. Every week is: "what's the new problem?", "oh, we should figure out a system for that" like, it's just a bunch of people trying to do our best. And so, once COVID came, with the pandemic, it shut down. We weren't allowed to meet anymore. And it has been hard. (?). So, we don't meet every Monday night, but we communicate with our group on Slack, and Joanna still gets all of the mail, and she makes sure that they're set up, and then people come, you know, doing social distancing and pick up a stack of letters. They work through them, we make sure they get into the database, we make sure the letters get scanned. We make sure that that people are getting responses back. We're mailing things out. So, we're still doing it, but now, we go and pick up a stack. We go to our home and we do it (laughs) and then Monday comes again, we'd go and do it again. So, it has been hard because all of us are also in our own personal lives. And this time is really hard on everyone, and not everyone is

just sitting at home and those who are just sitting at home, I mean, that we're in what like week nine, like, pandemic depressions are pretty solid, and so we're very good about respecting, like if people have to take a break or step back during this time, like, take care of yourself. That's what's important. It's been great because a lot of the professors are like :“we're still down, huh, let's go and do what we can”, and so they're still organizing, like protests with other groups and things like that. A lot of them went to the protest down at Otay Mesa. They stayed in their cars with signs. Some people got tickets (laughs). So, they're still organizing. There's a group of us still organizing events. A lot of us are still involved, making sure that the letters are going out that we're connecting to new volunteers. We're trying to connect to people to get more bonus mail and to send to new people that come. So, we're still doing it, but the structure is different, and that's a little hard. And yeah, so that's kind of how it's changed. It's hard, it's different, but we're still getting the same work done, even if it's a little awkward sometimes. And I'm grateful that we've built such a strong community so that people, all during this time, haven't just disappeared. Like, we're all like: “no, we're family”, like, I call us the Allies family (laughs).

Interviewer: The main focus of your job can be done. Letters can still be written.

Cristina: But that's kind of the power of Allies. Like, a lot of other orgs are trying to figure out how to keep doing the work and letters can still go in. I mean, they have ridiculous rules, you can't color or write in crayon, which I don't understand. Because they actually still use prison rules. You can't send anything with glitter. You can't send any stickers in, you can't write with crayon, it has to be pen, pencil, colored pencil or marker. You cannot send literally anything but paper and those envelopes, but, the, so, when we get a new person we fill the envelope with information on other organizations. You can contact information on the legal avenues you can take like, how to get ahold of those legal individuals, what actions you can take, how to help you with your case, things like that. We send them information about who we are, we send in a notification of like :“if you do not want your letters in the public eye, please contact us so that we can make sure we protect them”. So, people are allowed to choose whether anyone else sees their letters or not, like, we can just read them so people are protected that way. You know? And then we always send bonus mail, bonus, we call it bonus. Now, bonus mail is people who have written in or sent pictures and that are not assigned to specific person. So, when a new person comes in, we get a new letter, they automatically get mailed back, like nobody has to wait for a pen pal to sign up. Like, we don't, we don't do any of that. We want to make sure everyone gets a letter that's in our database. And so that's kind of really awesome because being new doesn't mean that you don't get a letter because you don't have a pen pal being new. You still get, you still get a letter, whether we're writing it individually or we are waiting like, or, we're set up a new pen pal. We get letters from families and other groups around the entire US who write : “Send us letters to send to these people”, and it's really amazing to see how people connect, and that's actually part of the power of Allies. Like, I tell people all the time, I'm like, “I can do this work (?) while going to school and working and struggling because I'm super poor all the time”. Like, I have a lot of things on my plate, and everybody has a lot of things on their plate. So, if I can do it, anyone else can do it. And it's just writing a letter. It's the easiest way to take part in activism and we want people to get involved and then to build from there. Because the minute you get involved, the minute you see like, there's more than I can do and we, when people ask :“what else can I do?” It's like, “look up the detention centers in your town because they exist everywhere, and find a way to

connect those people to”. Allies to End Detention isn't the only organization doing things and also Otay Mesa is not the only detention center in the US. We have detention centers in literally every single state in the entire US across the nation, they're everywhere. And there's many, many... And so we want to help people. We realized, like, if you're writing to us from all over the nation, we also want you to connect with the places in your town because those people need this too. And so that's kind of one of our big things for people like once they start getting really involved and they want to do the next step. We're like :”hey, the next step is to look what's in your town”.

Interviewer: Allies to End Detention inspires me a lot. And now in Switzerland, I know a lot of organizations. I'm particularly involved in one that actually gives free online legal aid for asylum seekers and refugees in Switzerland. It's like to be more accessible for everyone. So they don't have to go somewhere, they can just write us an email or everything goes through Facebook. That's amazing. And we also have right now we also have a project detention because in Switzerland, they also detain them. And so this is a very good idea.

Cristina: (laughs) It's so simple. And even for people who can't do more, I'm like, literally, anyone can write a letter, literally anyone. You can write it in English, you can write it in Spanish. We're always looking for people who translate other languages. We have somebody who speaks Russian, we have people who speak Arabic writing letters, and we're doing our best to translate and write back. Google Translate has been a great thing. We know it doesn't always translate perfectly, but we're doing our best. So, people who speak other languages can transcribe other languages. Like, we're always looking for more people, because we have languages from around our world. We have French speakers, like, all sorts of stuff. And so, we, so we're always looking for those people, but we also make sure that people still get letters back and we do our best to send it back in their native language, so that they can read it because what's the use of a letter if you can't read it? But to that point, it's also amazing because we receive letters, where people who don't speak Spanish or English, talk to their cellmate who helps translate a letter into like, English or Spanish to send it into us, and they've created this whole amazing community in these spaces to help each other out, so that they can write letters to us, and so that they can get letters back. And it's really beautiful. Like, we have people who don't speak the same language finding a way to communicate so they can write letters, and that's amazing. So om an ugly, terrible space, they've made community.

Interviewer: You see there is a need to externalize and express what they feel and what they leave.

Cristina: So, that's been amazing to see.

Interviewer: And maybe, can you talk more about what you specifically do for the organization?

Cristina: So, my job, you know, it's kind of funny because that's grassroots everyone. There's no, I mean, we're working on building structuring, things like that, but also, there's no perfect structure, because it just, we don't have money for infrastructure. So, we're just figuring it out, when we tell people all the time, when they're volunteers like, so this is a problem: “How do we fix it? “, “I have ideas on how to fix it”. We're like :”hey, run with it, come back to the (?)of ideas”. Like, “we can't do everything. So go with it”, like, there's no wrong answers, and we

will work out the kinks as we go, but there are no wrong answers. There's just an answer, so, figure it out, and come back and we'll work together. And so that's been really great, because at first people are really apprehensive, but this year, it's like, we finally hit this transition of people being like :”Oh, you really mean that I should run with this?” I'm like, “Yes, we're too tired. There's too many things we can't do at all”. And so, it's been awesome to see our group like, transform and change and get involved, and more people are like :”okay, I want to be part of like, figuring out how to build the social media” and “I want to be a part of kind of finding ways to connect to the art, the artistic community and finding ways that we can express that”, “and I want to find a way to, like, fix our process here with how we process letters”. And everyone's like, :”I have ideas” and they're starting to run with them. And it's amazing to see all these people like, take ownership and run with it, because, that's what we are, we're an organization, we are grassroots. There's no perfect structure, you just got to run with it, and so, that's been really cool and fun to see that. But, so, that said, for me, I kind of wasn't really sure what my job is. I kind of help my sister out some, I mean, my main thing in the meetings, every Monday nights, kind of chaired the meeting. So, I'm part of making sure communication goes around and everything but um, I don't have a perfect title, but my biggest goal, and what I do for Allies is actually to give back to our volunteers. There are high rates of secondary trauma and burnout, and you see it in many organizations, you have people who will volunteer, and they might do it for a few months, or a couple of years, and they get burnt out, because these stories are hard. They are hard to hear, they are hard to read. Pictures are hard to look at, like, when you're a lawyer, and you're building cases, you have to look at horrible, gruesome pictures when people are like ”they killed my whole family”, you have to give proof, and you have to look at really hard things in the world, and people get burned out and then they tap out, they're done. Because you can only handle so much, and so, my goal is to make sure that our volunteers feel supported and feel like, mentally and emotionally and physically nourished, and we want to make sure that our students coming in are not going hungry. So, if that means we're bringing dinner or, you know, we want to make sure that people aren't getting too burned out. So, we're willing to talk to them about, you know, if somebody is having a really hard time, like, we talk to them as family as friends and like :”how are you really doing? What do you need to be okay?”, and so, one of the things I ask everyone, we go around the table and everyone shares their name and their pronouns, and then, a good thing from the week if they want to, things that have been hard that you're going through, and it's not even about us, just like, doing things for them. It's just about listening and, like, solidarity. And so, you know, we have people saying “you know, these hard things are happening in my family” or “this is something hard for me” or “it's just a rough week”, like, we're able to listen and be there for them, and it's built this amazing connection. We've had new volunteers come in, that are students that I've met through my school who have joined, and one of them I call my little brother, like he's, he's chosen family. He is my adopted little brother, and he's like: “I don't know where it would be if you hadn't found me”. He's like “I needed Allies, I needed family”. And a lot of us feel that way. We're a ragtag team, and a lot of us needed connection. We needed to feel like we had a community. Me especially came to a place that I'd never lived before with no family, no friends, I knew no one (cries). I had nothing, and when I started going to Allies, I built family, and that's part of what I've put into it, because that's what I needed back, which is a little selfish (laughs), but it turned out good of like, I need people. I need family, because the family I'm close to is far away and I've lost family that I love. I've lost a husband that I cared about, and it's been really hard (cries) and I needed people. And so, I have been big on giving back love to people and our group and

encouraging us to be there for each other and encouraging friendships within that group, and trying to find ways to sometimes, you know, to just take a minute to sit and breathe together, like being mindful in that space. I mean, that's kind of what I do. I take care of our volunteers, because if we're taking care of them, we have the energy in that space to give back to the people that we're trying to support and give love to. And this organization doesn't exist if we burn out. These people don't get connection to the outside world and support and love without our volunteers, and so, we need to support them, and so, I do my awkward best to do that and it's turned out great and I'm grateful for that. I kind of joke with my sister. I was a recreation therapist, I know how to do that, I know how to celebrate birthdays, I know how to be the office person who, you know, celebrates birthdays or can decorate on a dime and like, I don't always do it perfectly but like, we encourage people to take part in celebrating together and in mourning together and caring for each other. And it's amazing, and our group is beautiful, I am so proud of something that was needed in that space. Like, each of us have skills and talents that are needed in this space, that can be translated into that space. It doesn't matter who you are, doesn't matter if you're a medical professional or you are a sandwich artist, or whatever, like, everyone has learned skills in their lives that can be translated in to this space, and that's a big, and I love it.

Interviewer: It's also an exchange, like you give, you receive, and then it's like a circle. You read letters, but you can also express what you're going through.

Cristina: Right? We also need support. We literally know that we literally hold those letters, but you know, we also understand that we're people and we have needs to and so I kind of help our group do that and with COVID, like it's super cheesy but I send out pandemic survival kits to everyone in the mail (laughs). I finally got them in the mail yesterday, and it had coloring pictures, like coloring pages that I printed off and a checklist of like, you know, things that you've accomplished for the day, "I put on pants and I ate something and I drink water", and "this is how I feel today", like, it's a mental health check in and like, be proud of what you're doing and it's okay that it's just this. I sent them a face mask and I found discounted jelly beans, which are kind of funny. And so I put jelly beans in there, I put some glow stars in there because I had them and then my sister and I really wanted to send in the sticker, like a good vinyl sticker that people can put on their laptop or on a book or wherever they want to put it, in their car, I don't care, and they're usually like a buck apiece. So we found one place, it was like for 50 dollars, you can get 50 stickers and I'm like, we can't afford that. So, I like, put it on Facebook and like of course hiding it from these people, but can anyone help us find a way either to make these for cheap or to help, so that we can. My cousin reached out, this is a cousin I've actually never met in my life, and she lives in Orange County, I think, and she was like: "I can pay for that. Just give me your Venmo info, and I'll make sure you guys have the money to get those because I want to make sure that you guys have something that's, you know, nice for your group", and it was just so sweet. And so we were able to get those stickers. So, I wrote a handwritten card because that's who I am, I love mail. I love writing cards, like I've always been that person. I literally have a binder, I had a best friend in fifth grade and a couple years later, she moved away and we wrote letters all the way through our like, first years of college, because I went to college for a little bit right out of high school, and so, I have a binder full of letters for like 10 years. So I'm like, "I love letter writing". It is not a dead art (laughs). And so I wrote a letter and we put a sticker in there, and I'm so excited for them to get them because even though they're totally silly, and even though a lot of the stuff in there,

they're gonna be like :”what the hell am I gonna do with this junk?” Sorry (laughs), I'm kind of a cheesy person, I'm like, “we all need a little bit of whimsy in our life. We all need a little bit of support”, and even if you just laugh at this, like, that's what we need, and at least you have the nice sticker, because that's really what we want in our lives (laughs).

Interviewer: I have so many stickers on my computer. Every experience I have in my life: sticker, sticker, sticker (laughs).

Cristina: Right? See, I don't have that. I only have two stickers on my laptop and I'm so jealous of people who have so many cool stickers. So, I'm glad I now have Allies, and from Toy Story, if you don't know there's a dinosaur Rex, and in the latest movie, he's like :”the panic is attacking me” and I have to struggle and manage anxiety. I was like, I have to have that sticker (laughs). So, hopefully I'll get more stickers (laughs).

Interviewer: (laughs).

Cristina: I found it on like Etsy, or even, you know, one of those crafty places, because I'm like, “this speaks to my soul”. I understand anxiety on a deep level (laughs).

Interviewer: (laughs) So I don't know if you want to share something else but I feel that I understand first, your life, a little bit of your story also, then how it is connected to Allies to End Detention, and I think we can say it partly saved you in a beautiful sense.

Cristina: It did. I wouldn't say partly. These people save me. I needed family. I needed connection, and I think and I needed a bigger purpose outside of myself.

Interviewer: Yeah, and also to accept that we need people because sometimes it's hard to accept that we need others to feel alive.

Cristina: Yeah, right?

Interviewer: And so I also feel I understand better how the organization works. And now I'm also volunteering but I didn't understand very well because I moved back and everything went very quick and the quarter also is very quick, so we don't have time. We don't have time to invest so much, but I get so inspired. And now I think I also want to do something to bring those ideas to other organizations that I know here, because I think the pain is the same. If you are detained all over the world, the pain is the same, the struggles are more or less the same.

Cristina: Yeah.

Interviewer: I was really inspired, and I don't know if you want to share something else, but if not, I don't want to take more of your time.

Cristina: Oh, you're fine. The last thing I would say is, I think the power of Allies is building community and learning that we have to reach out, even if it's to strangers, to ask for help, to ask for solidarity, and to have these people who have gone through really hard things, to ask

them to share their story is really big, and to have them respond is amazing. And the other thing would be, this is a really easy way to get involved. There is no reason for anyone to be uneducated about this, and there is no reason for anyone to not take part. Even if you write one letter this year, that makes a difference. This is really easy activism and there is no reason not to take part. You know, at all (laughs). And that would be my thing. Like, anyone can take part in this. If I can do it, other people can. It's literally writing a letter. It's a Facebook post, like, you can do that.

Interviewer: Yeah, it's a message. It's a WhatsApp message.

Cristina: Yeah.

Interviewer: Thank you.

Cristina: Thank you.

Interviewer: Thank you for your sincerity, for everything you shared, for your openness for you, your smile. I really appreciate it and it feels so far away, but this way I feel more connected to you, to San Diego, to Allies to End Detention's community. And I, I hope you can take care of yourself, of your son and of the community also.

Cristina: Thank you so much. I'm glad I could talk to you and good luck (laughs). You too. Take care of yourself.

Interviewer: Thank you so much. Bye!

Cristina: Bye!