

Luz Hidalgo Interviewed by Sadaf Majeed
March 17, 2020
Manhattan, NY

Sadaf Majeed: My name is Sadaf Majeed and I am interviewing Luz Milka Hidalgo in Bryant Park on March 17, 2020. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Luz Hidalgo: Yes, I give you permission.

SM: Where did you grow up?

LH: I grew up in the Dominican Republic, but I came here four years ago.

SM: Why did you leave your country of origin?

LH: I left my country because of the American dream. Everybody hears about the American dream, so my mom decided to come here to seek better opportunities and a better education for me.

SM: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

LH: They were crying, but the thing is that my dad didn't know that I was coming here. So, he was acting normal until he knew I was staying here in this country.

SM: Why didn't he know you were coming here?

LH: Because my mom didn't want to let him know that she was traveling to stay here because otherwise he was going to let me stay in my country.

SM: Okay, what do you miss about your country of origin?

LH: I miss the people, even the traditions because everybody is like happy, everybody is friendly and it was my country I lived there my entire life.

SM: What were your expectations of the United States?

LH: Before coming here my expectations were like, I was excited to come here because everybody was like, oh you should travel there because there's so many opportunities there. The food, new people, you can get to meet people from a lot of countries and see a lot of things you don't see in your own country.

SM: How did New York City meet and fail to meet your expectations?

LH: I thought in this country it was very easy to get money and everything was easy. Until I started living here, I noticed everything was hard for an immigrant coming to a new country like this.

SM: How was it hard?

LH: It was hard because when I came here with my mom, she didn't find a job easily. Then after two months she found a job in New Jersey as a housekeeper and it wasn't easy because she wasn't getting paid much money, because she didn't have any document papers.

LH: Tell me about your journey to New York entail and did it go according to plan?

LH: Before going on the airplane I was very excited, but then I was scared because that was my first time traveling and it didn't go according to my plan.

SM: How were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically and the United States more generally?

LH: When I came here the neighborhood was very friendly with me because my family lived there already and there were a lot of Dominicans there, so I felt like I was at home.

SM: How did you adjust to a new language and or culture in New York City?

LH: The process was very difficult, like for example for me I didn't know how to speak English. I didn't even know how to say mom in English. Even when I went to school for the first time it was difficult because I didn't understand the students, but then I transferred to an International High School. So, it was very useful for me, still it affected me in a way because all the students spoke in Spanish. So now it's difficult for me to talk in English but I try my best.

SM: So, you were more comfortable in that high school because everybody else spoke in Spanish?

LH: Not only because of that, also because like me they were coming from the Dominican Republic. There were a lot of students I could relate to and I felt comfortable and supported because I was going through a lot at the time, but in my high school I found like that support I needed as an immigrant student coming to a new country.

SM: What opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York?

LH: Winning scholarships for immigrants and also being part of programs in my high school.

SM: What opportunities were you denied because you were an immigrant?

LH: So, because I was undocumented there were a lot of scholarships that I applied to, and also at first when I was thinking about college I didn't know if I was going to be able to attend because I wasn't receiving scholarships because I was undocumented.

SM: Where have you lived in New York City and why?

LH: I have lived in a lot of places in the Bronx because coming here was nice like I said before. I had to stop living with my mom since she had to move to New Jersey. So, I started living with my uncle and then my sister came to this country and I started living with her for one year. Then I had to move back and live with my uncle again and then I started living with my mom.

SM: What was the hardest part about your move to New York City?

LH: The hardest part was leaving my dad and my siblings, like it was very difficult because I was very close to my dad and I didn't have him here when I came here.

SM: Do you live with your dad now?

LH: No, I don't live with him.

SM: Do you have contact with him?

LH: Yeah, he came to this country a year ago.

SM: What's your favorite part about living in New York?

LH: What I like about living in New York is the places I can see and there are a lot of people around me.

SM: Do you ever feel like you have to hide the fact that you're an immigrant?

LH: No, because I am proud of my Heritage and all the things I have become as an immigrant in this country.

SM: How long have you lived in this country?

LH: four years.

SM: How has your culture been impacted since you've been here?

LH: In my country I used to go to church, but when I came here, I stopped going to church I don't know why.

SM: You don't know why? Are there churches around your house maybe?

LH: Yeah, there are.

SM: You're just too lazy to go.

LH: Yeah.

SM: That's ok. Why did you come to the US instead of another country?

LH: Because my family have traveled here since 1994 and this is the only country they know.

SM: So, you already have family living here that's why?

LH: Yes.

SM: How does your family remain connected to your family in the Dominican Republic?

LH: We try to maintain contact with them because my grandmother lives there. So, my mother tries to communicate with them as much as we can, and we try to eat the same food we ate in my country. We try to maintain our culture because that's something that defines us as people

SM: Is the clothing the same? Do you wear the same clothing?

LH: Yeah, we always dress as we want.

SM: Tell me about your path to citizenship.

LH: It has been a little difficult, for example I am still undocumented. I'm still waiting for my green card to come and I don't know how the process is going to be. I don't know if I'm going to have to go back to my country or if I'm going to receive the Green Card. However, it was hard, the process of getting green card, for example my family doesn't have a lot of money and it cost a lot to apply for a green card.

SM: If you don't get your green card would you remain here, or do you want to go back to the Dominican Republic?

LH: Honestly, I don't see myself living in my country again, like here there are a lot of opportunities that are difficult to get in my country. For example, even if you get an education in my country, even if you are a professional, it's difficult for you to find a job.

SM: So, you don't want to go back to your country because you won't be able to find a job?

LH: Yeah, and even like the environment I don't know if I will be able to get used to it.

SM: But would you go back for a visit?

LH: Yeah, of course. I love my country.

SM: What would you change about the current US immigration system?

LH: What I would change is the opportunities that are offered to immigrants, to undocumented people. For example, when my mom came here, she was a housekeeper, so she didn't get paid that much even though she had to work more hours than most people. Also, I think undocumented people should get health care because we're human and the money that undocumented people get paid doesn't allow them to pay for insurance. So, it's hard for them to get treated when they're hurt.

SM: Is the education in the Dominican Republic any different from the education over here?

LH: Yeah, it is very different. For example, over here we use a lot of technology to do our work, but in the Dominican Republic we use mostly books and stuff like that. Even the education itself is not the same, like here you can learn new things, while in my country the students can't even imagine how different it is. Also, there are more subjects available here than in my country. Over here if you want to be a doctor it takes a lot of time, that's why a lot of people move to the DR to become a doctor because it takes less years.

SM: How has your reception in your neighborhood in the United States more generally changed over time?

LH: Even though I haven't lived here for that long, people are very welcoming and that's what I've seen for my experience living here.

SM: How have they been welcoming?

LH: Since there here are more immigrants coming into this country and people are very welcoming because we are immigrants, so we know how to treat each other.

SM: Have you experienced any racism since you've come to the U.S.?

LH: So, when I came here, and I was on my way to school I was on the bus and I didn't even know how to speak English. So, a black woman told me "oh can you please move please?", but I didn't understand her. I asked her in Spanish, and she pushed me out of the way.

SM: How did you feel after that?

LH: I felt scared and I didn't know what to do because I was only 13 years old. I didn't know what to say I said sorry, I said sorry for someone who pushed me.

SM: Could you tell me a story about where you grew up?

LH: Yes, when I was little in my country on Christmas, we celebrate Aguinaldo, that's like a part of a Dominican tradition. That means for example, that we reunite together at

4 a.m. in the morning, we spend time together with people, we pray, we sing, and we eat food. That is something that will always stay in my memory because I don't know when I'm going to experience it again. So, I remember we used to drink tea and eat cookies and then we would talk for hours and then dance until it was over.

SM: Do you still celebrate that over here?

LH: No.

SM: Why not?

LH: Because even though there are a lot of Dominicans over here, we forget about our traditions and culture sometime. For example, I have cousins that live here, and they were born here, but they don't know about that and don't know how to keep that culture so that's why we don't celebrate it here.

SM: Would you celebrate in the future when you're older?

LH: To be honest I don't know if people will keep celebrating it, but I wish I could celebrate it in the future.

SM: When you were living in the Dominican Republic would they teach you English at the school's?

LH: Yeah, they would teach English, but I didn't take it seriously because I didn't know that I was going to come to this country. But if I go back, I will study really hard and take it seriously.

SM: How has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant in the United States?

LH: It hasn't impacted me a lot, but it has impacted a member of my family. For example, I have a member of my family that is undocumented too and she applied to DACA, but Donald Trump ended the DACA program. My cousin was really sad because an opportunity was taken away from her and she didn't know where to start again and what other scholarships she could apply to because there aren't a lot of scholarships that undocumented students can apply to.

SM: What don't you miss about the Dominican Republic?

LH: What I don't miss about my country is that when I was in my country I had to dress nice because people could criticize you but here I feel free, I can be whoever I want, I can dress in the way I want.

SM: Thank you for sitting with me and answering my questions. Did I miss anything?

LH: No.

SM: Thank you.

LH: Thank you.