

Matthew Zapata interviews Yurella López
March 13, 2020

Matthew Zapata: Hello my name is Matthew Zapata and I am interviewing Yurella López on 2850 8th avenue on March 13th, 2020. Do you give me permission to record this "Oral History"?

Yurella López: Yes you do have my permission.

MZ: Matthew: Ok so where did you grow up?

YL: I was born and raised in Honduras, Central America.

MZ: So why did you leave your country of origin?

YL: I left looking for a better future for myself and my family.

MZ: Ok so what do you miss about your country of origin?

YL: Um what I miss the most is the bond that you have with your family like everybody is so close and you know on the weekends you know you like have like family gatherings and friends and neighbors mostly friends you know gather together and you cook and you eat and you talk about how your week was and just spend quality time as a family.

MZ: Ok so what don't you miss about your country of origin?

YL: What don't I miss...

MZ: What don't you miss about it?

YL: The violence I guess I don't miss that because there's a lot of violence.

MZ: So what makes it so violent that you don't miss it? Like what kind of things are happening there?

YL: Well we don't have safety over there like we do over there, like sometimes um like people decide that they want to hijack you and they get on the buses the public transportation over there is nothing like here in the united states. Um, you can be taking the buses to go to school, to go to work, to run your errands and the next thing you know somebody decides to hijacks the bus and want to go rob everyone on the bus, They get on the bus with guns heavily armed um and they ask all of the people sitting on the bus to give them their jewelry, their money, and their cellphones sometimes even their clothing. Um, they take away from you and if you refuse they would just kill you on the spot no questions asked. So it's like you never know when they're gonna do it because there are no previous warnings they don't give you know signs of what they're

doing. They just board the bus like a regular passenger and the next thing you know they just put the gun to the driver's head and tells the driver to stop the bus and request all the customers on the bus to hand over all of their money and their belongings.

MZ: So what did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

YL: Ah well they were sad and I was sad as well because you know it was a separation um you know. I've been with my family all my entire life. I went to school with my friends and best friends you know we lived in the same neighborhood we grew up. Um you know we lived in the same area from when we were kids we played we've been friends for years so um nobody was happy. Well, they were happy for me coming to something more promising like for me to make a better future for myself and my family, but on the same token it was a separation and a separation at the end, um they're not easy they're not easy to depart from the ones that you love.

MZ: So what were your expectations of the United States?

YL: Um I didn't really have a lot of expectations, I know that everything is um is a challenge and you have to adapt. You have to be mentally prepared to know that there will be changes and you have to be open to you know for changes you just have to do the best you can and make sure you stay doing things the right way and if you follow the rules and regulations and you work hard you can accomplish a lot of things that you put your mind to it you can work hard and get it. So I didn't really have any set expectations. I just knew that I wanted to better myself and get a better future for my family and myself and I knew that it wasn't going to be easy and that I would have to work hard and adapt to a lot of things and I think I did just that.

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

YL: Again, I didn't have any set expectations, I knew that I had made things happen. Um I had a lot of opportunities like everybody else there are opportunities out there you just have to make your choice and you just have to do the right thing if you really want to accomplish or get ahead because nothing is going to be given to you easily and the things that are worth wild don't ever come easily you have to work hard to get things done.

MZ: So tell me about your journey to New York. Did you go according to plan?

YL: Um well no I didn't really have a plan and the journey was not the best it was hard because when I came to the United States it was not really um. I came into the country with a Visa, so it wasn't like I was going to come, and I was going to stay here. I always had that in mind that I was just here temporarily. Um, so the journey was not easy. The transition was not easy, but I always did the best I could and I always strived as high as I could and you know, to accomplish the dreams that I had that I came here for.

MZ: When and with whom did you come to New York City with?

YL: I came to New York City with my 1-year-old daughter that was born in Boston Massachusetts because the thing is that when I came to America I landed in Boston Massachusetts, I lived there for a period of time like maybe 4 years roughly and then I transitioned into New York City. Um, so when I came from Boston Massachusetts to New York City I had my 1-year-old daughter with me at the time. That was back in 1989.

MZ: Alright so um how were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically in the United States more generally?

YL: I was received with a lot of open arms. I was greeted with a lot of love my grandmother was living in Boston Massachusetts at the time and you know of course my grandmother did her best to welcome me into the country into the neighborhood and you know into their life because I had a lot of family members that I did not know in person until then um I knew them by pictures, but I didn't have the opportunity to meet them in person until I came into the United States because they were living in the United States from the time they were kids and this was my first time coming to the United States and they never went over to Honduras so I didn't get to know them until back then in 1986. That was the year I first came into America.

MZ: So how did you adjust to a new language and/or culture in New York City?

YL: Well the language was not too hard to accomplish thank God because um my mom English and Spanish to us in the home back in Honduras. So when I came here I had to like kind of just brush up a little bit, but I pretty much knew the language I just had to learn how to utilize some of the words that maybe we say them was different, but at the end of the day I already knew how to speak English. So that was a blessing because I had to polish it up a little bit and learn how to speak it correctly and that was a big thing because I knew how to communicate with others, I knew how to ask questions, I knew how to ask for directions if I didn't know something, I knew how to ask um questions in general weather I was in the store, or I was around people and I needed to ask whatever the question might be. I knew I had to communicate with them in Spanish and in English. And the culture it was just not hard to adapt at all I just had to learn to understand that everybody here just had to get up and go to work and everybody just striving and going to do whatever they needed to do and the culture was not much more different than what I knew so it was not a hard transition at all neither the culture or the language was not hard for me. Like I said I always adapt so if was something that I was a custom I just learn and I adapt to it. So it was not hard at all.

MZ: So what new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in New York?

YL: I had many more opportunities in New York than I had in Boston. I was very fortunate that I got a job. I came and I started going to school to improve my English. Then I started working in the health field. I started working as a home health aid. I went and I took a training for 4 weeks, after the 4 weeks I got my certificate saying that I was certified to work with um people um older people with kids, people who have some kind

of disability, people that was just released from the hospital and needed somebody to come to their home to provide home care. Um, that's one of the things that I did. Some of them I had to take like vital signs so in the training, they trained us how to do all of that I was not allowed back then to give them medication I can just assist them with taking their medication and remind them to take their medication, help them with their showers, prepare their foods, take them to doctor's appointments, help them clean their apartments of their homes, um run their errands, etc, etc, be their companion be the person that was there to give them support.

MZ: Were there any opportunities that were denied to you because you were an immigrant?

YL: No I don't think there were. I think everything like I said before it's just you have to work hard and you have to be good and you have to try your best you can't just give up, you can't just sit there and say "oh it's too hard" you can't just make assumptions you just have to go out there and try and you have to always be mindful and you have to respect people, you have to try to treat everybody fairly, you have to be kind to people and that will open up a lot of doors, a lot of opportunities um for you just have to be positive you can't go into the mentality that you cannot do something because you just have to set your mind and if you set your mind to something it can take you as far as you want to go in life. There's no obstacle you make the obstacle for yourself. The opportunities are there you just have to be the one to find them and have to be the one to make it happen and work hard because like I said nothing comes easy you have to be somebody who is willing to go the extra mile, somebody who is willing to work hard to accomplish things and if you do that it might not happen as quickly as you want it to, but if you strive and try hard enough it will eventually happen you will see that it will happen.

MZ: What did the assimilation project look like for you?

YL: I would think the assimilation process was or the project it was just like I said it was not the easiest, but I work with what I had and I made the best of what I could out of it even if it was something that probably at the beginning looked like it was gonna be hard impossible or wasn't gonna be possible or people would tell you can't do that. I never believe that was the concept or the idea that others might have that I just cut my self short and don't try just because somebody else says so. I always believe that I always wanted to try I always wanted to learn and I wanted to see for myself not saying that people were telling me the wrong thing sometimes it all depends everybody is different and some people just don't want to go and don't want to do anything that is hard so they would just easily give up. I've always been like a fighter I have always been somebody who is a go person I get up and I try hard and I work hard so I guess to me it wasn't as bad as they thought it and if it was I just change it around and I make the best and I open up the chance for me to do what I had to do.

MZ: Ok so where have you lived in New York and why?

YL: Um I came to New York City in 1989 December of 1989 to be exact. When I came here with my young daughter who had just turned 1 at the time, I lived in Manhattan. This is the borough that I saw others in. I visit people in other boroughs in the Bronx, in Brooklyn, in Queens, but the one that I like maybe it's because it's where I got my apartment here, I work, I got the chance to go to school here. Um, I had the rest of my family here, I had my 2 other sons who were born in New York in Manhattan so I just established my roots here I just establish and started my life and raised family here and I like Manhattan I work here, and I just maybe because I know it the way I know it and everything just worked out for me here.

MZ So what was the hardest part about living/moving to New York?

YL: When I moved from Boston I mean I had my Grandmother who was alive at the time, she's no longer with us um and my families my uncles and my cousins were there and it was hard because I had just left Honduras um a couple of years before that and left my family and friends and now I had to leave my family and my friends again so it was hard, but things in Boston was not really working out for me and I didn't see the opportunities that I have in New York happening for me in Boston, so I had to transition you know I had come to New York not knowing exactly what I was getting or how, but I was always somebody like I said determined and I always trust in God cause God was always next to me and he would see me through everything and my determination to better myself and to get what I need to get and get established I think with that drive I just make the decision that it wasn't the easiest to leave my family again in Boston, but that's what I had to do.

MZ: What was your favorite part about living in New York?

YL: There are so many places in New York, It's just so, it's just a beautiful place in New York the only thing that I didn't really like is just it can be a bit crowded sometimes because Manhattan especially Manhattan is a very crowded city, but um I really like it overall with all the obstacles and whatever that it's a lot of people it's like overcrowded in the buildings and stuff, but at the end of the day you know what I really like Manhattan um I not saying that I probably wouldn't live in other boroughs, but If you asked me to pick so far of what I've seen I'm very comfortable with Manhattan I like Manhattan very much.

MZ: How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

YL: Oh My God tremendously, I've been living in this area since 1990. Yes, cause I moved from Boston to New York in 89, and in 1990 I moved to this neighborhood where I live. It changed tremendously there was a lot of buildings that was like not vandalized, but they were empty you can see the board up the windows and the doors and they put locks and chains on the doors downstairs to prevent people from going in there to sleep in the night or starting a fire because they used to do that a lot they use to go in these buildings and I guess they use to keep themselves warm in the winter and they use to

end up sometimes starting fires. So all of that had changed other people had bought these buildings and they renovated these buildings they turned them into co-ops they turned them into housing and it's beautiful and it beautiful they have the co-ops they have the gyms they have a lot of banks they have the nice supermarkets they have like 4 supermarkets 5 supermarkets in the same area they have coffee shops they have fast-food restaurant. They have so many things they have opened in the neighborhood. It had just changed tremendously it has daycares like new schools and it had changed tremendously from when I first moved here until the present is like you walk up and down and it's like these beautiful buildings and co-ops and they clean the streets and they plant the gardens and the trees and they build the park for the kids and it's beautiful it has changed tremendously for the best.

MZ: So how has your perception in your neighborhood and in the United States more generally changed over time?

YL: Like I said maybe they had better so much this around here and the quality of neighborhood the quality of the life in the of the area have improved there are not as many people outside that used to be hanging around doing bad things all of those people thank God the police cleaned up the street It's not that there's none out there at least it's not the amount that you used to see like as soon as you come out your house you would see them standing there and standing around doing bad things and selling drugs. Just doing bad things they clean up a lot. As far as me getting to know I'm always at work or if I go outside I go to the supermarket to run my errands. I don't really hang around out there. I say hello to everybody, but I keep and mind my business. Other than that I don't really be outside, but overall I think it's ok.

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

YL: Oh that's a tough topic. I don't think I would change anything other than the period that you have to wait to process a petition like if you're petitioning for a family member you have to wait like so long. I understand that there are millions of people that are in the process of legalizing themselves in this country and there's a lot of people that are petitioning to bring their loved ones from all over the world. I'm aware of that maybe that's the reason why the process is so long, but I think that if I can change something that's probably one of the things that I can advocate for because I think their processes are less extensive people can get through and do their things quicker it wouldn't be as many as illegal people in this country and there wouldn't be as much people waiting for their loved ones to come to be reunited in this country. That unfortunately the time that it takes to process they have to wait a very very long time. I had brothers and sisters that had to wait over 14 years almost 16 years to get a permanent resident and get a visa interview. It was long tedious process paperwork and again that is the only thing that I would like them to change to don't make the period so extensive.

MZ: How was the politics of the last decade impacted your experience as an immigrant of the united states?

YL: There's been some good ones there's been some that were not too good, but again it's just a matter of opinion. I can't really say much and I don't have to really agree or disagree I think these people are put in this leadership position they are people that are put there to run the country to make decisions for their country and we just gotta hope and pray that they make the right decision for everyone. Some of us might like the decision some of us may not like the decision, but at the end of the day we just have to respect it because they are the people that lead they are the people that are in charge of these decisions and we all have to make sure that we vote that we get involved, we have to support our communities, we have to advocate and vouch for our communities and our cities and our states and we all have to unite we have to work as a team to make things better. We cannot put the responsibility on one person only this is something that everybody has to be involved everybody has to play a role in or for it to be better. We can't just sit there and criticize what they are and what they aren't doing we have to be a part of it we have to add ourselves to the equation and we have to do what we have to do and if everybody pulls their weight and if everybody does something you know then we have better results. We can't just sit there and say oh he or she is not doing a good job or this president or this governor or this mayor were always quick to make judgement and accuse and you know, but what are we doing as part of this what are we doing to contribute to make it better you understand? It's everybody's responsibility to make the world a better place it's not just one person.

MZ: So as an immigrant what fears do you have?

YL: As an immigrant what fears do I have?

MZ: Yeah

YL: Um as an immigrant I don't have any fears as a person living in the world you know you just have fears of things that happen you listen to all the earthquakes and the hurricanes and the viruses and the disease and so much stuff that happen. You're afraid as a person in general just because you know things happen and you hear and see people dying in the earthquakes and the hurricanes and airplanes and because they catch a disease or viruses and it just so much is going on, but as an immigrant no I have no fear I love this country I live here, but if you go by the rules and regulations in this country you have no reason why you cannot be a resident or a citizen of the United States. If you break the rule anywhere else there is a penalty there's a fine to pay if you break the rules you might just have to go back where you came from and you do something over there you will also be held accountable so it's not the country it's just in general anywhere if your somebody who don't follow the rules and regulation you're gonna always run into obstacles, but I don't fear anything as an immigrant. I'm thankful that I was given the opportunity to come to this country.

MZ: Tell me about your path to citizenship?

YL: Well I became a permanent resident of the United States and then I think after five years I went and I studied they give this form and they give you this book that you'd

study back then I don't know now I mean things change every day, but back then you had to read and you would have to kinda study all of these questions I believe if I'm not mistaking there was like 100 questions and you would have memorized all 100 because you wouldn't know what question what the interviewer was going to ask you so, therefore, you had to know all 100 answers the questions that were going to be asked were like three or four maybe five, but you had to know all 100 the whole thing because you never know which one was gonna be asked. So I memorized the whole thing I went in of course you make an appointment. I went in the day of the interview the officer asked me the questions I answer the questions and then they told me to go into the other place and then I had to sign a form and then they gave me another interview date that I had to come to and there was a room full of people all those people sitting in there was gonna become American citizens and then you know they read the odds and everything to you and you sing the national anthem and then they tell you "Welcome to the United States of America" and now you a citizen of the United States of America. So that was a very joyful day for me and I'm very proud of what I accomplished, and I came so far and I'm very honored that I was given the opportunity as well.

MZ: Ok, so why did you come to the United States over any other country?

YL: Because United States ah. Who doesn't want to come to the United States? Its a beautiful country and it has so many opportunities that if you work hard and you're here for the right reason and you do the right thing you can go and accomplish as much or as far as you want in life. This is a country that gives you all the opportunities it's up to you to go find them and make it happen, but everything is out there they give you so much support they give you so many resources so many things to for you to be to accomplish the American dream of whatever it is that you are seeking. Other countries you would work hard, but the opportunities are just not there the United States of America is well-known that's why everybody even the last place on earth because it's well known that it's a place that people don't have to agree or like you decision, but everybody has to respect each other not necessarily that people follow that, but at least you have the chance to voice your opinion it might not be the right one, but at the end of the day it's your opinion and they give you the respect and the right to say whether it's right in your eyes or not, so that's something that other countries support with. You know they judge people by the color of their skin they judge people by their gender they judge people by their preference they judge people by their lifestyle they judge people by so many things and in this country, it doesn't matter what's your race, what your age, what your color, what your sexual orientation preference, what your lifestyle they don't judge by that. Everybody here from the smallest to the oldest has an opportunity everybody has the right to be heard, everybody has the right to be treated with respect, everybody has the right to be treated with a fair chance no matter what it is. So that's one of the things that make this country one of the greatest and if not the greatest on earth and that's why everybody is looking they are going through so many things trying to get here whether it's the legal or illegal way because they know that once they get here even if their wrong they would have the opportunity for someone to hear them out to give them a chance to give an opportunity to respect their beliefs. That's why I think it's one of the greatest if not like I said the greatest on earth.

MZ: How did you stay connected despite the differences with your family?

YL: Well nowadays well back then we did not have much technology. The technology was not as great as it is now, but now they have Whatsapp, you can facetime your family you can call them all the time. You can send them a text you can send them an email it's like technology is a monster it's so huge that you can stay in contact with them on a daily basis when they're here or when there over there you can talk to them like they were over here every single day and if you don't do that it's because you choose not to do that. The choice is there you can do that again like I said the technology is so advance and it's given us the tools to utilize in order to stay in contact with our loved ones.

MZ: Do you feel that you need to hide who you are because you an immigrant?

YL: No no no-no-no. I am a very very proud strong black female. That I think that I accomplished so much I came to this country with nothing but a basket full of dreams, by myself I had no family members at that time here. I only had my grandmother in Boston so I really had started from scratch and I managed to get a job to establish myself had my family raise my family go to school get a very decent work job that I love working with people who have mental disabilities challenges in this field I've been doing it for 13 years in this agency and another agency when I worked as a home health aid I work like 6 years with them. So I think I had accomplished so much I think that I am very proud of who I am. Like is said before the opportunity was given to me and I had accomplished a lot of things that the people of this country that were born and raised here had not accomplish in this country so I am very proud of being a Hispanic, black, stong female very proud of my roots.

MZ: Are there any other questions that I could have asked you that I missed out on?

YL: I think you covered pretty much everything. You covered pretty much everything. You asked me all the questions and I think I answer you to the best of my ability and I hope that my feedback and my input can be helpful to you.

MZ: Thank You for your time