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Coming to the Plains

Carlos Ortega, Interviewee
Michelle Warren, Interviewer
Jacob Rosdail, Videography

Chihuahua, Mexico

Interview date: 5/18/2018

WARREN: Can you state your name and where you're originally from?

ORTEGA: Yes. My name is Carlos Ortega, and I am originally from Chihuahua, México.

WARREN: Could you tell me, with as much detail as you can think of, what your childhood was like in Mexico?

ORTEGA: Yes. My childhood in Mexico was very interesting. We moved to Cuauhtémoc, one of the cities in Chihuahua, because my dad used to work for the railroad. When Calderón had the presidency in Mexico, he ended up running out the railroad. And I think a little over 800 people were let go from their jobs, and my dad was one of them. So, we ended up moving to Cuauhtémoc because it was a bigger city, and there were more opportunities there.

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So, when we moved there, my parents opened a small convenience store and that was our main source of income when we lived there. I used to go to school. I started there in first grade, and I went 'till third grade, and then I had to repeat the third grade because I got sick. I had a really bad abdominal hernia. I had to get surgery, and I had to be home for over a month and a half. The school in Mexico had this rule where if you missed more than twenty-four days of school, it was an automatic drop-out. You had to go back and start over again. So, halfway through my first year at third grade, I had to get the surgery, and then I was at home...I was held back again. My teachers in Mexico, they were okay. There was one teacher that I had... my first third-grade teacher, who used to be very hard on the students. I remember there were several times that we were in class, and he would make us come in and read out loud, and whenever we would read, if there was a student that would stutter, or couldn't read at a certain pace, he would come to us and he would hit us. And that's something that has always stuck with me. That's something I have never been able to forget.

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I remember I would come home and tell my parents about it, but they always thought it was just us, kids, that we don't listen to the teachers. But there were a lot of times I would come home with missing hair here [points at side of his head] because he would pull our sideburns up, or the back of our hair, they would pull it up, and they would hit us in the back of the head, and they

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would make us cry. So, I've always had this bad image of teachers in Mexico because I saw that the school didn't really do anything, and our parents neglected us a lot. They felt like we were just being kids, that we were not obedient, and if something like that did happen, it was just part of school, you know? That's something that we had to deal with. And now that I came here to the U. S., my idea of what school should be has completely changed. I've had a lot of really good experiences here in school. I've had some bad ones, but... I've noticed that there're bad schools and there're good schools, and then there's bad teachers and good teachers. In Mexico, I was in a bad school that had bad teachers. But here, I've been to a lot of good schools with some bad teachers, so it's been a little bit better.

WARREN: Thinking back on when you were little, before you left Mexico, tell me what you would do for fun. Tell me about your friends and what kinds of fun things you would do outside of school.

ORTEGA: Oh! [laughs] Oh, man! There were a lot of things that my friends and I would do for fun. I always make fun of my little brother because he is ten years younger than I am, so when I was in Mexico, I was there until my ninth year, and then we moved here to the U.S. And when we moved here, he was two months old. Most of my childhood was in Mexico, and his has been here in the U.S. And, when I was in Mexico, like I mentioned earlier, my parents had a stable income. We weren't rich, but we weren't poor. We could live.

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And my dad could afford to buy us toys, but it wasn't a "I'm going to buy you toys every month" kind of deal. It was more like "You'll get toys for your birthday and Christmas." That's about it. My friends and I had to get creative. I remember for fun, if we wanted to play cops and robbers, we would take 2 X 4s and cut them about two feet wide. We would put a nail on one side, and then we would take rubber bands and tie them around the nail and take them all the way to the other side. On the other side we would put a clothes hanger, and then we would take the aluminum bottles caps and we would hammer them down. That's how we would make a gun out of that. We would just play like that every single day, you know. We played a lot of soccer. I mean, that's very common in Mexico. We play a lot of that. But if we wanted to play, let's say, yo-yo's, they were kind of expensive, so we couldn't afford to buy a lot. Some of our friends that were a little less fortunate, we would take the string from our shoes, and we would grab a lemon and put it through the lemon, [laughs] and we would kind of make a yo-yo out of that. We were very creative, and that's one of the things that I've always made fun of my little brother for, because when we came here to the U.S., he's been able to be a little bit more fortunate than I was. He has had more toys than I had. He had a PlayStation. He's had Xbox, stuff like that. When I tell him, "Hey, let's go play, we'll make, a sling shot". In Mexico, we used to make slingshots out of tree branches. Here, you can just go to the dollar store and buy one for two or three dollars. I ask him, "Why do you spend money on something that you have in your backyard; you can make this literally out of trash." And I always felt like that's very funny.

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WARREN: So, tell me about your relationship with your brother and your sister. Tell me both of their names and then what your relationship is like with each of them.

ORTEGA: My relationship with my siblings, I've always kind of taken of a parent role with them. My little brother's name is Luis, and my sister's Polina. My sister is three years younger than I am. So, I'm twenty-six. I believe she's twenty-two or twenty-three now. And my little brother just turned sixteen. When we first came here to the U.S., my parents had to work a lot, so I was the one in charge of taking care of them. When my parents would go to work... My mom would go to work from five o'clock in the morning until about four, and so did my dad. My dad used to work in a restaurant, so he would work from eight o'clock in the morning until two, and then he would come home for two hours, and then go back from five until ten or eleven. So, I was the one that had to be in charge of taking care of them. I've always had this older brother relationship with them, but also kind of a parent. I've always tried to protect them and try to find the best for them. I mean, my parents were there. They taught us how to behave, you know? They taught us good manners, but a lot of that I had to teach them because they had very limited time with my parents. They couldn't really interact with them because of their work. So, I was kind of their older brother and kind of a parent with them, too.

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WARREN: Do you remember how you felt when your parents told you that you guys were going to move to the U.S.?

ORTEGA: I don't really remember much about it because I was so involved with trying to be a child. When I was a kid, I was trying to forget about the bad experiences I was having at school and all the bad situations that my parents were having, because like I mentioned earlier, they had a store, and it seemed like every three or four months, someone would come into our house and to our store and they would rob us. I noticed that my parents started having problems, and my dad wanted to find a way out. He wanted to have a better future for us, but I didn't really pay much attention to it. I mean, I remember the process because I remember we had to take a lot of pictures. We had to get tests done, we had to go talk to the schools, we had to get letters and all that, so I remember all that process, but to me, the U.S. wasn't really a place to go. To me, it was just a name. I didn't know what it was, or where it was, or anything about it. I just knew it was a name, and it was in a different place, and I remember when... we went to El Paso, Texas to get our passport and our visa... It's a memory that I've always cherished because it was on May 10th, and in Mexico, that's Mother's Day. And I remember we arrived there at four o'clock in the morning, and we had to stand in line for long hours. We ended up going up to this lady at this desk and she started asking my parents all these questions and all this stuff. And I remember they got approved. They got their passports, and they got their visas as well as a permit to come here to the U.S. So, I remember the plan was get all this paperwork done, go back home, and plan for when we're going to move up here. That same day my grandma went with us, and she had

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already applied for her passport and her visa. She had come to the U.S. before. And my aunt - I had an aunt that already lived here in the U.S. - and when we walked out of the building where my parents got their permits....

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[sighs] I remember my dad telling my mom, “Listen, I don't have a job, we're struggling for money, I have the permit right now. I could just leave right now, and you guys can go back home. I will go up here to the U.S., work a few months and come back, and we'll start another business.” The same day that we got the permit, my grandma and my dad crossed over to the U.S. and my mom and I went back home. And I remember on the way there, my mom cried a lot because we were going to be without my dad for a long time, and my parents have always been together. They have never been apart for longer than one or two days. So, the idea of them being separated for months frightened her. We went back home, and when we got there. It took about two days before my mom got a hold of my dad, when he finally arrived here with my aunt, and they started communicating. We would talk on the phone almost every week. We didn't talk as often as we wanted because, in Mexico, everything was so expensive that we couldn't afford to have a phone at home, so we had to walk several blocks to a public phone, so we could use it. We had to buy phone cards that allowed you to call other countries, but they were very expensive. And, at the time, my dad was struggling to find a job here, so had to depend on my mom trying to manage the convenience store. Every now and then we had a little extra money, so that's what we would do. We would go buy a phone card so we could talk to my dad and...

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Almost every single time that my mom would call my dad, she would cry, and she would say, “We miss you. We need you back,” and all this. It took about two months before we saved enough money. He saw how much better life was up here. Rather than coming back, he decided to send us some money so we could buy our tickets so we could cross. That's what we ended up doing. The summer after my third-grade year, my mom told me that we were going to move to a different town, and that we were going to come back. She said, “We're going to move to the U.S.,” but I didn't know where it was or anything. We ended up leaving one day at night. My grandma took us to the bus stop, and they helped us out with everything, and I just remember a really, really long ride on a bus. It took that thing about twenty-four hours, and my little brother was about one and a half months old, two months old, and he cried most of the way there. I had to help my mom with the bags and everything because she had the baby in her hand, and my little sister was about five years old, so I had to make sure that we didn't leave her behind. We had all this luggage and all this stuff, and I remember crossing the border. We had to get off the bus, and they checked our stuff, and they didn't really say much to us. They just made sure our passports, and everything was valid. We crossed El Paso, and next thing I know, we arrived in Denver, Colorado. That was where we first came, and it was pretty interesting because we got out there and it was a really big city.

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Cuauhtémoc, where I'm from, it's a city, but it's not like a city from the U.S. I mean, it's a city because it's very populated, and there're buildings, but there're not buildings like skyscrapers, like here. It's just buildings like Walmart. That's probably one of the biggest ones they have. When we got out in Denver, my aunt had driven there from Yuma, Colorado and she picked us up. She took us out to eat to McDonald's. That was the first time I ever had McDonald's. In Mexico, we had McDonald's in the cities where I lived, but it was too expensive. My dad had always told me, "McDonald's is more of a luxury. Rich people go to McDonald's. We go to the fruit stands, because it tastes better and it's cheaper, but it tastes better." I'm sure it did [laughs]. It was pretty interesting having McDonald's for the first time and being around people that I could hear them have sound coming out of their mouths, but I was like, "What are they saying? They don't sound like me. And why are there so many blonde people? We don't have blondes where I'm from, why am I so different? You know? And my mom wouldn't say much. She would just tell me, "We're almost there. We're almost going to see your dad. We're almost there. Your dad is only two hours away now. He's not days away anymore. We'll be there, we'll be there". She tried to keep all these distractions that were around us out of us. She was trying to mainly put our focus on my dad, because that's really what we wanted to see. We wanted to see my dad. And at the time, I knew we had moved somewhere, but I didn't know that we had left my country, and I didn't know I was somewhere else. That's when my life began here.

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WARREN: What were your first impressions when you started going to school here in the States? What are some of the things you remember being surprised by, or liking, or disliking at first?

ORTEGA: When I first came here to the U.S., the school that I attended was Yuma Middle School. We got here to the U.S. in August and that was about two weeks before school started. My cousin María, she had already been here for a few years, so she knew how to speak English. We got to her house, because when we first moved here, we had to go live with them because my dad was still between jobs and my mom didn't have a job at all, yet. We were living with my aunt, and my cousin was the one that told me, "Oh, don't worry about school. You'll catch up because I caught up. And just remember that, when you go into class, you have to say, "Hi", and this is how you say "Hi" and "Hi" means, "Hola" and they say, "How are you?" They're saying, "¿Cómo estás?" So, you have to say, "Fine". They started writing sentences down so I could remember them because the idea was to develop your English language as fast as possible if you want to succeed here. And I remember the first day of class, my mom took me there, and they had a person that was an interpreter, but the principal was the one that was giving us a tour of the school, and he wanted to see how much I knew. The first question he asked was, "What's your name?" And I had practiced this for the past two weeks, and when he asked me that I was so lost. I was so scared. I kept looking at my cousin, like, "What is he saying?" And she would get so

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mad, “Oh my God! We went over this for the past two weeks. He's asking you what your name is. Just say Carlos and...” [laughs].

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It was very nerve-wracking, you know. I started fourth grade. My teacher's name was Mrs. Cambell, and she was a good teacher. I could tell that she tried with me, but she didn't have the patience to deal with me. The classroom that I had... Yuma, Colorado, it was a very diverse town. It was about fifty percent Hispanics and fifty percent Americans, so it was very, very diverse. Every single classroom that you walk in, you could see there were Hispanics. I believe there was maybe one African American student or two there. We didn't see a lot of African American people. We saw a few people from China or other countries, but not very many. It was mainly just people from either Mexico or Guatemala, places from Central America. So, when I walked into my classroom with Mrs. Cambell, there were three other students there that were from Mexico. I think they grew up here in the U.S., so their English language skills were very developed. They could communicate with the teacher. And they knew how to speak Spanish because their parents spoke Spanish at home. So, it was easier for them, you know. My teacher, what she tried to do was give me the lessons of the day, and just stay on those other kids, try to ask them questions because she didn't speak any Spanish. It was just English. After a few months in school, they enrolled me into the ESL [English as a Second Language] program so I could start developing my language and understanding it. And after that, she just gave up on me. I felt like she thought that now I was in the ESL program, it was up to them to make me develop my skills, you know. And for her, her only job was just to take attendance, you know. There were several days in school that I would come in and she would give me the paperwork and then she would tell me, “Wait until your ESL class. And then do this with them”. She would just sit me there, and there were times that I would just fall asleep in my desk, and she wouldn't say anything. A lot of the other students that were Hispanics gave up, too. I feel like they were so young. They were fourth graders, you know. It kind of seemed like a job to them, and I felt like they didn't want to do that, so it was a lot easier for them to just ignore me and let me deal with me, and then they would themselves. So, halfway through the year,

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my grades were D's and F's. I don't remember my teacher helping me out a lot. I don't remember many of the students helping me out a lot, either. Really, the only help I had was from my ESL teachers, and they were really good teachers. I wish I could remember their names, but I can't, but they were really good. They had a lot of patience. They were nothing like the teachers in Mexico, I remember telling them, “I don't know. I don't know the answer to this, I don't know how to say that.” And I remember them just saying, “Oh, it's fine. You'll get there”. In Mexico, my third-grade teacher didn't say, “It's okay, you'll get there.” If I told him I didn't know, he would hit me in the back of the head, he would pull my hair; he would make us stand up for the rest of the day. It was an eight-hour day, and in school, standing up all day, it was ridiculous. I

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do owe it to those teachers from Yuma School because they sacrificed a lot of their time to help me out. One of my favorite teachers was my fifth-grade teacher. Her name was Mary Baker, and it was her first year out of college teaching. I passed fourth grade with all D's. Now that I'm older, I understand why they passed me with all D's, because if they would have given me all F's, you can't pass anybody, you have to hold them back. But they couldn't hold me back because I had already been held back one year in Mexico, so it created this conflict with the school, so they passed me with D's because that was the minimum qualification for a student to go to the next level. I went into fifth grade, I walked into this room and there was Mrs. Baker and...

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I honestly have to say that me going to school now to be a Spanish teacher is because of her. Because she was fresh out of college and it was her first year, and she saw how much I was struggling. She didn't speak Spanish, so we still had that problem between us, that we couldn't communicate. But she did everything she could to get me, to develop my language a lot quicker. She would come in forty minutes before school, and she would give me lessons, and she would stay forty minutes after school and keep giving me lessons. Right now, I have a few kids that I'm tutoring in Spanish, and all my ideas that I use for them are ideas that I got from her because she would bring, for example, apples, you know, fruits and she would label them in English, not in Spanish because she didn't know how to speak Spanish, but I had to use my common sense, knowing that if she labeled an apple as "an apple," that I knew that it was manzana, you know. She would go home, read books, record herself, and she would send those recordings home with me, and she would say, "Just listen to them, and that's all you have to do." Halfway through the year in her class, I dropped my ESL program because I was learning more from her than my ESL teachers. By the time I left fifth grade with her, I probably knew half of what I know now in English. I was struggling to read it and I was struggling to write it, but I could speak it very well, and I had an accent, but not that bad. She did really good, and then, after fifth grade, she ended up having to move to California. She left me a bunch of books and stuff that she wanted me to keep working on. And she wanted me to do the work and send it to her through the mail. She would grade them and send me feedback.

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And that lasted a little bit, but then it just stopped because I was a kid and my parents were so busy at work that they didn't really focus on how well I was doing in school. So, there was really nobody there to keep pushing me, and there was nobody else that wanted to take the responsibility, so everything just fell apart. So, my sixth-grade year was a little better. I went back into the ESL after my sixth-grade year because the school noticed that I wasn't progressing anymore. I went back into it and then I was there my whole sixth grade year, and then my seventh-grade year, I dropped out of it again. And that's where I started developing my language and it just went on little by little. When I was in seventh grade, my dad bought me my first drum set and he wanted me to be a musician. He told me, "You have to develop your ear. You have to

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have an ear for music.” There're a lot of people who learn how to be musicians by just reading music, but there are some people that can develop their musician skills by just listening to it. And I used the same concept to develop my English skills. I would listen to people, and I'd just remember what they were saying. Even though I didn't know what it was in Spanish, I just remembered it, and then I started hearing it from other people, and somebody else, and somebody else, and then, every now and then I'd have a ten-word sentence that I would know two or three words. So, then I would just try to develop an idea of what they were saying and little by little that's how it started developing. By eighth grade, I started to communicate with my teachers. I started developing a lot more friends, more diverse friends. And I could actually go to the doctor by myself now and communicate with the doctors. I could go to the store and communicate with the people at the store. I could go to restaurants and order by myself; I didn't have to have somebody there translate for me. So, little by little I just started developing my skills.

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WARREN: What did you notice about how people's reception of you as someone from outside, someone from another country, someone who didn't speak English that great at first? What were some of the reactions that you encountered as a kid, from the people who were living in Yuma already, the people who were local?

ORTEGA: Some of the reactions from the people were a lot different than the ones they are here in Nebraska; I can say that. Because, like I said, the town of Yuma was a very diverse town and people had already become accustomed to having other people from other countries come in. I don't think... I experienced any actual racism there, or any type of discrimination. I don't ever remember any student calling me any names or anything while I was there. Because I felt like everybody fit together very well. I felt like they were accustomed to it. My teachers, like I said, were fine. I didn't have anybody discriminate against me. I had several parents of my other friends that were inviting me to their homes and all that, so I felt very welcomed, you know? It was strange for me to come to a place where people didn't look like me, and didn't speak like me, but yeah... I felt at home when I was in town. Like I said, I had friends and people spoke to me.

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WARREN: How old were you when you came to Nebraska and how did things change for you as far as how people reacted to you?

ORTEGA: Yes. When I came to Nebraska, I was fourteen years old. And the town that I came to was Arapahoe, Nebraska. And if you go to Arapahoe Nebraska now, you will see that it's a little bit diverse. I believe there's about fifteen different families from Mexico or other parts of Central or South America. When I first came though, I was the second Hispanic family in that town. And I was the third Hispanic that had been in that school. And people were not accustomed at all. I remember I would walk down the street and people would literally be

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walking and they would stop where they were and just look at me as if I was... like if you go to the zoo, you know? And you go see animals, you look at some of them like, "Oh my God! "Look at that! What is that?" It felt like that. I didn't really pay much attention to it, because when we first came to Nebraska, in Yuma - I'm not very clear on this - but I believe that Immigration came in and started checking a lot of people for papers, so the town went from being about 50/50 to maybe 20/80.

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A lot of people moved out of Yuma, so, when I came here, I was expecting to have the same environment that I had in Yuma, but because of what happened in Yuma, my dad had to go to work in Santa Fe, New Mexico and my mom got a job here. So, we had to be separated and when my dad went to Santa Fe, he went with a sister, and he took my oldest, younger sister with him. And my mom and my little brother moved to Arapahoe. While my mom was working, I had to take care of my little brother again. So, from five o'clock in the morning to five o'clock in the afternoon, when my mom was working, I was with my little brother. We would always be at home. We couldn't leave the house, because it was a new town, and we didn't know anybody. After my mom would come home, then that's when I could go out and try to see the town. It's kind of a small town, it's not very big, so, my mom wasn't too afraid that I would get lost or anything. It's so small that there's not even stop lights.

When we first moved to Nebraska, it was during summer, so it was before school started, and I did not know I was one of the only Hispanics that was going to be going to that school. I remember when I walked in there for my freshman year of high school, the only other Hispanic student that was there was Elvis and his sister, but I can't remember his sister right now. But that was about it. There was one other student, he's African American that was there. But that was it. There were no other students from any other part of the world, it was just us. And I walked in, and I could just feel it... I walked in there and you could feel the students were uncomfortable. I could hear them talk; I felt like they thought I didn't know how to speak English. They probably thought I didn't know what they were saying, but I did. I remember this word they kept repeating and I didn't know what it was, and I didn't know until my senior year.

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They kept calling me "spick" and I didn't know what that was, I'm like, "What is that? Was it my clothes, was it something I'm wearing? Why are they calling me that?" I didn't pay any attention to it. Like I said, I didn't know what it was; it was the first time I ever heard that. There was this one kid, in my freshman year, that started bullying me a lot. He used to call me "beaner" all the time, and I had never heard those words. Like I said, in Colorado I didn't hear those. I didn't hear them from my fellow students. I didn't hear them from my teachers or anybody around me. I didn't hear any of those words so when I came here those were new words to me and I'm like, "What are they...?" You know? When I asked one of the kids that was Hispanic that had moved there, he told me, "Oh, beaner is a racial term. They're trying to discriminate against you." I

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asked him, "Yeah, but what does it mean? What is it?" And the best translation he gave me was, "They're calling you: Frijolero." And I'm like, "Why?" And he said, "Because you're from Mexico and you're brown, and you eat beans." And I'm like, "But they eat beans too. I mean, have you been to the convenience store? There're beans everywhere. They eat beans too!" "Yeah, they're not dark, but you know. I don't know how that works, I just know that there are darker people than others, that's it." [laughs] It was like that my whole freshman year. I didn't really make friends. I was friends with this kid named Corey, and he took me under his wing. He was like, "Listen... Don't listen to them. They're trying to make you an outcast and you can just come hang out with me. We'll be friends and all this."

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So, that's what I did, I hung out with them. My sophomore year, I started developing my language a little better and that's when my dad came back from New Mexico. By then, I had already lived through this experience of people trying to make me feel less than them, trying to put me down, trying to discriminate against me. So, when my dad came, I started telling him all these stories, stuff that had happened to me in school, and my dad has always been a guy that knows how to deal with conflict. He always tried to guide me and say, "Listen, when people speak to you like that, it's because they are the problem, not you. There is something wrong with them that they need to fix, but it's not your problem. Don't worry about them. Listen to them but ignore them. Let it go in one ear and out the other and just keep being you, keep going to school. Get good grades and one day, they are going to see you and they're going to think, "You know what? Maybe he's not like that. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe they'll come to you, and they'll apologize for what they said, and maybe something will happen to them where they will have a change of heart and see what's wrong with them and, or you can do something to change their mind in a positive way. But don't get in fights; don't let them get a reaction out of you. Just pretend they didn't say it and just keep living your life."

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I felt like my dad didn't understand what it was like because I don't ever remember my dad coming home and talking about stuff like this that had happened to him. Well, when he came here, my dad got a job at a farm. Where they have cows, and they milk them and all that stuff. About a week after he started working there, it was a very rainy day, and my mom was going to work, and she got stuck out in the country, and we didn't have a four-wheel-drive car, so my dad had to use his car to try to get her out of the ditch so she could go to work. When he left in the morning, I didn't know that my mom was stuck and I ended up getting a phone call at home, saying, "Hey, where's your dad?" And I told him, "Oh, he left." He's like, "Oh, I'm his boss. He needs to be here. He's thirty minutes late for work." And I told him, "Let me call him on his cell phone and see what's going on." I got a hold of my dad and that's when he explained what was going on. So, he came home and picked me up so I could go with him to his job because my dad does not speak English. My dad wanted me to translate for him, to let his boss know that there

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was an accident with my mom and that she needed help and that he was helping her out and that's why he was late. And we walked in, and the guy just went off on my dad. It seemed like when you see a really angry dog barking at another dog, it was like that. He was just attacking my dad, and I was so surprised because I thought, "Oh, okay, my dad is going to lose it.

[0:45:01]

He's not going to let this guy talk to him like that." He said so many things to him that I couldn't keep up. I couldn't translate everything, but I knew what he was saying, and my dad was just saying, "Just listen to him and then whatever you remember just tell me after he's done." Because he was just talking and talking and talking and when he finally got done, he told me, "Tell your dad that he's been working here for a week, and that I'm not going to pay him because he's late. He needs to leave because he is trespassing now. He is fired." I told my dad that, and my dad told me to tell him that he wasn't going to leave because he needed that week's worth of pay, because we had a family that we needed to feed. And the guy started calling him all these racial names and I didn't want to translate it because... I just didn't want my dad to go through what I'd been through. After a few minutes I finally told my dad everything that he said, and I just remember my dad putting his hat down and he told me to just get into the car and leave. So, we ended up leaving the farm and we went straight to the police because my dad wanted his money. After that we had one of the deputies from Arapahoe call the owner and told him that if he doesn't pay my dad, he was eligible to get sued. We ended up going back in and the guy sent one of the workers out with a check because he didn't want to talk to my dad. My dad got his check. We left, and I remember going home and my dad was just so quiet. He wouldn't say anything... and... [cries].

[0:48:00]

That was the first time that I knew that he actually experienced something like that. And he just looked at me and said, "You know, we're not going to deal with this. We are going to pack your things and we're going to move somewhere. Because we can't live like this. We're not going to have somebody talk to us the way he did." We waited at home for my mom to come from work, and my dad explained to her what had happened. Well, my mom had already been working for this company for a few months, and the supervisor had a really good view of my mom, so my mom ended up explaining what had happened. They immediately gave my dad a job. They had no issue with him working there or anything. So, we ended up staying there, in Arapahoe, until I graduated high school. But my experience in that town has been really hard. It's just motivated me even more to become a teacher so I can open the minds of students, so I can guide them away from ignorance and away from that hatred that's either being created at home, in the streets, or on tv. Wherever that hatred is coming from, I want to be there for those students, so I can guide them and show them that we have to live in a better world, where we need to stop all this. Because, even now at 26 years old, I still experience stuff like that. I hate to say that I'm accustomed to it. Because I feel like I shouldn't have to be. People shouldn't come here and deal with the things that I've dealt with and just get used to it and learn how to live with it. Stuff like

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this shouldn't happen to people. Even with my wife, when we go to Walmart, every now and then we'll be walking, and people will look at us and say, "Ew." You know? Or they'll say, "Did you look at her? Why is she with him?" And it's funny because, well, it's not funny, but sometimes the only thing you can do is just laugh about it and move on.

[0:51:26]

WARREN: As an adult, how do you feel that you're perceived by non-Hispanics? How do you feel is your treatment in general as you move through university, through social life?

ORTEGA: Now as an adult I see a very positive change in school. I see how not just the Caucasian students, but the Hispanic students are joining together to try to make change, to make a better world, you know? But I also see that, especially here in Nebraska - because I like to travel to other states - and I see this mainly here in Nebraska...I feel like the voice of the Hispanic people has quieted down. I feel like they have become to accustomed to being treated wrong, and rather than standing up and joining hands and trying to make a change, they'd rather look away than deal with it. I've seen it where my parents work, because I've worked with them. And I've seen how some of the managers treat them. The worst thing that I have seen in the Hispanic community is when you see Hispanics that have been here for a long time, and they discriminate against other Hispanics. One of the things that my dad told me after everything that we've been through was, "People are always going to try to find a way to put you down if they don't like you, if you don't agree with them. But as a Hispanic, you have to find a way to make things better." But unfortunately, one of the things that I've learned is that a Hispanic's worst enemy is another Hispanic. You always see people that have been here for a long time, and they apply for citizenship, and they have legal status in the US, and rather than helping their fellow immigrants, they put them down. They don't help them when they're at work. They don't stand up for them. A lot of people that are immigrants that are illegally in the country deal with discrimination at their jobs because they have to work.

[0:54:28]

Because they don't want to be sent back to where they're from, because, clearly, they left where they lived because it was a bad place. They didn't leave because it was heaven; it was bad. You see a lot of people that have legal status here, and rather than standing up for them, saying, "Listen, you can't speak to them like that, because you're speaking to me like that too because I am also an immigrant, just because I have legal status doesn't mean I'm no longer an immigrant." Rather than standing up and saying, "We're not going to take that," they hide. They look away. They just let the other people deal with the hatred. And that's one of the things that I wish as an immigrant, as a Hispanic, that people would understand. We all came here on the same boat; we're trying to find a better living, you know? Just because one person succeeds doesn't mean that you shouldn't try to help other people. It can't just happen in schools. It has to happen in our society. We have to change. And Hispanic society, they need to come together and say, "Listen, we're not going to take this no more. We are one and we have to fight for our human rights,

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because in the end that's just what we are, we're just humans. We can be black, white, brown, pink, or purple, it doesn't matter. At the end of the day, we're just humans, and we're all just trying to have a better living.” I don't understand why people don't see that when you discriminate against one Hispanic, you're making their life hell, but you're also doing that because your life is hell. Rather than affecting two people, why don't you just fix what's wrong with you? So, there's less hatred in this world.

WARREN: This next question is connected to that. I know we've had this conversation before about the beginning of your feelings about it, but why do you think it's important for you and for other people who have come to live in central Nebraska from places that are Spanish speaking? Why do you think it's important for these stories of immigration to be shared?

[0:57:08]

ORTEGA: I think it's important for these stories to come out and for people to hear them because we need to stop turning a blind eye to this. We have to find a way of fixing things. And I think if people listen to our stories, they will understand that we are not here to take anybody's job. We are not here to take anybody's place, anywhere. We are here because we want to live. We want to live how other people live. We want to have freedom. Because where we came from, our freedom was taken away. There's too much corruption; there's too much crime. People have to see that it's not really the people's fault. It's the government's. If I'm here in the US, it's not because I'm a bad person and I want to harm somebody, you know? It's because where I lived, there was crime, there were people that hurt me. People that stole from me, and people that killed around me. If I come here, I'm not going to bring those problems here. Because then I would just create a world here that I just escaped from. These stories are important because it will open the minds of other people and hopefully, it will help them understand that we're also human and that we just need to come together. That we need to stop separating from each other.

[0:59:11]

WARREN: Tell me about your future professional goals and what sorts of big things you hope to accomplish through those goals.

ORTEGA: One of my future goals is to become a teacher. I want to be a Spanish teacher. I want to be able to go as high as possible in my education. But more than my education, I see that maybe the reason people discriminate against other people, or the reason people hate on other people, is because they're not communicating. One of the things that I want to do once I graduate, I want to open some kind of program where I can teach other adults - not just students, but adults that come from other countries - how to speak English because I do understand that it is a problem. I hear people say, "If you come to this country you need to speak English." But a lot of the people that are coming here, to this country, they're not people that had an education, you know? But I do feel like speaking good English can benefit both sides: the people that are coming here and the people that live here. If we have communication, if we have a shared

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language, we can all talk and say what we need to say to each other. I feel like that's one way of eliminating all this hatred and all this confusion. Because you can't judge somebody if you don't know them.

[1:01:03]

And if you can't talk to them, you can't just say whatever you want about them, because you don't know them, at all. One of the things that I want to do is open programs where I can do it, where I can help parents, where I help students. I've been to some middle schools where I've helped teachers and the schools interpret for their parent teacher conferences and I see all these students struggling. And when I see them, I see me, because I went through that. If I help the parents develop their language, that's another way of them taking some kind of responsibility for their kids. So, they can be better and succeed in school, when I was going through middle school and high school... I believe my dad only went through sixth, seventh or eighth grade. And I think my mom only went through sixth grade. So, after those grades, after I went through all those years, my dad could help me with math, stuff like that, but they couldn't help me with reading and writing. They couldn't help me with science or history because they didn't know the language. If we can get these parents to develop their language, hopefully their kids can improve in schools, rather than be like me. When I was in middle school, teachers threw me in the basic classes, when I was in high school, I didn't get reading and writing. I got basic reading and writing which is a step lower, just trying to get you through high school. They're trying to get you out of there, you know? Because you need to go out of there, because you have a certain time. By the time you're, I believe it's eighteen or twenty-one, they have to kick you out, it's the law, you know. They just try to get you through there with kind of good grades so hopefully when you're out you can get a good job. I feel like that's not fair. Hopefully, by helping these parents, their kids can get out of those kinds of classes and get into real English and writing classes so when they get out of there, they can get real jobs. They can go to school and get real careers rather than just saying, "Okay, he's done" or "Okay, we got him through."

[1:03:37]

WARREN: I'm going to jump back in time, because I want to ask you something that I would have asked earlier and... se me fue el momento. I want to know, are there any specific things that you can think of that you really miss from Mexico from when you were little?

ORTEGA: One of the things that I miss from Mexico besides having this feeling of being afraid and having to look over your back all the time, would probably be my family. I mentioned when my dad came to the US on May 10th... this May 10th that just passed, it was his seventeenth year here in the US, and he hasn't gone back. He hasn't seen his family since and neither have we because we have never been back either. It's been seventeen years since I've seen my uncle Carlos, my aunts, my cousins, all of them, all my friends, you know? There're friends that I grew up playing marbles and playing those games, creating those games, creating those toy guns and stuff. It's been seventeen years since I've seen them. Now, thanks to technology like Facebook,

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we communicate, but we don't communicate like family anymore. Because we've been apart for seventeen years, we lost that feeling, that thing that makes you family. I have my family who say, "Aw, we miss you." And they tell me stories about when I was a kid but it's really hard for me to relate to them, because it's like, you can tell me this story about me, but so could my neighbor. I don't know my neighbor that well, but I also don't know you that well, you know. I grew up with you until I was nine, but even then, I was spending all this time with my friends. We didn't really have Christmases together or holidays together. Now, it's really hard to have that family connection with them. That would probably be the only thing that I wish I could have back, you know? Maybe all that time that I spent. Maybe a way of meeting with them and catching up.

[1:06:35]

This past week I finally got my U visa, so I have a better legal status here in the US, but after I got it, I also got a letter in the mail saying that the U Visa allows me to stay here legally, but it does not allow me to leave the country. I mean, I can but I can't come back, you know. So, I still have that barrier; I can't go back because if I do, then I'll lose everything I have built here. I don't consider myself to be somebody from here, but I don't consider myself to be somebody from over there either, you know? If I would get deported... I'm not accepted here, and I feel like I'm not going to be accepted over there anymore. Because I don't have that culture. I celebrate what I can here with my family, but it's not the same as over there.

ROSDAIL: So, I know you wanted to touch upon his recent incident.

WARREN: Oh, it was the one four years ago. I've just heard bits and pieces of it. Do you want to tell us what happened?

[1:08:04]

ORTEGA: Four years ago, I was working back home in Orleans... I guess it's also one of the things that I wish I could take back from... what you asked me earlier, was one of the things I wish I could have back is that ever since I came here, to the US, I lived in, like fifteen different houses, and I lived in like seven different towns. When people ask me, "Where are you from?" I always go to the place where I lived the longest which is Yuma, Colorado because I was there for four years, but I don't really have a place that I can call home. I don't really have a place that I can say, "Ey!" Like this, I mean... I say I'm from Mexico, because that's my nationality, that's where I'm from originally, but I could also say I'm from Colorado because I spent just about the same amount of time there. But I can also say that I'm from Arapahoe because I spent the same amount of time there. I can say I'm from Orleans because I've spent the same amount of time there, or from Hastings, or Grand Island, or Kearney. Any place could be my home now because it's the same amount of time. But four years ago, when I used to live in Orleans, a few friends of mine came over after I got off work and they asked me if I wanted to go hang out with them at the bar. And I decided to go with them just because... I don't like going out to bars because it's

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not really my scene, but also because I don't want to come out of a bar and be pulled over and then my immigration status can be affected. There's no point in pulling the tail of the dragon if he's just sitting there. Might as well just ignore it, but that day I decided to go with them because I had a long day at work, and they had a long day at work, and we just wanted to go and play pool. We weren't going there to get drunk or do anything bad; we just wanted to go play pool.

[1:10:26]

And the town that we went to was Oxford, Nebraska. Oxford is a really small town. I think maybe there's 400 or 500 people; there's really nothing to do there. My friends and I went there, and it was the first bar that we went to, and we got out of the car, and we walked in, and we sat down, and there were some people playing pool. There was only one pool table at the bar, it's a really small bar. There were only a couple playing there, so we were waiting for them to get done, so that we could play. We sat down at the table closest to the door, and the minute we sat down, all of the eyes in the bar turned towards us. You could immediately feel this tension in the building. You could see that we were not welcome, that they did not want us there. We sat down and within two minutes all my friends were like, "You know what, let's just go. It feels weird. It's uncomfortable. People are looking at us. They keep whispering things. Let's just go." We get up and as we're walking out of the bar, these two guys get up and they say, "Where do you guys think you're going?" And I say, "Well, we're leaving. We're going somewhere else." And they say, "Well, we don't welcome beaners here." And then I say, "Well, you know what? It doesn't matter what you want. We're leaving, we're not going to put up with this."

[1:12:03]

My friends started walking out and I was the last one in line. As I'm walking out, the two guys pin me against the door. And they say, "Oh, you think you can just get out of here? It doesn't work like that. We don't want your kind here. Not just in the bar, but here at all." And I say, "Well, you know what? It doesn't matter what you want. We're leaving, I don't want to put up with this." And as I'm walking out, there's a guy, I believe he was about 27, 28 years old, and another guy was about 42. Later I found out it was his dad, dad and son. I was walking out of the bar and the dad grabbed me by my shoulder and turned me around and started punching me. I couldn't get the door to open, so the only thing I could do was just cover myself. The son started hitting me from the side. So, what I did to try to get away from them is, I pushed the dad as far as I can and I pushed the son, and as I was turning the son had this pool stick and he hit me in the back of the head. I actually have scars on the back of my head. He managed to cut me a little bit, but it just completely soaked my shirt in blood. I couldn't see exactly how bad he had cut me, I just knew that when he hit me, I just felt this really hard headache and I ran out of there and when I was outside, my friends saw me and they ran towards me and they said, "What's going on?" The other two guys came out and the lady, the owner of the bar, came out and she started yelling, "I'm going to call the cops! I'm going to call the cops!" So, then the two guys ended up

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leaving, and the bar lady asked me if I was okay, if I wanted to go the hospital, if they needed to call an ambulance, and at the time I didn't want to because I didn't know what was going on.

[1:14:11]

At this time, even after he hit me, I still hadn't seen the blood and it wasn't until one of my friends said, "Hey, have you seen your shirt?" I looked down and it was completely soaked. I mean, it was all front and back and my headache just started getting worse and worse and worse, and my friend ended up calling the ambulance and they came and got me. When I went to the hospital, I had a small cut on the back of my head, but the doctors said that even the smallest cut on the head, since it's one of the most sensitive areas, bleeds the most, so that's why there was so much blood. They ended up putting a little bit of super glue so they could close it. They didn't put any stitches or anything, because it wasn't big enough and they cleaned me up and everything. I ended up going home and after that day, it has always affected me emotionally when people call me those racial names. But I have always done what my dad told me: just listen to them and forget about it. But it wasn't until I was actually physically hurt that it really made me depressed. After that day, I quit my job. I didn't want to go to my job anymore. I didn't want to go out, I stopped talking to all my friends. I wasn't on Facebook anymore; I wasn't on social media anywhere. I stopped watching movies in English, I would just watch TV shows in Spanish. I was a big country music fan, and where I lived, Orleans and all those towns, the only thing there is to do around there is pretty much just drive around and listen to country music and do the country things like fishing and all that stuff. And I stopped doing all that. After a few weeks, my dad told me that I had to find a way to get out of Orleans because I had already started school at CCC [Central Community College].

[1:16:37]

My dad wanted me to move out of there because he saw how much I was getting depressed and how it had affected me. My dad told me, "We need to do something about what happened because you're depressed, so we need to get you out of here." And I told my dad, "I am tired of living this. I am tired of people saying things to me and not doing anything about it."

We left Mexico because our house was being broken into and robbed and the cops were doing nothing about it. But in the US, it's not like that. In the US, the law works and that's why we came here. The day of the incident I got a hold of the police officers and when I spoke to them, I just gave them a brief description of who they were, because I didn't know them. The deputy knew exactly who it was, and he pulled up the picture on the phone and said, "Is it this guy?" And I'm like, "Yes." And he swiped again and said, "Is it this other guy?" and I'm like, "Yes." The same day they went, and they arrested the dad, but the son, they didn't because I guess he had a warrant against him, and they couldn't find him. It took me about a month and a half to find a lawyer that was willing to take my case. It was thanks to the attorneys from Justice for Our Neighbors; I believe they changed their name to Legal Immigration Services. One of the ladies, one of the attorneys took my case and they started asking all these questions. I had told them

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what happened. I had all these bills from the doctor that came in, and they were able to send them to court and have the guys pay for it. I believe that they ended up catching the guy, the son; he went to jail for a few months, but I think he's out now. The dad spent three days in jail, and he had to pay a bond and was out. After that, the lawyer asked me what I wanted to do, and I told them I wanted to do more than just this. I told them, "We need to do something about it." They filed a case for racial discrimination, and I can't remember what the other one was. It's been a long four years, but after that I was finally able to get my U visa.

[1:19:21]

Thanks to the lawyers, thanks to all their hard work, they managed to help me out with my legal status here. Now I have my U visa and they have opened a path for me to get citizenship in the future. I hope that, once I get my citizenship, I don't change how other people have. I still want to pursue my dream; I still want to open programs to help people. I don't think I am ever going to stop wanting to help people. I don't think I am ever going to stop wanting to help immigrants better themselves and better their lives and help their children better themselves in school and give them a better future just how my parents have struggled to get me a better future.

ROSDAIL: Just a point of clarification, when you said you wanted to do "more", as far as your legalization or in terms that your seeking of justice, is there an update that you can tell us about that?

ORTEGA: Yes! I wanted more against them. I felt like the dad had got away with it too easily. I mean, spending two nights or three nights in jail and just paying \$700 to get out and being okay... I feel like, when stuff like that happens, judges should... invoke some kind of therapy for them, for those people, you know? Send them to some kind of therapy and make them understand that what they're doing is not just hurting them, but it's hurting other people.

[1:21:22]

I want to find a way of changing that. I want to be able to have better justice, you know? I feel like it's too easy to say, "I'm going to discriminate against this person, because I know that all they're going to do is send me to jail one or two nights and then I'll get out." That's too easy. Anybody can do it, and anybody is doing it. And I feel like it's not right, you know? If we had a better legal way of handling that, maybe people would think twice before they do something like that.

ROSDAIL: Thank you for the clarification.

ORTEGA: These are pictures from when we used to live in Yuma, Colorado... [flipping of photos] Since we couldn't travel anywhere because there were Immigration Checkups everywhere, rather than going to New York to the Statue of Liberty, we went to Sterling, Colorado

[1:29:19]

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