

Southwest Detroit Oral History Project

Detroit, MI

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas

Interviewed by

Edras Rodriguez-Torres

12/9/2014

Detroit, Michigan

As part of the Oral History Class in the School of Library and Information Science

Kim Schroeder, Instructor

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Brief Biography

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas is Program Manager and Site director of the Living Arts out of School programming located in Southwest Detroit. She is also a long-time resident of the community. She is a graduate of Wayne State University and an advocate for improved community relations and activism.

Interviewee

Edras Rodriguez-Torres is a Student of Wayne State University's School of Library and Information Science. He is also a Graduate Student Assistant in the program in charge of Diversity and Outreach.

Abstract

This a transcript of an oral history interview of Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas, Program Manager and Site director of the Living Arts out of School programming.at the Ford Resource Center located in Southwest Detroit. Casillas recounts her life experiences in the community and shares some her thoughts on the current state of the community as well as what the future might hold.

Restrictions

None

Original Format

wav audio file

Transcription

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

My name is Edras Rodriguez-Torres and I and I will be doing the interviewing today and you are?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

And your work here at the Resource Center is?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

I am the Program Manager and Site director of the Living Arts out of School programming. That means we offer arts and dance classes for youth really anyone who's over 3 to adult we can facilitate classes to them.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Start off by talking a little bit about your growing up and your life experiences early on. Can you talk about where you were born and where you grew up and give us some background?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Well, I was born in Ciudad Guzman Jalisco in Mexico and I was there until I was six. Then my father came first to Chicago, then moved here for work. I guess he was still in that youth because my parents are on the younger side. He finish school and he decided to try something else. He is an adventure I guess. So he decided to come here and he was.... I can't remember how old he was but he came here and during a summer break because my mom is a teacher. We decided to come and see if we liked it and she liked it I guess enough for us to stay longer than she had hoped for maybe because she really enjoyed being a teacher and she had to leave her career behind. So, with the whole language barriers and even though my parents are professional people they weren't allowed to continue that lifestyle. They had to go into different career paths. My father went into construction work and my mom pretty much stayed on as a housewife.

I started 4th grade...3rd or 4th grade. So, I started the immersion of the language and I pretty quickly began to speak it and the whole public school was to place all these kids in bilingual school or bilingual classes. I was in the class for maybe 3 months at that point my parents decided to switch me to the full English classes. I saw that a lot of the kids that were already in the bilingual class had been in that class for a long time. It was pretty much like a recess or like a detention really. You weren't really covering any of the subjects you needed to cover. It was just babysitting time I guess. So, I definitely appreciate that my parents made the effort to switch me to the regular class, if you will. From then on it was a struggle to adjust for my mom because I guess she really enjoyed her career. So we did a lot of going back and forth. So, I went back to school. I was here until I was in 6th grade. Then we moved back to Mexico and I was there for a summer in school. So it was like summer school because I needed to make up for the fact that I did not graduate with my 6th grade cohort. They don't allow you to just move up because of age or whatever. You need to graduate with a group. So I had to go back and repeat that. At that point my mom decided to come back so I didn't really get to finish that. Then I went to Saint Vincent because there is a bad reputation with Earhart which is a middle school and my parents didn't want me to go there. So I tried that but in being in the classes in St. Vincent it was pretty clear that the kids thought they could do whatever they wanted because it was a private school and eventually I found out that one of the teachers was being poisoned with chalk and she eventually died. So, that was pretty tragic (laughter).

So after that, I believe when back to Mexico and I was there for...I can't remember if I actually...because I know I stopped going to St Vincent. So I guess we went back to

Mexico and I was there for maybe a summer and then we came back and I started at Earhart. So eventually I had to go there anyway. Which my experience was fine. I didn't go with the bad crowd. I pretty much do my own thing. So, I really liked to...I really went for extra homework and I wasn't just sitting around and looking for trouble I guess. So after I finish with Earhart, I that must have been 8th grade...7th, and then I went back to Mexico and I finished what was middle school there. That's a lot of running around as you can see. It's hard to keep up.

After there we came back another time and I went to Western and then I was there for 9th grade. We went back to Mexico and I started high school officially I guess in Mexico. So I did my full two years there. I went to college was a technical college so they focus a lot of technical career. So I went into Industrial Engineering and in high school I specialized in Computer Technology. So, after that my mom decided to come back again. I didn't want to because I didn't think I was at the age where I could say "you know what I'm going to stay here" but I guess something pulled at me and I came back with her again. I started at or I waited because I couldn't just enrolled at Wayne State. I talked to some counselors when I went to Western and they advised me to go to Wayne State which I did. I went to the CBS program

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

CBS?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

It the Chicano Boricua studies which now is something different

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Yes, it's CLLAS (Center for Latino/a and Latin American Studies).

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Which must have been 6 months in and my mom said I'm going back and I said can go back with you anymore. I'm staying here so this is the one time that we stayed on for more than what is it now...14 years.

So I finished my career. The CBS program wasn't for me. It was too...I don't know what the focus really was, what the goal was for students who acquired the CBS scholarship to that was a requirement. So if you got the scholarship you had to take I believe it was three courses with them. But I didn't see the goal of that. Like why do I need to take these classes? What's a going to teach me? Is it going to help me with my current career path? It wasn't really clear. Which in a way it sort of help me because it was sort of an easy A being that I had just come back from Mexico and I needed help with my writing skills because I hadn't had any college writing at that point. So that so that sort of helped I guess. But in a sense you could do more with that money as opposed to having it be kind of like an extra class. Maybe it could be geared towards you need to take this math class or this science class. So I went for Business Administration, which was one of the interest I had in Mexico but I decided to pursue the Engineering instead of the Administration there. So I just change that here. I focused in marketing which was interesting because...the whole experience was interesting because I was pretty much the only Mexican woman, the only Hispanic person in class. So it's kind of hard to assimilate to that experience being the only person. Am I really supposed to be here? Why are not more people here? Because just in every...as in every other race you see people that are

this-and-that. Why are not more people interested in educating themselves? So that was...it was sad I guess.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Can you talk about some of those experiences on campus at Wayne State? First as a student, did you engage with the student body? And then talk a little bit about the work you did with the Office of Government and Community Affairs?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

I did not engage. Solely on the CBS group. They have the sororities which I had some friends but I never really. I went to some meetings but I never really considered that a path for me because the way they came off as “this is your family now, this is what's important” and I thought well I have a family, and it just didn't work for me. So what I did was I spent lot of time in the library. I worked as a tutor. Then I worked as an Assistant at the Labor Studies Center. That was the majority of my on-campus participation. I didn't really...I mean I used the fitness center or and I went to some games but I never really participated with a group. So with the sense that I really enjoyed what it was to be at Wayne State, I always wanted to go back and get a job there but I've applied many times and it's never really worked out. I don't know what it takes to get a phone call. So I decided to...well let me see if...I had a lot of patches of no employment because I never really had the time to say well I'm just going to go and intern. I don't think that...There's a big need for counselors look at your grades and say “well you know I see that your grades aren't that great here. Why do you think you should continue? Or maybe you should reevaluate?” or maybe offer some sort of “you need to go to tutoring.” And then make it really clear on how important it is to get an internship, even if it's just

one. Make it a requirement because in my case I didn't really see how my career was gonna...like my studies were going to help as a career. Even though I knew I really liked to write and event planning. But how where? Then I really became involved with volunteering. So that helped. And then I thought; well maybe I can go back an intern this time since I don't have a job anyway. So I contacted WDET first and I was there for three months. I was working with their contest page and updating information and that's sort of thing. Then I decided to contact the Community Affairs and I was very lucky to get accepted into their apartment. That was an experience I really enjoyed because it opened my eyes to what I could possibly do. I would love to go back unfortunately budget...their budget is very tight and that it can't be helped. So for now it's he continues to be a dream. Then I found this opportunity which is a lot of community engagement. so I really enjoy that part of creating the relationships with being a liaison between what we do here and trying to reach other students, other schools, creating events, assisting with the events, updating forms and updating processes, meeting the parents and their needs. A lot of times it's not really job related but I get to help them with their personal problems. So I get to do a lot of resource...what's the word I want to use? Like a resource kit because I have a lot of ways. Oh well "you contact this person". What's the word I'm looking for?

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

So you're a link basically between those that need resources and the resources themselves

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Um huh. So that's what I really like about this job.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Talking about the people in South West as a community. Can you talk about how Southwest has changed throughout your lifetime? From your periods here and moving back to Mexico. How do you see it over all that Southwest has changed both the physical space and the buildings of Southwest and also the people?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Well my life here started on 23rd Street and the bridge decided back in what it was '91 maybe. They already had the vision of what they wanted to do with this area and it took 10-15 years for it to start happening. Then they have their continuous plans that we know now what they want to continue doing and we're not seeing exactly what it is but apparently it takes a long time. We started there. My dad sold. Then we move to 24th. He sold the house because they also want to that land but not everyone on that street sold. So 24th is still occupied. I don't think that they actually need it because they already used that area on 23rd. then now I'm on the Wing Place which is sort of like a closed dead end street and that that's on the side. So I've been living on that side of the bridge and now I'm on this side.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

By bridge you mean?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

The freeway

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

The pedestrian bridge?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Yes.

Well there's a lot more Mexican presence now. I remember on one of our trips to Mexico we went to this resort and one of the persons there was Canadian and said "there are no Mexican people in Detroit" and I guess that's to believe. But at that point there weren't a lot of people. But now you see a lot more Mexican presence and there a lot more market. Now you started seeing those pollo asado things. Well before you didn't say any of that is very present especially in Jalisco. And I don't know these people maybe from Jalisco. Apparently there are a lot of people from San Ignacio which is Jalisco but that's in the northern area of Jalisco and I'm from the south. So a lot of San Ignacio people are here from there. I guess maybe a lot of family's friends. Definitely a lot of even this building, it is completely I don't even remember it when I was a kid. So I don't know if it was already here and I was just it's been renovated over the years. I know that in the 2000 I guess, they had the idea of becoming an actual market so commerce related not really services like it is now. But that's what it's become. It's a lot more vibrant and you see a lot more foot traffic. Yeah it's just vibrant.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Why do you think those changes have happened? The people coming in and some of the buildings both the decay and the gentrification. We talked a little bit about what factors are playing into those social changes.

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Well I guess money is the main thing. I don't know how much does Southwest Solution presence has changed. I mean they've taken over a lot of buildings and made them apartments. They their purpose is to house people. So they've used to build things that have just been boarded up and use them that way. I don't know exactly how they get there

rent from people from people who don't have money. but there is two sides of that a lot of people are happy that the buildings are being used and then a lot of people are angry or upset that Southwest Solutions has taken up so many of the buildings and what they're doing with the buildings. So I don't know...that's one aspect but a lot of it is also like you said the gentrification factors. So houses that I've been sitting there are now in foreclosure or some people can afford to buy them at a thousand to five thousand which is the cheap side I guess. And for them it's cheap for some people who live here that's still expensive. So in some ways the residents aren't really benefitted by that because they still can't afford it. so why not have some home for them to purchase these properties as opposed to some people who aren't really familiar with the area and I just coming because it's hip again or because they can't afford or what is the real intent? Are they actually going to incorporate into the community? or are I don't know?

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

So, with the current state of Yorktown which is right nearby. Do you think that there is any sort of spell over about the gentrification and the influx of people that are coming in the non-Hispanics and the non-Detroiters that are coming in to neighborhood so close. Do you do you think of the possible that I could happen here in Southwest?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Oh it's already happening. Actually this area that we sit in a now it's considered Corktown. So I had a real problem with that because I've tried to find a place and the rent is just its eight hundred plus or they talk to me over the email. So if everything's fine in print but then when they actually meet me oh "I guess I didn't realize you were Hispanic" or they don't know but. I had someone actually, not in the area but it applies to this

because it was Woodbridge. I went over there and she questioned “well why would you want to move here when you people like to stay in Mexicantown” so that was pretty shocking and it was pretty offensive as well. She was like well I didn't mean to offend you I just didn't know how to fix my comment. Why can't I live here in that area? Why do I have to live in this area? And even now that this area is concentrated with people purchasing things on Hubbard and Vinewood and even the nice mansions on the boulevard; Grand Boulevard. So yeah it's definitely making things very competitive and I don't know that there's a solution to that. They're not doing anything wrong, I guess. So just I guess so it's a way to pluck people out.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

You mean current residence?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Yes.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

What do you think...how do you think that can impact the sense of community and the culture here in Southwest? do you think that that change can be positive or negative?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

It can be both. We can start seeing the changes with the...the garbage situation first it was the city of Detroit managing. Now it's Rizzo (?) and apparently they can provide the recycling option the curbside. I don't know if that's because of the new people moving in the area. That are you asking for the services. Where before maybe I could have asked for that and it wasn't possible. So what I'm doing is I collect my recycling and I drive it out to the recycle center on Holden. Now that they have more of a voice that well “we need

the services and we can actually pay for it” it’s a possibility. You know structures are improving and you can start seeing more of these farms and gardens. So that’s positive. I actually went to my local library at Bowman and I see that Kresge brought one of these posters putting out applications for people to apply for grants. Whereas five years ago I never saw Kresge even coming to Bowen. Why now? Now you have qualified people that can apply? Well you think the people that were here before weren’t qualified? In southwest a lot of people think that it’s Mexicantown but it’s pretty diverse. It’s not just brown. It’s black, white. It’s hard to answer that question because in my perspective, I could give you the Hispanic response. But really so there’s a lot of tension I think because people this group wants to say “that’s my area” and the other one wants to say “that’s my area”. Why can’t it just be “the” area? When you see people trying to push you out that’s not good. But when your existing-coexisting helping each other. I think that’s what maybe the local wants to see as opposed to something that says territorial well “now I’m here and I’m going to make things better” and you have to go.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

What do you think are some of the biggest challenges facing southwest currently? so what are the biggest challenges for people and organizations as well?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Trying to get people engaged and educated. I have a big problem with educating my parents and having them see that it’s best for their children to come to an activity as opposed to just being at home or being punished not to come here because they’re behaving badly. That’s not really a punishment. Money people can’t afford extra activities. It’s just their sense of their stress their depression. They don’t feel heard. That

could be a reason why they try to stay away. They may not feel included. Maybe the selection of activities aren't as broad as we think them maybe. Even though now there is this here (Inaudible) Renew the World is in front and then the Roberto Clemente. So there's stuff for everyone it's just a matter of getting up and doing it. Which is that's the where the X of equation lies. How do you solve that and how do you engage these people? How do you make them see that you going to be better after this or do they not or do they not see that they have a problem and are they do know they have a problem but they really don't know what to know about it or resolve it?

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

You started to talk about some of the attitudes that persist in the community and how that relates to community resources centers and people from outside the neighborhood coming and helping. Can you expand a little bit on what you were talking about as far as people's attitude towards resources?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Well as a volunteer, I volunteered with the cleanup at Midtown for several years and every time I go back I think well do people actually want outsiders to be here and clean the area or is it just they can't they have no interest they can't help? And it and once it's been cleaned why not keep up the work? Again does that go back to the depression people and they're still in the same building that they can't help and improve so why clean the house side? I mean these are all questions that are maybe unanswerable right now because we don't know what the cases is. I feel like there needs to be more education in terms of "this is your area you need to keep up with it". I don't know if they make that connection I guess because I'm not in their shoes so I can't really answer that. but in my

case I would think...well I've seen how, like I said right now especially with the whole people losing their homes and other people taking them and apparently there a lot of homes in foreclosure but now the problem is you know kicking people out of their home. So...or the water rights. What can you really do it that? You're supposed to pay your bills if you don't pay your bills you don't have that service? But can you really just...I mean people need water so they die if they don't have it. So you have that responsibility in your mind well I'm going to shut off your water, knowing that then they may die. So you know it's very complicated and well I don't really see those cases in immediately here in my surrounding life, it's happening out there. I don't know how in my interests in volunteering I can really help with that. I think things are going to get worse before they get better unfortunately. Now that we saw those cases...well the case we seen recently on TV with all these case race related issues. How is that really going to help our current situation of gentrification and identity issues and "I belong here and you don't"? instead of collaborating is that going to create more tension.?

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Do you think that it is possible that something like that could happen here in Detroit and Southwest as far as the breakdown of relationship between police and you know the residence? Or perhaps has it already happened?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

You know I'm not aware of that but even if the police isn't involved I could see if they continue to be so tense. I hope that the riots don't repeat that's all I hope.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

So, I'm getting the sense that you think that it's a possibility that the tension is there?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

It's a possibility.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

How do you see southwest changing? I know you talk about you feeling like it's going to get worse before it gets better. but can you talk specifically about how do you see a change in both for me a community sense so the people, and also what sort of changes to you see in the neighborhood itself like in the buildings or anything like that?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Well I guess people still need housing. So well that's something that needs to be tackled. I've seen more buildings being built. I don't think its quick enough or the quantity is not enough I don't know about the quality. Is it just well we need more jobs better preparation kids need to be in school than being challenged? I don't know that that's actually happening like. I said in my time going to Earhart which was a middle school and going to Western which was a High School is a big taboo and that continues to be that way. Now with Southwest closed and a lot of those students come in the Western, is there enough attention for the students? Schools closing all the time. Teachers not being able to handle the load. Teachers not having the support of administrators. So really where the key is, getting the kids educated and prepared so that they feel qualified, ready, valued.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

do you think there's enough here in southwest to make that happen both in terms of people and resources and a desire to make a change do you think that that's here?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

I think it is because people are still trying to fight for their for their rights for the spaces for their lives. So it's possible. But I think it's they need more nourishing. They need more positive reinforcement, more training, just more time. So value both employees, so that in turn they can bring that to the students and the students can feel satisfied in their lives. Where maybe they don't have that at home but maybe if they start evolving their parent's see that may be the parents themselves can start changing the attitudes and I'll create a better outcome better lives. Maybe create more entrepreneurs if we don't have the office jobs that are necessary for everyone or create more relationships with colleges and universities mentoring.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Can you talk a little bit about your organization and the work they do here in the community?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

living art started as a dance organization in back in 1999 and it was dance solely until 2013 at which point we moved to this building here and we open the are component of the art services. So for dance and always had a you dance ensemble and what they do is they perform in the community. They just performed at Noel night at the library. So they do these kinds of...you need you need to audition and be accepted into the group and this is more and intensive group. They take a lot more they take a lot more classes then recreational student would. For the art we don't have that different track of intensive and recreation. But a lot of our classes in the arts media are very intense in the sense that they don't about video animation, video production, and photography. We used to have a multimedia class. So they did a lot of different things with that class. We have drawing

art and the family art workshop. That class that's a very unique because they can bring in the community, parents participate in the class so it creates a bond between the child and the parent. It also allows the parents to have that time to be creative. Like I said, we also we are we offer classes for children three to adults. In the summer we offer a family music class for toddlers zero to three. Which the parent also gets to participate. So we have some classes and where we include the parents so they can create deeper bonds with the family. We also have in school programming which art is infused. Primarily DPS schools. I hope that answers your question

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

What sort of Reese's resources do you help the community with?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Primarily my duty is to get students enroll in a class so that way having them be productive in their own lives. But as I said, on the side of all that stuff that's also I support the families a lot with other things they may need. Just creating a presence and allowing the students to be creative and innovative in that class and hopefully not only be in the class but carry it out in their lives.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

What sort of response do you get from the community and parents?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

They really like the program. They always say "it's a shame I didn't know about it before". What we do primarily is bring flyers to school and that way they get distributed in classes and the students get to take them home not all of them. As you know as a child you don't always understand the responsibilities of things and or the gravity or the

importance. So they don't all take them home but most children that do come and register and the parents are really happy. I have students that take one class after that so take ten classes, and they as many classes that they can attend. In the sense that they can make it here and are going to be responsible and understand their commitment. They are there free to do that. We do charge for classes but if they can't afford it we can assist them with a scholarship. But yes they're very happy that the kids have something to do that they're learning and at the end of the year for dance classes we have a showcase so they get to present whatever they learned in class at the showcase in June. We also have now that we have the art component, we also have an exhibit for the Arts the art pieces to be exhibited.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Where is that exhibit at?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

well it's been in Allen Park but the auditorium that has been chosen many times I don't know if that's going to be there this year or not we have an established that. But it's in the same building with actual dance performance is we have a side where we display the art.

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

I just have one final question. Is there any other story, life event or topic that you would like to cover? That of importance to you that you that you would like to get on the record?

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Again community plays a big role. Ever since I was a child I had a lot of help of my life so that's why I see myself as a volunteer and trying to get involved in different things. I

have money interest. so I understand the need for some people to be helped when they need to be helped and then that way and helping them raise themselves up again and become self-sufficient and at some point realize someone help me get here, so it's my turn to get back. so if more people get back I think would be in a better place

Edras Rodriguez-Torres:

Very good thank you for your time.

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas:

Thank you for including me.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

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Walter P. Reuther Library

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Detroit, MI

Transcript of interview conducted (12/9/2014) with:

Cynthia Elizabeth Casillas

Detroit, Michigan

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