



Oral History Interview with Liliana Morenilla, 01-22-2024

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Liliana Morenilla conducted on January 22, 2024. The interview took place at the Princeton Public Library in Princeton, NJ as part of the Voices of Princeton Project.



Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

TRANSCRIPT

Kim Dorman: [00:00:01] Good afternoon. We are in the Princeton Public Library on the 22nd of January 2024 as part of the Voices of Princeton Project. My name is Kim Dorman. I am here as the interviewer and I'm here with-

Liliana Morenilla: [00:00:13] Liliana Morenilla.

Kim Dorman: [00:00:16]

The interviewee. Liliana, thank you so much for coming today. I'm really grateful that we can include your voice and part of the Voices of Princeton Project. Can we start with you telling us how you came to Princeton?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:00:29] Yes. Um, I came to Princeton in 2007. Um, my husband was, had a job in BMS. And that's how we started, you know, the relationship with the Princeton community.

Kim Dorman: [00:00:44] Okay, wonderful. So you've been in Princeton since 2007. Do you feel like it's changed?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:00:51] Oo, a lot. A lot. Yeah. So when we came here, I think they only had five restaurants, and like two stores [*laughs*]. And now I think we're up to thirty something

and lots of stores, we're going to have a Hermès [*laughter*]. Um, so yes, definitely has changed a lot. It has developed. Yeah.

Kim Dorman: [00:01:12] Okay.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:01:12] In a way. In other ways, it's still the same way. So, you know, it's for the families that I take care of. So they, they in the Witherspoon Jackson neighborhood, is the underserved community, is as it was.

Kim Dorman: [00:01:28] So can you, well, I say first, tell us a little bit more about you know, you said that you serve these families. I think that there's been an evolution in that. Can you tell maybe first, how you came to be involved with working with community members? And then how, what that commitment has looked like over time?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:01:47] Yes. So when um we came in 2007, my youngest Ines was a JP and she was in third grade. And the principal then asked me if I wouldn't mind translating for some of the families when they had a PTO. So they had like parent teacher conferences and so on, because they were very few. So I said yes. And that was the beginning of um, a very, very long relationship with Dr. Ginsberg. In fact, he asked me at the end of that year, if I would get more involved only with the Latino families. I said, Yes. And so I was at the library at then helping them with some ESL classes. Um, then I also with Arm in Arm, and then in 2010, the public schools offered me a position there part time the first year. And then the second year, I was just full time. And I was mostly in the uh, self-contained classes, what they call LLD for

the public schools, that they were mostly Latinos. And that's when I started realizing the need that Princeton had for someone to speak up for them.

Kim Dorman: [00:01:56] And so how did you start? Uh, you started doing that in a role as a school liaison to the Latino/Latina communities. But then you also took on some roles in addition to that?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:03:18] Yes. So in 2017, we created the Princeton Children's Fund, and at the same time, we, we had what we call "pantry," it was something that started from my pocket in 2010. It was at my area Wednesday, because that was the day that the families wanted to be, to be helped. Um, we, it was like a little relationship that I had with Mercer friends. And every Wednesday, I had little things that I had in my car, apples, bread, stuff like that. And little by little it became bigger, bigger and bigger. So we started with I think it was 20 families right now. I think we serve 310. We became a 501c3 pantry, became a 501c3 after, during pandemic. So yes, my relationship has been the public schools, the Princeton Children's Fund that now is done. The principal of food pantry, and I was a co-founder for share my meals.

Kim Dorman: [00:04:17] And so a lot of that has been around food.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:04:22] Yes. Yeah. So the need of food for the underserved community. It's, it's amazing because our families like fresh produce, they're not used to using any cans, and they don't know how to cook, the children don't eat when it's like that. So it's not a matter of, you know, we can give you peanut butter and jelly and we can give you a mac and cheese

because the kids don't eat mac and cheese and they don't eat peanut butter. So you have to approach with the you have to give them what they can use. For them to be fed. So um, it's been, it's been a process. It's been a long process. Yeah. And also, you know, it's, they don't have, they don't live in one family per home. It's we have different families in a home. So they have different schedules, they don't have an entire fridge from themselves. They have different shelves. So you have to know what can go there or not.

Kim Dorman: [00:05:23] And so you've been um, working with families, through your position at the school and also on these non-profit things. What have you learned about yourself in the process of helping in these two avenues?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:05:40] Patience, I think I have a lot of patience. Um, I think also that you can always do, you, there's, you know, you can always go, you can always ask for more. I don't have any shame. I asked everybody, I asked to whom I can. So I have lost my shame. I think it's uh, it's uh, I feel very strongly that this is something that, it needs help and to have a face that someone, to have the trust at the end of the day, it's uh, it's one word and it's, it's trust. These families trust me, so I do, um, how do you say it in English above and beyond? Of what if I can do it? I will, I will definitely do it. Yeah.

Kim Dorman: [00:06:24] I mean, your background, your background, as I understand it was not—

Liliana Morenilla: [00:06:28] I'm an attorney.

Kim Dorman: [00:06:29] You're an attorney! [*laughs*] So how do you—

Liliana Morenilla: [00:06:33] My father was a Supreme Court judge. So I think I'm very—

Kim Dorman: [00:06:38] She's, she's put her hand up and down to indicate possibly—

Liliana Morenilla: [00:06:41] Exactly.

Kim Dorman: [00:06:41] Legally minded. Yeah. [*laughs*]

Liliana Morenilla: [00:06:42] Yes yes yes. Yes, so.

Kim Dorman: [00:06:45] Do you think that you've brought in your legal background in any way to this work?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:06:49] I think I have brought in perspective. And that is that, you know, everybody talks about equity that still people don't understand. But I think it's, it's been a movement that you have to give each one what they need. Not everybody needs the same. And I, and you know, Princeton is a super generous community. And it's very liberal. And it's, it's, it is, it is um, it is wonderful to work with Princetonians. But at the same time, you know, when we ask for you to, to donate, we're not asking you to enter your pantry and give us Thai food

that, no, it's, we, it's very specific what we need. So please, yes. And I don't pretend to be rude, but it's like, you know, it's if you get them curry, well, they're not going to use it. So um. Hm.

Kim Dorman: [00:07:42] Um.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:07:47] Kim is speechless. [*laughs*]

Kim Dorman: [00:07:48] [*laughs*] No, not at all. Do you have um, visions? You know, do you feel like the challenges that are facing the communities that you're working with have been the same? Have changed over time?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:08:01] Well, I have to say, I mean, I'm super proud is like when I started in 2007, they, no one, I mean, not no one, but very few had access to affordable housing. Now more and more, even though you don't have a social, if you have a TIN number, if your children have a social there, that has been an amazing improvement for this, this community to have access to affordable housing. That has been I would say, and then also, the registrations for the public schools. It's much I mean, you have to of course, the requirements are the requirements. But it's, I think the public schools have done a good job, I want to say. Um, I think people they call me from the deportation centers in Texas, or they want to come to Princeton, because they know that they will be taken care of, and that makes me proud.

Kim Dorman: [00:08:54] Mm. Um, we've talked a lot about kind of the work that you're doing and how that's changed over time. Um, but personally, I wonder like, you know, I think this sort

of feeds into it, what have been your you know you've, you've raised a family here, what have been your formative experiences?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:09:14] And I think that's, I think that has been part of um, to do what I do is uh, you know, I have three children. Um, my kids, as I said, my youngest was in third grade. The others were in middle school, in they they went through the public schools, I had wonderful students, wonderful athletes, uh, not so wonderful students not so wonderful athletes [laughs], so I think it's uh, you know, I think it's I have experimented as in I was almost a single mom. So I have experimented the how hard it is for a kid that you have a different last name. Um, and you don't look the same and it's so, I think it's been, it's been hard but at the same time, my kids have done very well they went to amazing uh, colleges, they did well or in school, they. So I mean, for my own family, this has been this, this has been a great town. This, this town is, I think is very familiar focus. There are tons of things that you can do, you can go, you can, you know, take them on walks, you can go to, through the path in the canal, you can go to Princeton University games. I mean, there's, there's a lot to do here. And I took advantage of that.

Kim Dorman: [00:10:31] How would you describe Princeton to someone who hasn't been here?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:10:35] I always say the same thing. I think this is a very uh, familiar town is very liberal and is very generous.

Kim Dorman: [00:10:45] What are your best memories of Princeton?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:10:47] Well, I think it is the three nonprofits that we I have been part of it. And right now my, my baby that is Pantry. That is, I mean, that is an honor to be still part of it.

Kim Dorman: [00:11:01] I mean, the Mobile Food Pantry has done does more than food.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:11:04] Yes. So we, you know, we deliver family, we deliver groceries, fresh groceries is protein, there's a bag of protein, and there's a bag of produce, and then what we call a goodie bag that can have hygiene products, there's um, I don't know, whatever. It's been donated. Uh, we have different donors that really help us. So that is, you know, that is, that is one of the things that we do every other Wednesday. And then we have what we call pop up clinics, every third Saturday of the month. So we help families, there's a store that everything is free that you can purchase at zero cost seasonal clothes, then we have pop up clinics, so they help you with New Year's Eve Family Care application. So with the free videos application, so they teach you we have different pediatricians from Rutgers that they have like little seminars like how to read temperature. What is temperature? With COVID we did tons of clinics about COVID. We have the health department coming in, do flu shots, we had COVID shots, I think it's, we are, my goal is to create a sense of community for everybody. And I think that Pantry does a good job in that

Kim Dorman: [00:12:17] I was going to talk about community because really, with all the different communities that you're connected with, you're building different networks, it seems.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:12:29] Yeah.

Kim Dorman: [00:12:29] You know, people who are making sure that everyone feels comfortable and can help you and Mobile Food Pantry or the different organizations and the work that you do. But also making sure that all the people who live here are connected with one another.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:12:43] Exactly. I think it's part of the success of Pantry is the volunteers. We, I mean, we have 57 volunteers every other Wednesday. It's a lot. We have 20 drivers, we have packers, we have, you know, seniors who come and do get the bagels, that leftovers at the bagel, look, we have different, people that donate different things that are huge. I mean, and I don't want to leave anyone out. But I think it's volunteers are, uh, uh, this is amazing. I come from Spain, and they don't do that.

Kim Dorman: [00:12:49] *[laughs]* And you also have a sort of notification list—on WhatsApp.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:13:23] Yeah. I have different chats. One of them—Kim is part.

Kim Dorman: [00:13:28] *[laughs]*

Liliana Morenilla: [00:13:28] But it's called “Amigos.” And it's uh, it's everything that goes on in town kind of, it's um, so if the library has an event is posted there if Human Services has an

event it's posted there. Um, if there's snow if there's a heat wave, I mean, it's different things, if they're school, no school, and all that is, and we are like, I think they're like 700 people there.

Kim Dorman: [00:13:50] There's something like that. But I also was gonna say in terms of community, it's another space that you're building community because you put these notices up in that group, but also other people contribute. Oh, yeah. within the group. And—

Liliana Morenilla: [00:14:03] I mean, they, when they ask me, I said, this is your chat too so you see, sometimes they fight but—

Kim Dorman: [00:14:09] [*laughs*] So real community?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:14:11] Yeah. There you go. [*laughs*]

Kim Dorman: [00:14:15] What has been a difficult time for you in Princeton? Or has there been a difficult time or a time that Princeton has disappointed or frustrated you?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:14:24] I mean, I think it's I only have good things to say about Princeton. The only thing is Princeton has lots of pockets, and lots of pockets of people doing the same thing you do. That is kind of, I don't know, I don't want to say the word ridiculous but it's a, I just don't get it. So I don't know why we you know, I don't know why we all don't sit down at the same table and we talk about the same thing. And on the Wednesdays, if you see on the Wednesdays, I'm talking about food. All the people who deliver on Wednesdays, like this is

why is like you know, that is frustrating and it's, it's kind of silly in a way. And again, let's create community. It's uh, I think it's um, we, there's some egos there that I just don't get and I am not, I'm not like that. So I, I don't like to talk in public. I don't like I mean, no.

Kim Dorman: [00:15:18] That's true. I was pretty surprised that you said yes and grateful to this interview—

Liliana Morenilla: [00:15:24] [*laughs*] Because it's Kim!

Kim Dorman: [00:15:29] [*laughs*] Um, is there a big event that sort of sticks in your memory? Being in Princeton?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:15:33] It's funny when I read the questions is, I think something that really, I also did is I went with my own family, and I made sure that other members of the community is when, when we had the Black Lives Matter event for George Floyd. That was, it was almost during pandemic, and we're all out there, kneeling down. That for me was, was incredible.

Kim Dorman: [00:15:56] Yeah, can you talk a little bit about that?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:15:58] Yeah. So uh, you know, it's, well, everybody knows who George Floyd is and what happened there. But I think it's in Princeton and um, having three young kids who were very active and very motivated and very against um, I think it's, it was very important

for, to also tell the families it is okay for you to go, you will be safe, nothing is going to happen to you. If you express that you're, you know, that you are against any sort of brutality. And this is not fair. And everybody should be safe, that you have your rights. I think it's like the motivation. And uh, I was very proud of uh, the different families that, and many of them were there, many of them were there.

Kim Dorman: [00:16:45] It was a big, big gathering that day.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:16:47] Yeah. Was all Witherspoon. I mean, it was amazing.

Kim Dorman: [00:16:51] Yeah.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:16:51] Was like a cross from kind of was the—

Kim Dorman: [00:16:55] The students were university students who, but a lot of them, connection to the town as well. That organized uh, I don't know a protest. Sit in.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:17:07] Yes, it's I don't know in Spanish, you call it manifestation.

Kim Dorman: [00:17:10] Okay. Um, but a lot of people came all along as Liliana was saying Nassau Street, and Witherspoon right outside the university too.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:17:21] So that for me was it was, I mean, as sad as it was it was beautiful. And then also the way Princeton pulled up in through pandemic. I mean, the meeting house was, had cooks there cooking for the families. Mezzaluna, I mean, the halls from the, the university is, everybody trying, like, we can do this, we can do it. So it's like it was, it was really, really impressive. I would say. It's something that sticks with you.

Kim Dorman: [00:17:53] Um, could you have imagined when you came to Princeton?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:17:57] Never. Never. I thought I was going to end up, I don't know. I well, I started working in InLingua and said, "Okay, well, I'll do my legal translations," you know "I'll be—" and so many things have happened.

Kim Dorman: [00:18:15] Do you, you've had children there. Are they carrying on this thing? Or do you feel like, like either your legal?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:18:23] No, I think my kids um, we were, we were just in Colombia. And uh, my kids were impressed that Mike and you really showed up here? And I'm like, no. There were a couple of things that happened there. I'm like, no. So I think my kids have had enough, you know. I'll to take this to my grave.

Kim Dorman: [00:18:47] And um—

Liliana Morenilla: [00:18:48] But that we need new generations and you know, that this has to, this is a, this is a small movement that I think it's the new generations need to take care of it. And we have many kids volunteering for Pantry that help us not when we deliver because I don't like that, but it's before and after. I think it's very good for the, yeah, for the future generations to understand that not everybody is as lucky as you have that you are not everybody, you know, they, we do not have the same. And even if we started again, we wouldn't, you know, there's always one who's smaller, or smarter, or people are different. So I think that you need to be kind and, um, I just had an issue with a third grader that they were, someone was, I won't say her name, but they were calling her "tamales." I'm like really, really? In third grade. You don't do that. So I think it's, it's I think it's, if I, you know, it's, if this can keep going with uh—future generations in the—that this can, you can do this, you can do this, but it's, you need to push and it's, you have to work very hard it's a 24/7 thing you cannot say, over the weekend, oh, I cannot help you because I'm at the beach. No! You have to keep doing what you're doing.

Kim Dorman: [00:20:09] I mean, I was we've talked a little bit about, you know, the various, you know, communities and the way that you bring numbers of communities together. Um, but you just touched on something, you know, this—a lot of what you've talked about is the families that you work with. But also there are all kinds of other students. So you're sort of trying to imbue this, this work that you're doing, but also teach other people kind of the ways to be in community or demonstrate ways to be in community kind of like, you were talking about with the children. And way, ways to be like a good community member. Are there things that you feel—have helped you contribute, like, from, you know, your, you said, the perspective and

your legal background and kindness, but what are the other things that have made it like that are within Liliana that have made it possible for you to do the things help the community in the way that you have helped?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:21:11] I think I'm very warm, I'm open. It's difficult to surprise me.
But—

Kim Dorman: [00:21:18] Has that always been the case?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:21:20] Yeah, I think I was, yes, you know, always like that. And also, it's, I speak other languages, which is also, you know, it gives you more flexibility to, to understand and I, through...I coming from another country you have, from another continent, from another galaxy. I think it's, it gives you, as I say, the worst perspective and um that, you know, we're not all the same and, unfortunately, not everybody's as lucky as you are. And any of you can share your luckiness or whatever you say that. I think it's, it's, it's, it is, like something that should come from you is like to help not put, not put people down, you put them up.

Kim Dorman: [00:22:11] So you're looking for, you're hoping to kind of develop people to pick up the mantle in their own way.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:22:19] I hope. I really hope. Yeah. Because I'm getting old. So it's uh—

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Kim Dorman: [00:22:24] For the record, she doesn't look like she's getting old.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:22:24] I'm almost 60. But I think it's, it is a fact of life. And I think, I don't think people should stay in the same role forever. I think this has to change and it's okay.

Kim Dorman: [00:22:40] Okay, is there anything else that you'd like to share with us?

Liliana Morenilla: [00:22:43] No, thank you so much Kim, it's been a pleasure.

Kim Dorman: [00:22:45] Thanks so much, Liliana.

Liliana Morenilla: [00:22:47] Thank you.

Kim Dorman: [00:22:47] Bye.

[END OF INTERVIEW]