

Lydia Villanueva
Narrator

Ron Kroese
Interviewer

August 8, 2017

Lydia Villanueva—LV
Ron Kroese—RK

RK: It's August 8th, and videographer Anna Aragon and I are at the Lowell Center on the University of Wisconsin campus, where today it is my privilege to interview sustainable food and farming organizer and leader Lydia Villanueva, who hails from Hereford, Texas. Correct?

LV: Yes.

RK: Lydia, I am eager for you to talk about your many years as a community organizer and the work you have done at the local, state, and federal levels, but I always like to start these interviews for the National Sustainable Agriculture Oral History Archive, as we call it, by learning about your personal and family life as much as you want to talk about it, especially how you got interested in and involved with this work on food and family farmers, and the Hispanic community in particular, going all the way back to your childhood.

LV: OK. Well, thank you again for the invitation. It's a lot of years to go back to. [Chuckles] But I think one of my favorite stories of how ... I get that question asked a lot about how did I get into all of this, because it's clearly that I'm not a farmer. But I do love to eat, and I like good quality, fresh, healthy food. But one of the ways that I remember telling this story, and I actually wrote an article about it, was my father, when we were younger, as young kids, we would sit around the table back in the day families did eat around the table when papa would come home, and my father, through those conversations would always tell us the story about the way his parents crossed over the Rio Grande. And both of my grandparents on my father's side come from up in San Luis Potosi. And so my father would relate to us that the only thing they came with when they crossed over from Mexico to the United States was that they brought two of his older siblings. My father was carrying one of them on his shoulders, and my grandmother was carrying a baby, his sister, in her arms, and they also were carrying a metate, which is basically a flat stone grinder. And that's all they had. They settled in Edinburg-McAllen, Texas, had eight children after that, so it was a total of ten. So I'm second generation Latina, and so that story just always intrigued me, because after my grandparents passed away, my father inherited—he said—I don't want anything, I just want that metate, that stone grinder. And he still has it—I actually have a picture of my father with that stone grinder. And his sister, one of his sisters. But that story in itself prompted me to always look at the similarities of someone coming from Mexico and someone being born here. It just always intrigued me. I happened to kind of ... about the only way, probably in small, rural towns, a lot of times there's not a whole lot to do as far as

activities and things of that nature. Hereford is population, perhaps, of like 18,000, so one way of getting involved was, for me ... let me back up a little bit. My mother was always involved in the church, so when she passed away, that is a legacy she left, her being involved in the church, so I, when she passed away, volunteered at a local church in Hereford. As I went there, I thought I was going to go in and help with the ladies that cook dinners for the bereaved families, whatever. There was a priest there, and his name is Darrell Burkenthal. Young, young priest, coming from a large farming community, the family located in Nazareth, Texas. He was very involved in the rural life ministry within the diocese of Amarillo, so he initiated an organization called The Promised Land Network. Through that, he asked me—and I related to him my story about my grandparents and my father's story about how food was such an essential part of our family. He said OK, he said at that point—this was back in the early, the late '80s, early '90s. At that point I was 34 years old—I have fast-forwarded—I'm a mother of two, two children, grandmother of five, and so he asked me, he says—I'd like for you to go and ask one of these families that's just immigrated from Mexico if there's a similarity of you, being second generation Latina, versus a person that has just newly migrated from Mexico, if there are similarities as far as the foods that you all eat. Is it the same? I said OK. Then he asked me to write a story about it, an article. We actually have those newsletters archived in Lubbock in one of the museums, so they are there for people to look at.

Anyway, I went and asked the family of eight—six children and then the father and the mother. You know, started asking questions—how is it for you here? How are things for you to adapt? And things like that. They lived off of five acres, and it was amazing to me, because they were recycling pallets for fences, an old abandoned bus for storage of feed, raising hogs and chickens. As you can see I'm not a farmer. So as I was talking to her and just hearing her story, she said to me, she said, you know—I'm having a problem. I said, oh? I said—what is your problem? And she says—well, I have six children, but three of my eldest are not legal, they don't have their paper. I don't know where to go to turn for that. They are about to step into high school, and I don't know what to do. She wanted them to pursue into their education. At that point my son was about to graduate, or was going to graduate. It was in the early '90s. And I thought, well, I can't believe you can't find anything here. Back then there was Texas Rural Legal Aid, there was a lot of stuff. I mean, we're talking about a lot of movement. I said—well, I'll see what I can do. I thought I was just going to take it back to the priest and say—hey, look, she presented me this problem. I don't have the answer, but it's on you. Here's that question, and you deal with it. He, in turn then said—OK, what do you plan on doing about it? That really threw me off. I said—what? He says—what are you plan on doing about this question, this request? I said—oh, wow, I don't know. She didn't know how to talk English. I know both languages, thankfully. And I said OK. So I started researching. Well, there wasn't anything, and then that really got to me, again, because my son was about to graduate, and I kept thinking—what am I going to do—what would I do in this place? So then we connected with a deacon, started offering people a path to citizenship. At that meeting there was over 100 people, and in that there was a deacon. He said—well, we can do this. It was back during the amnesty.

RK: Oh, yes.

LV: And so he said, you know, we can offer this, but, he says, somebody's got to be around to teach them citizenship classes, and everybody turned around and looked at me. So, long story

short, I was introduced to sustainable agriculture because this priest within that newsletter that he would have four times a year, we would also hold a conference. He still continues to have conferences. The Promised Land Network is no longer in existence, but the conferences still exist. In that he kind of introduced me to the Southern SAWG [Sustainable Agriculture Working Group] Conference, the very beginning of it. I learned a lot about the sustainable agricultural movement in itself. I began to know just tidbits, looking through the church, through the lens of the church, because that was the only place we knew to go volunteer. I discovered that the church in itself has one of their principles, seven guiding principles within the Catholic Church, one of them is being stewards of our land— you know, taking care of the hungry, the poor—you know, all those things. And so The Promised Land, I think, was trying to follow some of those guidelines, and that's where I was introduced to the Catholic Rural Life Conference, began attending their meetings, and some of their meetings were really interesting, because they were talking about being good stewards of our land, taking care of our environment. The social injustice issues that were, at that point, not as intense as we see today, but they were there. And I know I'm kind of going a long way around it, but that was one of my introductions.

RK: Good, good. I'm really glad you talked about the role of the church, because I, too, I got to serve on the National Catholic Rural Life Conference board when I was working with the Land Stewardship Project in Minnesota, and I think it's very important. It provided a real spiritual, Christian basis for the notion of stewardship, and that if you care for the land the way we're supposed to, the land will take care of you. The blessings of production will come out of this understanding of our role as stewards, and that's been a very sound undercurrent, a base, really, of a lot of the sustainable agriculture, and we can thank the church for that.

LV: I've been very fortunate that I came at it from that path. I can't imagine myself not having that. I didn't graduate from high school; I have a GED.

RK: Oh, I was going to ask you about your education.

LV: My education's a GED. I've taken some college courses now, but I've always said that the people that I've met throughout my journey have been my teachers, and so I've been very blessed and fortunate to have had probably one of the finest mentors and teachers. Those have been through the Catholic Church, and even in the sustainable food movement. And even now as I've gradually moved, throughout the years, in the federal policies, just people who are just advocates, really.

RK: Right. And we'll get into this. But now you, yourself are a mentor to many people. Very clearly, that's the case.

LV: I hope so, I hope so.

RK: Well, I've got several things I want to talk about, but I know you also started an organization that continues to exist today—CASA del Llano?

LV: CASA del Llano.

RK: So, will you talk about that? I saw, I can say, on your website, it was started 2000, it's a rural outreach center that unites the regional education and training interests of other groups with the goals of community-based grassroots organization.

LV: Yes.

RK: So what does that translate to?

LV: That, again, working with this priest, I began to help him build The Promised Land Network, together myself, and with another priest. There was the three of us. And so in that he had written a grant through the Catholic Development—I can't even remember—the Catholic Campaign for...

RK: Human Development

LV: Yeah, the Human...

RK: Yup, I know what you mean.

LV: That one. [Chuckles]

RK: Yeah.

LV: And at that point they wanted to help. I mean they wrote a grant to bring me in to be an organizer, community organizer. And so the director, the national director from Washington, DC, actually came to my house, and he was talking to the priest and was saying—yeah, we'll fund this organization, we'll fund this project with one condition. We want her—which was me—to go to an IA, Industrial Areas Foundation training, an IAF training, which is basically the Saul Alinsky type of training that I think Barack Obama, President Barack Obama also comes through. I know there's challenges in that, but it's a very good program. So I was sent to Tucson, Arizona to go for a ten-day training—very intense. So I came back, and through that I started working with some of the communities in and around Hereford. Hereford has started seeing a lot of folks migrating to Hereford and those areas, because Hereford is basically situated in the middle of the Panhandle of Texas. There's three million head of cattle, so the industry there is feed yards, dairy farms, meat packing plants within 35 mileage between them. So many of the people would buy their acreages of land. So one of the things that I started doing was organizing, when I came back, organizing some of these communities, because the communities were basically more of the backdrop, or looked a lot like the colonias within the border of Texas and Mexico. No water, no infrastructure. Sometimes when the 911 calls, some of these communities were situated between two counties, didn't know who was going to respond. Started working with these communities and helping bring some sort of infrastructure with them. We talked with county commissioners, things of that nature. There was a member through The Promised Land Network that saw that I was working from the back of my car, basically, the trunk of my car. He was a retired dentist, and invited me to come and see this house that he that he had. I thought he was going to rent me the house for me to continue my work in organizing and working with these two communities. So once he showed it to me, he says—well, what do you think? I said—

yeah, it's great. And I said—how much are you renting it, or whatever? He said—no, no, no; it's yours. I said—what? So he gave it to us. So then I took it back to the community members, the colonia members, so to speak—I call them the Panhandle Colonias—and asked them if I accept this gift, will you help support this. Most of the community members—and these are farm families, the Latino farm families that I still continue to work with—and I said if I accept this will you be a part of it? And they said—yes, we will. So in that was how we started CASA del Llano. I wanted to honor the fact that not everybody just gives you a house out of the goodness of their heart. And so I wanted to honor the word “casa.” Casa to me is just very important, so CASA is an acronym for Communities Assuring a Sustainable Agriculture in the Llano. And the llano comes from the region where we're at, which is the Llano Estacado, which rarely do we ever pay attention to the Llano Estacado. My emphasis on that was, again, going back to my roots of my parents and recognizing where my grandparents came, my father, and then myself. The whole emphasis of you got to know where you come from to know where you're going. So the CASA basically took off, and that was October the 1st of 2000 was the very first day we opened it up. It's still going very strong. It continues to advocate for the Latino farmers. Now it offers immigration—and I can talk to you a little bit more about that. But we also teach English classes. We have probably helped more than 100, if not more, people become actual citizens, and have even taken them to go vote, become part of the voting system. And then about maybe six years ago or more, the Texas Workforce closed its door in Hereford, these small communities, for whatever reason. I couldn't understand why they were closing the doors when work was like an essential part of a person's livelihood. So I took it upon myself, and I didn't know Cargill happened to ... it was bothering me a lot, and it just so happened that Cargill came and asked me—Cargill asked me if they could do interviews in our little place. It's about a seven little room house, just basically donated. We did make it into a 501(c)(3).

RK: Oh, good.

LV: The Cargill officials, human resource folks says—hey, we'd like to offer interviews here. And I said—well, OK. And he says—and we're willing to pay you. And I was very hesitant, for the simple fact that I wasn't sure if we could handle that capacity. And what I told him was— young man, I said, you know what? I said, no. It had taken me—because I had been working extensively throughout the years, in the '90s, more than ten years already, of building trust within the community. And I said—no, we're not charging you. And I know people probably criticized me for not taking money from Cargill, but I think there was more of a sense of pride and a sense of value for us. I didn't ask for money; I said no. I said no, no, no—we're going to try and see if we have the capacity to do it, one. Two, let us build a relationship. Too many times we put emphasis on money. Certainly our organization could have used the money, but because there was a risk taken on that, it has slowly but surely outgrown everyone. It's now the place to go for job seekers, for employers' interview. It's like a life of its own, and never would I have thought that this little place would still keep going. I think what we do there isn't any different than anybody else can do. So CASA, in a way, that's why we call it, it's a rural outreach center. It has also worked with children in the past, bringing healthy nutritional foods, and working with the extension agent. So we don't try to reinvent the wheel, we work with who is in the communities. We work with the library, we work with extension service. We work with the school system. If they're wanting for ESL, people can come to us for the basic English. We work with just about anybody and everybody within our own little town. It's all been word of mouth. I

think CASA del Llano there in Hereford is more well-known than any of us that work there. So it's self-sustaining, because there's no taxes paid on that house. It's just that overhead is very little. So it's, you know ...

RK: Do you get some donations from individuals?

LV: I've written grants and, yes, I do. My salary has always come from another source of, like, another organization that I've done and other works that I've done. The person that I have, the senior citizen program pays her salary. And we charge a very small fee for the ESL classes and citizenship classes. Very small, but it's not a whole lot of overhead. And then some of the companies have donated to us now. So it's self-sustaining. Because the grants are great, but they run out.

RK: Yeah, they do.

LV: I don't want to rely on grants. So that's the story behind CASA that continues to flourish, I think.

RK: That's a wonderful story.

LV: It's a great story.

RK: I do want to get to some of the federal stuff. Maybe this is a good time to ask—this is 2017; we're six months into the Donald Trump administration and all the talk about immigration reform and tightening up the borders and building a wall and all of that. How has that affected your community?

LV: A lot. Right after he was inaugurated, there was a huge influx of folks coming to us that were and still are literally scared and confused, asking us if we could do power of attorney for children, their children, in case they're stopped and deported, and they feel comfortable knowing that their children are going to go with a family member. They continue to feel that, you can see there's fear in the community because of that. We are losing quite a bit of people. Hereford, again, is, like I said, feedlots, dairy farms—it's a working industry. We've got the two ethanol plants are there, so you can imagine. We're beginning to see a decline in reference to other immigrants coming in there, just for the fear of knowing that they may be in trouble. Folks don't go out of their homes, some folks. That was seen immediately afterwards. So I can see that it has had a huge impact, especially in Hereford. Not as much as I've heard it in other states where sometimes the fields are left with the crops to rot and things like that, but I think we are headed that way. I think if we can bring in that new ... I don't know if that new H-2A immigration policy that's coming into effect, if that's going to help with some of the issues that we're facing, because nobody wants to do this field work. So I'm not so sure if this guest worker program is as effective. I've heard the pros and cons on both sides. It appears to me, and somebody mentioned it the other day, it seems very similar to the Bracero Program. And if you remember, the Bracero Program took in effect—and I can't remember the decade and the year that it started. You probably know better than I do. But it happened probably right around World War II when a lot of folks, a lot of men were taken to go fight, be a part of the war, so they brought in some of the

Mexicanos to come in and work the fields, but only while the war was going on. Finally there was groups that finally fought for the rights of them to stay and be recognized as the work that they did. But a lot of what I see now is, I think, this whole trying to bring in the Bracero Program, which, again, there's pros and cons to that.

RK: No, I tell you the truth, I didn't know about that program, so that's very...

LV: It's an interesting story.

RK: So there's a whole history there that might be relevant, and we ought to know more about.

LV: Yes.

RK: Yeah, that's going to ... as we are doing this issue, that's an issue very much unresolved, and we don't really know what's going to be happening next.

LV: Yeah, I think it's more familiar in the California region, probably more so than our place, but most of these agricultural states. But I do know that it ... that one would be a great one to research.

RK: Yes. Moving on, then, I've gotten to know you a little bit and know of you from your work with the Southern SAWG, and SAWG is Sustainable Agriculture Working Group. There's different ones around the country, and you worked for many years with the Southern SAWG. I have from 2005 to 2014 you were in a real leadership role in the SAWG, and I think you probably still are. So I'd like you to talk about how you got involved with that a little bit more, and then, looking back over it, what do you think was really accomplished with that, and that sort of thing.

LV: Well, I can talk a little bit about it. With the Southern SAWG I was introduced by it again with Darrell Berkenthal. I think I may have attended maybe the second Southern SAWG conference that was held in Austin. That was my first introduction to sustainable agriculture, and I didn't know. I always liked the way their outlook is. These are just the salt of the earth kind of people, the farmers, farm workers, people that are on the ground working. There's no hype on this. They usually have an annual conference, so they do encompass the 13 states. In my work I used to be a postal employee, but that was so aggravating, so frustrating. So I quit that to do this, which was another critical part of me, like—you're giving up money for this? But I got introduced, and at the same time, when I quit my postal job, I started working at the church for a little bit, but it wasn't ... churches are very political, in addition to being great, but they're also very political to work with. And so I happened to run across an ad that they were asking for a policy coordinator for Southern SAWG, right about ... and I can't remember the farm bill—may have been the 2012 Farm Bill.

RK: Yeah ... 2008, maybe?

LV: Yeah, maybe. There you go—my memory's kind of lapsing here. But I remember that they hired me through a Kellogg grant. They, being Southern SAWG, hired me to be the policy

coordinator, and so part of my job was trying to weave—and we're talking 13 states—to really bring policy front and center. It was a great initiative, because it did help bring a lot of these groups that normally wouldn't be at the same table. So Southern SAWG was a part of that. And so that was my introduction within Southern SAWG. I did that like what you just mentioned the years that I was on there, and we had policy sessions, listening sessions on the farm bill. I think at that point NSAC wasn't yet, it wasn't yet an initiative, yet. I mean, they were both working, both the Campaign for Sustainable Ag and NSAC, or SAC were two different entities working for the same purpose, I think.

RK: Right.

LV: I do remember that we would have listening sessions, and there was a lot of talk about inclusiveness and diversity and bringing more people on the ground that were affected more by the policy programs, so that's what I did with Southern SAWG for several years. And just about a couple of years back, because I love, again, the salt of the earth people that are really in contact with the soil and the land and the food production and the food growing and all that, I've come back, and now I'm serving on their board for Southern SAWG. I still continue to stay engaged with them.

RK: But you're not a paid staff with them.

LV: No longer I'm a paid staff, but now I come back and I'm on their board. I still believe in their mission and purpose. I think it's one of the finest organizations that exists, because, again, it's ... the conferences are always focused around farmer, you know, practical techniques that farmers and farm workers and people, again, of the land. And they share that. The workshops are very down to the ... just detail of how to grow flowers, how to till—all of the things. And then in addition to offering policy on top of that. So I think it's a good ...

RK: Good, yeah, and the policies really, the idea..., and I think the strength comes from—and I'm sure you do, too—is that the policies come from the needs of these people that are really trying to do the right thing on the land and make a good livelihood, but also do the right thing.

LV: Yeah, I remember being in one of them that I had invited, one of the head branch officers out of NRCS (Natural Resources Conservation Service) out of Washington, DC, happened to be a good friend of mine, and I invited him to do a workshop. And he was talking about all of the things of NRCS and USDA (United States Department of Agriculture). That meeting was, I am sure there had to have been about two or three hundred people in that room. It was about the same time when there was a lot of discrimination and this whole lawsuit of the Pigford.

RK: Oh, yes.

LV: And so I remember them talking, asking them—there were several farmers in that audience that were extremely mad and wanted answers. It was before they had even heard anything, and no response from USDA what was going to happen with all these farmers, yet, at that point. There was rumbling, but nothing yet was decided. And they really did take him on and asked him some really pertinent questions. And I remember him—he was able to respond back. And I

said, afterwards, I said—how was that? He says—oh, I can handle it, but I don't have the answers to them, because he was just—not just—but he was an officer in NRCS, which, being with USDA, that's a whole big entity that one person in that department can't respond. But it was interesting to know that Southern SAWG provided that platform to give them an opportunity to air their frustrations. And it continued, and it continued working and advocating. Not to say that it started on Southern SAWG, but it was a very small part of that.

RK: And that Pigford suit you referred to—just to bring that out a little bit for the sake of the interview—that was a suit by a man named Timothy, I think, Timothy Pigford, a suit brought on behalf of many, many thousands of farmers, particularly people of color, who were not getting the benefits they deserved from USDA.

LV: Yes.

RK: The subsidies weren't coming down to them, and there was just a whole history of inequality when it came to that. That lawsuit was intended to break through that, and I think it took about 20 years before some of that settlement finally happened, thanks to the work of RAFI (Rural Advancement Foundation International) and Randi Roth and others. Really, all the detailed legal work that ultimately did get a settlement on that issue.

LV: Yeah, and along with that they also started—they being USDA—recognized and realized, well, if we've done that with the black farmers, then that's where you started hearing about the Native American, the women, the Latinos, and I can't remember, but there was other ones. So they did, the settlement on the women, Latinos, and I can't think of the other group. Because I know the Native Americans kind of broke away and they settled on a different one. But I do know that the Hispanic farmers and them, their pay-back or settlement wasn't as high as the Pigford, but there were some discriminations, where people would go to the offices and they were turned away, or they weren't recognized. Their farms weren't recognized because you weren't registered. And, again, we go back to the whole issue of some of these offices, even today you see a lot of these offices, FSA (Farm Service Agency) groups that still do not hire people of color that can help target some of the communities that are there. So we're still lagging behind that, but there was even some of that as a part of the Pigford. And it was going on ... I mean, this happened ... I'm glad they recognize it, but it's a shame that we have to go down that path to be able to be recognized.

RK: Well, along the way one of the things that you were a big part of was the decision to merge the Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, which represented a lot of different groups around the country, with the Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, which had Ferd Hoefner in the office in Washington and things, and they were obviously intersecting at a lot of levels but weren't formally linked up.

LV: No.

RK: So, I'd like you to talk about that effort, because I know it was a lot of work getting that all worked out together with all of those grassroots groups interested. I'd like you to talk ...

LV: Yeah, I got introduced to all of this on the federal level by, again, Brother Dave Andrews, who's now passed away, again with the Rural Life Catholic Conference. He invited me to a meeting for the National Campaign in Washington. And, again, it was all grassroots; it was all Southern SAWG folks, it was farmers, it was the grassroots kind of people. It was working fine for awhile, and that really intrigued me, because I met some awesome people through that meeting, and, again, they would have once a year, they would have a conference, but they would bring in people to come in and lobby for some of their issues, some of the policies. And it was just regular people like me. I mean, again, I'm not a farmer, but I was able to speak on the behalf of, for example, the CAFOs, [Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations] because that's where I come from. So I was able to talk to my rep, and the campaign helped introduce me to some of that. That was, I thought was ... you're talking to a small-town person here, going into DC. [Chuckles] And so it was working fine, had a great, awesome board of directors members. We were having conferences, having these fly-ins, talking about working in conjunction with other groups, with the farm bill. But we ended up hiring, and unbeknownst to all of us, a person that had no knowledge of policy. Let me just put it like that. Policy was not at the top of the list of this person that was in charge of a policy organization. No knowledge. What happened was that the campaign basically just dwindled away, just died. The spirit of that organization just went down. That's my version. I'm sure there's better versions, but that was my version of seeing what happened. About the time we started talking of—and we recognized it, that we either had to get rid of the executive director or change the course of the Campaign. Well, at the same time I think we were probably running out of money, for one, but we were also noticing that by the time it was recognized that the executive director had taken the campaign in a place that we weren't able to be at the top of our list as far as advocating for policies, it was probably a little too late. So then we said, OK, we ... and at that time SAC was moving front and center. They were really the go-getters. They were the advocates.

RK: [Unclear]

LV: Yes, yes, they were out there. So the group decided, OK, should we ... not to dissolve it, but to merge it, because SAC was coming a lot more stronger than the campaign was. The campaign was just so much internally fighting all these different kinds of challenges. So we decided to set up a merger team. What we did was there was three of us from each of the two groups, two coalitions or campaigns, organizations. Three from the Campaign and three from SAC. In that I know we were placed, we were in Missouri somewhere in the basement, talking about how do we do this. Prior to before we did the merger—I'm going to back up a little bit—we did have a meeting in Missouri, Kansas City, Missouri, we being the campaign, and talked to the membership. So, what do you think? Should we merge, should we not? At that particular meeting, we happened to have ... one of the groups that we had was the Social Justice Policy Group, that was the name of it. And in that meeting we happened to have ... never before had I seen more than 20, 30 people of all walks of life coming to the Campaign meeting. Again, because it was so accessible; there were no fees. Ordinary folks could just be a part of it; there was no membership fees. And so I remember us being in that meeting, and we had people who, for example, folks that I know now, a young lady by the name of Karen Washington, who is in charge of the urban farming in New York City. She's a great advocate—I encourage you to research her—but she was putting out—OK, what about us? What about the urban farmers? No one's there to help us, recognize us. So she brought that out to the table. There was people

talking about—what about the migrant workers? What about the farm workers? What about the Native Americans. I mean, you should ... it was a meeting that, oh, my gosh, we had never been to, but it happened at a time when the Campaign was deciding whether to merge or dissolve or what. So we went ahead and had the merger team, and we went through some struggles to get through that, because we did not want to lose that one meeting that we actually had captured more than 20-something names that were ready to go front and center and be at the front line to fight for some of these policies within the farm bill. They were ready to go. At the same time, we knew that SAC was already an organization that was very much well-known in Washington, DC to lobby and to really get some of these other policy programs in line. But in the meeting that we had, the merger team, a lot of time talking. We had a facilitator, outside facilitator, talking, and heads were bucked, and people didn't want to lose parts of ... there was a lot of people that didn't want to lose some of the qualities that the Campaign had that the other one already had, so we bucked heads a lot. But one of the things for sure that there was several of us on both sides of the team—we didn't want to lose sight of the diversity of making sure that diversity and social justice and the racial part of it was not forgotten, so we fought for that. I think we all decided, OK, as long as some of that is not lost as we merge, we'll merge.

RK: And that was coming more from the Campaign side, which had such a broad constituency, where SAC had more of a Midwestern base and was not as diverse ethnically, racially.

LV: Yeah. No, not as much. There was some, after the merge, as with everything, there's always that honeymoon period. It was OK, but there was some members through the campaign that just basically were very disappointed in the merger. Did not like the way it took on. I think a lot of us walked into the merger thinking that there was going to be a little bit of both in the NSAC, but there wasn't. We lost a lot of the grassroots ethnic diversity from the campaign, I think, when we did the merger.

RK: That's what I've heard.

LV: A lot. And so it's been a struggle to try to keep it going even now. It's been an amazing opportunity to be a part of that journey, but it's also been very frustrating to know that we've had to continue to fight for it. I know a couple of years ago NSAC finally put out the racial equity statement, which we're really thankful. Now we're working on the immigration statement that we hope that the membership will agree, and we can put it out there. I think it's a good sign that we're now stepping forward and acknowledging that. So there's several things that NSAC has moved forward to. We've had an anti-racism training for membership and staff. We hope to continue to do that.

RK: Well, you've been ...

LV: No, that's fine, I may get my ...

RK: So in 2009 that merger formally happened.

LV: Yes, I'm sorry.

RK: Than, what you've done in your role since then has had a prominent role in what became the diversity committee within the National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition, and that's been the way of trying to bring these things to the fore through ... and that you didn't lose ... what the campaign had done wasn't lost, or could be regained through the diversity committee.

LV: Yeah, the times that we've worked on the farm bills, I think there was one year they wanted ... the 2012 Farm Bill they were introducing the Beginner Farmer Program, and so I remember they asked do I know anybody that could help speak to that. I remember there were several of the leaders in Texas that, for example, the Texas Mexico Border Coalition, Omar Garza, was one of the ones I said—you need to come to this meeting; come talk to some of these folks. And he did a tremendous amount of work on that. And helped bring some light to that and helped put some, I guess, words in the policy or the program, and in itself. They were working on the ground in Texas, but it was able to offer that, as well, on a national level. And then there was others that came in and worked within the farm ... like the farm worker program as well, and then even with some friends that I had met throughout my lifetime, because I was on the board of the Community Food Security Coalition that was mentioned before. There you met a lot of these other leaders that also were working on policy, so I wanted to continue to bring that voice. They would always ask me, and I think the last year or two I introduced Lalo Zavala, which is with MAFO (National Partnership of Farmworker and Rural Organizations) don't ask me, but I know it's a farmworker program. It's out of Minnesota.

RK: Oh, really.

LV: So he represents them. And so we've stayed ... trying to bring forth not only the inclusiveness and diversity, but making sure that the voice of some of those organizations that can speak about some of the struggles and some of the ... that can help articulate and be a part of the programs as they're being designed within the farm bill, I guess is one of the reasons why I stay on here.

RK: Good.

LV: Not myself, but being able to, again, bring forth the people that I know can talk to ... and they're setting about priorities and policies and what's needed.

RK: Lydia, you've had so much work earlier with the Campaign, with the Southern SAWG and now with NSAC that I'd really like to get your perspective on what you think have been the, sort of, key successes for NSAC or its predecessor groups, looking back over the last couple decades.

LV: Well, certainly some of the settlements, as we mentioned earlier, with the Pigford, and then Latino and women and Native American settlements. I think that that in itself, they were at least heard and recognized. I think one of the things that I feel really proud of is that I was part of one of the listening sessions with USDA and other groups, and talking about—I remember that it was just a thought, and somebody put it out there, and I can't remember who it was, but they talked about developing a USDA outreach center for just minorities, people of color, farmers, and so I feel really good that USDA listened to these groups. I was, again, a very small part of playing in

that role, but I know that it did happen, and now it's just so, it's so much needed. So I think that, in itself, I feel really good about. I feel great that now we have the mandatory 2501.

RK: And what is the 2501?

LV: The 2501 is mainly for funding and for the Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers Program that helps pretty much a kind of a direct funding for farmers to help them—both farmers and organizations, non-profits, that are working with minority farmers to help them develop their farms and ranches. So I think that, there's been a lot of groups that have helped be a part of that, so it's been great to know that now it's a mandatory.

RK: That means they don't have to fight as hard to have it funded; it's under the farm bill, which is, itself, a victory.

LV: Yeah, and then the Beginner Farmer Rancher Program, and in itself, I think, just knowing that it's been recognized as well. Probably one of the other ones, because I was on the board for the Community Food Security Coalition. One of the things that I think I feel ... I wasn't a part of it, but I feel like I was in the room when it was all happening, so to speak. And that's the mandatory [funding] for the community food project grants, which that, in itself, encompasses a lot of the urban farming. And so, grants for them, grants for communities that want to have community gardens and then again, I think, one of the things that I see now is the farm-to-school programs that have been born out of even just the community food projects, in itself. Then, I have ... just so many things that I've seen happen that it makes it more accessible for people to have healthy food. You don't have to go and reinvent the wheel. So, there's a lot of groups that you have, community gardens. You have a lot of groups that are now working with farmers and within the schools and colleges and even hospitals that are providing healthy food. So some of those programs were a part of, you know, as I was being involved in the several farm bills that I've been a part of, that other groups—again, I was not front and center, but I was a part of the masses of people that we would lobby for, and advocate for, and so it's good to know that people are now much more aware of the fact that eating healthy and staying healthy and providing the nutritious food, but not just the food at the table but also taken into consideration both the hands that first touch it, which is the farm workers, the farmers that help produce it, and then, of course, the people that can ... the chefs that cook it. So, all in all, it's all like a joint effort, I think, a collaborative effort by all. So knowing that some of these programs have made it, and we hope they continue to make it. So ... yeah.

RK: Have you seen some of those successes really start to appear, manifest in Hereford?

LV: Not so much in Hereford. Hereford is a unique place in itself, because we are up against the drought. Again, water is very scarce in our region, as it is in most of Texas, as you probably know. But we do hear a lot of the schools now looking at the nutrition, the healthy nutrition choices. You do see the extension agents, which really are the contact people for most part in some of these rural communities. So they have helped introduce and advocate for the "My Plate," within the extension service and FFA (Future Farmers of America) and 4H groups and other groups. So those are some of the ways that we see it. We have noticed more cooking classes for both children as well as even women. So in ways not so much as you would see in an

urban or even in other parts of the nation, but it's coming, it's there. Out of Hereford, I know, north of us where Amarillo is, the High Plains Food Bank has their own garden. They're really pushing for more of the healthy gardens and the farmers markets, as well in Lubbock they're more locally produced as well. There's more farmers markets and more gardens and things of that nature. So you see it more in these other bigger cities as opposed to Hereford. Hereford is a lot smaller, but yes, I feel like it's coming, and I think when the former first lady, Michele Obama, introduced that healthy eating and all that she was pushing for, I think that, in itself, helped a lot of the schools recognize that, hey, we need to modify the cafeteria food. Still have a long way to go, but we're getting there. So, yeah, those are things.

RK: Good, good. Well, the other thing I always ask too is sort of the flip side of that. When you look back on your quite lengthy career and your continued work now, of course, but do you have any areas that you feel that sort of failed or haven't lived up to what you'd hoped for?

LV: Continuing, and perhaps that's what gets me up in the morning and keeps me coming to these meetings and being engaged is the continuing lack of inclusiveness of people of color, my people, and those decision-making and in the policy. I think one of the ones that ... well, on the one sense I'm kind of glad that we're now talking about immigration reform within the agricultural world, so to speak. It's been disappointing that we've had to wait until now under this administration to really now take it serious, because we don't know how things are going to unfold with how the administration is going to handle immigration. So it's been disappointing, because a lot of the people that I am in contact on a daily basis and everyday life is the people who are most affected by it, the immigrants. And yet, they are the first ones that touch the food. They're only here to come and work. While I recognize the fact that they do need to become, they do need to be legal, I recognize all of that. But yet I think that the immigration reform in itself, the immigration system could be better. It should be working for us and for them as well. So I guess it saddens me to know that a lot of these advocacy groups that have worked on policy never really had taken immigration as serious until now. In so many words, that's really where I'm going with that. And it's something that again my community, my people—not just my people, other ethnic groups have faced for years and years and years. I don't know when that's going to happen. I don't know when the dignity and the recognition is ever going to be recognized and given to those that work the land and are most affected by all these decisions. I hope I get to see it in my lifetime. I seriously doubt it. So, again, I wish that this had ... and it wasn't for lack of trying from these advocacy groups, these groups that are out here. I understand people were looking at conservation programs and beginner farmer programs and the EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program), and all these other programs—don't misunderstand me; those are just as important as all—and very grateful for the farmers that are here in the United States that provide the food for us, but we also have to recognize that, again, most of the time the first hand that touches that apple or grape or whatever are from the immigrants.

RK: Yeah, so you're right, certainly, about the role of farmers, but increasingly the whole food system is increasingly dependent upon immigrant labor.

LV: Yes, and I hope we don't, again, I hope we don't lose sight of that. Well, in the one sense, like I said, I am saddened by it, but I am hopeful that now with all this travel ban and the way ... wanting the building of the wall of this new administration, and the way it's been approached, I

guess for lack of a better way of saying this I guess we can thank Trump for that, because there has been more of an awareness and more of a sensitivity of knowing the struggles of the way ... not just Mexico, but some of these Latin American countries that are coming into ...

RK: The Somalis.

LV: ... all these people. They're beautiful people—I've met them all, because again through CASA we've had people that are looking for jobs, and I've always told folks—man, if you ever want to see the United Nations, come into CASA when the Cargill was doing all these job interviews. So, yeah, I mean ... and again, they're just wanting what I wanted for my kids, what I want for my kids. Just a simple way of life. I think that's what draws a lot of people to America, the simplicity and all-American dream of just living a good life. And so I think it's hopeful now, I think, that we're now again, NSAC is taking the initiative of having this statement. I think more groups are starting to be more involved of making sure that we are prepared for who knows what's coming down the road. I do hope that Congress and the administration and others, legislative and all that really do look at this whole issue of immigration in a way that is very humane way of looking at things and way of responding to the people that are most affected by it. And I'm glad that we're now looking at it, again, through the lens of the agricultural, and I hope that we can continue and not push them to the side.

RK: Right, very good. Well, you've pretty much answered my last thing I always ask people to say—well, what should we do going forward? Obviously, the whole question of diversity and inclusiveness is very high on your list. I don't know if you'd like to add anything more to that, as any particular policies or anything?

LV: Of course, immigration's always been one, but not just limited to immigration. I think continuing to work on healthy food, healthy nutrition. The fact that my husband died of diabetes and heart problems and all kinds of stuff which, when one of your own members dies through that and is affected by that, you kind of take a step back and you think—OK, wait a minute; this is like a red flag for me and my family to take better care of myself and to look at what it is that I'm eating. And so I think health and food is very important, so I would like to just say that the groups that are working on the healthy foods and nutrition and all of that—and I do hope that the insurances and the medical people come into this as well as we are deciding some of these programs as well, because their input is very vital to our own well-being. I think it's important that we all recognize, because I think I read somewhere or heard somewhere that I may outlive my own grandchildren if we continue down the same path. I don't want to do that. I'd love to see ... I've got, like I said, five grandchildren—only one grandson, and I'd love to see him—not just him, but my granddaughters—but just prosper and move forward. You want to leave this world in a better place that you left it. So I hope we can as a group and as a people continue to work on policies that can be there for our grandkids and their kids and that's all, I mean that's it. That's all I've got to say.

RK: Right. And I would say that ... and this is sort of my own thinking here, but certainly not my own alone, is that by having this broader community of folks who are interested in health and food should ultimately help build a constituency for improved care of the farmlands and things, too.

LV: Oh, yes, oh yeah, no ...

RK: So it comes back to the land again.

LV: It comes back to the land, and, like I say, with the farmers that are there in the panhandle, I have always admired the fact that here are these immigrants coming from other countries, and they are buying five-, ten-acre plots of land, and they're living off those land, even if they do have to go get another job. But it's so comforting knowing that these people are buying land and becoming homesteads for them, and they're building an empire, so to speak, small as it may be, for the legacy of their own children, as opposed to bringing in more—no pun intended—Walmarts and all ... McDonald's and everything else, you know, the sprawling urban cities. But they're actually cultivating the land, as it should be. I think I'm here because of the way my father and my grandparents again took care of the land and the fact that, like I said, my father's 90 now, and he's ... I hope I get to live to be that age, but I think times when my father and my mother were coming up, life was much more simpler, and I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I think we've lost some of that simplicity, and I hope that the Baby Boomers, I guess, are able to recognize that and introduce it to our Millennial grandchildren. [Chuckles] That's just my hope. I don't know; we'll see.

RK: Yes, we will. Well, I think we've really covered everything I wanted to cover today. I really appreciate your great answers and your thought that you put into it. And even more so, all of your great work.

LV: Thank you for inviting me. I feel, again, very honored. Thank you for this great, great endeavor. I wish you only the best for this. I hope more voices are heard; this is a great idea.

RK: Good. Thank you.

LV: Yeah, thank you.

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